

## **Pheasantry May 28<sup>th</sup> - A Tale of Friendship and Cheesecake**

### **by Jane W**

And so we reach the end of another month, and that can mean only one thing...ah wait. It can mean many things, including payday – but the one I'm here to write about is, of course, Lee's latest Pheasantry gig.

For once the run up to my travels was relatively stress-free, with only the dilemma of what to pack for a weekend that promised to be hot, sunny, humid, and torrentially wet. (The answer in case you're wondering is 'layers'. Then again the answer to all my packing issues is always layers, so no surprises there then.)

No train related dramas; no significant delays; just a very relaxed journey to London with one of the Northern ladies. Gin might have been involved.

She had made all the arrangements for the hotel and figured out all the logistics. We checked in, changed, and met the others in the foyer. We were ready to go. Pheasantry, here we come!

Over the last few days I've been picturing myself on that Sunday afternoon – a glass of something cold and white (I'm talking wine here; I never drink lemonade in my day dreams) in my hand while I lounge with lots of other Lee fans outside the venue. It wasn't to be. Well not exactly. The weather as we trotted up the Kings Road was not conducive to al fresco drinking, delivering on the 'wet' part of the 'let's keep this interesting' promise.

However Lee fans are a hardy bunch. When we reached the Pheasantry we found many of our friends gathered in the courtyard, sheltering from the soggiess under the big square sunshades which turned out to be pretty effective umbrellas.

Hanging around in the damp for as long as possible turned out to be a good call, because...but I'm getting ahead of myself.

It's just turned 6pm.

Time to move. We have a stairwell to stand in.

We formed the traditional queue in front of the closed door. After a few moments the manager emerged and apologised for 'a slight delay'. He might have noticed that we weren't exactly paying attention. From the open door we could hear a man's voice, raised in song. Everyone strained to listen. Lee!

No. It's didn't sound like Lee. Those close enough to hear properly guessed it was Stephen Rahman-Hughes. Were they right? Read on!

The manager returned inside, closing the door behind him (spoil sport). After several minutes it opened again, and the staff began taking their customers through to their tables.

As we filed in, the band filed out.

“Hya John!” I said as our favourite fiddle-player caught my eye.

“Hya!” He chirped back. Such a friendly bloke!

Following him came a very welcome addition to the line-up. Lee had already tweeted to say that @fabulands would be joining him as a guest singer. A few of us called out “Hello Landi!” as she walked out into the stairwell. She beamed at us as she said her ‘hellos’ back.

Finally a furtive figure appeared, shielding his face with his hand as though he expected the world’s press to be lying in wait.

“Hya Stephen!”

“No no. I’m not here. Nothing to see!”

It appeared the performers were in high spirits.

I reached the front of the queue and gave my name to the manager. “Table for three.”

“This way.”

He led us passed the Northern Ladies’ table and the one that I not-so-secretly hoped to be given. Further back we went to the bench seat immediately in front of the balcony. Hmmm – not quite where I wanted to be, but hey, I’ve had fabulous seats up to now, and it would be churlish and greedy to complain.

One of my dinner companions (gosh how formal that sounds!) slid onto the bench next to me.

“This is a great table,” she said.

I looked towards the stage and saw the unobstructed view of the microphone stand. Ahhh. Maybe she had a point.

We ordered wine, and diet coke. (Not in the same glass. Though once, due to a very dark night and two identical beakers I did create a wine, rum and coke cocktail. It wasn’t as bad as it sounds. Well not after the amount of wine I’d already consumed. Sorry. Rambling. Again)

We mingled. When I say ‘we’ I mean pretty much all the fans there. It seemed as though the half the clientele left their seats to talk to the other half.

The pleasant hubbub of happy voices counterpointed by the tinkle of cutlery on crockery makes a sort of overture to a Pheasantry show.

We returned to our table to consume our pizza. We finished our meals, sipped our wine/ diet coke, the lights lowered.

“Ladies and gentlemen – Lee Med.”

Lee Mead threaded his way between the tables and climbed on to the stage.

I want to say “my heart stopped” but that would be a palpable lie seeing as I’m alive and well and writing this report. It did however skip a beat or two.

He looked divine. And I’m using that in the literal sense. The amber stage lights, created threads of glowing gold around his tightly clustered curls. It was as if one of those classical sculptures of Apollo had come to life. Ah, but Lee is no arrogant, unfeeling plaster god. Just an ordinary young man, who happens to be blessed with extraordinary beauty and a heavenly voice. (I’m rambling again. I bet you don’t mind that one though, do you?)

No preamble. He opened with ‘Everything’. In my last report I mentioned the depth and strength of his lower register. If anything, it had improved. Those soft, sultry, low notes had me melting.

Mind you everyone was melting in there, and not just because of his wonderful voice.

Goodness that room was warm! Some of you will understand how warm when I say “just like Chitty in Wimbedon”. For those of you who didn’t experience Chitty in Wimbledon, I can only explain it by saying REALLY – VERY – WARM – INDEED!!! And I sat in one of the more comfortable areas. You could have baked a loaf over on the other side of stage, where Lee’s family sat. (OK, yes I’m exaggerating, but not by that much, honest).

Yet I thought Lee looked cool and comfy up there in his slightly rumpled, white shirt. Ah, but there was a reason.

“I probably shouldn’t tell you this…” he said.

Everyone leaned forward, expecting some revelation – or at least a snippet of juicy gossip.

