

The background of the cover is a light yellow-green gradient. It is decorated with several stylized, light green leaf motifs that appear to be floating or falling from the top left towards the bottom right. These motifs are scattered across the entire page, with some appearing near the top and others near the bottom.

THE WORDS AND MUSIC OF STING

Christopher Gable

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The Words and Music of Sting

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THE PRAEGER SINGER-SONGWRITER COLLECTION

The Words and Music of Sting

Christopher Gable

James E. Perone, Series Editor

PRAEGER

Westport, Connecticut
London

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Gable, Christopher, 1968–

The words and music of Sting / Christopher Gable.

p. cm. — (The Praeger singer-songwriter collection, ISSN 1553–3484)

Includes bibliographical references, discography, filmography, and index.

ISBN 978–0–275–99360–3 (alk. paper)

1. Sting (Musician)—Criticism and interpretation. 2. Rock music—
History and criticism I. Title.

ML420.S847G33 2009

782.42166092—dc22 2008037530

British Library Cataloguing in Publication Data is available.

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express written consent of the publisher.

Library of Congress Catalog Card Number: 2008037530

ISBN: 978–0–275–99360–3

ISSN: 1553–3484

First published in 2009

Praeger Publishers, 88 Post Road West, Westport, CT 06881

An imprint of Greenwood Publishing Group, Inc.

www.praeger.com

Printed in the United States of America



The paper used in this book complies with the
Permanent Paper Standard issued by the National
Information Standards Organization (Z39.48–1984).

10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

For my brother Ted, who first turned me on to The Police
and went with me to the *Synchronicity* concert at Hollywood Park.
He would have liked this.
And for Cora, who I hope will read this someday.

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Series Foreword

Although the term, *Singer-Songwriters*, might most frequently be associated with a cadre of musicians of the early 1970s such as Paul Simon, James Taylor, Carly Simon, Joni Mitchell, Cat Stevens, and Carole King, the Praeger Singer-Songwriter Collection defines singer-songwriters more broadly, both in terms of style and in terms of time period. The series includes volumes on musicians who have been active from approximately the 1960s through the present. Musicians who write and record in folk, rock, soul, hip-hop, country, and various hybrids of these styles will be represented. Therefore, some of the early 1970s introspective singer-songwriters named above will be included, but not exclusively.

What do the individuals included in this series have in common? Some have never collaborated as writers. But, while some have done so, all have written and recorded commercially successful and/or historically important music *and* lyrics at some point in their careers.

The authors who contribute to the series also exhibit diversity. Some are scholars who are trained primarily as musicians, while others have such areas of specialization as American studies, history, sociology, popular culture studies, literature, and rhetoric. The authors share a high level of scholarship, accessibility in their writing, and a true insight into the work of the artists they study. The authors are also focused on the output of their subjects and how it relates to their subject's biography and the society around them; however, biography in and of itself is not a major focus of the books in this series.

Given the diversity of the musicians who are the subject of books in this series, and given the diversity of viewpoint of the authors, volumes in the

series will differ from book to book. All, however, will be organized chronologically around the compositions and recorded performances of their subjects. All of the books in the series should also serve as listeners' guides to the music of their subjects, making them companions to the artists' recorded output.

James E. Perone
Series Editor

Acknowledgments

Writing a first book is possibly a bit like being plunked down on a sailboat on the open water and expected to bring the thing back to the dock. One has a general idea where to go and how to get there (by the wind), but one doesn't know which rope to pull or which way starboard is. I would like to thank the following deckhands, navigators, and able bodies for their invaluable help: Mark Mazullo, Phil Ford, Barb Peterson, Tricia Davis-Muffett and Carroll Muffett, Kat Jayne of Jayne Indexing, James Perone, my editor Dan Harmon, my students at Macalester, and many friends and colleagues who have offered encouragement and ideas. Long-term thanks also to Steven Schmidt, who many years ago encouraged me to stay in music, and who drove us to the *Synchronicity* concert.

Especially grateful thank yous go to my parents and “the in-laws” (who don't live up to the traditional connotations of the term). Jan and Dave Kirby and Dorothy Taylour have been constant sources of love, laughter, and inspiration throughout this voyage. My parents, Fred and Barbara Gable, have made the wind blow in the right direction to get the ship going again with their financial support, encouragement, and guidance. Thanks for those viola lessons that got me started on this musical journey!

