

Critics can't slot Lotti

And so what?

12 million in sales
show he's on track

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Most music writers experience their share of surreal moments on the job, but seeing Helmut Lotti suddenly burst into a song by heavy metal icons Iron Maiden has to rank pretty high.

"Run to the hills / Run for your liiiiiives," the 35-year-old Belgian pop crooner belted out in a screechy falsetto while in Montreal on a promotional visit last week. "That was a wonderful song. Bruce Dickinson - great singer," Lotti said. The reality-defying moment came as he explained that there was no style he wouldn't attempt in the recording studio - including speed metal. Dressed impeccably in a blue suit and tie, as if he were about to go on stage and deliver some of the light classics that have made him famous, Lotti sounded utterly sincere.

What leaps out at you when you spend an hour with Lotti is that he loves what he's doing.

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When he brings up a song, he doesn't just mention the title - he sings a few lines. And his joy is clearly undiminished by classical-music critics who say he's too pop, pop writers who consider him too easy-listening, or rock scribes who are convinced he's the antichrist. "You cannot do it right for everyone," he said. "The problem with the thing I'm doing is that it's so untypical, they don't know where to put it."

Lotti's music has sometimes been attacked with extreme venom in the press, but derisive snorts from apoplectic critics haven't made a dent in his sales, which so far total 12 million worldwide, including 800,000 in Canada. With cash-register action like that, he can afford to be gracious to his detractors: "I can understand these guys, because whenever I hear somebody sing Elvis, it usually irritates me. I'm an Elvis purist, so I can understand the purists," he said. "I even had a problem (recording) my own Elvis album. I respect him too much."

There's one qualifier in Lotti's laissez-faire attitude toward journalists. "It irritates me when they try to get into my private life," he said. His amicable separation from his second wife, Carol Jane Poe, has been all over European newspapers, he said. "I can stand it when they are trying to destroy me, but when you touch me, you touch my mother, you touch my family, you touch my little girl. People who do stuff like that - I don't think they realize what they are really doing," he said.