

## Louw Cronje, Billy, Donny and Me

Anyone who was there would've had to be stone deaf not to feel it. From the opening bars, the rhythm came up through the floor of that badly lit old trailer-home like the heart-beat of the times we were living in. Billy Karstens, with that half-baked, concentrated look he had when he was responsible for bass, scrunched up with one foot on the edge of the corner bunk, Donny Dippenaar chinning his fiddle and beating time with his bow or harmonica against the knuckles of his left hand, anxious to get to it and, like the rest of us, envying Louw Cronje his limelight on lead guitar and vocals in the middle of the floor.

And me. I was just happy to be there, even though they'd told me to cut back on the drums – right back.

There was always a girl or two, chewing gum, smoking and nodding out of time or drumming long, chipped nails on the cracked Formica, eyeing Louw without making it obvious, unless someone had brought a bottle in which case it was less formal, so to speak.

It was Louw's trailer, so I suppose we just naturally deferred to him, what with him having started the band and all that. It never really struck us that without us to back him he would have been just a guitarist who could sing country style. Not good enough to get gigs on his own, but quite acceptable with Billy laying down a solid bass and some inspired riffs from Donny.

I wasn't Gene Kruper, and I knew enough not to get adventurous and to allow Louw his moments. Especially since that bust-up at the Holiday Inn when the Black Labels caught up on me, and Donny, Billy and Louw had all climbed into me at the break. I would never have thought I was playing so loud. It had seemed like inspiration to me.

Anyway, the point is, that in our pecking order, if Louw was king rooster, Billy was prince regent (if he could just get rid of his spots) Donny was the closest courtier and I guess I was maybe an egg. An egg in no hurry to hatch out. They all seemed to me to be so talented, so.... you know....from their Levis to their haircuts..... confident. Apart from me having the only drum kit in town, it never occurred to me to question why they let me drum for them. I was just too grateful to be part of it all and to get an occasional smile from some desperate, small town groupie.

My mother wasn't keen on the band. She had that way of sniffing and looking out of the kitchen window at her wilting pot-plants on the blue-painted stand in the passage. Dad made it out of packing cases salvaged from the plant, a few days before they brought him home one overcast Tuesday, clutching his chest and very white in the face. All the bicarbonate of soda in the flat didn't make this one go away and my mother had worn black ever since. At first, I made excuses for going out and leaving her alone with her patches of unfinished cross-stitch and the Fair Isle sweater that was short of a left sleeve. I knew I'd see her accusing face above the row of fabric brushes stiffening in their jam-jars on the window-sill, so I stopped looking back.

The fifth gig we got was, as usual, by default. Malcolm and the Malcontents had turned their Toyota twin cab over on the low bridge across a flooded Uintjies River and the Royal Hotel at Joubertsvlei was in a fix.

The local community had been looking forward to this langarm opskop for months and they were in an ugly mood, said the anguished manager on a party line that echoed with background complaint as much as from the interference by birds garroted and entangled here and there along those miles of sagging wire.

Thirty minutes later, we were all in Louw's Volkswagen, staring through the cracked windscreen at the winding descent to the Uintjies Bridge, my drum kit tied to the roof under an old army groundsheet and the others embracing their instruments like lovers.

It had stopped raining, but the bridge was still somewhere under a sullen left to right flow. At full revs, Louw hit it at the furthest possible left point, but I swear the right wheels had slipped off the right edge of the bridge when the screaming engine spun the bald left back tyre just enough to make the far bank and we churned up the rutted climb out of the riverbed, shedding drowned khakibos, laughing like relieved maniacs, with Louw accepting all the praise as his right.

There's a Royal Hotel in just about every South African town, and this one had at some time believed in itself. Before it slowly came to terms with reality. The local farms were fertile and profitable, city fishermen put up with the hellish drive to The Point to try their luck and really hardy nature-lovers camped or caravanned at two run-down sites along the banks of the Uintjies estuary. In living memory, nobody had stayed in the hotel, but

the bar-trade made up for it and Tannie Kritz served meals by Tilley light on the red-polished stoep that made stumbling about in the dark over a smoky fire an unattractive alternative.

With the humidity and the waiting, much of the bar-trade had spilled out onto the stoep and our clattering arrival had them crowding to the rail to watch us unload. A sodden withaak bush had entwined itself with my drum kit and took some persuasion so I was last up the steps and into a ballroom that must have been grand in its time.

Louw was plugging in and smiling his white smile at a scattering of abandoned women nursing tepid drinks at the tables. Husbands and escorts were trickling back, hitching pants and excuses alike, eyeing us in that speculative, suspicious way of the returning harem male.

I had my drums up and ready by the time the others had found outlets and unkinked their leads and when Louw stepped up front and struck a pose that jutted out his right hip suggestively, I was ready with the drumroll and the pale blobs in the gloom around the dancefloor guffawed the way they were supposed to.

Louw launched into Help Me Make it Through the Night and took us through a Kristoffersen medley to open. He was a skilful judge of tastes and by the end of the first set, they were all out on the floor. A quick smoke and a Coke and we were back, tackling Mickey Newbury's better known hits. Those that didn't know him took just a number or two to be converted and at the end of that set, even I could sense that they thought we were a good substitute for the Malcontents.

And then, there was a girl tugging at my right sleeve, there at the back of the stage where the shadows were deepest. Those drummers who don't need to look at their equipment have got me beat. Me, I have to watch it all the time, so I didn't have time to do more than glance at her. Long, glossy black hair, pale skin and a round face with slanting dark eyes and a soft, open mouth. In that light, she looked damn good to me. I kept on drumming and she kept tugging gently, but pleading and apologetic, like someone who was used to doing that - waiting to be noticed.

