

STING'S FRENCH SOJOURN YIELDS 'BRAND NEW DAY'

Exclusive: A&M Set Finds Artist In Romantic Mood

An occasional feature column of analysis and opinion regarding music industry issues by Billboard's editor in chief.

BY TIMOTHY WHITE

PARIS—As if in a dream, cleansing showers come to a simmering city, a June cloud-burst sending young lovers scurrying for cover, while in doorways of cafés lining the avenues radiating from the Arc de Triomphe, apron-wearing waiters frown at the petulant French sky as they probably have for centuries.

But “after the rain has fallen”—to quote a song from “Brand New Day” (A&M Records, due Sept. 28), Sting’s excellent seventh solo album—a visitor sees it has dampened “nothing that love can’t replace in the blink of an eye.”

Indeed, 10 torrential minutes of sky-blackening bluster instantly give way to a beaming day and the return of the human bouquets of clingy couples who hurried, park-bound, along Avenue Foch, possibly the most handsome residential street in the French capital.

But in the lonely cobbled back lanes of Passy, an ancient village-

sized West Paris precinct of the city’s 16th *arrondissement* (district), there is only a perfect urban quiet. Once the haunt of celebrated French novelist Honoré de Balzac (1799-1850)—the author of “La Comédie Humaine,” who resided there late in life to elude



STING IN PARIS, 1999

his creditors—this genteel neighborhood is now defined by canyons of characterless facades that conceal urban chateaus with private gardens enjoyed by secretive modern habitués.

“Welcome!” says Sting with comic surprise as a big door set into an anonymous stucco wall lining the Rue de la Faisanderie suddenly

swings wide to expose a palatial home within. Visible from the street is a private *jardin* whose towering trees and shrubs are still dripping from the brief downpour, and waiting between the large foyer and the lush foliage of the back garden is a tranquil dining room with a long, rustic table set for two.

It is lunchtime in this metropolis famed for “A Moveable Feast,” and the man of the house offers a

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seat overlooking a blossom-filled outdoor birdbath as the hired cook strides in carrying bowls of steamy seafood chowder on a lacquer tray.

"Let's eat!" the host urges, plopping down and unfurling his bright orange napkin. "Let's take our time but start right now. We've got to get to the studio so I can finish mixing my damned record!"

His blue eyes flicker with impish fire as he takes a gulp of *potage*, and the smiling, sun-bronzed face comes into focus in the natural light of the large, high-ceiling room.

Gordon Matthew Sumner is in his 47th summer, and the skin remains taunt on the lightly whiskered jaws of his lean, diamond-shaped head. If the slight hollows of his high cheek lines have become slightly more pronounced, it's because his longtime dedication to yoga has brought a marked definition to every angle of his aspect, from his full shoulders to the thick staves of his forearms.

His dark blond hair is cut close to his broad brow in a boyish post-modern Caesar style, and his overall mien is of a man-child who's had his fun but paced himself well.

Paris is a sentimental sojourn for the artist; it's where he wrote "Roxanne," the Police's first international smash, and where he first unveiled his solo music in a mid-'80s concert at the Theater Mogador, the renowned operetta venue designed in 1919 by an Englishman. Paris is also the place his son Jake was born.

Over soup, salad, oven-toasted slices of baguette, and Evian, Sting eagerly shares the ages and activities of his six offspring ("Joe is the oldest; he's 22, writes songs, is an interesting man and a very good singer in many bands, while Giacomo is the youngest at 3. Coco is 8, and Jake, who's given up music, is 14; next is Mickey, 15; Kate is 17") and then recounts the questions he constantly fields from them, the topics ranging from social mores to mortality.

An hour onward, after the meal is finished, the Sumner kids' father bounds up a winding staircase to fetch a satchel of notes and work tapes, moving with an easy dispatch that seems to shed half his years.

