

STING DMus

Mr Chancellor,

Three decades have passed since Gordon Sumner, a young unemployed teacher from Wallsend, the bass player in a band called *Last Exit*, signed off at the Newton Park Hotel at Four Lane Ends. The appreciative applause of the two dozen mostly male punters was acknowledged but as he prepared to leave he shared with a member of that small audience, now a professor in our university despite his dissolute ways, that he was preoccupied by the thought of his wife, lying in labour across the city at Newcastle General Hospital. A few hours later I arrived for work in that same children's unit as one of the new house doctors oblivious of what had turned out to be a routine delivery of another small Geordie along the corridor, as indeed was his father who was still inadvertently asleep back at home.

We were the same age and born 40 miles apart. As he left that year with his wife and new baby to make his way in London as a musician, I had a clear edge. I would receive my monthly cheque to pay my mortgage and support my wife and daughter on the way while Gordon went to sign on the dole. Here we are today, I'm still here and still have a mortgage while

Gordon has made the nickname he once received for wearing a striped black and yellow sweater into a household name across the planet. He has achieved instant recognition with a single name, a distinction shared with very few icons, Ghandi, Pele,.... Lassie.

Such is Sting's fame I hardly need to recount it. That it endures is illustrated by the remarkable ease with which we recruited volunteer staff for this year's ceremony.

His website lists 98 songs, 41 of which were released as singles by the phenomenally successful supergroup *The Police*. They also released five albums, three compilations, and four soundtracks before the dangerous transfer to solo artist which freed him to experiment with novel musical styles and lyrical structure, and has netted an additional eleven Grammys, two Brits, a Golden Globe, an Emmy, three Oscar nominations, Billboard Magazine's Century Award, and MusiCares 2004 Person of the Year. He has translated his skills as a performer to fifteen films and a Broadway play, but music is his core.

His vivid autobiography, *Broken Music*, charts his progression through a series of musical experiences until the defining point when he decides to leave the safety of his native Wallsend for London, to seek his musical

fortune. A complex series of interactions led to partnership with drummer Stewart Copeland and later the talented guitarist Andy Summers. Andy's arrival brought the recognition that their new band, *Police*, must part company with friend Henry Padovani and they walked on stage for the first time in 1977 in Birmingham as a three piece.

Success was a little way off: their first gig at Newcastle poly stirred little response and unloaded only four copies of their newly pressed first single, 'Roxanne', but the reaction of that Birmingham crowd was the moment Sting realised he had found the vehicle for his songwriting.

The Police soared above the conventional structure of contemporary punk bands with a cocktail of mainstream rock, punk, pop and reggae. Copeland's polyrhythmic figures and Summer's use of tasteful sustained guitar voicings would fill space ordinarily left empty by other trios. Sting's melodic bass lines were the glue bonding the elements together.

I suspect every person here would recognise his singing voice in a moment, an edgy rock tenor with a range with has exasperated many imitators, including myself. That voice and his striking good looks would be reason enough, with a little good fortune, to achieve celebrity but they

are underpinned by his prowess as a musician and an exceptional poetic capacity as a lyricist.

Like many of us from that era, a grammar school education expanded his horizons but also contributed to his isolation from the tight shipbuilding community into which he had been born. His talent for English provided the focus for his subsequent teacher training and his love of words. There are few writers of pop songs who could get away with slipping the name of the author Nabokov, the author of *Lolita*, into a verse of “don’t stand so close to me”.

He writes beautifully and honestly of the parental love which sustained him, but also of their strained relationship which he speculates was a factor in his need to escape and his life-long travels as a performer. There is no doubt his long years striving for critical success and his intelligence have helped defend against the threats of the world he inhabits, but standing out above all is his determination to make a difference on his own terms, whether as a musician or as a leading environmental campaigner with the Rainforest Foundation he created with his wife Trudie Styler.

His self belief is central to his deserved stature. In commending him to you, Mr Chancellor, for the degree of Doctor of Music *honoris causa*, I will end with words every graduate here today would do well to remember, as an Englishman in New York said “be yourself, no matter what they say”.

Citation by Professor John Burn