And the person who has been on deck the most, without whom this ship would be stranded at sea, is my wife Merie Kirby. Muse, guide, Mommy, sounding board, typist, lifeblood, bibliographic assistant, editor, soul mate. This book is really a collaboration between us, in the truest sense of the word.

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Introduction

It's very hard to talk about music in words. Words are superfluous to the abstract power of music. We can fashion words into poetry so that they are understood the way music is understood, but they only aspire to the condition where music already exists.¹

—Sting, “The Mystery and Religion of Music”
(Berklee College of Music commencement address,
May 15, 1994)

What is music? It's a journey.²

—Sting, *The Journey & the Labyrinth:
The Music of John Dowland*

In late 2006, many Sting fans were perhaps surprised that his new album was a recording of Renaissance lute songs by John Dowland. Here was an international superstar, a veteran of the music and film industries, an environmental and human rights activist and award-winning songwriter with a practically guaranteed fan base, sitting down with a Bosnian lutenist to sing 400-year-old love songs. But, after the initial surprise, those who were familiar with Sting's career trajectory could undoubtedly see the logic behind his new choice of repertoire. For he has always been a risk-taker, both professionally and artistically. His restless energy has served him well and forced him on to hitherto unforeseen paths. He has described himself as a lifelong learner,³ and this curiosity has not let him stagnate for lack of creative direction. Sting's

interest in John Dowland (1563–1626) will be explored further in the conclusion to this book. For now the pertinent element of this project is Sting’s identification with Dowland as a fellow singer-songwriter.

The singer-songwriter tradition as we commonly know it began in the 1960s, with the folk revival. It is often associated with a simple instrumentation of a singer accompanying themselves with a guitar, and Woody Guthrie seems to be the grandfather of the genre. Like a Wagner opera on a much smaller scale, these songs are their own *Gesamtkunstwerk*, where every note, word, and performance is by the singer-songwriter. From Guthrie and Pete Seeger’s influence grew seminal figures of the 1960s like Bob Dylan, Joan Baez, and Paul Simon. The instrumentation eventually expanded to include other accompanying instruments besides guitar, and some singer-songwriters recorded and performed with a backup band. Still, no matter how complex the arrangements became, the crucial element of the genre is that the singer wrote both words and music. In a typical “group” situation it is more of a collective effort, with more collaboration on the writing of songs and different songwriting credits from song to song.

This distinction is important, because a large part of the singer-songwriter’s aesthetic is that of personal expression. In the 1970s, with artists like Joni Mitchell and James Taylor leading the way, the “confessional” mode became the order of the day. Intensely personal, sometimes political subject matter was delivered in the most intimate of ways—directly to the listener’s speakers or headphones.

The reader may be a bit surprised to find Sting included in this series on the singer-songwriter. After all, he initially became famous as a member of The Police, one of the most successful groups in popular music history. But he was, like Paul Simon, the primary songwriter for the larger outfit, and he ultimately gave in to his urge to become a solo artist. He has been described as the child that Joni Mitchell and James Taylor never had.⁴

The music, words, and life of many singer-songwriters are inextricably linked. Sting is no exception. Many of his confessional songs have connections to events in his personal life; these connections are either explicit or implicit. This book will serve as a kind of “road map” through Sting’s life-journey thus far—the signposts being his primary mode of expression: his songs. As we all know, people change over the course of their lives—we develop new interests and new friends, and these new experiences become part of us. Yet despite changes over a person’s lifetime, people also, paradoxically, remain the same. In the following pages we will discover how Sting’s music and choice of subject matter change: from reggae to jazz to country, from lyrics focused on the self to songs about universal love. At the same time, I believe it is possible to discern a through-line in the songs of Sting—examples where similar lyric content occurs over the course of many years, as well as songs that refer musically back to a previous chord progression, melody, riff, or general mood.

This book is not a biography per se; that task has been adequately completed by many other previous writers, including Sting himself, in his memoir *Broken Music* (2003). However, it includes biographical information as it pertains to Sting's creative output. I focus on his career as a solo artist, but also discuss (later in this introduction) his beginnings as a struggling jazz musician and school teacher in the Newcastle region and his subsequent move to London and joining The Police. It must not go unsaid that he would not be where he is today without his seven-plus years as a member of The Police; however, his ambition to become a solo artist was constantly with him and was a major factor in the breakup of the group.

