

20/04/2001

Golden girl with the golden voice

Errol de Cruz

IT WAS a typical family suite at the Quality Hotel, Jalan Raja Laut, KL.

Food trays idled outside the door awaiting collection, and just as we were ushered in, a bellboy arrived, carrying two more trays of sundaes, fruit juice, iced coffee and chocolate.

Inside, the TV set was on.

"Siti's having her hair done," said her brother, manager and former recording artiste, Aiyee. That was nice. No fussing about. No preliminaries about what the interview was to be about.

Ten minutes later, the star walked in, dressed casually, looking radiant without make-up, long hair flowing free.

The daughter of Tarudin, a policeman, and singer Siti Salmah, Nurhaliza, now 22, was just another student, five years ago, when she won RTM's Bintang Hiburan Minggu in 1995.

Since then, the awards have just poured in, and she can't recollect exactly how many at the interview.

After the contest came a recording deal with Suria Records and she hit the top with her first single, Mawar Ku, a P. Ramlee composition, originally recorded by Ramlee's Panca Sitara, led by Aziz Jaafar.

For her debut, Nurhaliza recorded the song with boy band 2 By 2, and took off like a rocket, winning two awards at Singapore's Popular Music Awards in 1996 (Most Popular New Artiste, Most Popular Song) and followed her success with three more awards at our Juara Lagu '96 (Best Performance, Ballad and Song of the Year) for Jerat Percintaan.

Her run was nothing short of phenomenal as more awards fell into place for Jerat Percintaan at the Anugerah Industri Muzik, the year after.

Barely 17, the Kuala Lipis girl was awed by her success. Until then, her life was an example of kampung bliss, as she studied and helped her family sell kueh-mueh at the pasar malam, her mind set on a career in medicine.

That was how she had her first vocal lessons, shouting out her wares to attract customers.

"It was difficult, virtually impossible then, for a student to make it so big in the music business and get accepted by both critics and music-buyers," the demure star said. "Moreover, we didn't expect Singapore to accept it so fast."

But, she admits, she had an advantage. A big one. The choice of song was perfect. It was a cover version of an old hit. And one by P. Ramlee, to boot.

Half the battle was won. The rest of the victory came with her good looks and fresh vocal style and presentation.

Five years on, Siti Nurhaliza has become used to success but still retains her humility, a virtue that belies her star status. Her family still comes first and as she speaks, she makes it obvious that it will for some time to come.

"I know, people talk about how my brother or sister is always around when I go out, that I'm over-protected.

"But I'm still young and in this business, what people say about you is very important," she emphasised, concerned that unnecessary talk could easily get out of hand, become controversial, even.

"Besides, they're also concerned about my safety when I go out."

Siti Nurhaliza, mature beyond her years, also admits that with her hectic schedule, she has precious little time left for herself, "It's the

sacrifice I have to make, being an anak seni (child of the arts)."

"I have no regrets," she said. "It's my choice."

The lady knows she's young and that being young, she will have a lot of time for everything else and there's some naivete when we discuss her private life and she comes across really cute.

"You mean being (part of) ... a couple," she says hesitantly, blushing, an eyebrow cocked. "No, there's no one waiting on the side."

"It will all come in due time," she smiles modestly. "Right now, my responsibility is to my family ... to make sure that my younger siblings get what they need."

Thanks to her childhood years in Kuala Lipis, Nurhaliza may know what hard times are all about, and she is aware of her familial duties.

"Maybe the time will be right in a couple of years," she ponders. "Right now, there's no time to spend or think about boyfriends."

"I do have a private life, now, but it's with my family and I enjoy it," she said, adding that she keeps fit, trying hard to catch up on lost sleep and supplementing her diet with vitamins.

Leisure time for the young superstar is spent either bowling or playing badminton, but there's always family around, and yes, they do protect her.

And why not, especially when you consider the number of stars whose careers and private lives have been littered and destroyed by all sorts of mongering and media scrutiny.

A couple of years ago, Nurhaliza was accused of taking sides politically when she spoke in favour of Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr. Mahathir at a concert.

Today, that seems like it was taken out of context as Nurhaliza insists that she has no political aspirations and even answers the question as if she had no other choice.

"Maybe some time later, much later, I could help in the development of local politics, especially if I could help society with my contribution.

"There is no doubt that, being artistes, we have a great influence on our fans ... but not now ... I have no experience in this ... maybe much later."

Her attitude is the same when she responds to questions about movie offers.

"I won't do anything that I'm not sure of and certainly not until I'm ready for it ... the price doesn't matter.

"Right now, I'm a singer; I have music in my blood - and that's what I want to concentrate on."

The rest of 2001 seems pretty packed already for Siti Nurhaliza, singer, beauty product spokesman, soft drink endorser and former goodwill ambassador of the Malaysian Red Crescent Society (MRCS).

Her two-year contract with MRCS recently expired and they're already talking about a renewal. But Nurhaliza is uncertain, although she has already pledged to help the organisation when the need arises.

"I don't need to be an ambassador to help them in their activities," she offered. "Moreover, other charities seem reluctant to approach me, knowing I'm an MRCS goodwill ambassador."

"If I'm free of contracts, I'll be able to help any of them."

Right now, the cards include a mega "comeback" concert at the National Stadium at Bukit Jalil in June and another at the Singapore World Trade Centre, possibly in September.

And there are other queries from other parts of the world - Indonesia, where her album, *Aku Cinta Pada Mu*, sold half a million copies, Japan and China (where she's performed twice before).

No one's saying so, but the money should be on Indonesia, where her last two albums - *Cindai* and *Safar* - should soon be released. Here,

unfortunately, her latest outing, Safar, is badly hit by piracy, taking its time to cross the 100,000-mark.

"And that's what I'm trying to nurture in my concerts and public appearances - the need to buy original products, to help the industry grow and prosper," Nurhaliza said.

The "comeback" is bit of a joke in the music industry, because Nurhaliza never took that six-month break she said she would at the beginning of the year.

Well, she did, for about a month. "I couldn't sit home quietly and do nothing but watch videos and rest ... I just didn't feel like myself.

"The expectations of fans ... and sponsors ... is very high," she explained. "I couldn't disappoint them."

Working full steam for Siti Nurhaliza means performing five shows a week and two days at rest. When she takes a break, it's the other way around.

She's doing it whole-heartedly. And enjoying it thoroughly.

The reason comes straight from her heart.

"Music is in my blood," she smiled. "I don't plan to do anything else."