

The Pop Life

By Stephen Holden New York Times Published: January 16, 1991

Sting's 'Soul Cages'

"I don't think our modern myths and rituals are able to deal with death," said Sting the other day. "The modern way to deal with death is to try and ignore it, which is what I did."

The 39-year-old pop star was reflecting on the death a year and a half ago of his father, a milkman who lived in the industrial north of England, and its powerful effect on his third solo album, "The Soul Cages," which A&M Records will release next week.

"I decided to keep on working and pretend it didn't happen," he continued. "But of course it bit me on the leg a year later. The record is really my way of mourning."

Among the themes that wind through the album's nine songs are father-and-son relationships and recurrent images of ships and the ocean. "Island of Souls," the album's opening cut, tells the story of a riveter for a shipbuilding crew, who dies after an industrial accident, and of his son, who continues in the slavish occupation while fantasizing his escape. The album's title song takes the same story and recasts it as a folk legend.

"'The Soul Cages' is an old British folk tale that I heard when I was a child," Sting explained. "It's basically about the Devil keeping the souls of the dead in lobster cages under the sea. To free a soul from the cage, you have to go under the sea and drink with the Devil. If he manages to drink you under the table, he keeps you. If you drink him under the table, one of the souls can be freed. For me, it's an allegory about understanding death. It seemed to have a mythical resonance with my own problem."

"This is my most personal record, and I had a hard time writing it," the singer went on. "Although I think that writer's block is a normal thing for someone to get occasionally, I hadn't written anything in two years, and I was panicking. It was only when I started to look back and remember images from my life that the whole thing spewed out in a very short time. The setting of the album is northern England. I'm from Newcastle on the northeast coast, and I was brought up next to a shipyard in a house that was literally dwarfed by giant ships."

Both lyrically and musically, there are significant differences between "The Soul Cages" and Sting's two previous solo albums, "The Dream of the Blue Turtles" (1985) and "Nothing Like the Sun" (1987). The new record includes no overtly political songs. All told, Sting said, he recorded 40 songs for the record, and in selecting the final 9, he dispensed with anything that had an African-Caribbean influence. Because the record is so personal, he added, its music represents what he described as a "return to my ethnicity" in the modal folk music of northern England and the Gregorian chants he heard as a child in the Roman Catholic Church.

Another influence, one that is especially apparent on "Island of Souls," is the music of Bertolt Brecht and Kurt Weill. The album is dedicated to John Dexter, who directed Sting on Broadway in "Threepenny Opera," and to Ethyl Eichelberger, a fellow cast member, both of whom died last year.

"Brecht and Weill provided a lot of blueprints for songs that are not only emotional but full of information and politics -- the sort of thing I aspire to," Sting said. "Weill is particularly interesting as a musician because he came from a classical background and became a pop musician. My route is the other way around. I'm a pop musician who is aspiring to write more serious music."

Among other efforts to develop his musical skills, Sting said, he has been studying the piano for 10 years. Several years ago, he bought a Syn clavier, a computerized keyboard on which he programmed the entire score of Ralph Vaughan Williams's Sixth Symphony, which he described as sounding as though it were being played on a huge pipe organ. He has also been working on a piece for the Kronos Quartet. Next month, Deutsche Grammophon is to release a recording of "Peter and the Wolf," which he narrates with the Berlin Philharmonic conducted by Claudio Abbado.

"I don't see three chords plus a relative minor as being the ultimate form of music for me," he said. "I like modern classical music. It's what I listen to. And I'm more interested in bastardized forms of music than in pure forms because I think progress comes from joining things together that haven't been joined before."

Sting also said he has been inspired by the late jazz band leader Gil Evans. "One thing that Gil Evans taught me is that you never stop learning. He was 76 when he died. I spent quite a bit of time with him and sang with his band several times. He was a great inspiration as someone who never stopped learning, who always stayed young and kept listening to new music."

"I'm also part of the baby boom, of the generation that was brought up with the Beatles and all that that heralded," he added. "It's our duty to carry on with that." Blues From "The Simpsons"

In just five weeks, "The Simpsons Sing the Blues" (Geffen), a record on which the actors who supply the voices for the animated comedy series perform 10 pop, blues and rap numbers, has soared to No. 4 on Billboard's pop album chart. With sales of two million copies, the album has become a novelty phenomenon comparable to Alvin and the Chipmunks in 1958 and "Disco Duck" in 1976. It is also the first album from a television series to make the top 5 since a compilation of songs from "Miami Vice" in 1986.

Despite its popularity, the album has received some of the most scornful notices to be given any pop record in recent years. Although musicians like B. B. King, Joe Walsh, Buster Poindexter, the Tower of Power Horn Section and D.J. Jazzy Jeff contributed to the record, the arrangements and performances are strictly run-of-the-mill. And songs like "God Bless the

Child" (sung by Yeardley Smith as Lisa Simpson) and Chuck Berry's "School Day" (by Nancy Cartwright as Bart Simpson, with a little help from Mr. Poindexter) are massacred.