



ORPHANS

Up there, the atmosphere was thin. They lived in a bubble, protected from the rigors of the world but also trapped inside a pressurized container that amplified every thought, every action, every sound.

The odds of ever reaching that rarefied position had been stacked heavily against them. But somehow they made it, catapulted to the stars in a junk bucket powered by hubris and jury-rigged for success. The junk bucket transformed into a juggernaut that hurtled around the globe two, three, four times over. Inside, an umbilical cord connected all three occupants, sustaining them while constraining all movement. As time went on, they yearned for individual freedom. They struggled, pushed and pulled against one another until, eventually, the cord snapped. The juggernaut ran out of fuel and ground to a halt. And there it remained for twenty-five years, like a rusted satellite

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floating in space; always visible but in perpetual stasis, evidence of a distant memory. A monument to the time when the Police were the biggest band in the world.

Pop music is a dream. The promise of a perfect moment deferred. The music business is a machine in perpetual motion, passion conscripted into the service of industry. Music culture is born of tempestuous change and an incestuous genealogy. Each iteration of genre birthed by, but also forged in reaction to, the one before. Each owing a debt for its existence to the last.

And then there was the Police. They seemed to come from out of nowhere. A group with no discernible parentage, no distinct musical lineage, no acknowledged antecedents. Orphans. Three individuals whose only commonality seemed to be the color of their hair, dyed peroxide blond, golden like the sun. Hair had long been a signifier for youth movements. These three might have looked like punk rockers, superficially at least, but they didn't really dress like them, and they certainly didn't sound like them. Instead, they produced a sound that was all their own and would remain their own. It was dubbed "white reggae," an amalgam of Western pop and Jamaican rhythms (albeit blanched of roots and ethnicity) that seemed alien to both.

The Police piggy-backed the punk scene and rode it to new wave success. They expressed no allegiance to any particular subculture or movement, musical or otherwise, but played by their own rules and single-mindedly pursued an internationalist agenda. Along the way, they changed the expectations of what a band that struck out on its own could realistically hope to achieve. Their success was an anomaly, a phenomenon.

This was not a group formed out of the camaraderie of youth or the shared discovery and learning of music. It was a common alliance forged through shared ambition and the determination to succeed. Even so, there could scarcely be a less-likely bunch of musical bedfellows. The Police came from diverse backgrounds and boasted personalities that were starkly at odds.

Drummer and group founder Stewart Copeland was born in the United States and raised in Beirut, the blue-blooded scion of two spies: a perpetual adolescent, garrulous, nervy, and arrogant. Bassist and front man Sting (born Gordon Matthew Thomas Sumner) was the son of a milkman from Tyneside, the industrial north of England; he was raised Catholic, flirted with Marxism, and had trained as an elementary school teacher. Introverted and intensely self-assured, he cultivated a dark charm as a performer. Guitarist Andy Summers, born in a caravan, was raised in a sleepy southern English seaside town; he was devoted to his guitar and possessed of a particularly dry humor but could also be moody and resentful.

Their clear-cut personas were tailor-made for profiles in teen magazines, and it was the teenyboppers who picked up on them first, embracing them as a pop band. Music aficionados were not quite so easily won over. The Police moved as a unit, were clearly outsiders, and therefore viewed with suspicion. Not only their credibility but their provenance was called into question by music critics, who found it difficult to work out whether the Police were a pop act masquerading as a rock band, or vice versa.

The band responded by putting on a ruthless charm offensive. They actively courted the media and promoted themselves aggressively. The Police were as much a media event as a musical phenomenon. As such, they shifted the parameters of rock success, not only how to achieve it but how to maintain it. They thrived on manipulation and constructed a myth around themselves as outsider heroes who had conquered the world on their own terms. The myth was so pervasive that the Police acquired “classic rock” status the moment they left the world stage. Yet their reign at the top was remarkably brief: only a five-year span from 1979 to 1984, just shy of a six-year span between the time their first single, “Roxanne,” cracked the charts and the last date on the world tour for their fifth and final album, *Synchronicity*.

During that same period, the record industry underwent enormous changes, moving from bust to boom. The artist-centric labels

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that had started in the sixties became profit-driven corporate entities in the eighties. Compact discs were introduced. MTV was launched. Promotion and image overtook originality and virtuosity as the qualities deemed most valuable by the music business. Rock music would never be the same again.