On the ride across Paris to Mega Studio, situated on Rue Merlen de Theonville in the suburb of Suresnes, the car bisects the Bois de Boulogne (the vast and beautiful inner-city woods culled from the remnants of the ancient Forêt de Rouvray), whose mixed reputation began as far back as the great park's opening in the 18th century—when the quip of the period was that "unions cemented in the Bois de Boulogne do not take place in the presence of a priest."

Sting gazes at the dense green expanse, now peopled with children, nannies, tourists, and ambling pairs of *amour*-struck Parisians, and explains that after nightfall portions of the park will teem with "prostitutes, many of them Brazilian transsexuals" as well as *échangistes* (curb-crawlers interested in partner-swapping).

The singer notes that this subculture was chronicled in an acclaimed BBC documentary, "The Boys From Brazil," by his wife, actress/filmmaker Trudie Styler. Such after-dark public *mises en scène* have also inspired a track on "Brand New Day" called "Tomorrow We'll See," in which Sting provides an empathetic glimpse at some transsexuals as they mull "the small transaction we must make."

Other lovelorn characters studied on the forthcoming album—perhaps the best-crafted and most consistently satisfying music of his distinguished solo career—include the principals of a reincarnation-based love story ("A Thousand Years"), a fairytale thief and princess ("After The Rain Has Fallen"), a broken-hearted fool trapped in a "twisted bossa nova" ("Big Lie, Small World"), a dog—played by Sting—distracted by his impossible ardor for his female owner ("Perfect Love Gone Wrong"), and a true romantic believer whose anthem of renewal ("Brand New Day") finds him pleading, "Stand up all you lovers in the world/Stand up and be counted every boy and girl!"

Co-helmed in the studio by Sting and noted producer/programmer Kipper, "Brand New Day" was executed by Sting with his core band (guitarist Dominic Miller, drummer Vinnie Colaiuta, and percussionist Manu Katché, while boasting such guest artists as Stevie Wonder, Branford Marsalis, Chris Botti, French rapper Sté Strausz (aka Stéphanie Quinol), and Billboard Century Award winner James Taylor.

But the record's most impressive, pathfinding track is the exhilarating "Desert Rose," on which Sting duets with famed French-Algerian vocalist Cheb Mami. One of the few songs in contemporary rock that deserves the much-abused adjective "soaring," this stratospheric epiphany also became a behind-the-scenes *cause célèbre*, with admiring associates as diverse as Madonna and Mike D of the Beastie Boys urging Sting to make the musically audacious and aurally intoxicating track the new album's first single.

The chief obstacle to this strategy was today's multi-formatted, research-ensnared radio climate, which often discourages established artists from bringing any new music to the airwaves that defies instant recognizability. Consumers might be surprised to learn that programmers and independent promo "consultants" increasingly seek to arbitrate what even a veteran superstar's music is supposed to sound like for radio purposes—but they do, diluting the medium's entertainment magnetism en route.

Confronted by such challenges

but intent on satisfying all parties, Sting decided to tender the title cut of "Brand New Day" (featuring Stevie Wonder) as the initial emphasis track in Europe and the U.S. It will be followed in the States by "Desert Rose," but only after the latter song's thorough domestic-market setup, which will include joint TV appearances by Sting and Cheb Mami, plus a series of October-January concert dates

noon in Paris.

"All Would Envy," detailed in its lyrics as the bittersweet "high society" saga of an "older man and his beautiful young wife," was dropped. And the arresting "The End Of The Game" will appear only as an 18-second "bonus" on the U.S. edition of the album, but shall surface in all its 6½-minute glory on the Japanese release. "Game" also awaits placement as a B-side in assorted territories. (In the States, no commercial singles from "Brand New Day" are yet planned.)

And so, like all love affairs, the making of Sting's new album was not without its heart-tugging trials. Thus the talk that ensues, conducted over hot tea in a sunny upstairs lounge at Mega Studio, unfolded just prior to the first public announcement of a Sting project called "Brand New Day," and just after the rain had fallen.



