

INTERVIEW

“God is a cleaning lady who has gone on strike”

What better way to celebrate the 60th anniversary of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights than with the rock singer who, more than any of his peers, embodies the concept of artistic freedom in this country. Meet Arno.

“See the fresh flowers over there? When the previous owner sold this place, she insisted on it being stipulated in the paperwork that there must be fresh flowers at all times. Fantastic. That’s Brussels for you.”

We are in L’Archiduc, Brussels’ legendary jazz bar, and Arno is in fine form. This is his local, although you suspect that, to paraphrase The Temptations, wherever he lays his hat is his home. And if trying to keep him in one place is an ungrateful task, trying to stop him going off on a tangent is like nailing jellyfish to the wall. Within minutes, two things become obvious to this journalist: (1) the man gives good quote and (2) it is pointless to repeat the original question hoping for a conventional answer.

Arno Hintjens doesn’t “do” conventional, and chances are he never did. His 1980s band, TC Matic, were impossible to pigeonhole. Blending white funk and blues with what was then generically known as new wave, they sounded like no one else – and that’s just the music. Arno’s voice is also one in a million; many clichés have been (over)used to describe his gravelly tones and, to be fair, he does sound like a multilingual Tom Waits trying to hail a taxi after a night on the tiles.

French, Dutch, his native *Oost-ends* dialect and English all feature on TC Matic’s best-known number, “Putain Putain”. Play it in any rock club in Belgium, and the whole place goes mental. The band’s other signature tune “O La La La” is regularly hailed as the greatest Belgian rock single of all time.

Following the demise of TC Matic, Arno made a name for himself in France, where cult status gradually led to mainstream recognition – as well as a *louche* pin-up image. The French can’t get enough of him and see in him a rock’n’roll reincarnation of Jacques Brel.

You would think that this lucrative foray into *chanson* (the song “Les Yeux de Ma Mère” has been known to reduce Hell’s Angels to blubbering wrecks) and his approaching 60th birthday would have somehow mellowed him, but nothing could be further from the truth.

One day you may see him on French national television promoting his latest album, the next he will be involved in some art-house movie or planning a collaboration with traditional Moroccan musicians. The man simply doesn’t know when to stop – and for this we should consider ourselves very lucky.

You’re about to do a charity concert. Given your profile in Belgium and France, you must be a prime target for charities in search of a headliner or spokesperson.

“Last month alone I was approached for five charity events. I can’t say yes to everyone, otherwise it would just get farcical.”

So why did you choose Amnesty International?

I got a phone call from Amnesty International asking if I would help... I replied that I had

already played for them years ago, but they said: “No no, you played for Amnesty International Europe; we are Amnesty International Belgique Francophone”. I nearly fell off my chair when I found out that Amnesty had been split in two in Belgium! I said I’d do it because I think it’s good that such events do take place, but, honestly, this is proper Belgian surrealism. I’m half expecting a call from the German-speaking branch of Amnesty Belgium!

Cue long rant against the narrow mindedness of separatist politicians (“you only need to look at them to realise that it’s because they have small penises”) and the sorry state of mainstream socialism in Belgium (“any old hairdresser is more socialist than the current lot put together!”). Okay then, let us naively try to get back to the origi-



Flemish rock god Arno plays at the Ancienne Belgique in Brussels on 10 December, a concert celebrating the 60th anniversary of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. Tickets from www.abconcerts.be

nal topic, namely human rights...

American voters recently had the choice between someone who is in favour of the death penalty and someone who refuses to condemn it.

I think it has a lot to do with religion. So many wars are being waged in the name of God... I reckon God should do us all a favour, go back up to Paradise and leave us alone! That’s my master plan [laughs]. Anyway, maybe God is a woman, eh? Maybe God is a cleaning lady. Who is currently on strike. How’s that for a headline huh?! You want another beer? I want to drink to that. [Bursts into laughing and heads for the bar.]

It’s by now crystal clear that the best policy is to let Arno go with the flow. Besides, it is incredibly enjoyable – an endless succession of juicy anecdotes, quips and non-sequiturs, each punctuated with the dirtiest laugh this side of the Atomium. Arno comes back with beers, and he’s at it right away: “See that guy over there? I suspect he has a mistress”. He leans forward: “I think it’s fantastic!” and we raise our glasses to the potentially lucky fellow.

As we casually discuss long-defunct 1980s Brussels rock bands, we both realise that he, a Dutch speaker by birth, is being interviewed by a native French speaker

for an English-language publication. Isn’t Brussels simply wonderful? “Brussels is like an old whore: open to everyone. And I love old whores. In fact I’m an old whore myself!”. What a shame that this article only needs one headline.

You spend your whole life speaking a mixture of many languages. What language do you dream in?

Good question; I’ve never thought about that. I honestly don’t know; I often don’t even remember what language I was speaking the night before! What I do know is that I dream in black and white. My dreams are like Léon Spilliaert paintings – I’m sure it’s an Ostend thing. [smiles]

We then discuss the comparative merits of Spilliaert and Ostend’s other famous artist, James Ensor. (“Did you know that Bob Dylan’s song ‘Desolation Row’ was inspired by Ensor’s painting ‘Christ’s Entry Into Brussels’?”)

Finally, what is your preferred, err, bed-time language?

“Smell is the best bed-time language!” [nods knowingly, bursts out laughing]

What a man.

Interview by PM Doutreligne

online
www.arno.be

Win tickets!
Win a pair of tickets to see Arno on 10 December in Ancienne Belgique. Email editorial@flanderstoday.eu by 7 December with “Arno tickets” in the subject line. Winners will be notified by 8 December

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