After a twenty-three-year hiatus, when all but the hardiest of fans had given up on ever seeing the Police perform again, the band took the music world by surprise and burst back into public life. For the whole of 2007 and most of 2008, the Police dominated headlines, resuming their position at the top of the pop heap as if they had never been away. Only the lines and creases in the bandmates' faces were proof that they had been off the scene for close to a quarter of a century.

In the intervening period, only Sting had remained in the public eye, seemingly compelled to maintain his status in the higher echelon of performing artists. In 2007, he was reputed to be worth \$360 million and lived in lordly splendor. His main residence was a grand seventeenth-century Jacobean manor, set within an eight-hundred-acre estate in the Wiltshire countryside. He spent his summers at another palatial residence, a sixteenth-century Tuscan estate called Tenuta del Palagio. Both homes were equipped with state-of-the-art recording studios. His portfolio of property also included a beach-side house in the exclusive Malibu Colony and an eighteen-room apartment in Manhattan overlooking Central Park. But his phenomenal wealth could not inure him from criticism. In 1990, Sting's credibility took quite a knock with the admission that he enjoyed marathon sessions of tantric sex with his wife, Trudie Styler. From that point on, he became a figure of fun, and his sexual prowess became more of a talking point than his music. But when the Police returned, all of that seemed to have been forgotten.

The fans came flocking back, too. But now they weren't simply those who had been there the first time around, in the seventies and eighties. They brought their children as well, a generation who had grown up thinking of the Police as a classic rock band, like the Beatles and the Stones.

The music world the Police reentered had also undergone dramatic changes. Again, it was sinking into a recession. Record sales were dropping, but live shows brought in a higher slice of the revenue. And the Police seemed more than equipped to ride those changes as they whirled around the globe on what would be billed as the third highest-grossing concert tour of all time. But it was also billed as the group's swansong, an absolutely final world tour to provide their fans with a definitive end to the Police story.

The Police started out in rather inauspicious circumstances, rehearsing in the basement of a shop run by a gay hairdresser in north London. "I remember a very damp, cold, mildewed basement in the depths of winter," Summers recalled. "And [the hairdresser] liked Stewart, I remember this."

One day in November 1977, toward the end of the first year in the group's existence, they began to work on a song that Sting had brought to the rehearsal space, a love song based around a bossa nova rhythm about a man's infatuation with a prostitute named Roxanne.

"We started to fool around with 'Roxanne,'" said Summers. "He had, as I remember, just the verse, and we kept playing with it. Sting always denies this, but I remember Stewart kind of teaching him where to put the bass line, because Stewart was more into the reggae thing than Sting was at that point."

Copeland concurred with this. "One time we had a party at Sting's, and I, kinda working on a hunch that he'd relate immediately to the music, brought along a bunch of Wailers' albums, some Burning Spear, some dub records, et cetera. And sure enough, Sting just latched on immediately to the rhythmic slant of the music, all the possibilities."

Tellingly, Sting's take was rather different. He asserted that Copeland's intervention resulted in only a slight geographical realignment of his original rhythm—a tango, rather than a bossa nova—giving it a "lopsided Argentinean gait."

The feint of memory, slanted by the temptation to self-aggrandize, produces a Rashomon effect. This is the story of the Police, an inevitability in a group made up of such dominant personalities. But the seeds of dysfunction were also built into the group dynamic. An intense sibling rivalry simmered below the surface at all times. One oldest child (Sting). One youngest (Copeland). The third (Summers), a generation older, acting as a counterpoint and a pivot between the other two, but also seeking their approval and validation.

With just six months between them in age, Sting and Stewart Copeland bickered like brothers and were constantly at loggerheads. Sting had been born at the beginning of October 1951; Copeland in the middle of July the following year. Summers had arrived ten years earlier, in December 1942. He relished his position as the experienced elder in the group, even though his emotional maturity was stunted somewhere around the other two.

They behaved like rowdy teenagers in one another's company: carping, sniping, play-fighting, cracking one-liners as a form of one-upmanship, and batting insults back and forth. One candid (and extremely rare) roundtable interview with all three for a July 2000 magazine profile, conducted many years after the band had broken up, illustrated how easily hostilities could break out.