STING, LEFT, AND JAMES TAYLOR IN MEGA STUDIO, PARIS.

in San Diego, Los Angeles, New York, and Paris (as part of Sting's 18-month world tour of America, Europe, Asia, and the Pacific Rim) in which Mami opens for Sting as well as duetting with him on "Desert Rose."

These and other promotional efforts for "Desert Rose"—including a video to be shot in October—will be further aided by the Sept. 21 release of "Meli, Meli" (Mondo Melodia Records/Ark 21), Mami's fourth album, which has already reached platinum status in France on the French Virgin label.

At the time of the following interview, however, Sting's principal deliberations centered on which



CHEB MAMI CUTTING "DESERT ROSE."

music to keep or exclude from the new album itself—and what to title the final lineup, the alternative choice being "The Lovers." He made the toughest calls during that changeable summer after-

noon in Paris. They're all connected in that sense, and I think it's quite a romantic record.

On "Fill Her Up," which sounds like some surrealistic form of country/rock, this poor young guy, played by James Taylor, has all sorts of larcenous, hot-blooded scenarios in his head, and his whole interior life gets played out as he goes down this angry path—until he suddenly sees the light. Meanwhile, the listener is sympathetic, because when you're young and love is new, you can exhaust the very idea of love—or lust—in your own head before a single real thing ever occurs!

[Laughs] I don't know what's intentional or what isn't in that song, but I don't think the listener is ever wrong. To my mind, a big shot pulls into this gas station with a beautiful redhead in the front seat of his car and says, "Fill her up!" And the guy pumping gas gets jealous.

What listeners get next is what's real to them because I don't have to explain the joke; I just told it, or I've acted it out.

See, it began on a lark, this whole record, whereas all the previous records had been done very professionally, where we'd start at day one, we'd clock on at 9 o'clock, the songs were already written, and the producer was on board.

That's the professional way to do it. But this was done for a gag, to have some fun with my friends. I only admitted very late—fairly recently, in fact—that it was an actual record.

You did all the primary recording at your house in Italy?

Yeah! And we recorded and built on that; the demos are the record. You have to dig fairly deep to find the original core, but it's still there, the bedrock still exists.

The vocals are very strong on the new record. Were you thinking about your singing or simply not worrying about it?

My intention always when I come to a new record is to have done enough work on my craft for there to have been a noticeable improvement in the technique, if you like. It can be as cold as that. I practice the guitar, I practice the bass, I practice singing, so that when I put a record out people hopefully say, "Oh, that guy's gotten better."

I absolutely put the hours in; I do scales, the whole thing. I think you have to explore your instrument, so I work hard at vocals. 'Cause this is what I want to do for the rest of my life. I'm not the kind of guy who just wants to sit back and say, "I'm Sting, I can do what I want, and I can just moan for a while and people will like it."

You've got a sizable body of work at this point, but you still travel a lot, integrating those (Continued on next page)

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experiences into your music, and you haven't let your career make your life claustrophobic.

I'm still the eternal student. I think leading an extracurricular world outside of music feeds that well. I'm fed outside of music, and I try to interact with different kinds of people who aren't musicians or celebrities, and that feeds my work. I like to watch and observe people, and do a lot of different stuff.

This year, I went to India again, after visiting there in the early '80s and then going there with the Amnesty tour in the late '80s. The magic of that country stayed with me, and I always longed to go back but never quite found the time.

So last year, I spent a long time in Rajasthan and the Himalayas, just going on pilgrim routes with ordinary Indians, and living in pilgrim huts, like little concrete bunkers, or sleeping out, and seeing a side of India you couldn't see as a tourist.

It was part of my yoga study, and other yogis were my guides, in that sense, and I went with a very good Sanskrit scholar who had access to a level of understanding in India that you wouldn't normally get. He was a devotee of Krishna, and I'm not a devotee of anything, but if you suspend your Western disbelief for a month or two and realize that God is everywhere, then he is everywhere [smiles].

