

Andy Summers

Since the unofficial split of The Police in 1984, guitarist Andy Summers has built a successful solo career, releasing various albums and collaborative works of the jazz, classical and world music persuasion. So how does he feel about being on the road again this year for The Police's worldwide reunion tour?

Paul Tingen

Rock concert listings have in recent years become increasingly surreal, filled as they are with the names of reformed bands from the distant past — Genesis, The Police, Steely Dan, The Cars, Wet Wet Wet, The Stranglers, Squeeze, and even Led Zeppelin. If *Doctor Who* were to appear on TV as well, the illusion of the past overtaking the present would be complete. What's that? Oh dear.

It's easy to be cynical about these backward-looking band reunions because, so far, no reformed band has made a credible claim to superseding the artistic achievements of their heyday. Big bucks, rather than music, appear to be the motive in most cases, but I sense that there's more to it. For starters, most people find an opportunity to turn back

the clock and attempt to revisit the intensity and aliveness of adolescence hard to resist. In addition, many of the above-mentioned bands went through a period during which they were derided as dinosaurs. Quite a few have since been rehabilitated as venerable living rock legends, so why not go out and enjoy the adulation?

The most critically acclaimed reunion has arguably been the 30-year anniversary tour of The Police. The reason for this may be that they were one of the few big bands to escape a period of critical censure. When The Police burst onto the international stage in 1977, they rode the coat-tails of the trendy post-punk movement. Eventually becoming the biggest band in the world, Sting, Stewart Copeland and Andy Summers were wise enough to quit at the height of their success in 1984, before they had descended into too much Spinal Tap-like excess.

During their tenure, The Police were responsible for a large number of respectable hit singles — 'Message In A Bottle', 'Roxanne' and 'Every Breath You Take' — as well as five widely acclaimed studio albums, from *Outlandos d'Amour* (1977) to *Synchronicity* (1983).

The massive commercial success of The Police Reunion Tour 2007/08, with stadium-sized gigs selling out in minutes, 1.5 million tickets sold worldwide and a gross revenue of £80 million, has nevertheless taken many by surprise, even the band members themselves. Visit www.thepolice.com or YouTube, and you'll find guitarist Andy Summers telling of his fear that nobody would turn up. He had probably spent too many years playing jazz clubs and releasing relatively

■ A Mesa Boogie Triaxis programmable valve preamp sits at the heart of Andy Summers' 2007 touring rig.



obscure experimental and jazz-tinged solo albums to instantly tag on to the difference in scale between the commercial appeal of his solo work and that of The Police.

But the punters are en masse laying out serious money for tickets. As a result, Summers, 64, is now in the middle of a year-long Police reunion tour, being worshipped by tens of thousands of delirious fans and seeing his bank balance swell by millions. One would imagine that he is flying high and bubbling with enthusiasm. Not so, it appears, on the morning that I interview him on his hotel phone. Such is the guitarist's current profile that he has taken to registering in hotels under a pseudonym. Having just called the hotel, the unusual name is still lingering in my mind and I ask Summers about it. In reply, the guitarist barks, "Well, if I told you and you printed it, there would be no more point in using it, would there?" Silence. OK, that didn't go down too well, so best ask him about

when they both performed at the New York Guitar Festival. There was a further prompt by preparatory sessions for a concerto for classical and electric guitar and orchestra to be written by American composer Ingram Marshall — the finished piece, 'Dark Fluorescence', was eventually premiered in New York in 2005. Asking Summers

and I would be singing over the top of it, a bit like a soprano singer over a piano accompaniment."

First You Build A Cloud contains one Police track, 'Bring On The Night', which opens with a sample of a strange disembodied voice warning "brother Andrew" that there's "no greater deception than religious deception." I wondered whether

"I do play solos now and they're always high points. Excuse the lack of modesty, but they're blazing."

how the album first emerged from these events initially runs into yet more turbulence when he learns that the interviewer hasn't yet received a physical copy of the album. "What's the point of doing this interview?" he growls, but is assuaged when told that WMA files have been sent via email and that yours truly has actually heard the whole album. He audibly relaxes further when I tell him that I play the classical guitar.

the song's beginning and title were a political statement, but apparently it came from a happy accident. "It was one of these weird things that happened in the studio," explained Summers. "I was using my Gibson 335 and a whole bunch of fuzz pedals — among them the Fulltone Ultimate Octave pedal — and was about to overdub for the first time, with the guitar up at a hair-raising level. There was so much crap in the signal that



something that will make him smile. "How are things going with the tour?" I ask, sweetly. But Summers is having none of it. "What kind of question is that?" he snarls, "I can't answer that. You have to ask me specific questions." The press officer who arranged the interview admits later that Summers has a reputation as a difficult interviewee, with the caveat that since he is The Police's guitarist, he has "probably deserved" [sic] the right to be awkward.

