Oh no! Oh my! What's a poor boy supposed to do? Well for one thing you don't NOT go and see a performance and songwriter of the calibre of Sting no matter what you may think of his image. You know what I mean? Everyone wonders what Stings into jazz and save the forests. Hell, he even sings about love! Devastable bastardl How dare he say don't sing like him just roll over and die and let me have the race just get on with it? Well I've got music for you. The more things change the more things stay the same. I'll say it again, only a little louder, just in case you didn't get it the first time. THE MORE THINGS CHANGE THE MORE THEY STAY THE SAME!

Let me explain what I mean. We were on the way to Sting's sold out show at the Newcastle Entertainment Centre. To while away the time on the train I was reading a new book by Craig Mariotte about silverchair, Spiderbait and You Am I. It's called Hi Fi Days and it's all about the changes in the guard that's supposed to be occurring within the rock industry.

When we stepped off the train, the night was typical of Newcastle just after a southerly has blown up. A quick pressure drop had let the mercury fall just enough to cool the place down and the air put a little in the mix. We left the platform and headed down the underpass keen to slip into the warmth generated by a few thousand people eager for a glimpse of the man who had been at the forefront of popular music during the early Eighties. Just a few weeks before, the subway tunnel that runs under Bredeniaser station had seen the departure of some old and hot old punks raving the glory days of punk. The scene could just as easily have been the setting for the droogs of A Clockwork Orange to partake in a little night time amusement, beating and bashing just for the sheer nihilistic glory of it.

As we emerged from the tunnel and headed for the Entertainment Centre I was surprised by the sight. It was really on right up to the platform were the Sex Pistols, Spiderbait and Silverchair. Apart from the astoundingly low I was wondering what the hell was going on. Someone or odd enough the song that wouldn't leave my mind was the Who's 'My Generation'. You know the famous line that Pete Townshend lived to regret...hope I die before I get old!

So we got to the foyer of the pristine barn that passes for the biggest venue in Newcastle and, as is hallmarked of all good rock shows, we couldn't help spotting the Celeb. Cranb Welsmey from the Screaming Jets was locked in conversation with the program seller, scrawling up some action, and also keen to see Sting. We were keen to find our seats.

Unlike the preceding Bush show and the Sex Pistols show this one was sold out. A full house. The band was fantastic. Packed. You see Sting had achieved what few of those who have ambitions in the music-scene have come near achieving. As the chief songwriter and lead for the Police, he helped introduce a new awakening to music in the world in a cold blast of streaming post punk that left those of us who were aware breathless in awe. The Innovation. The Police rose into rock, heralding the reign of punk but they owed a massive debt to the third wave. They crossed reggae with the aggression of the new wave and produced a hit after hit of intelligent music - Message in a Bottle, Walking On The Moon, Don't Stand So Close, Spirits In The Material World and the list goes on.

They did it the hard way too, initially working outside established industry prac- tices. They toured America, before they were 'supposed to', in a crowded van doing their own setting up and lugging, sleeping together in fleapit hotels all over the Eastern seaboard of the U.S. They recorded fast, effectively and cheaply and owed the record company nothing. They put up withulous inventive by the real punks but they came to be loved by a half of a lot of record buyers so what did it matter anyway. They toured the world including places off the beaten rock paths. India welcomed them and Egypt caused a few worries, but their foray into some of the dictator riddled countries of South America led to riots and arrests. Sting could live up to his name splitting out vitriol with the best of them. America too had succumbed to Police fever and by the time they recorded their fifth al- bum, the cold blast of whistling wind called Synthrockery, they were the biggest band in the world.

They were a three piece band who sang about disenchantment and suicide and loneliness and the way the world had been left by a prior generation. They were young and angry and a breath of fresh air. They were above all a great rock and roll band. Any of this sound familiar yet?