But she was upsetting my concentration and when I missed the first drumbeat, I turned to her and that made me miss another and the cymbals all in one bar. Louw, out there under the lights and the attention, flinched and brought the number to an early close. He shrugged off his

shoulder sling and bowed his way through the usual guff about a break to fill glasses before stalking back to me, Donny and Billy close behind. He opened his mouth to start in on me and then stopped, staring at the girl.

“What’s this?” he demanded. When the girl stepped forward, I shrugged and sat there, sticks in hand and was as surprised as the rest of them when she said “I wanna sing. I can. An’ I wanna.”

Louw leaned back a bit and narrowed his eyes, looking her over. He hated any sort of incursion into his circle of light out there and I knew what he was going to say. The girl sensed it and seemed to make up her mind. She brushed past Louw and took up a position on the stage, next to where he’d been standing. We looked at each other and at the audience returning from the bar, brimming drinks in their hands. Louw compressed his lips and strode towards her.

He never got to say or do what he meant to, because the crowd recognized her and started chanting “Antjie, Antjie, Antjie” just like that, some of them laughing and slapping each other on the shoulder. It sure stopped Louw and he stood just a moment before taking up his place and catching us all flat-footed by going back to Kristofferson’s Bobby McGee.

The girl swayed with the opening bars and then closed her eyes and opened her throat in an inspired descant that mirrored Louw’s lead singing, but hit notes and places the writer and certainly none of us had ever imagined.

It says something about Louw that he knew when he was on a winning streak. Either that he was a warm, appreciative, modest human being or that he was a cold hearted, opportunist shit with one eye on the main chance. I tended to support the second view.

By the second number, he was giving the girl the breaks and playing a convincing back-up role. Mind you, I thought his mouth looked a bit tight with the famous Louw Cronje smile as forced as I’d ever seen. But the audience was loving it - listening more than they danced - a good sign when it’s country - sure indication that you’re hitting them where it counts. In the heart instead of in the feet. The girl was oblivious to anything other than the freedom of her soul and she seemed to grow with each number.

By the time we got to Spanish Johnny, I was pretty inspired myself. Emmy Lou Harris had stuck chords in me that were pretty private, but the girl took it to places they'd never been intended to go and I was having difficulty following them. Maybe it was fortunate that Louw called a break just about then and there was an exodus to the bar.

Ma Kritz had laid out a meal on one side for us and we fell to. Louw was silently chewing and thinking when the girl slipped onto a stool beside him and put her hand on his shoulder. He jerked in surprise and shrugged off her hand. She put it back and he left it there.

"Take me back with you." she said.

He swallowed and said "What?"

"I wanna come back with you. An' sing. Like tonight." her almond eyes were pleading "I'll clean an' work an' everything. You'll see".

"Back? Back where?" Louw's eyebrows almost merged with his blonde brush cut.

"With you. Or with them. I don' care." She waved a hand at the rest of us, but was looking at Louw. He stared at her.

"No! It's....it's ...No!" he pushed his plate aside and felt for his pack of Texans.

The girl seemed to crumple. Her face puckered and she closed her eyes. It was how she would look when she was dried up and eighty, I thought. Louw might have been thinking something similar, but he just dragged on his cigarette and surprised us all.

"Tell you what. We'll give it a go. You got stuff?"

"What? You mean I can?" realization dawning. "I can fetch my things. It's just down at the caravan..... I can.....you won't go, will you?" A mixture of joy, disbelief and fear that Louw's about face wasn't what it seemed. It churned me up inside that someone should be that needy. Louw didn't seem phased. "Naah. Go fetch it. We got a few more sets to finish off."

As it turned out, the clientele wasn't in a hurry to let us go, and it was after two by the time they conceded that they were as bushed as we must have

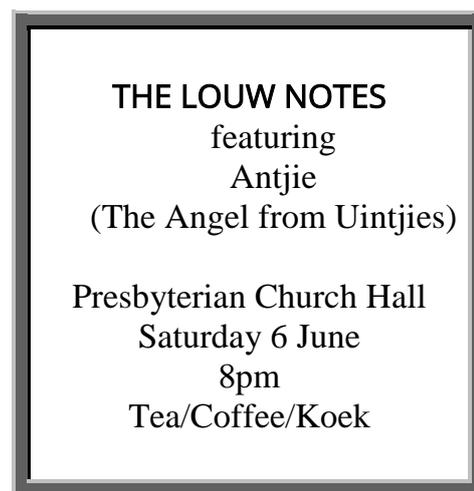
looked. The girl hadn't come back. When we lugged the stuff out onto the stoep, we found her sitting on the bottom step, her head on her arms and a worn, cardboard suitcase beside her.

The tall man standing beside the car was shabby, his big hands hanging at his sides. His head was bowed like he was grieving. He looked at each of us in turn before turning away and disappearing into the night

It was a lot more crowded on the way home, with Antjie on my lap and her suitcase lashed on top of my drum-kit, but the river had gone down quite a bit, so Louw just grated the Beetle into bottom gear and trundled through and up the far slope. Donny and Billy were still asleep when we pulled up outside my place. Louw sat drumming his fingers while I got my stuff and put the suitcase on the girl's lap. I could sense he was regretting that moment of weakness in the hotel. "I don't suppose your Mom...." he started.

"No" I said and went inside. My mother certainly wouldn't approve of strange girls found in country hotels. Me being in a band was depraved enough.

I didn't see Louw for about a week. When I did, I thought he looked a little desperate. Antjie looked good. She'd changed her hair somehow and her T shirt and jeans looked new. She smiled at me and took hold of Louw's hand. He didn't take it away, but I thought he looked embarrassed. When I saw the first poster on a shop window, I knew why.



**Mike Job**