Fearing that Summers is about to hang up, the safest way forward appears to be to ask him about the very thing that brought about this interview — the new album he has produced together with classical guitarist Ben Verdery, *First You Build A Cloud*, issued on Summers' manager's Rare label. Recorded at Summers' home studio in Venice Beach, Los Angeles, as far back as 2004, it's apparently been released now to coincide with Summers' currently enhanced profile.

Building clouds

First You Build A Cloud was the result of a chance meeting between Summers and Verdery in 2002,

"I'm very into classical guitar," Summers replies, "and I was familiar with Ben's playing, particularly an album with him performing Bach's sixth Cello Suite. We immediately hit it off and it turned out that he was a big Police fan. We became best friends and he came out to my place in California, where we found that, although we play in very different styles, we had a common musical knowledge and language. Ingram also came to the studio to see how we worked together. Ben and I found that improvising together worked really well, so we went on to create a duo album like that. Of course, when you improvise, not everything works, so we occasionally needed to tighten certain tracks up afterwards and make them slightly more composed. Ben works a lot with altered tunings and he likes to play arpeggios in modes, rather than using chord changes. I would figure out what mode he was playing and dive in and create lines against it, purely by ear, feel, and instinct. I mostly used a Steve Klein guitar, delays and an octave divider to create a beautiful ethereal sound. Ben gets this broad middle range out of his classical guitar

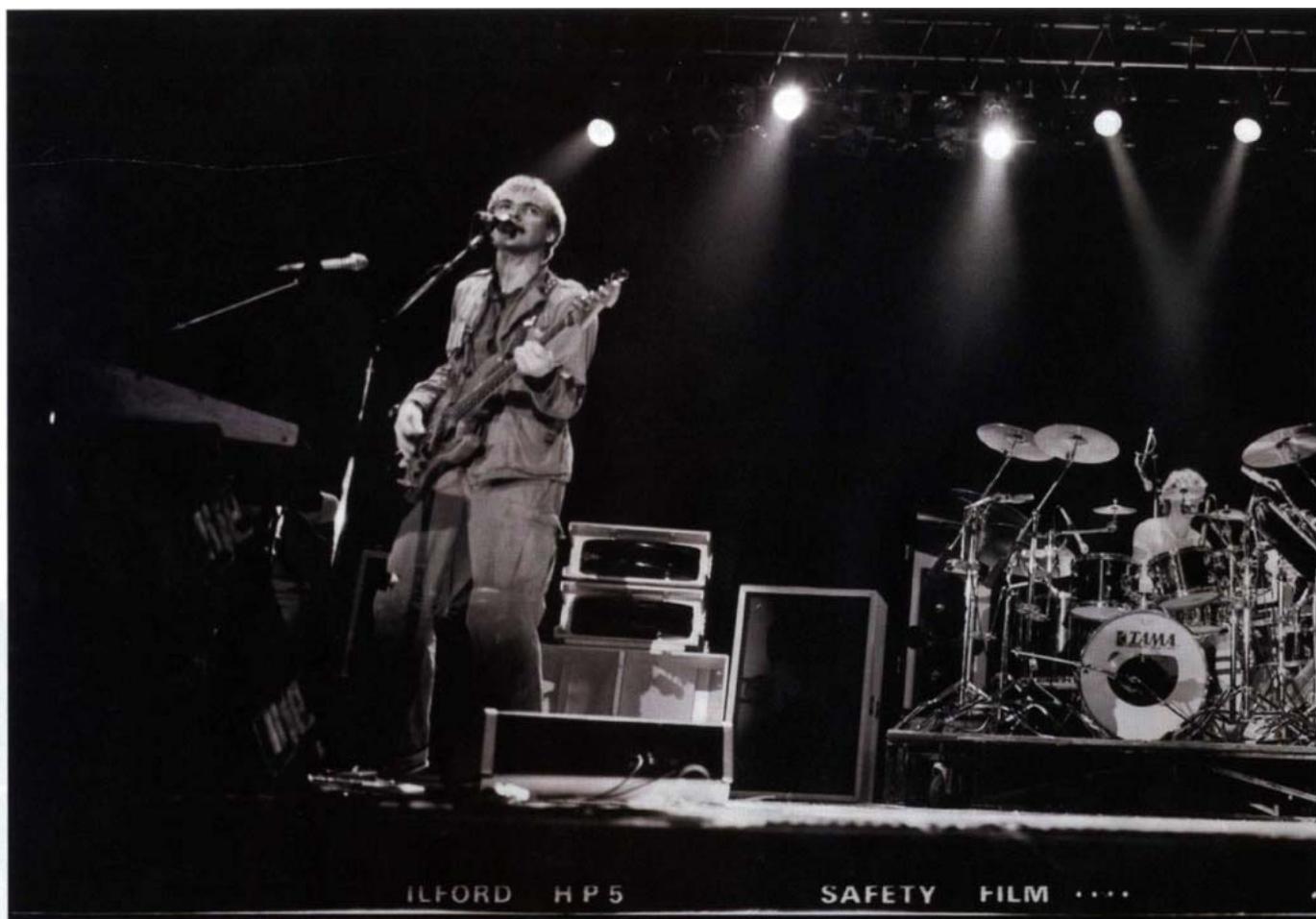
my pickups picked up this radio station. It was one of those magical little moments and fitted perfectly with the track, so we left it there."

