“Synchronicity”--The Police (1983)

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The Police, c. 1983

In 1983, the readers of “Rolling Stone” magazine voted “Synchronicity,” the last studio album that the Police ever released, “Album of the Year.” Not bad for a band in the late stages of disintegration.

Their success, worldwide, had attracted comparisons with the Beatles. The Police were spearheading the second “British invasion” of America. They were making more money than the Beatles had, selling more records, causing more hysteria, playing to bigger crowds. By most quantifiable measures, the Police were outdoing what everybody, up until then, had believed this band could do.

Sting had come back from his summer holidays with three hits in his back pocket: “Every Breath You Take,” “Wrapped Around Your Finger” and “King Of Pain.”

In London, he recorded demos and played them to Miles Copeland, the band’s manager (and the drummer’s big brother) and Hugh Padgham, who was to produce the album. Miles was impressed and arranged for the band to fly out to Air Studios on Montserrat to start recording.

Hugh Padgham hadn’t seen much of the band since the “Ghost in the Machine” sessions the year before. He was shocked to see how badly relations between the three of them had deteriorated.

“By now,” Hugh said, “they were all really tired of each other--Sting and Stewart weren’t getting on well and, although Andy didn’t show as much venom, he could be quite grumpy--and there were both verbal and physical fights in the studio.”

The main studio, it was decided, was not the best acoustic for Stewart’s drum sound. Accordingly, the drums were set up in the dining room with long cables feeding the mic signals to the desk. A video camera was set up in front of the kit, with a monitor in the control room, so that Hugh, Sting and Andy, could see Stewart but Stewart could not see the others. And, while Hugh, Sting and Andy could speak to Stewart over the talkback in his headphones, he could only talk to them if they deigned to open the faders to the drum mics. This meant that, often, after a take, he would be left for an age while the others discussed its merits before they passed down their judgement.

And, on top of that, the dining room didn't have much in the way of air conditioning. Sometimes Stewart got so sweaty, the sticks flew out of his hands. They had to be gaffer-taped in place.

The recording of "Every Breath You Take" brought a low point.

"Sting wanted Stewart to just play a very straight rhythm with no fills or anything," Hugh said, "and that was the complete antithesis of what Stewart was about. Stewart would say, 'I want to fucking put my drum part on it!' and Sting would say, 'I don't want you to put your fucking drum part on it! I want you to put what I want you to put on it!'"

After ten days, they had nothing on tape that they could agree was worth keeping.

Miles Copeland was sent for, and a meeting was convened by the swimming pool to try to work out a compromise. Sting did not want to compromise.

There is a story, possibly apocryphal, that Miles, given the choice between a proven business asset and filial loyalty, chose the former and said to Stewart, "Just fuck off and play the drums!"

Eventually they got enough on tape to start mixing and overdubbing. They reconvened at Studio Morin-Heights, in the Laurentian Mountains, southern Quebec, to mix the album.

Sting and Stewart enjoyed skiing--but not together.

The usual routine was that Sting would go skiing and, while he was away, Stewart would, say, overdub a hi-hat part. Then Stewart would go skiing, and Sting, fresh from the slopes, would wipe the hi-hat part.

It was not a productive workflow.

Like Ringo and George on Beatles albums, Stewart and Andy got one song each—"Miss Gradenko" was Stewart's and "Mother" was Andy's.

The new album was called "Synchronicity," a title stolen from "Synchronizität als ein Prinzip akausaler Zusammenhänge (Synchronicity: An Acausal Connecting Principle)," by the analytical psychiatrist C.G. Jung, which advances the theory (in a nutshell) that events we call coincidences are in fact manifestations of a deeper order that may be able to transcend the known dimensions of time and space.

A lot of the songs are vaguely informed by this metaphorical view of reality. "Synchronicity II" links a domestic situation where a family is falling apart with a monster appearing in a Scottish loch. "King Of Pain" talks of a black spot on the sun, dead salmon in a waterfall and butterflies in spiders' webs.

The themes of pain and damage crop up a lot.

"'Synchronicity' is really more autobiographical," Sting told "NME." "It's about my mental breakdown and the putting back together of that personality."

Following the established pattern, the single “Every Breath You Take” was released before the album.

Earlier in 1983, in March, while they were in Los Angeles, they shot a video for the song. It was directed by Lol Creme and Kevin Godley, who, after their adventures in 10cc and Godley & Creme, had become hotshot video directors.

Sting plays an upright double bass. Four elderly gentlemen play violins. Behind a huge, ornate window, a window cleaner goes about his work.

The camera dwells on Sting’s face. He has never looked more beautiful nor more menacing.

It is often cited as one of the best pop videos ever made. Daniel Pearl, who shot it, would win the first MTV Best Cinematography award for his contribution.

A&M Records executive Jeff Ayeroff reckoned the video probably cost $75,000 to $100,000. “With a good video, the return on your investment was phenomenal.”

And, to prove the point, MTV put it into heavy rotation and sales rocketed.

Thirty-six years later, in May 2019, BMI handed an award to Sting recognising “Every Breath You Take” as the most-played song in the history of radio. Up to that date, it had received 15 million plays and had already generated over a third of Sting’s music publishing income.

Sting has always been mystified by people’s reactions to “Every Breath.” He has called it a “nasty little song” about obsession, jealousy and surveillance. Others have pointed out its liturgical resonances. Sting was brought up in the Roman Catholic faith and the repetition in the lyric is prayer-like, similar to the cadences of traditional Catholic prayer.

“One couple told me,” Sting said, ‘“Oh, we love that song; it was the main song played at our wedding.’” I thought, “Well, good luck with that.”

“Synchronicity,” the album, reached its “worldwide consolidated airdate” in mid-June. It went straight to number one on the album chart and stayed in the Top 100 well into the following year. The jury’s still out on whether it was indeed the band’s finest hour, but its depth and intensity, musically and lyrically, puts it in an entirely different universe to “De Do Do Do, De Da Da Da” or “So Lonely.”

On 18th August, the Police played Shea Stadium. After three songs from “Synchronicity,” Sting led the audience in singing “Message In A Bottle” and they went wild. After “Don’t Stand So Close To Me,” he addressed the adoring crowd: “I’d like to thank the Beatles for lending us their stadium.”

For an encore, he took off his shirt in front of 70,000 worshippers.

“It all seems to have happened step by step,” Sting told “Smash Hits.” “And this time everything fell into place. We’ve got the biggest album, the biggest single, the biggest video, the biggest concert tour.

“What else was there to do after reaching this peak?’

Caroline and David Stafford have collaborated on scores of dramas, documentaries and comedy series for radio and TV over the years, as well as writing biographies of Randy Newman, Kenny Everett, Adam Faith, Billy Fury and Lionel Bart. Their recent biography, “The Police: Every Little Thing” is a tale of ambition, anger and attrition both on the road and in the studio.

*The views expressed in this essay are those of the author and may not reflect those of the Library of the Congress.