During a conversation about the Police and their music, Sting and Summers made the mistake of couching their conversation in musical notation. This infuriated Copeland, the only member of the band unable to read music, who complained that they were purposely trying to exclude him by talking in a language he didn't understand. But his protests fell on hostile ears.

"Stewart, those are called 'notes,'" Sting quipped.

"You want to hear an oxymoron?" Summers chimed in. "Musical drummer!"

"Hey, Andy," Copeland retorted. "What do you throw a drowning guitarist? His amp!"

Sting made sure to get the last word in. "What has three legs and a cunt?" he fired back at Copeland. "A drum stool!"

At times, Sting's native Geordie humor could be particularly crude, but in this instance it was meant to be. This exchange couldn't be written off as just light-hearted banter. It was more sardonic and bitter than that. Despite their ages—Sting and Copeland were just shy of fifty when this exchange occurred, Summers was approaching sixty—their relationship was still clearly underpinned by a simmering adolescent rivalry, the same love-hate dynamic that had driven them all the way to the top.

Each musician had his own reason for the dogged pursuit of success. The most tenacious was clearly Andy Summers. A decade older than the other two, he was of the same generation as the Beatles and had already been playing as a professional musician for sixteen years before he joined the Police.

Summers was a war baby, a child born of the bomb—literally, according to family lore. While his mother, Jean, was employed at a munitions factory in Lancashire, northwest England, during World War II, she was overcome by fumes that induced contractions. Andrew James Somers (he later changed the spelling) was born on New Year's Eve in 1942. He would be the second of four children, with one older brother. A younger brother and a sister came later.

He was born in the small country town of Poulton-le-Fyde, near where his father, Maurice, was stationed as a serviceman with the Royal Air Force. Summers recalled that due to the shortage of housing during wartime, his parents lived in a gypsy caravan for the first two years of his life. This detail, revealed on the first page of his autobiography, served to generate an image of Summers as a free-spirited romantic, rather than serious and tightly wound.

At war's end, the family moved to the seaside resort of Bournemouth, all the way down on the south coast of England, where Maurice resumed civilian life as a restaurateur.

Summers's own account of his Police prehistory reads like a storied career through the annals of rock greatness. The guitarist pops up Zelig-like in the lineup of several seminal groups: he was a member

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of the Animals and Soft Machine, played shows alongside Pink Floyd, jammed with Jimi Hendrix, and did stints as a sideman to Kevin Coyne and Kevin Ayers.

His first gig as a professional musician was playing in the house band at the Majestic, a kosher hotel that was a popular destination for Jewish holidaymakers in Bournemouth. From 1961 to 1969, Summers clung to the coattails of George “Zoot” Money, a gregarious, flame-haired Hammond organ player of Italian stock. Money, who also grew up in Bournemouth, rescued Summers from his hotel lounge gig and enjoined him to become a member of Money’s newly formed Big Roll Band.

Money moved to London in 1961 after being spotted by the manager of British bluesman Alexis Korner, whose group Blues Incorporated would serve as the launch pad for many future music stars, including members of the Rolling Stones, the Animals, and Cream. Summers and the other two members of the Big Roll Band followed him there. In London, they expanded to a six-piece (adding a sax player and a vocalist) and enthralled audiences at the Flamingo Club, knocking out energetic covers of American R&B tunes. The Big Roll Band soon became one of the hippest groups on the Soho blues scene and played on the same bill as bands like the Animals and Georgie Fame and the Blue Flames. Despite releasing two albums on Columbia Records and scoring a minor hit with a track called “Big Time Operator,” the Big Roll Band never quite broke out of the London scene.

By 1966, sharp suits and neat hair were on the way out. Paisley shirts and acid rock were on the way in. Summers convinced Money that the Big Roll Band had to roll with the changes, too. They downsized to a four-piece again and changed their name to the mythical-sounding Dantalian’s Chariot. Their music took on a psychedelic hue, and they acquired an oil wheel to project on top of them at live performances in London’s Middle Earth club. The group didn’t last more than a year.