Bring on The Police

Having had the space to elaborate on his new album, Summers now seems at ease. For fear of upsetting him again, I don't have the heart to ask him about his other newly published work, since I haven't received this yet either. *I'll Be* »



Summers' Klon Centaur overdrive is "almost always switched on".



» *Watching You: Inside The Police 1980-83* is a large near 400-page book full of Summers' photos of The Police on tour and in the studio. For strong coffee tables only, this weighty tome not only contains hundreds of great black & white pictures, but also diary musings by the guitarist, in which he gives an entertaining and sometimes chilling perspective of life in a very successful band that's continuously on the go.

“Sting became a better singer after the Police.”

Summers writes, 'Rather than merely touring, we surge along on the top of a giant wave — a tsunami powered by music with a light drizzling of power, sex and money. This kind of success seems like an act of penetration on a public scale. Many have likened live performance to sex, but none quite like this. Summers also details the disintegration of his marriage and the increasing

stresses of the band and touring. On 12th March 1982, he wonders, 'Do you hate touring or love it? It's a job, someone's gotta do it. You shrug and then leap like a rabid dog onto the stage.' The following August, he notes, 'I'm bored, this is dangerous,' and the next day, 'This [hotel] room feels like a cell filled with death.'

We all know how it ended — even as they re-convened in 1986 for an Amnesty International

tour and briefly tried to record something. The Police were dead meat by the time their *Synchronicity* tour ended in March 1984. Yet three decades later, Summers, a self-declared old lover of serious music, on the verge of pensionable age, has become embroiled in another round of playing 'Do Do Do Da Da Da', 'Every Little Thing She Does Is Magic' and 'Don't Stand So Close To

Me'. One wonders how he has fared. Luckily, he's happy to elaborate (only to specific questions, mind you) and, at times, sounds bullishly enthusiastic. Nonetheless, the whiff of boredom creeps in between the lines.

