

I am an entertainer, says 'Platinum' Lotti

CATHY RETIEF-NEIL

Our globe trotter journalist, Cathy Retief-Neil, interviewed the Belgian singing sensation before his concert Stuttgart and found a "new, supremely confident" Helmut Lotti.

There is something about the man...

Certain people have that special something and Helmut Lotti, Belgian singing sensation and one of Europe's top entertainers, has "it".

A few days before Christmas, as I waited for Helmut in his dressing room at the Schleyerhalle in Stuttgart (while 5 000 fans - or is devotees a better description? - filed into the auditorium), I thought back to the last time we had met in South Africa, almost four years ago.

I was privileged to spend some time at the Hotel Sandston Hilton and at Sun City, with Helmut's entourage, during his two-concert tour five months after filming the video of the hugely successful "Out of Africa" in October of the previous year.

'Helmut was visibly affected by the plight of the children in flood-ravaged Mozambique'

I met with and chatted to Helmut the night he returned from a trip as Belgium's Goodwill Ambassador to Unicef, from South Africa's flood-ravaged neighbour, Mozambique.

It was almost midnight and Helmut was talking, glass of wine in hand, to Piet Roelen and André

Walschaerts, in the confines of the hotel lounge reserved for him, when Mario van

Renterghem - who is the mastermind behind the Lotti corporate image and design - introduced me to him.

It was the night before the concert at



Carnival City. The second of only two concerts was at Sun City the following night March 31, 2000.

We talked a while and I was immediately taken with this boyishly charming young man, who was a little preoccupied and visibly affected by the plight of, particularly the children, of Mozambique.

(those who do not desire him for a son-in-law) find him exceedingly sexy!

I believe this combination of boyish charm and sex appeal, coupled with an amazing and versatile talent, is the recipe for his success.

I see a future in movies. The camera loves Helmut - and Helmut admits to enjoying the limelight, and he does call himself an entertainer. "I do not always like the way I look on photos," he says.

By the same token, he says he is not as good looking as he appears on some - when last did you look in the mirror, Helmut?

The expression "High on Life" must have been written with the boundlessly energetic Helmut in mind!

In fact, he said during a later interview: "People ask me what drugs I am on, but I tell them that I do not and never will take drugs and that I am naturally 'high on life'.

Had I known at the time that it would be four years before I had the opportunity to speak to Helmut again, I would have accepted Mario's offer that I declined, for fear of abusing my position. I was there as a fan and not as a radio presenter or journalist.

I shamelessly admit to secretly studying him the following morning, as he tucked into a healthy breakfast while being interviewed by a Belgian journalist - and kicking myself several times over for not having interviewed him!

Now, four years later, I wondered if I would come face to face with the same man. I did not.

The extended hand, the three Belgian kisses and the wonderful, sincere smile were the same, but the "boy" had been replaced by a supremely confident,

They left and Helmut said: "Do you mind if I finish signing these CD covers and photographs while we wait?" (Yes, he

I think I adolescently blurted out that it was "unfair for one man to be blessed with such a magnificent voice," to which he just smiled that disarming smile.

Oh yes, he knows how to turn on the charm!

Anni and Omer returned and the spell was broken.

I came back down from the cloud I had been floating on while allowing his voice to carry me to some distant place, far removed from the dressing room at the Schleyerhalle, in time to remember that I was supposed to be a professional and that my purpose for being here, was to interview him... the man with the voice of an angel.

Having gotten off to a bad start, I told Helmut that I had pre-recorded the introduction and that we could go straight into the interview for South African radio.

His fans would be happy to hear his voice "in person" as they were starved of any contact with him. I was bold enough to suggest that he spoke to his manager and producer, Piet Roelen, to market him

more extensively in those countries where his CDs have been released, but where he does not tour regularly, but he responded with: "I am only the singer, I have nothing to do with promotion or marketing."

Oh well, I tried.

I proceeded to do a short overview of how he got started in the music business, from his childhood days when he listened to Elvis at every opportunity, to The Soundmix Show - all well-



slender, well honed man, with only glimpses of the "man-child" remaining behind the sometimes coy smile.

His body language exuded new-found maturity and self-confidence that was endorsed by his strong, charming voice and - yes, I do still admire it - the obvious intellect of the man.

And now to the interview in Stuttgart.

As one of the most organised people I know, it was with huge embarrassment that I realised my DAT system (recording equipment) had been left in the car in my rush to get to Helmut's dressing room at the pre-arranged time of 5.30pm on this chilly December day in Germany.

My preoccupation with being on time suddenly faded into insignificance as I meekly told him of my dilemma!

I adolescently blurted out that it was unfair for one man to be blessed with such a beautiful voice!"

But I could have saved myself the angst. Charming as ever, Helmut called his personal assistant, Omer Denies (a most friendly and helpful man) and asked him to accompany my friend and appointed photographer, Anni Zanello, to collect the equipment.

really does sign them personally).

Did I mind - was he serious?

It would give me time to gather my thoughts and to secretly study him, as we journalists are inclined to do. Suddenly he started to sing some of the old classic ballads and the sound of his perfect, melodious voice managed to send shills even through these middle-aged veins!