I believe that God exists in the creative imagination, so I just go with the flow, and I was rewarded with that suspension of my rational education. Again, I'm not a Hindu, but I can appreciate what they do, and that journey was a very fulfilling one for me, climbing up mountains.

Most religion—in fact, all religion, I think—is based on ideas that were germinated in the Himalayas and the Indus Plain, because in your primary nature you're dwarfed by these god-like structures, these huge, massive mountains, and therefore you're forced in that hierarchal way to realize that there's something bigger than us. When you're exposed to that kind of thing, even as a modern person, you have to think that way.

Hinduism is based on the Vedas, hymns and benedictions that predate organized religion and express humanity's longing for proximity to God.

I think "longing" is a very good word. In fact, one of these songs, the "Desert Rose" song, is a song about longing. Essentially the metaphor ["I dream of rain/I dream of gardens in the desert sand"] is romantic longing or lustful longing—or a longing, as you say, for some Other, a higher presence.

I gave the song to Cheb Mami, a very big Algerian singing star here in Paris, and he doesn't read or understand English. He listened to the song and liked it and recognized it was based on his milieu, and I said, "I'd like you to improvise some Arabic words over

this melody, and you can sing what you want."

So that spiraling rai descent on the track is his own contribution?

[Nodding] Absolutely. So he goes away and comes back with lyrics written out in Arabic script, and I have no idea what he's singing but it sounds right to me. [Grinning] So I say to him, "What's this about?" And he says, "It's about *longing*." It's exactly the same as my subject, although not line for line, but the intention is the same as mine!

So my feeling is that the music

is full of self-love. If anything, it's the opposite; that's why he's got the gun in his hand.

And the bigger the gun, the smaller the self-image.

Yes, and we're addicted to sensation, and our children are addicted to sensation—the roller-coaster ride. The bigger and more dangerous, the more exciting we think it is. The good films are supposedly the films where the most people are killed and the most spectacular cars are blown up. But I don't find that exciting, particularly. I really don't.

Police days, is very writerly and playerly, with a joy to it. What was it in your personal history that fired your public aims?

The engine that drives me, perhaps, is the frustration that my parents must have felt. My parents were very smart people and yet had no opportunity to use that ability to be mental. My father delivered the milk, my mother cleaned the house, washed the dishes, cooked. Their wish for me was that I be educated so that I could lead a better life, a different life to theirs. That is the engine that has driven me and still drives me.

albums of shows: "My Fair Lady" and all those Rodgers and Hammerstein musicals—"South Pacific," "Oklahoma!"—which I love. I wore them out, these records.

But I remember hearing "All Shook Up" as a very young child of 5 or 6 and falling around the room with this excitement—it was the most exciting thing I had ever heard, and "Great Balls Of Fire," too. So I owe this to my mother, Audrey, who was a good singer too.

She was the one who appreciated it when I picked up a guitar that my uncle John Sumner had left in the house when he emigrated to Canada—it was a very basic Spanish guitar with five rusty strings. I'd pick out tunes on it; I eventually got to buy another one. But she was the one who suddenly realized I was making music on this thing and not just a noise, and she encouraged me to play.

My father aspired to playing it, but I took it off him, so he always resented that I stole it [chuckles]. But he had a very sweet, emotional voice. He and my mother would sing at parties.