24-truck eight-bus juggernaut

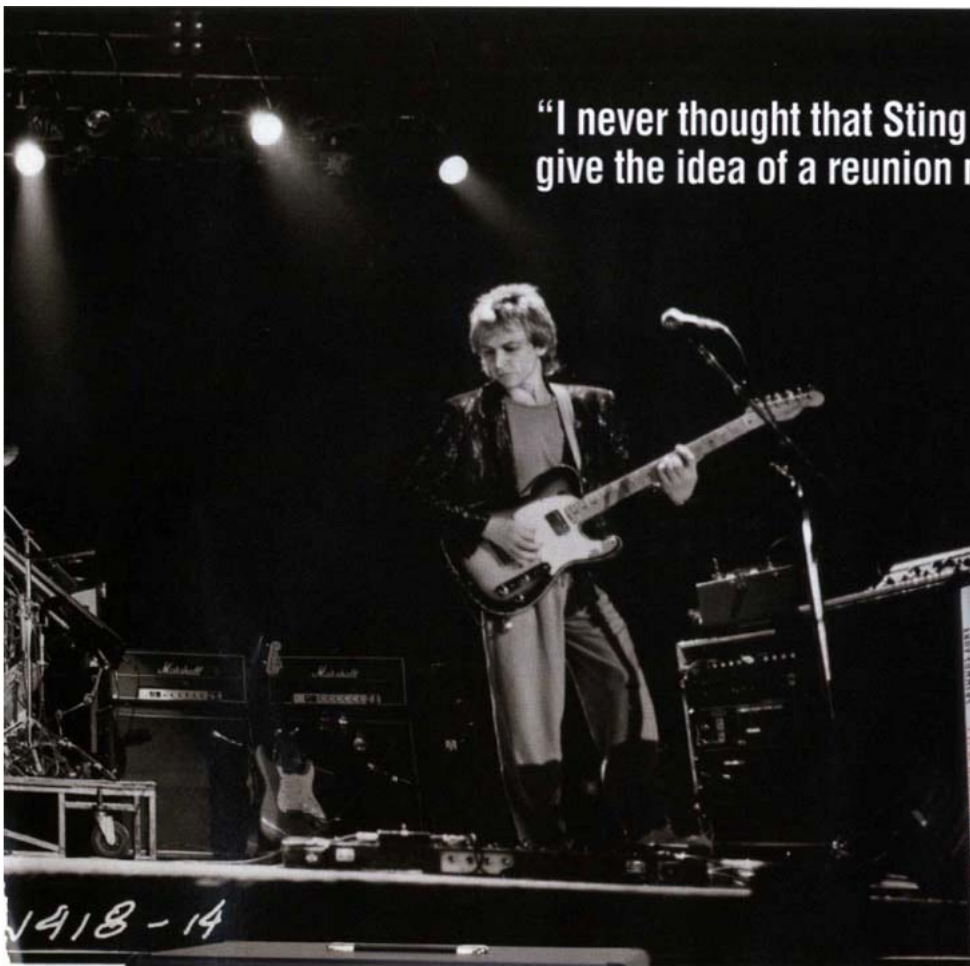
Conventional wisdom has it that Sting was, for 30-plus years, the obstacle to The Police reforming. But an official-looking site, www.thepolice.com, quotes a *New York Post* story that claims the reunion was the singer's idea all along, and that he needed six months to convince Copeland and Summers. This story is rather at odds with recorded interviews with the three band members, and when queried, Summers dismisses it as, "completely untrue. I never thought that Sting would do it, so I didn't give the idea of a reunion much thought. But amazingly, so late in the day, he was up for it. And of course we were going to embrace it! Who wouldn't? This is where the money is, so what are you going to do?"

In search of serious money, the commendably honest Summers now finds himself, with 110 others, part of the 24-truck and eight-bus juggernaut that is the Police Reunion Tour 2007/08. Earlier this year, the trio convened for two fortnights at Sting's villa in Tuscany to choose and rehearse the songs. This was followed by another two sets of rehearsals in Vancouver with

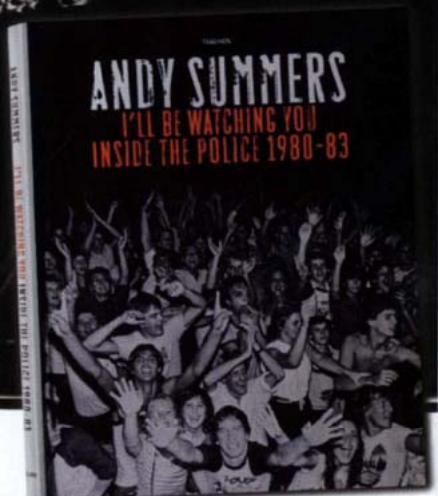


▲ With its ability to reconfigure itself under the control of the preamp, Mesa's flagship 2:90 power amp makes the perfect partner for a Triaxis.

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Summers’ recently published book of tour and studio photographs presents an insider’s view of The Police at the height of their fame.



V418-14



In place of the twin Marshall 4x12s above, Summers now runs a wet-dry-wet rig based on 2x12 Mesa Rectifier cabinets.

the stage production, which featured an oval stage layout designed by Patrick Woodroffe, a light show created by Danny Nolan and stage video images by Kevin Williams and Jim Gable. The world tour kicked off on 28th May 2007 in Vancouver, did the rounds of North America and Europe, and culminates in dates in South America, Australia, New Zealand and Japan during December-February. Oh, and because some European dates were cancelled due to Sting’s throat infection, four European catch-up concerts are planned in June 2008.