Summers was then asked to join Canterbury psych band the Soft Machine—which had just come off an extensive U.S. tour with the Jimi Hendrix Experience and was due to start another within weeks—but

was dismissed a few weeks into their tour. Founding member Kevin Ayers told Summers there wasn't room for two guitarists in the group. "My playing was pushing the band in a direction that didn't suit Kevin," Summers contended, "and in my view he simply could not keep up with it." Summers had been in the band a total of two months.

Stranded in New York, he managed to contact Money, then playing in Eric Burdon's New Animals. A space had just opened up for a guitarist, and Summers jumped at the chance. He makes great truck of his tenure with the Animals, which included an appearance on one album (*Love Is*) and playing on a poorly organized Japanese tour toward the end of 1968 that ended with a nasty run-in with the Yakuza. In actuality, he was a member of the group for just six months. Burdon disbanded the New Animals shortly after returning from Japan and got back together with the old Animals, reforming the original lineup of the group in December 1968 to play a one-off benefit gig in their hometown of Newcastle.

Summers had floated through the sixties, indulging, by his own account, in his fair share of free love and pharmaceutical experimentation. Now his free ride had come to an end. He was only twenty-six years old, and his career had reached an impasse. Stranded again, this time in Los Angeles, he bided his time for four years, studying classical guitar while earning a meager crust by teaching it as well. He fell in love, got married, and prepared to settle down. But there was a need gnawing inside him to pick up where he had left off with his music career. In 1973, Summers returned to England with his new wife, Kate.

By contrast, Sting's early life in the industrial north of England was devoid of sunshine and bereft of glamour and opportunity. He was born and raised in the northern England town of Wallsend, so named because it marked the eastern extent of Hadrian's Wall, a second-century relic of the Roman occupation that once provided fortification against incursions by Celtic hordes from the North. In the nineteenth century, the area became associated with another

kind of fortification, the construction of vast sea vessels made of steel: warships, container ships, and passenger liners such as the SS *Mauritania*.

Still, to the teenage Gordon Sumner, Wallsend must have felt like the world's end: old-fashioned, parochial, limiting. He would come to feel trapped there. To the west of the Sumners' family home was the Wallsend Golf Course, which had covered over a former coal pit. To the south was a railway line. And just below that were the docks of the venerable Swan Hunter shipyard; the skyline at the end of Sting's street was dominated by the vast ships that were constructed there. His father and his grandfather had both worked in the shipyards (as fitter's engineer and shipwright, respectively). As the oldest son, this would likely have been Sting's calling, too, had his father, Ernie, not changed careers and become a milkman. His mother, Audrey, was a hairdresser by trade and an enthusiastic piano player at home, something for which she apparently displayed considerable talent. Her playing and the rock 'n' roll 78s she brought home to play on the family's turntable provided her son with an early introduction to music.

When Sting was five, the family moved into a two-story apartment above the dairy that Ernie had taken over as manager. There, as a child, Sting became an inadvertent witness to an event that seemed strange and awkward at the time, even inconsequential, but later took on immense significance in his life. Early one morning, before going to school, Sting stumbled upon his mother engaged in a tryst with the young man who had been hired to help out in the dairy. Hearing his mother's urgent pants and moans behind a closed door at the end of the house, he feared that something frightful was happening and instinctively attempted to enter in order to comfort and help her. But his way was blocked, his mother offering hurried reassurances as a supplication for her indiscretion.

This event set off a long estrangement from his mother, whom he began to regard as a flighty, emotional creature. The realization that her infidelity had continued throughout his parents' marriage harbored in Sting a deep hostility and mistrust. His father, typical of men

of the time, kept a tight lid on his emotions. The young child sought affection and approval from him that were not forthcoming. As a result, Sting became introverted and aloof. He inherited a guitar from an uncle, later bought another with pocket money saved from his job on the milk round, and was swept away by the sounds he plucked out of them in his bedroom. Music became a means to spirit himself away from the humdrum world of the everyday and into an eternal “now” built on fantasy. It also provided a buffer against the humiliation he had experienced during his strict Catholic school upbringing at the hands of unforgiving nuns. Music was a source of comfort throughout the existential loneliness of childhood and adolescence. It was something onto which he could latch his hopes and dreams while embarking on his first steps as a young man forced to assume responsibility in an adult world.