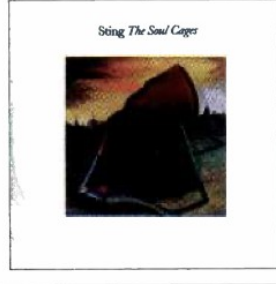
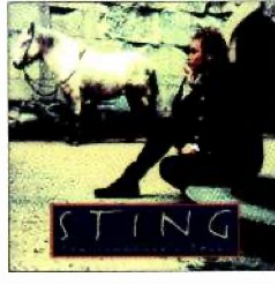
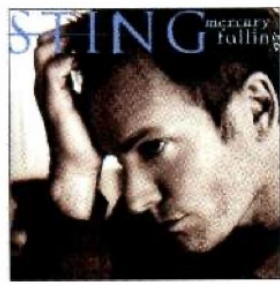
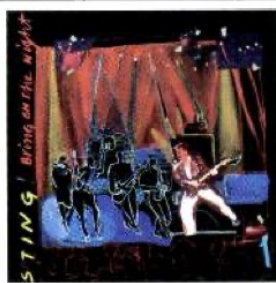
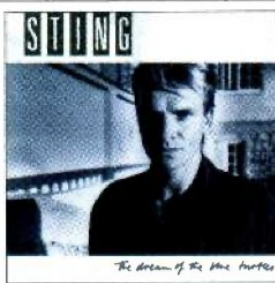
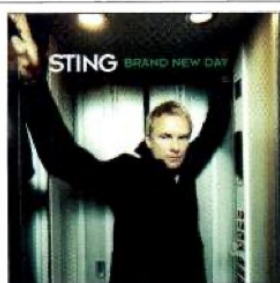
Growing up, there was my brother and two sisters and me. When we'd get to be too much, my mother used to say, "I will swing for you!", meaning "I'll be hung for you," which meant that she would murder us and then be executed [laughter]. It took me a while to work out what that meant, but that was the time of hangings in England; we were hanging a lot of people then. She was a pretty exciting woman, and she swore like a trooper.

These days, my brother, Philip, is a milkman like my dad. My sister Angela is one of the top people in British Airways in the north of England; she has a very high-powered job. My little sister Anita is the one with the brains; she's got an M.A., and she works in my wife's film production company.

I remember spending a week in Paris in late spring of 1985, watching as you shot the video for "If You Love Somebody Set Them Free" and did rehearsals for the live, pre-release debut of your first solo record at the Theater Mogador. The young French fans loved the music, but no one knew how your solo career would turn out. How would you judge the distance between then and now?

In terms of history, the number of singers who've left big bands to launch solo careers—only to run aground on some desert island somewhere—are legion. Those who managed to succeed and eke out a career are rather small. Offhand, outside, say, the solo Beatles, I can think of Don Henley and myself, and then I start to struggle for names. People don't really want you to succeed outside the big group; there's this constant nostalgia, this constant pull towards what was great, asking, "How could you have broken that up?" I think you succeed against the odds, which I'm very happy about.

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Sting solo, clockwise from top-center:

The Dream Of The Blue Turtles, 1985
Bring On The Night, 1986
... Nothing Like The Sun, 1987
The Soul Cages, 1991
Ten Summoner's Tales, 1993
Fields Of Gold: The Best Of Sting, 1994
Mercury Falling, 1996
Brand New Day, 1999

has told him what to write, just as the music had told me what to write. So it was an interesting experiment, and without telling each other what we were writing, we ended up writing the same thing. And it dovetails, too, almost as if he sings something and then I translate it!

There's always tenderness, quiet spaces, and elements of surprise in your music. But these days people don't seem to trust in emotions unless they're big, bombastic, or violent; they don't have faith in subtlety anymore.

Well, I have faith in myself. You said during lunch that, in a way, the creative act demands self-love, it demands that you like yourself. I agree.

I don't think that a man brandishing a gun in a song or a movie

The biggest revelations can come so quietly. Historians posit that the original Hebrew word for God, lost in modern culture but now usually written out as "Yahweh," likely sounded like one's breath leaving the mouth, since that's how life starts and ends. Thus, there once was a sacred, symbolic word that could both electrify people and make them humble—yet the room had to be quiet to even hear it said.

We have a vestige of that sacred symbolism in our language in the word "inspiration," which means "to breathe in," as in "to breathe in God." In the Hindu, the word "om" is just the sound of breath coming out. Like so many things, it's all still there in our society, but we have to seek it out.