With over a 100 concerts, mostly in large arenas and stadiums, spread out over about half a year of actual touring, it’s a pretty gruelling schedule by any standard. But does Summers find it any more challenging than thirty years

ago? “Age does not seem to be an issue for me,” he replies. “I have absolutely no problems with the physical performance. I am as blazing as ever. When you see the show, you’ll see that it’s very athletic for me. I’m still jumping off the drum riser and throwing rock poses [laughs]. I do believe in being in the best possible physical shape.

You play best when you’re loose, when there’s no tension, so I do yoga every day.

Given that drumming is very physical, I think it’s harder on Stewart than on anybody, and I tend to worry more about him making it than about myself. Sting became a better singer after the Police. He really learned about the technical aspects of singing and sounds great now.”

“Of course, there are the rigours of touring — making sure you don’t go mad. Obviously, we travel in pretty luxurious circumstances, but you still have to make sure that you keep your head in one place. In fact, my frustration is that because of the size of the tour and the long distances, it’s like two days on and two days off. That drives me nuts! When I toured solo, I would play five nights in a row and have no problem with it. Certainly, playing live is a great experience. I like the process of recording, of fulfilling a vision of what your album might be, but ultimately, playing music and being in the moment and the interaction

with the audience is the purest and highest way of playing music.”

Slick and professional

Performing Musician caught The Police late October at Wembley Arena, the last of their European gigs of 2007. Enjoying a seat right at the front, not far from the celebrities in the audience — which, as far as we could see, consisted of Eric Clapton and Sting’s brother — and with hardcore fans who had coughed up £95 each for the seats immediately behind, it was possible to observe Copeland, Sting and Summers very close up. They were slick and professional, skillfully working their way through a set list that included all of their greatest hits and has remained remarkably similar throughout the tour. Summers played a red Stratocaster for most of the evening and, for a few songs, switched to the Fender’s Custom Shop signature model based on his legendary modified 1961 Telecaster.

Sting, however, perhaps still a little under the weather from that throat infection, appeared tired and didn’t move with any of the liveliness he had as a young man. Copeland, who used to drive the band with his intense, slightly ahead of the beat drumming, gave the impression of

Photo © Peter Cornish



▲ Like many top touring players, Summers' effects control originally revolved around a custom-made Pete Cornish pedalboard.

» merely hanging in there. Only Summers seemed entirely comfortable.

To get the guitarist to talk about live performance with The Police, I tell him about my impressions when seeing The Police live on television in the early eighties, on the German program *Rockpalast*. They were spellbinding, living extremely dangerously, deconstructing and constructing almost all songs to an astonishing degree and sometimes almost veering into free jazz. "As a kid, I was a jazz freak," Summers comments. "I listened to jazz guitarists and I aspired to play like them and to be able to improvise. Sting also came from a jazz fusion background, and when we got together in a rock band, we had this more interesting aspect to mix into the rock music."

"As a band, we have always felt disrespectful towards our own recordings. We always tended to change things and be in the moment. So, getting ready for the reunion tour, we didn't listen to any of our records. It was more a question of, 'let's see what we can do with the songs, how we can really bring them to life and make them sound vital and great now'. The songs will always have a certain amount of structure — the chords in 'Message In A Bottle' are fairly sacrosanct. But we have new ideas on the songs and play them better now than we used to. I've put in another twenty years of playing and I've been in all sorts of incredible musical situations, and all of this adds to your strength."

Blazing solos

The list of musicians Summers has played with since the early eighties is certainly impressive and includes Robert Fripp, John Etheridge, Herbie Hancock, Vinnie Colaiuta and Deborah Harry. He teamed up with Robert Fripp for *I Advance Masked* (1982) and *Bewitched* (1984), and since then, Summers has regularly released solo albums, mostly exploring an experimental jazz fusion direction. Two excellent explorations of his jazz roots, *Green Chimneys* (featuring the music

of Thelonius Monk) and *Peggy's Blue Skylight* (with pieces by Charles Mingus) were recently re-released on the Rare label.