As I sat waiting for Sting to appear all this was flicking through my brain. What had he done after the Police? Well for the song of his solo greatest hits album is as long as The Police's. Like McCartney after the demise of the Beatles, Sting had successfully reinvented himself. Like McCartney he suffered the blight of a critical backlash and became the whipping boy for a new generation. It became fash- onable to snigger at Sting especially as he involved himself in causes like saving the Brazilian rainforest and performing for Amnesty Internation. After the massive success of The Dream of the Blue Turtles album, that was released during the peak of the Anti-Nuclear protests his pol- itical views closer and closer to the jazz he had performed before entering the pop world. As he explored the deeper moods he was experiencing as an older rock artist, his music became imbued with a subtle and ethereal melancholy. And still the records sold.

Then the lights went down and Sting strode onto the stage with his new Fender bass, locking every iron in charge, older but more graceful, physically fit and im- pressive in basic black. The first of the songs from his new album filled the air. These cats had their shit together. The drummer, Vinnie Colaiuta, handled the versatile and complex material with ease and Dominic Miller was the consummate sideman on his guitar, playing every note in exactly the way Sting had arranged it. After they ranged through the well crafted narrative of Hang My Head Sting let the crowd know that he too had grown up in Newcastle on Tyne in England that is. How come we had suburbs named Sandgate and Jesmond and Wallsend? Had grown up in Wallsend. And the weather was warmer there he joked. He'd been twenty years on the road and the only song that made him homesick was the one he was about to sing called Fields of Gold.

It is a beautiful song that captures the lingering sadness and post and the Entertainment Centre relaxed into a contemplative listening mode. This introduced Sting to the major source of tension during the night. Whether it be nobler to follow the finer points of the subtle music or simply rock out. That was the question.

Halfway through the tour Sting let loose one of his hits from the album roving into his back catalogue for the rousing Every Little Thing She Does Is Magic. This reaction was of split second's duration as a vast number of the audience stood on end but I don't know whether it was me meeting my past or the musicians doing the same. Soon enough, the song that first made Sting's reputation, then settled it's way into an extended jam on a mad and wild rock with the band and the crowd happy to be here.

But the other songs seemed to be missing both the jaunty, chipper, and slickly produced edginess that had become ob- ligatory from Sting's former Police for- mer partner, Andy Summers and Stewart Copeland. By the time Sting's band got to Every Breath You Take they were sounding very old and dated and it was easy to tell they were keen to move onto newer and more challenging pas- tures. Some of the subtle music faded into some more tunes from the Mercury Fall- ing album.

Kenny Kirkland was the favoured son of the crowd and it was obvious he was enjoying himself, singing and amping at the unique place he occupied as Sting deferred to his jazz pedigree. He led a keyboard solo that seemed close to losing the band. He returned to keyboard before he hammered home the basic rhythm and forced the band to work harder than they had for some time.

As I looked around the crowd, trying to figure what sort of people were here hooping and hollering, I glanced at the people in the middle of the mainstream. I followed Sting through all the twists and turns of his career from the early punk days and here we were right up to the edge of the river of humanity that makes up the big- gest audience in the world. And then I remembered Sting's story on Spiderbait where Janet, the bass player,explained that they had a skinhead following them and travelled down to Melbourne to see The Police on their farewell tour. "We thought we were cutting edge. We thought we were the only people in the world who knew who the Police were. But there were 50,000 other people there." Sting had taken us all with him on his journey when the world had last turned and now there was another in the long line of periodic seismic shifts in the main- stream. Along the way he had faced the same questions that bands like You Am I and Spiderbait have. "You look so path- facing. Can an artist survive if half the fans who've travelled with them so far want to give up on music? What if you want to move on? How do you keep your music open and alive to experimentation? How do you progress if you don't die before you get old?"

As we headed back to the train station down through the subway tunnel another song swirled around my head. Further along the track I could hear, echoing around the concrete and slipping over the acoustics of the post show crowd making their way home, someone else also singing, "How fragile we are, how fragile we are..."