

The Police files

With the pop group about to tour again, guitarist Andy Summers explains how his obsession with photography kept him sane during the crazy years.

COVER STORY JOHN PRESTON

SOMETHING ODD HAPPENED to Andy Summers the other day. He went to his favourite neighbourhood restaurant near his home in Venice Beach, Los Angeles - something he does about once a week. Normally, he sits there without anyone recognising him but this time all the waiters asked for his autograph.

"I think that's when it really sunk in," he says. "Ever since then I've woken up every morning and thought, 'How much longer have I got like this? How much more time am I going to be able to spend with my wife and kids before I enter this ...'" - he breaks off and gives a heartfelt-sounding wheeze, before continuing - "... this completely other world?"

At the end of May, Summers and the other two members of the Police, Sting and Stewart Copeland, will start a world tour in North America, ticket sales for which have exceeded even Summers's most fevered expectations. "Do you know how long it took for us to sell out Madison Square Garden?" he asks. "Four minutes. I mean, it's quite hard to wipe the smile off your face after hearing something like that." They will almost certainly include Australia on their tour.

Quite coincidentally, Summers insists, a book of his photographs is being published, too. *I'll Be Watching You: Inside the Police*, comprises 600 of his photographs whittled down from the 25,000 that he took between 1980 and 1983. It's true that photographers tend to be a pretty trigger-happy bunch, yet 25,000 photographs still seems a hell of a lot to take in just three years. "Well, I am an obsessive sort of guy," Summers admits. "When I pursue something, I tend to do so very single-mindedly." In fact, Summers is so loath to be parted from his camera that when he and his wife go on holiday, she periodically has to remind him, "Life over photographs, Andy".

Here, in what the press release breathlessly calls "a sumptuous volume, beating with musical energy, nostalgia and atmospheric beauty", are pictures of Summers's band



Going Japanese ... Stewart Copeland, Sting and Andy Summers with a Zen master, or roshi, at a railway station in Kyoto in 1980.

'I always felt that we hadn't used up our creative juices.'
Andy Summers

mates on and off stage, with the occasional picture of a naked woman artfully posed with one of his guitars.

For Summers, photography started as a way of alleviating the boredom when he was on tour. "It meant I could say to myself, 'I'm not just this moron in a hotel room pretending that I'm leading a normal life.' It made me feel like a living, breathing human being again.

"It also allowed me to make some sense of what we were going through at the time. Instead of thinking, 'There's Sting and Stewart, and Stewart's really pissing me off right now', I was able to see them as these two shapes and as part of a more general composition. In that sense it gave me a degree of objectivity when everything around us was getting more and more out of control.

"Towards the end of the Police we didn't even leave our hotel rooms because it was too much hassle. We just led this existence behind darkened windows and with minders everywhere you looked. Under those circumstances, it became very hard to remember that, at the end of the day, what we were doing was just f---ing pop music."

At one point Summers's obsession with photography became so consuming that he rigged up on the side of the stage cameras that he could activate by hitting buttons on his guitar-pedal board. He was thus able to perform and take photographs of himself at the same time.

When I put it to him that he seems to have taken narcissism to new heights, Summers concedes there might be something in this. "Mmm, it does seem strange, doesn't it? I was going through a divorce at the time, so that might have had something to do with it ..." He subsequently remarried his wife, Layla. "But most of all it was a way of keeping

myself in the picture. I don't think it was insecurity; it was just making sure I was in there somewhere."

Certainly Summers was the least visible member of the Police, the small one with delicate features who appeared slightly distanced from what was going on around him. In rock music this attitude invariably means that, sooner or later, you'll be hailed as the true genius of the band. In Summers's case his air of detachment may have had something to do with the fact that he was 10 years older than the other two and thus more inured to all the hysteria and hero-worshipping.

Running through the book in the accompanying captions is a note of increasing disillusionment, a sense that Summers didn't much care for fame. "It can be very scary. It's like having huge muscles and walking on eggshells at the same time. All three of us are, I hope, gentlemen. But fame does do strange things to people. I think it's impossible not to feel slightly elevated from everyone else. That can be difficult to live with. Certainly, after the Police split up I felt psychologically shattered and it took me a couple of years to get back down onto Planet Earth."

Yet here he is about to descend into the maelstrom once more: a man of 64 with a string of highly regarded solo albums to his name, as well as an entertaining and well-written autobiography. "I know, I know ... I can't pretend I didn't have some disquiet about it. In January we spent two weeks rehearsing in Vancouver, and on the way there I thought to myself, 'Right, I've got to get through this.'

"But then, after three days, I was beginning to suspect that it would never work. It was as if we were having to cross this extremely rocky psychological terrain and it's not as if



Beached ... Sting relaxes on Brampton Island in 1980.

SPE 008

we're particularly mellow guys. In fact, we're all pretty pushy and so everything does tend to get tense.

"At one point in particular I thought, 'F---, I'm back with this lot again and I really don't want to do it.' What made it even worse was that we were being filmed the whole time, so it would have been difficult to walk away. We were caught like fish in the net. But then, all at once, things got better. It was as if the clouds parted; we started joking and suddenly it was as if we'd slipped back into this collective psyche. It's difficult to put into words, but it was a great feeling - something that, in some respects anyway, I realised I'd missed a lot."

Summers is honest enough to admit that the money was a big incentive; the band stands to earn more than \$135 million from the North American tour alone. "Well, yeah, of course it's a factor, but it's not the only one. I always felt that we hadn't used up our creative juices and that we didn't make enough albums. It was as if we f---ed off

without ever saying goodbye to the world. This is like a chance to make amends."

There was also a sense that the hand of destiny was hovering somewhere over the Police's reunion, just as it had been over their formation. "I've always felt destiny had something to do with it," Summers says. After spells with Zoot Money's Big Roll Band and Eric Burdon's New Animals, Summers - on a bizarre evening in 1977 - found himself impersonating Mike Oldfield at a performance of *Tubular Bells* in Newcastle.

"Mike didn't like performing very much and I was asked to take his place. I wasn't doing anything else at the time and so I said yes. The support band that evening was Last Exit, with Sting on bass and vocals. A couple of weeks later I ran into Stewart on a Tube train in London and shortly after that we formed the Police."

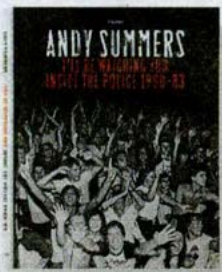
Thirty years on, and many public squabbles later, they're off again. That, of course, is assuming they don't start tearing one

another's throats out before the tour gets under way. There again, Summers tended to stay apart from the fray, with most of the bust-ups and fist fights being between Sting and Copeland.

"In one sense I suppose it's quite good that people think we hate one another because they'll come to see us wondering if we're going to have a big fight on stage," Summers says. "But if there was any real animosity we simply wouldn't be getting back together. Although it's true that we have had our differences, I promise you they have been hugely exaggerated. In fact, I'd say there's a real bedrock of love there."

But didn't Copeland once have a piece of paper stuck to his drums with "Sting. Is. A. C---" written on it? "Well, yes," Summers admits. "That is true; he did it so he'd hit them even harder. But he hasn't done it this time round and, right now, I'm feeling pretty confident he's not going to."

Telegraph, London



ANDY SUMMERS
I'll Be Watching You: Inside the Police, 1980-83

I'll Be Watching You: Inside the Police, 1980-83, by Andy Summers, is published by Taschen in June, in a signed and numbered collector's edition, at \$950; limited to 1500 copies worldwide; www.taschen.com.