As Sting suggests in the first epigraph above, music is difficult to write about. Despite being performed on very concrete instruments, music itself is an abstract art. In writing about music, writers try to capture at least a portion of not only the meanings of notes and words, but also the emotions evoked and the very essence of the art form. Throughout this book, I am assuming a familiarity with the songs that I discuss and that the reader will have ready access to recordings of The Police and Sting. Because of this, and because of the focus of this series on singer-songwriters, I have concentrated on only the most important Police tracks and on almost all of Sting's solo songs that are readily available. B-sides and miscellaneous soundtrack songs are thus given much less attention. I will essentially provide the reader with a listening guide to Sting's primary body of work. I feel that a chronological approach best reflects his growth as a songwriter: from the punk/reggae hybrid of early Police songs, to his embrace of musical "Britishism" in his middle solo career, to his use of non-Western music, and to his eventual arrival on the stage of adult contemporary rock.

After a brief biographical sketch at the end of this introduction, chapter 1 will examine Sting's major contributions to The Police, up through *Ghost in the Machine* (1981). Chapter 2 focuses on a few representative songs from the height of The Police's fame and their strongest and final album, *Synchronicity* (1983). Chapters 3 and 4 discuss his entry into the world of the "solo artist" with his first three studio albums as well as the live album *Bring on the Night* (1986). Chapter 5, after the darkness of *The Soul Cages* (1991), sees a new life and success for Sting in the 1990s. The final chapter, chapter 6, deals with his most recent two solo albums and their varying degrees of success. In the conclusion, I use the Dowland exploration as an example of his never-satisfied search for creative knowledge.

One of my main goals in teaching my undergraduate music theory classes has been to help the students to understand *why* they like a piece of music. Rather than simply expressing an opinion, I want them to be able to explain how a song or piece of classical music works. They should be able to articulate, as specifically as possible, what makes a song special, unique, or representative of its composer and the era from which it came. I have tried to do this

in the following pages. Sting's music has been with us for a sufficient amount of time now for us as listeners to move beyond simply "I like that song" to a more fundamental understanding of his musical and textual expression.

Since I am a music theorist and composer by training, I will approach each song through the lens of music theory. While that includes discussions of chord progressions, key areas, large-scale formal structure, uses of scales and modes, and rhythmic patterns, these discussions are geared toward the layperson. Western popular music, by its very nature and in the way that most of it is composed, is primarily harmony (chord) based. The vast majority of songs are written and worked out on a guitar. This instrument, in earlier folk and country music from which rock 'n' roll derived, is largely strummed. Thus the bedrock of a popular song is a sequence of strummed chords: its harmonic structure. In this study, then, melody occupies a slightly less important slot in the analyses. Throughout I will use the standard practice of labeling major chords with capital letters and minor chords with lowercase letters.

In order not to be too technical, I will eschew the use of notated musical examples and will define the more obscure musical terms not readily known by the layperson. I have found in my experience that technical music jargon is often used for fairly simple concepts. It is my belief that with a little explanation and a good set of ears, most listeners can grasp a fairly complex song with a concentrated effort. Sting is certainly an artist whose work stands up to this type of attention. Those readers who still feel some confusion in spite of my definitions may wish to simply skim or skip those paragraphs that seem too technical. After all, the ultimate goal of this book is a deeper appreciation of Sting's songwriting and artistry. His songs, like many of his forbears in the singer-songwriter tradition (Joni Mitchell, James Taylor, Paul Simon), work great as radio-friendly pop but also reward deeper analysis. It is not just any songwriter who can seamlessly combine Jungian archetypes with allusions to Shakespeare, Homer, the Faust legend, the Bible, and T. S. Eliot in a catchy song. And those are just the textual references. Musically, he draws on an array of stylistic traditions, sometimes multiple styles in one song. In his best songs, all of these musical and stylistic choices are in service to the text: getting the message across in the immediate medium of popular song.

One of my main goals for this book is to point out Sting's use of metaphor in his songs. It is one of his favorite rhetorical tropes and is an essential tool in every writer's tool bag. He uses it to engage his listeners; to make them think about what they are hearing. My contention is that Sting uses metaphor not only in a traditional poetic sense but also in a musical way. Now, I am not claiming that he is the first to do so. The Beatles were masters at this type of layered meaning that they elicited from a song's text, through harmony, melody, texture, and rhythm. My model in this regard is the musicologist Walter Everett, who with his two-volume study of The Beatles "as composers" set the gold standard for in-depth deconstruction of the popular song.⁵ Metaphor in music is all over the place for Everett.