

Herbert Kretzmer at 100 by Danielle Kretzmer-Lockwood



Danielle Kretzmer-Lockwood salutes her father, Herbert Kretzmer, writer of *Les Mis*, who would have been 100 on October 5, 2025, a date that also marked the musical's landmark 40th anniversary.

My father, once described as 'the most successful lyricist you've never heard of', was born a century ago, on 5th October 1925, in a small town in the Orange Free State, South Africa. It was something he never forgot.

Each time he received a recognition for his work, he would always say, with a big smile, 'Who would have thought it, for a boy from Kroonstad?' Then he would reflect for a moment; he had come along way—and he knew it.

Settling in London in 1954, Herbie (1925-2020) pursued twin careers as a newspaperman ('my day job') and a lyricist. He always considered himself first and foremost a reporter, feature writer and critic. Joining the *Daily Express* in 1962, he later became its senior drama critic, a post he held for 18 years, covering some 2,500 first nights. He then joined the *Daily Mail* as TV critic, winning two national press awards.

As a feature writer, his interviews with illustrious figures such as Frank Sinatra, Judy Garland, John Steinbeck and Truman Capote were published in 2014 in his book *Snapshots: Encounters with Twentieth-Century Legends*.

His career spanned the '60s cultural revolution, during which he wrote lyrics for the BBC's groundbreaking satirical show *That Was the Week That Was*. In 1965, Herbie first met Charles Aznavour through his agent, David Platz. He recalled, 'Charles and I spent two days at his home going over his recordings. One song that particularly interested me was *Hier Encore*, which I renamed *Yesterday, When I Was Young*.

‘When the lyric was finished, the song was submitted to the likes of Frank Sinatra, Tony Bennett and Andy Williams, but they all turned it down. It was suggested that no one in America, especially in show business, wanted to be thought of as no longer young.’

Herbie wrote the lyrics for *She*, the theme song for the 1974 TV series *Seven Faces of Woman*. The song was a hit and stayed at number one for four weeks. As with several of my father’s songs, it had a second life. In 1999, Elvis Costello introduced it to a younger audience by rerecording it for the film *Notting Hill*.

Often referred to as a translator, Herbie said, ‘A real translator is the faithful servant of the original text, but I aimed to be faithful to the mood and the sense of it. Translation does not interest me – the word makes me shiver.’ In fact, Herbie’s words have been translated into more than 22 languages for the musical *Les Misérables*, for which he won a Tony award.

In 1984, Herbie’s 60th year, he had gone to meet producer Cameron Mackintosh, in the hope he would back an updated version of his 1964 musical *Our Man Crichton*, co-written with Dave Lee. Cameron declined but, as Herbie was leaving, asked, ‘Why didn’t you continue writing lyrics?’ Herbie listed a number of songs he had written, including *She* and *Yesterday, When I Was Young*. These two songs, it turned out, were among Cameron’s favourites.

‘Six months later, when he was stuck for a lyricist for *Les Misérables*, Cameron remembered that snatch of conversation between the sofa and the door. In those 15 yards, my life literally changed for ever,’ Herbie recalled.

He went on to work with Björn Ulvaeus and Benny Andersson (ABBA) as lyricist for *Kristina*, a musical that met with critical acclaim at Carnegie Hall and the Royal Albert Hall. He was appointed Chevalier of the Order of Arts and Letters by the French government, and in 2011 was honoured with an OBE.

Herbie was the coolest, most liberal father anyone could wish for, and I valued his friendship. He had profound wisdom – the incredible ability to see with clarity the truth in any situation. When he listened, he really listened, and you can’t give anyone a greater gift than that. When he spoke – and of course he had a way with words – it was thoughtful, measured and always from the heart. He had a great sense of humour and we laughed a lot.

During the 60 years he spent in London before his death in October 2025 aged 95 years old, he became a true English gentleman, despite never losing his South African twang. He was always humble, positively shunning the limelight. He loved sport and always supported England, even when England was playing against South Africa.

He was generous in spirit; kind to everyone. He loved his family; he adored his grandsons and worried about us all endlessly. I learnt from him everything I needed to know to become a Jewish mother!

Perhaps better known for his more melancholy ballads, my father had a lot of fun with his lyrics too. He wrote the Peter Sellers and Sophia Loren songs *Goodness Gracious Me* and *Bangers and Mash*, and *Kinky Boots*, recorded by Patrick Macnee and Honor Blackman.

His poems delighted his two grandsons. We loved one called ‘Feet’:

'Centipedes have a hundred feet.
Most animals have four.
I (and you) make do with two
And have no need for more.
Sir Edmund climbed up Everest
With Tenzing at his side.
Each stood upon his own two feet
And saw the world spread wide.
Neil Armstrong walked upon the moon.
Two feet were all he needed.
Yes, men have gone much further than
Any centipede did.'

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