Your music, even back to the

I never met your mom. What was she like?

My mother was quite a good musician; she was a piano player, she had this passion for playing tango. We had an upright piano, and I remember as a child watching her feet going on the piano pedals when she played her tango rhythms.

She was also the one who brought rock'n'roll into our home; she brought Jerry Lee Lewis, Little Richard, and "All Shook Up" by Elvis Presley into the house. She was about 18 or 19 years older than me; she was almost my contemporary.

My father was four years older than her. He liked Gene Kelly; I remember a big MGM 78 rpm record he had of "Singin' In The Rain," and I remember Sinatra songs being played by him, and

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more mature you get, the more you know and therefore the less sure you are. That's a good paradox. I was very certain about things when I was 25—absolutely, rigidly certain about politics, who I liked, who I didn't like, and what I didn't like.

Now I know more, I'm wiser and smarter, and yet I'm not so sure. I can't be as dogmatic about my beliefs as I once was. I'm more open to the other side.

Some of the things I've been reading lately say that a cool revolution is sometimes better than a hot one, and I think that may be right. Such revolutions can take a longer time and be slower but more certain.

When I first met you in 1980 you were a very different sort of personality, ultra-confident, very directed, with a "Lead, follow, or get out of the way!" outlook.

Oh, I know [*sad laugh*], and I wasn't always a nice person to be around. But that was the engine we were talking about, the engine of frustration that drove me into the Police, through the Police, then out of the Police, and still drove me onward.

But now I'm slowing down. I'm still as ambitious creatively but not in every other career sense.

Your new album seems quite confident, yet you're not certain what to name it!

My point exactly! [*Huge laugh*]. Should it be "Brand New Day" or "The Lovers"? I'm leaning toward the former.

One sounds like a personal statement, the other sounds like a novel. The record sounds like both.

My confidence in anything is really reaffirmed in the people I love, and the people I cherish and who cherish me. That's where my wealth lies. It's not in the bank; it's in that woman over there [*pointing through a window to Trudie, visible in another room, reading*]. And it's in taking another mental path, into more meaningful things. As you get older, you move toward certain things with greater intensity, but away from the silly, surface extremes.

Bono came to visit us at our house in Italy this summer, and he's from a working class background, too, and as we sat there in this beautiful place with our children around us, he said, "This isn't supposed to happen to us. We're supposed to die in the streets with a needle in our arm!"

Making peace with what you've earned is a process. Are you moved by your own music. Does it touch you?

Yes. "Ghost Story" on the new album is an example. I was choked up by it recently because I thought of my parents, and talking to my 8-year-old daughter Coco when she asks about death, and if she'll ever die.

It was probably because I'd really heard the song and interpreted it for *myself* for the first time, because you're writing these songs generally from a fairly unconscious place. But when you touch that place again and you recognize that, then it does move you. Because in my case, I'll remember the original emotions that brought the song on—and my own history. It hasn't all been wonderful; some of it has been very painful. But I don't regret it. If anything, I value all of my experiences and maybe particularly the sad experiences because they've fed my muse.

The songs are written to move people, and the greatest compliment anyone can pay one of my songs is that it made them cry. And I've done that for myself on a number of occasions. It's lovely feeling; it's good to cry, it does you a world of good.

Has your own spiritual outlook shifted over the years?

I'm very aware of mortality, more and more. If I'm lucky, I'm already in the second half of my life. When



"STING AT THE MOVIES," 1997

my dad died, he was in his 50s, very young, and my mother died very young, too. So I'm very aware of that. I don't have an immortality gene [*nervous laughter*].

My grandmother Agnes, my father's mother and my only existing grandparent, died last year. She was 95. While she was still alive I thought there was just the chance I might be immortal, [*wistful smile*], but I know I'm not, now that she's gone.