I'm afraid he chided me lightly, saying:

"You have said it all for me. What do you want me to say?"

I quickly told him that he would have plenty time to speak during the next 30 or 40 minutes.

You see, I wanted him to talk about more recent events, touring, his next CD, new happenings in his life and other related facts. His rise to the top

has already been extensively covered, and he's asked the same old questions over and over again - and I was not going to do it that way.

I asked Helmut how many of his CDs had reached Platinum and he looked directly at me and said: "I have no clue".

At last count, I think it was over 70.

"But every one is special to me. I am never blasé and appreciate it - and my fans - every time a record goes Gold or Platinum," he said.

I remarked that sales of over 10 million was phenomenal and he surprised me with his answer.

"There are some singers like Andrea Bocelli and Robbie Williams who sell that many in one year! They are good and that is why they sell so many CDs, but they have also been released inter-



nationally and that gives you a far wider market," he said.

I asked why he was not released internationally and again the answer: "I am only the singer. Piet Roelen is my manager and he has always been right with past decisions. I leave all of that up to him."

I have no doubt Piet is a genius. Who else would dare to take a young Belgian pop singer with no classical training whatsoever and have him record a CD of classical music! A four octave voice does not necessarily a classical singer make...

"When Piet proposed the first classical CD, I remember asking him if he was mad - that is not the kind of music that the broader public wants! I told him it wouldn't sell and that I had bills to pay, and he said: 'Don't worry about the bills, just sing,' and the CD and the rest, as they say, is history."

Just as the extreme crossover from the classical CDs to *Out of Africa* was - another stroke of genius that became Helmut's biggest selling CD with sales of over 500 000 in Germany alone. The video was at No. 1 for quite some time, ahead even of Michael Flatley's visually exciting *Lord of The Dance!*

We touched on the topic of his lovely wife, Carol Jane Poe (Lofigiers), who had set up a dive shop called "Bubble and Dive" near their home in Gent and I said she must be a very special lady to accept him being away for weeks on end, traveling all over the world and being hugged, kissed and adored by so many female fans. Last year he spent a total of two-and-a-half months in his own home in Belgium and although Carol sometimes tours with him, more often than not, she is getting on with her own ventures. But how she must miss him. Again his answer was surprising.

"Carol is very independent and that is good. We all need our own space, but I think I miss her more than she misses me! She works very hard and once her shop is open, she will have even more to do."

I was impressed with Helmut for not "acting the big star" and telling me the 30 minutes promised for an interview was over. He simply let me ask questions which he answered without hesitation and when I said it was a wrap and thanked him, he picked up his guitar and said he would like to play something for me. I thought he was joking. "You said you don't play the guitar," I said.



"Ah, but now Freddy is teaching me to play," he said and proceeded to pluck the strings and to play a few tunes. His natural musical talent now extends to the guitar! I literally had to tear myself away, as I had to interview both André Walschaerts and Freddy Bisset before the concert started.

I have to offer fair comment on the concert, my first in a long time and (I thought) a completely new programme.

As the strains of Out of Africa echoed throughout the auditorium and I waited for Helmut to appear on stage singing his own composition – and one of my favourite songs – from the CD, the music suddenly changed to Bohemian Rhapsody and Helmut's voice floated hauntingly in unison from some unseen place.

Then he made the "grand entrance" and the magic I had experienced at those long ago concerts was back in an instant.

The repertoire was, as expected, songs from Pop Classics in Symphony, a mix of previous CDs and the effervescent Caruso, Nessun Dorma and Elvis Medley. But a new addition was the final song

that Helmut described as a lullaby, before shaking the walls with rock music reaching decibels my ears could barely survive – but I did – and it was wonderful. Even Anni was up and dancing, while Uschi, Renate and I clapped our hands and stamped our feet!

In retrospect, the Danny Boy duet with my other all-time favourite, Cliff Richard, was brilliant, although I do think it was a bad "live image" of Cliff – too close up and not at all flattering!

The addition of special guest star on the PCIS tour, Freddy Bisset, with his deep bass voice caressing classic French songs and the duet with Helmut, was a touch of class!

Add to the mix the brilliance of conductor André Walschaerts and his Golden Symphonic Orchestra and you have the final ingredient for this winning recipe.

After the concert, I heard some fans complaining that there was too much old stuff and not enough new. My own view is that it is what makes Helmut's concerts unique; the fact that you can once again relive the wonderful songs that lured you to the Lotti-stable in the first place...

On the way back to Aichtal I

was debating in my mind whether Helmut's version of Mandy was as good as the original (a copy rarely is), or whether the boy band Westlife did it best – the jury's still out on that one.

It was a magical evening and I was sad that, after looking forward to the interview, the concert and meeting some of the Lotti "family", for some weeks, the evening had come to an abrupt end.

Oh well, at least I have my live interview and my live concert tucked away in the recesses of my mind that I can call to memory whenever I want to relive those, magical memories moments!

The only Belgian to make it to the Super Final of the Soundmix Show in the Netherlands in 1979 has proved to everyone that he is now officially a Super(Belgian)star.

Will Helmut perform again in South Africa ... watch this space.