Sting abhorred the lot of the working stiff; he found desk jobs stultifying and was generally unwilling to conform. At the age of eighteen, he made a point of turning up late every day at his first office job—as a clerk at the local tax office—until, after six months, there was no option for the office but to fire him.

He enrolled instead in a local teacher-training college, where he met lifelong friend Gerry Richardson. The two bonded over music and began to play in a college band called Earthrise, for which Sting swapped his guitar for a bass. Richardson and Sting both subsequently became members of two different bands simultaneously: the Phoenix Jazzmen and the Newcastle Big Band. Sting once described the latter as “twenty-five pissheads on a Sunday lunch-time trying to get through to the end of an arrangement.” He cut his teeth playing traditional jazz in residencies at local hotels, working men’s social clubs, and bingo halls, and performing party standards like the “Hokey Cokey” at dinner dances. He also played backup music for strippers in seedy northern clubs. It was during his time with the Phoenix Jazzmen that he received a nickname (from the trombonist in the band) that would stick with him for life: “Sting,” after the striped football jersey that seemed to be his favored item of clothing.

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In 1974, Sting, as he was now known to all and sundry, graduated from college and soon began to work as a teacher at a Catholic primary school in a small mining village near Newcastle, teaching five- to seven-year-olds. He formed a new band, Last Exit, with Richardson (with whom he also shared a house) and two other local musicians. The name was taken from *Last Exit to Brooklyn*, Hubert Selby's abrasive novel about fifties New York street life. But the music they played was so anodyne as to render any association meaningless—one profile described their repertoire as consisting of “Stevie Wonder soul, Fleetwood Mac blues, Chick Corea hyperfunk.” Last Exit's stock in trade was ersatz jazz-funk allied to aching conventional love songs. Here, too, were born the roots of rivalry that Sting would carry over into the Police, as he and Richardson competed to come up with original songs for the band to play during a residency established at the Gosforth Hotel.

Sting had become extremely conscious of the importance of presentation from a very early age after attending a private school on a scholarship and mixing with children from a different class. From then on, upward mobility was the goal, whether it was achieved through sex or music. During Sting's teenage years, he learned to mesmerize girls like a snake charmer and reinvented himself as the “Don Juan of North Shields” (his hometown). “I used to get girls pregnant all the time,” he boasted. When his first serious girlfriend became pregnant, he left her in the lurch for another partner, who offered the promise of greater intellectual stimulation. He, in turn, was dumped by her. The vicious cycle of love and the active part he played in it would increasingly find voice in his songs. His first girlfriend, left heartbroken, would in years to come commit suicide. The event inspired a song, “The Bed's Too Big without You,” that seemed to be less a tribute to her memory than an attempt to re-characterize his own sorrowful guilt in the affair.

At the same time that Sting reinvented himself as a lothario, he primed himself for success, mimicking the announcers on the BBC to soften his speaking voice and remove the most obvious traces of his voweled Newcastle accent. He met and wooed his first

wife, actress Frances Tomelty, while performing in the band that accompanied a Christian rock musical, *Rock Nativity*. Tomelty was a headstrong woman from Northern Ireland. The affair with her was so all-consuming that the pair commuted between London and Newcastle to see each other for two years, until she became pregnant with their first child at the beginning of 1976. Tomelty became Last Exit's manager and shopped their demo tapes around to record companies in London. She also tutored Sting in the art of stagecraft.

For two years, Last Exit played residencies at the Lion's Inn pub at Blakey Ridge, an isolated sixteenth-century inn located on the highest point on the Yorkshire Moors, and at the Gosforth Hotel in Newcastle, where the band built up a reputation as local heroes. But the shows began to feel as stultifying as the desk jobs Sting had left behind. The band members were treading water, rather than moving up, and Sting was beginning to get restless.

Stewart Copeland had less of a burning desire to succeed than the other two did, but he had been reared to believe that his primacy was an inalienable right. Copeland's father, Miles Copeland II, was one of the founding members of the Central Intelligence Agency. Stewart's mother worked for the British secret service. Although Stewart was born in Alexandria, Virginia (in what he once described as "a suburb of the C.I.A.," close to the organization's headquarters in Langley), he was raised in Beirut, Lebanon—then considered the model of a westernized Arab city—where he led a privileged and cosseted life. His family lived in a grand apartment in the city, and Stewart was looked after by a nanny. The first band he joined as a drummer made its debut in the protected environs of the American Embassy Beach Club in Beirut.

