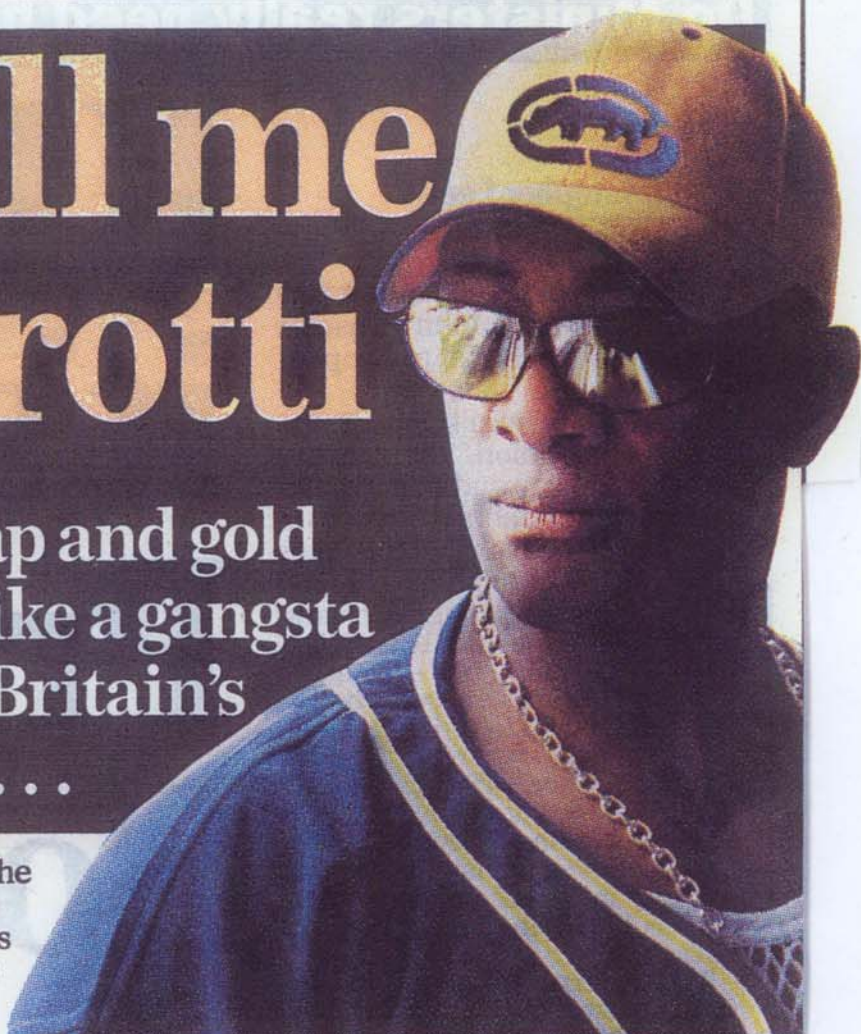


Just call me Rapparotti

With his baseball cap and gold jewellery, he looks like a gangsta rap star. But this is Britain's answer to Pavarotti...



HE WOULD be the first to admit he's not the most conventional-looking opera singer.

Slim, black, wearing a baseball cap, shades and a heavy gold necklace, Tony Henry is more rap star P Diddy than Pavarotti.

But Henry is set to be the next opera sensation, after signing a £3million five-album deal with Warner Music.

And yesterday it was confirmed that the 37-year-old will sing the National Anthem before the FA Cup Final at the Millennium Stadium in Cardiff on Saturday.

For one of five children brought up on a Hertfordshire council estate, his life reads like a movie script – the black teenager whose powerful voice and unlikely passion for opera propel him to fame.

Henry was spotted singing for a free supper in a London restaurant by two record producers.

Bradley James, who is working on the debut album, was astounded by what he heard. 'What struck us was the paradox of having someone who sounded like a fat Italian tenor, but looked more like Craig David,' he said.

Henry, a father of two who now lives in South London, said his opera career had been a struggle. 'I have always had to work hard. But I am amazed and excited about what has happened.

'Singing the National Anthem

HIP-HOPERA: Tenor Tony Henry will open the FA Cup Final

By **Katie Nicholl**

SHOWBUSINESS EDITOR

in Cardiff will be a huge honour.' The tenor is working with Rick Blaskey, the promoter who catapulted Russell Watson and The Opera Babes to fame, to launch his career. His first album – of chart hits sung in Italian with a

'I know I don't meet the cliché'

symphony orchestra – will be released later this year.

He has already performed in operas such as Aida at the Royal Albert Hall and is confident he will be as successful as Pavarotti – despite his appearance.

'I know I don't meet the cliché,' he said. 'People are very surprised when I tell them I'm an opera

singer. Sometimes I just say I'm a soul singer, because it's easier.'

When he left school at 16, Henry went to work in a restaurant.

'My mother told me there was no way I was going to earn a living as a singer, so I followed one of my brothers who was a chef.

'I stuck it out for a few months, but realised it wasn't for me, so I moved to London, where I trained as a dancer and an actor.'

After many knockbacks, Henry landed a role in the musical *Starlight Express*.

'I soon learned that you do it because you love it, not because you want to get rich,' he said.

'In my first week as an opera singer, I earned just £167. Opera is by far the hardest profession. It's a job that you absolutely have to love. It doesn't love you back until you get to the highest level.'

And he said he hoped his rise to fame would inspire others. 'There are not many black opera singers – I would like to see more.'