I think being spiritual is an internal thing. It's very hard to express it in words because it sounds so lame. But, as I've said, I think spirituality exists in the creative imagination, and that's where it's safest.

As soon as religious or spiritual thought become concrete or dogmatic, then they become dangerous. I think they need to reside or be kept in the imaginative realm. That's where they're most powerful.

So I don't belong to any organized, brick-and-mortar church or don't have any ritual analog for that experience.

Many people find comfort in religion and ritual, locating an emotional answer that softens the absence of more concrete ones about life and death.

I think it's important to discuss mortality with children as soon as the issue comes up, and of course it will come up with intelligent children. We shouldn't shy away from

it. I think part of the problem in our society is that we shun death, the idea of death, particular in popular art forms. [*In harsh, nasal, American accent*]: "Why you wanna sing about death? People won't buy it! They'll hate it!"

But it's the shadow that informs you all the time; it gives you substance, as does the fact that everything is transient and the fact that you will exist and then you won't exist. That's what's beautiful.

When you look at a flower of a beautiful child or a beautiful person, most of their beauty is about the fact that it's transient. It's a terribly sad beauty.

But if something's permanently beautiful, then how beautiful is it? It's artificial, it's wrong, it's a monstrous mistake. Beauty is something that's very fleeting and impossible to hold on to; that's why it's so beautiful.

The theory of a personal God [i.e., Ísvara, in Hinduism] and a meaningful role in one's own destiny are important ideas in religious history. We all want to know or feel our larger purpose in life. What role does a creative person have these days in our cultural destiny?

As a canary in a coal mine.

Caged birds used to be lowered down into mines like those in Newcastle after miners hit a deadly gas seam, in order to tell if the lethal fumes had dissipated. If the bird came back up dead, the danger hadn't yet passed.

Right, so I'm speaking in terms of guinea pigs.

But what, seriously, is the function of an artist in modern society? In its debased sense, it's to make money, because it's fairly easy for any artist to just be exactly like what goes on in the rest of daily society—to be loud, raucous, noisy, shallow. But it's quite another thing to try and turn the ship around and say, "OK, I'm gonna do something that will make people think differently, or stop and have a different emotion." I think that, if anything, an artist actually should try to interpret but also try to *change* a society. That's really what my intention would be.

But all culture has an effect. Music is essentially benign to most people, but it can be used to dark purposes. Hitler understood that. He used perverted theater to make people think and act in a totally atavistic and primitive, reprehensible way. He was [*sarcastic snigger*] a frustrated artist.

We think of the theater and music as something good, but, yes, music can be used to bad effect. I get very thoughtful letters from people who say my music almost seems to be the soundtrack of their lives, with them hearing me from their young teenage years through adolescence, getting married, divorced, remarried, having children.

I'm always very touched by these letters. So I believe that I do have some kind of effect, and that people are understanding what I'm singing about

and that it means something to them.

As you know, a new song that choked me up upon first hearing it in the studio here in Paris was "The End Of The Game." It can be taken on several levels, as the arc of a fox hunt—from the fox's viewpoint—or the arc of a love affair.

[*Nodding*] Or the arc of a life. It's about all of those things: the fox hunt, the love affair. It's about death and dying, too, and giving yourself over to that process. And it's nice when someone understands that; I mean, the song is not an apology for fox hunting [*chuckles*]*—or an argument against it.*

Over the next 25 years one hopes other artists will be allowed to assemble the same sort

of singular, substantial career you've forged, with the same degree of originality. It's getting harder these days; things are pretty commodified.

They are. The ditch is very deep, and it's hard to get out of it.

My strategy in life is to be optimistic, and that's always been the case. By experience, I've learned to trust that optimism, that gambler's risk.

It usually works for me. Because I think I'm blessed in that sense by not destiny but rather a certain amount of trust in Providence—that it will look after me no matter what.

I believe that so long as your intention is to explore rather than exploit, you will be protected. But if you seek to exploit, *that* will be the engine of your destruction. ■