Copeland's passion for bashing the drums far outweighed any natural musical ability he had. He couldn't read a note of music and had flunked the entrance exam for the music program at the University of California at Berkeley. He majored in communications

and public policy instead, later describing it as “a greater engine for my career than a musical education would have been.” But he did have one distinct advantage: both of his older brothers had entered the music business before him.

By the early seventies, oldest brother Miles had already built up a successful management business representing British progressive rock groups like Wishbone Ash and Renaissance. He had started his own management agency, British Talent Managers (BTM), which, by the mid-seventies, would also incorporate a boutique record label (BTM Records) distributed through RCA. Ian, the middle of the three brothers, was employed by a venerable old booking agency in London named John Sherry Enterprises and was also working on building up his own roster of acts. He booked a Scottish funk act called the Average White Band as support on tour with Eric Clapton, inadvertently launching their career. The two brothers swapped acts back and forth like trading cards.

Nepotism came as second nature to the Copeland clan. Miles aided his brother’s drumming ambitions by parachuting him into the lineup of two of the bands that he managed. The first, a group called Stonefeather, mutinied and split in reaction to the enforced placement of their new eighteen-year-old drummer—especially given that their manager had fired the previous drummer. The second was Curved Air, a moderately successful British progressive rock band that had gone through numerous lineup changes since forming in 1969. Stewart Copeland was the drummer for the band’s last two years and final two albums.

To draw attention to the start of his tenure with Curved Air, Copeland wrote a letter under an assumed name to the *Melody Maker* music weekly, praising his own talents as a drummer. He was rewarded with a half-page article in an April 1975 issue, accompanied by a large photograph of himself behind the kit. The headline to the piece, “Seeing through Curved Air’s Copeland,” implied that the editors had spotted his ruse. An unruly but transparent hustler, Copeland got away with most things through the sheer force of his boundless boyish charm. He also managed to charm his way into a relationship

with the group's sultry Danish front woman, Sonja Kristina, and set up home with her and her young son, Sven.

Meanwhile, a web of connections drew the future Police men closer and closer together. They had, at times, even unknowingly crossed paths earlier. On returning to London, Summers had taken to hanging around the West London offices of Virgin Records, hoping to pick up some work. He was rewarded with a slot playing lead guitar in a live production of Mike Oldfield's *Tubular Bells*, the multimillion-selling synthesizer-pop record that had established Virgin as a major player in the music industry. The support act on the Newcastle run of the show (which took place in October 1976) was Last Exit. The newly established publishing arm of Virgin, which was run by a woman named Carol Wilson, had caught wind of the band and trooped up to Newcastle en masse (led by Virgin boss Richard Branson) to see them play live. A few months later, a songwriting deal was on the table. This would provide Sting with the hope that his career finally had forward momentum and that recognition might be around the corner. His Last Exit bandmates were duly convinced to make the long trek down to London in an attempt to establish further in-roads into the music industry.

In the fall of 1976, Wilson set up some showcase gigs for the band in London, including an appearance at Dingwalls, the club where the Ramones had made their feted London debut just a few months earlier. Last Exit appeared as support to singer-songwriter Isaac Guillory, playing to little more than a dozen people—and most of those were either employees at Virgin Music publishing, who had helped set up the show as a showcase, or friends and associates of the band. One of those was journalist Phil Sutcliffe, a Newcastle native like Sting and an avid fan of Last Exit, who had managed to get a commission from the weekly music newspaper *Sounds* to write a report on Last Exit's attempts at making it in London. The article was as upbeat as it could be, given that, as Sutcliffe conceded, no one in London knew who the band was and no one particularly cared.

Sutcliffe was the person who first introduced Sting to Stewart Copeland, whom he brought to see Last Exit in November 1976, when Curved Air came up for a date in Newcastle. Curved Air had by that time decided to split, and Copeland was playing out his tenure with the group in support of what was to be its final recording, a cover of the Big Joe Williams blues standard “Baby, Please Don’t Go.” The song had already been covered by everyone from Bob Dylan to Gary Glitter. Curved Air turned in a boogie-woogie version that sounded corny and outmoded. Stewart Copeland had already devised his exit plan.