

Jhumpa Lahiri

A Pulitzer Prize winner's extraordinary story

Béla Fleck

The Flecktones' first new album in five years

Rolie Polie Olie

An interview with William Joyce, the famous robot's creator

Omar Tyree

Discussing *For the Love of Money*, his sequel to *Flyy Girl*

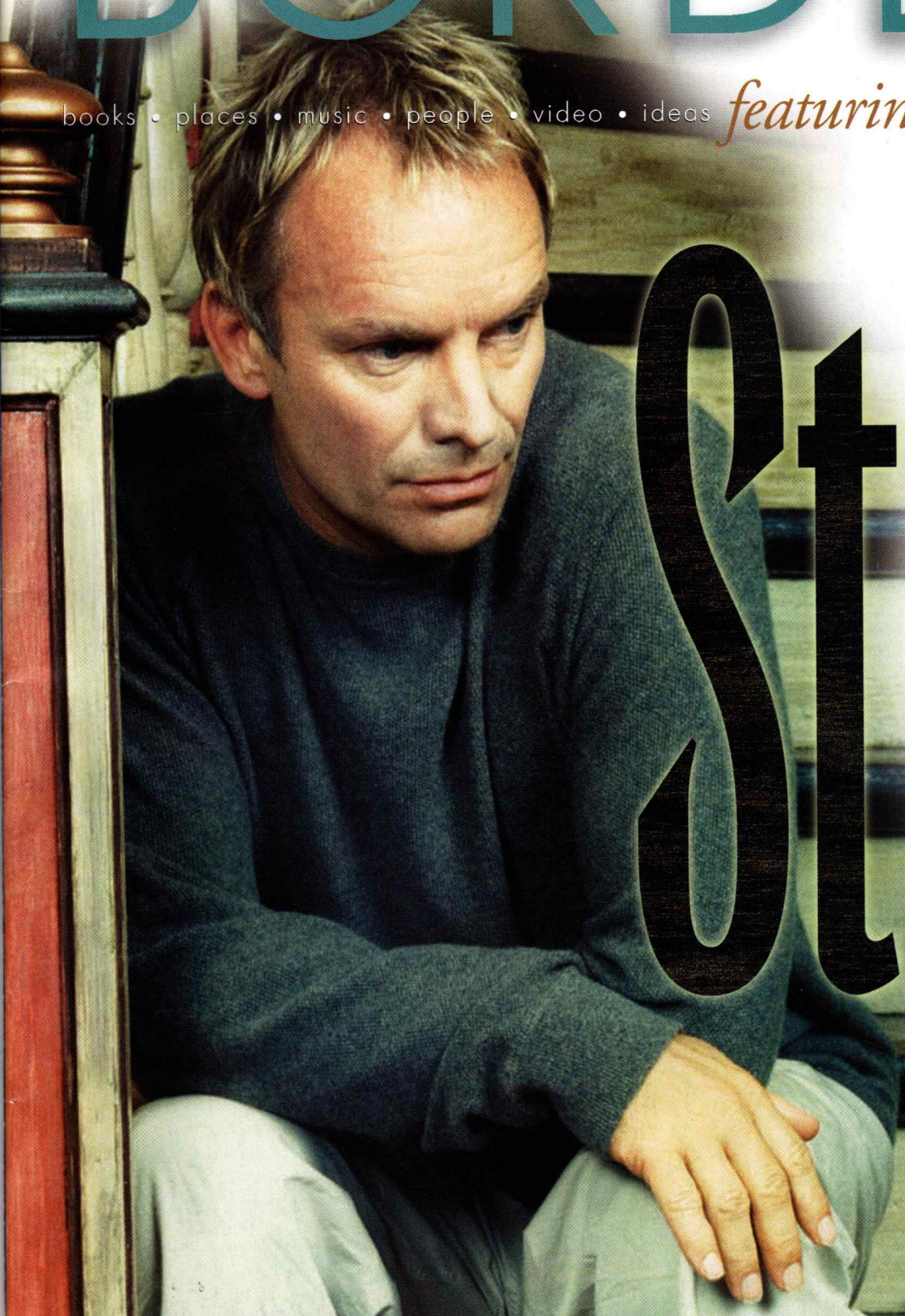
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august 2000