So how, specifically, did all of this experience translate into the current Police reunion tour? "Given that this is a reunion tour," says Summers, "and that people pay a lot of money for these tickets, we have to go out there and do two hours of entertainment. People want to hear all the hits and we were advised not to play anything new. We're privileged enough to have all those hits, and we play them with quite a bit of re-arranging and open moments that make things sound very now and modern. I think some of the most exciting moments are when we really open up and take off. But you can't get too out there — we're playing rock, not jazz."

"I've basically spent the last 20 years playing guitar solos [laughs]. Back in the eighties, we came out of the punk era, and there was this horrible thing of not being supposed to play guitar solos. It's a different time now and we have to go out and excite people. Sting has a different attitude about it, so I do play solos now — quite long ones — and they're always high points. Excuse the lack of modesty, but they're blazing [laughs]. Some of the harmonic stuff I do in the solos is probably pushing it a bit. A lot of the critics have picked up on that and I'm getting pretty big accolades, which is nice for me. There

"...we were advised not to play anything new."

are only three of us on stage and the guitar covers so much ground. I don't want to sound like a bighead, but you have to be pretty good. I cover lots of colours and sounds with my guitar pedals, which are fabulous and slicker than before. The technology is so good now."

Summers' big rock stereo rig

A large part of Summers' focus for the reunion tour was to update his equipment to get what he calls, "this incredible state of the art guitar sound."

"I'd been using a small pedalboard for years with only a few effects," Summers explains. "For the tour, I went back to the big rock stereo sound with lots of effects, split in a wet/dry setup, with mono/dry in the middle and the left and right for a big wet stereo sound. I had to sort out all the colours for each song, program everything and make it work with the Bob Bradshaw pedal switching board. I took a long look around at what was out there in terms of effects and pedals, and ended up using a combination of raw analogue pedals and digital devices. Everything is switched together and very quiet."

"When we first started rehearsing, I was hitting every pedal in sight. It worked, but it was cumbersome, so we decided to take that out of the loop. The effects are now operated by my tech guy, Dennis Smith, from an off-stage position. Dennis has worked with me for many years and he's also a very good musician. You couldn't do it if you weren't, because when you come to the end of a chorus and go into a guitar

solo, the change in guitar sound has to come right on the beat. I can be miles away from the pedalboard and rely on Dennis to switch the sounds as needed. I can override what Dennis does at any time, so it's like we're both in charge. It gives me a lot of freedom."

To complete Summers' on-stage sense of freedom on tour, his guitar is connected to his amplifiers via three Sennheiser EW500G2 wireless systems, and he also uses the Ultimate Ears in-ear monitoring system. "I hate in-ear monitor systems," Summers remarks, "I absolutely loathe them. I've played for years on and off with earplugs in to protect my hearing. I have a little bit of tinnitus in my left ear, but other than that my hearing is absolutely fine. Some people say that in-ear monitor systems are not good because it goes straight to your ear, but you can completely reduce the volume and still get a clear picture. They were an absolute bitch to get used to because it's just not natural. At the end of the night, when we take a bow in front of the audience, I pull out the in-ear monitors and the audience alone is just deafening. It's overwhelming."

With this groundswell of adoration flooding over them, are The Police tempted to extend their reunion and perhaps even record some new material? "Not right now," replies Summers. "We're still in the middle of a reunion tour and people

don't like us suddenly laying on a song they've never heard before. But after the tour, the whole situation is an open door. We'll see if we get as far as that. For now, the challenge is to go on stage and not get jaded. These songs are very simple to play for me and you don't want to knock them out like a factory every night. I'm much too sophisticated a musician for that. It's just one of life's ironies that I go out and play all of these pop songs. My worry is that playing them every night is dumbing down for me."

"This tour is pretty all-devouring. Initially, I left my whole musical universe behind. That really didn't work for me, so I'm trying to correct it now. I like playing the guitar and I have a classical guitar and a Fender here in my hotel room, which I play every day. I like to go on stage with my hands moving and warmed up. I also have a lot of music with me now. I'm trying to keep my own musical autonomy outside of playing The Police set every night. I almost feel like I'm done now with the tour, that I don't really need to do any more. I've had the experience and want to go home, but it ain't going to happen. We still need to do the second leg of the North American tour and then we go to South America, Japan, and Australia. It's an incredible situation and nothing to moan about really. When I go on stage, it's about being in the moment. Usually, that does come, because every night you walk out there's this huge mob and it's exciting..."

Hmm... are those the words 'I wish I had his problems!' echoing around the arena? ■ PM