An exclusive
interview with

Sting



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No Longer the King OF PAIN

An interview with

Sting,

conducted by Gary Graff

This year's lesson: don't take Sting for granted. Sure, he's been around long enough—more than two decades as a recording artist, with the Police and on his own—to have reached a point where he methodically puts out albums that are methodically good and that's that. Sometimes we need a slap across the face to remind us what a unique and ambitious artist he is. That's come from *Brand New Day* (A & M, 1999), the former Gordon Sumner's eighth album since the Police packed away their badges in 1984. Another collection of adventurous and stylistically varied songs, the multi-million seller scooped up two Grammy® Awards in surprise victories over younger artists such as Ricky Martin and Marc Anthony. And in the single "Desert Rose"—which has gotten an extra bump from its use in a Jaguar ad—Sting has his biggest hit in years. And he's done this without altering his approach and vision. A kind of pop renaissance man who's also worked in theater, film, and arenas of political, humanitarian and environmental activism, the key to Sting is that he's predictable in his unpredictability. He purposefully and joyfully collides musical genres into one another, crafting new sonic blends that are still melodic and accessible enough for airplay and chart success. And his collaborators are a legion of who's who musical heavyweights, from jazz cats such as Branford Marsalis and Manu Katche to singer-songwriter James Taylor and Motown legend Stevie Wonder—all of whom appear on *Brand New Day*.

Q: When you finish a project, can you tell if you have a hit on your hands or if it will have the kind of commercial legs that Brand New Day has demonstrated?

S: Well, really, I make music to please myself; whether it has legs or not doesn't detract from that. At the end of the day, I can see what its worth is by how I felt about it at the time. I think we always felt we had a good chance for this; there's a couple of things that sound like singles, and if I was 18 and in a boy band and I put those singles out, I'd feel very confident about it. The only thing that holds it back is the fact the charts are dominated by teenage music, which isn't wrong. So for me to be in the Top 30 or Top 40 today is an achievement, I think. I think word of mouth seems to be what's selling it, which is fantastic. People like the record; they get to know it, slowly, and then tell someone else about it. So, yeah, I'm thrilled.

Q: You had some first-hand exposure to the teen thing when you sang with Backstreet Boys at VH1's "Men Strike Back" concert. What's your view of that music?

S: Well, hasn't that always been pop, sort of teen-oriented music? I'm not going to sit here and go, "They should all be more serious." That's what pop music is. There's room for everything. The interesting thing is how those artists and how that music will develop over the years. It's difficult to survive being a teen. The Police were a teen band to a certain extent; we had a teen following, and we managed to outgrow that and have people buy our albums and actually listen to them. The thing is to have the ability to kind of sidestep that and say, "Look, I can exist without that kind of hysteria." That takes a bit of work and a bit of talent—certainly Ricky Martin has that. And the Backstreet Boys can sing; they're very good singers, so God bless 'em. I wish them the best of luck.

Q: What do your own kids listen to?

S: It's very strange. My nine-year-old daughter is completely into Jimi Hendrix, with no prompting from me at all. She sits listening to *Electric Ladyland* and all this stuff. She can play it, too; she plays with us at rehearsals and sound checks. The others have a wide range of tastes. My other daughter's into classical music. My 15-year-old son is into hip-hop and rap. We have heated debates about that.

Q: Dad's not too jiggy with it?

S: Some of the lyrics I really object to. I don't want to hear "motherf—er" in every line. I don't want to hear stuff that's clearly right-wing and women-hating and racist coming out of the stereo.

Q: In the kind of pop climate that's out there now—teen pop, hip-hop, rap-rock—"Desert Rose" seems like a pretty subtle song to be a hit.

S: That's a compliment, isn't it? I don't see any reason why pop music shouldn't be challenging, subtle, and maybe even a little difficult to get into, if there is a reward to it. Why should it be just simple nursery rhymes and stuff that you forget instantly? So that's always been my mission—to make pop music that people like but also make some demands on their listening ability.

Q: Does the breadth of your approach to music signal a personal kind of restlessness, in both your creative and private lives?

S: You know, not really. Not now. Getting to 40 and realizing I'm happier and healthier and more together than I've ever been was a great revelation to me. That continues; I feel very content. I know where my happiness is now. Happiness and success aren't necessarily the same thing; sometimes they're diametrically opposite. I remember that the most successful period in my life was in the Police, but that was also one of my most unhappy times. Now things are much more level, and I can deal with it.

Q: What do you think accounts for that?

S: It's basically a function of getting older. Whether you want to or not, you get a certain wisdom, a certain acceptance of life in general. I'm more accepting of the vagaries of life than I used to be. I used to fight against anything that was uncomfortable or that would make me feel strange...like getting older and mortality—that's the big one, the only important one. Once you sort that out in your head, that you will

die and are getting older, it's fine. It becomes much less frightening and oppressive.

Q: So you're not the king of pain anymore?

S: No (laughs). I used to subscribe to the idea that you needed to be in pain to be creative—almost to the extent I could manufacture crises in my life to be creative. Now I've decided I don't want to do that. I think music, rock music, is a very good way of processing certain emotions—anger, fear, anxiety, aggression. I understand music that comes from that because I did it myself. But when you don't feel that, you have to find something that's deeper and stronger and ultimately more fulfilling. That's the journey I'm on.

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The Sounds of Sting on A & M Records:

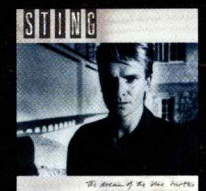
Brand New Day
Sting (1999)



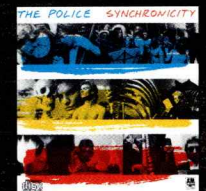
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You Take
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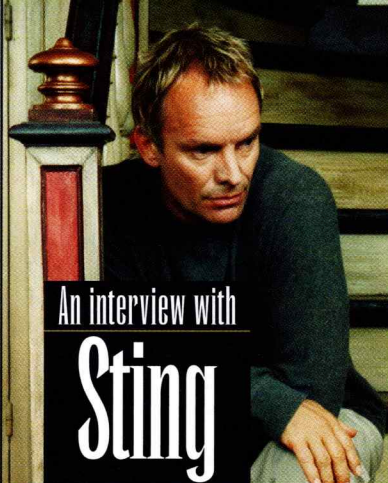


Photo credit: Don Farber Photography © 2000

An interview with
Sting

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Q: Will you play together if the group gets elected into the Rock and Roll Hall of Fame?

S: Oh, God. I don't know about the Rock and Roll Hall of Fame. I've been to a couple of bashes. They were fun, but I don't know. It seems like a mausoleum, you know? I suppose if we qualify, we qualify—if called, I will serve. But it's something I'm not looking forward to, being inducted, although I suppose I'll be upset if I'm not, come to think about it. So all right, I'm coming. I was gonna be washing my hair that night, but I'll come!

Q: Your work cuts across so many different styles.

S: I like the impurity of taking one genre and twisting it into something else. I'm not terribly respectful of genres; I tend to pervert them when I get hold of them. My interest is not to create pure country or pure rock 'n' roll or pure jazz or pure anything. People tend to want to compartmentalize music, to have it in these neat little boxes—"This is what you do. You can't do something else because it's not a pure form." I'm not interested in pure form at all. I'm much more interested in a bastardized form of music, where some kind of mutant can grow. Pop music at its best is that sort of mongrel thing. I enjoy breaking the pattern.

Q: You're often portrayed as a serious fellow—a moneyed and stylish auteur, if you will. But at the same time, you've done things to deflate your own balloon, like appearing on *The Simpsons* and the Saturday Night Live "Stingatollab" sketch. Do you think your image is miscast?

S: Well, I'm not totally serious, not all the time. I do have a lot of fun. I think it's important to have a certain degree of irony about yourself. I have a lot of fun in my life; in fact, I think my life is hilarious. The problem with irony is that it doesn't translate well into print. It can backfire on you; people can take you too literally, and that can get you into big trouble. I think that's where the word pretentious comes up. I try lots of things, and I don't care if I fail.

Q: You guested on Police guitarist Andy Summers's latest album of *Thelonious Monk* material. How was that?

S: It was great. Andy's milieu, I always thought, was jazz. For him to come out and do almost a straight jazz album was, I think, a great idea. I was honored to sing on it. Andy and I always have fun—except when we're fighting (laughs).

Q: Your guest spot also started a lot of rumors. How often are you pitched a Police reunion offer?

S: It's sort of a perennial offer, but it's all based on nostalgia and somebody's wanting to make a buck. There's nothing real about it. You can't re-create the Police; that was of a time. You can only fail, so why do that?

Q: You worked with some high profile guests on *Brand New Day*. How did Stevie Wonder come to be on the title track?

S: I wrote this song and it had kind of like a shuffle, a 12/8 feel. It reminded me of Stevie Wonder, and I said "God, it would be great if Stevie would play on this." I made a phone call, full of trepidation because he's one of my idols, and it was, "Yeah, I'll come to New York and do it." Stevie turned up and played his ass off and really authenticated the song for me. **B**

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