Instead he launched into a long explanation about the dressing room facilities and how they adjoin the store rooms. (Hmm where is this going? I wondered). There’s a walk in fridge in the store room (Ah, I started to guess the destination) and Lee thought it would be nice to cool off by (No, surely not!!!!) going into the fridge (aarrgghh!!!) where he got locked in (double arrghh!!!).

He mimed hammering on the refrigerator door as around him the audience collapsed into hysterics.

Thank goodness he found the door release!

Just checking my last report, I see I described the second song as “something about growing old together”. It turns out it’s called ‘Grow Old with Me’. I really ought to have managed an educated guess at that title! Doh!

After this he introduced his excellent band. “Micky Blue”, as Lee calls him, on piano; Nico (replacing Tommy on guitar). After each introduction Lee paused to allow us to show our appreciation.

Finally he said “And this is John Pearce on violin.” You could almost see Lee thinking “I wonder how big a cheer John will get tonight.” As we whooped and applauded, Lee shared a grin with John. Yes Lee, we’re also the ‘John fan-club’ these days, and well you know it!

Next ‘Forever Young’, which he introduced with a somewhat curtailed version of the-girlfriend-who-left-him-for-a-17-year-old-with-a-car story, followed by another stunning version of ‘Maria’ and, a beautiful ‘All of Me’.

He really was in superb vocal form.

There wasn’t as much giddiness though.

For instance he sang the Wham song (Oh come on. I remembered the title ‘Grow Old with Me’. I can’t store all of them in my poor little brain!) practically straight, without giggles or comedy dancing. Maybe he behaved himself because his mum and dad were watching. Actually it was nice to hear it as a straightforward song for once – but I rather hope the next time I hear it, he’ll be in a silly mood again ☺.

Don’t get me wrong. There were still plenty of funny moments. ‘Want You Back for Good’ still gave us lots of giggles, but I’ll remember this show for other reasons. Don’t worry I’m coming to them.

First though, it was Stephen’s turn to entertain us.

Many of us have become fans of the lovely Stephen Rahman-Hughes over the years. Though his song choices aren’t necessarily to my taste, he always provides us with a top-rate performance (even when he’s barely had a chance to rehearse). On this occasion he gave us ‘A House is Not a Home’ and ‘Dance with my Father’. I’m in an emotional place at the moment and both these songs brought the pick of tears in my eyes. Nicely done, Steve! (At the interval a very nice lady sitting next to me asked who Lee’s guest was. She’d brought her daughter with her to see Lee, but she’d fallen completely for Stephen. Awwww!!!!)

OK – other stuff Lee talked about...

He did mention Holby, and the big reveal about Lofty being gay, but didn’t dwell much on it.

He told us about the pantomime, and how he wasn’t asked back to the Palladium (cue cute little pout) but he’s pleased to be playing Jack in his home town, and working with Bobby Davro again.

And of course he talked about his Pheasantry residency, and his pride in filling every performance, admitting that most of the seats go to fans who see his shows again and again.

Then he gave a sort of wink and asked if there was anyone present who hadn't seen the show before.

"No? Of course not!" He said.

There were of course plenty of people there for the first time, but a goodly proportion of us were returners. He still might not understand why we do it, but he's blooming grateful that we do!

And, as before he asked where we'd come from. Shouts from around the room. He picked up on a couple. A traveller from Guernsey particularly impressed him – then he said "Yorkshire?"

"Yes!" came the cries of the Northern Ladies from our various tables. And then...OK I could have been imagining this, but to me it seemed like he looked over in my direction and said "Leeds?"

"Yes!" I called back – and I'm pretty sure I didn't imagine the acknowledging smile and nod.

"Sheffield?"

"Yes!"

Then a few people started pointing to a familiar figure in front of me on my left.

"New York!" they shouted.

"*New York?*" Lee spotted Grace. "You're back!" he said, and a look of delight passed over his face. Awww he's so touched when he sees his overseas fans ☺.

This leads me on to 'Blackbird'.... Now don't worry. I'm not going to spend half a page describing it as I did last time, but I do want to tell you a bit about it.

I did wonder whether Lee would do 'Blackbird' without Tommy to back him. Nico, however, is a very accomplished guitarist and played it beautifully. Lee turned to him for much of the song, his back to me, but this did allow me to watch John.

Now, it's always worth watching John when he's playing; he gets so caught up in his music, it's wonderful to see. But the beatific smile that adorned his face as he listened to Lee went beyond anything I seen from John before. No performer could give another a greater accolade. I listened with renewed respect, realising this isn't just a Lopyy thing; even his peers are blown away by Lee's talent.

One final lovely thing before the song ended. For anyone who isn't familiar with it, at the end of 'Blackbird' the phrase "You were only waiting for this moment to arise" is repeated three times. Lee turned back to the audience, as he delivered the first of these, and looked straight to Grace. As I was busy thinking "aww that's sweet of him" his eyes swept towards

me, and I swear he sang the next line right at me. That is my fantasy and I am sticking to it, thank you very much, even though there was no way he could see me from that distance under the stage lights. I don't care. He did! RIGHT!?

And there was so much still to come: 'Hushabye Mountain', 'Close Every Door'... but suddenly the interval was upon us. Well I suppose even Lee must be allowed a break.

The interval allowed us a little more time for nattering away – chiefly about how chuffin' good Lee was in the first half.

The nice lady next to me, who had brought her daughter to see Lee, asked if we were his fan club. That question had me stumped for a second. Yes, we're his fans, and yes we know one another – but are we a club as such? I've never thought of us as a club. Perhaps that's because we use so many different ways to keep in touch: Facebook, Twitter, various internet sites... Yet over the years a camaraderie has formed between us for which the word 'club' is just inadequate.

In the end I explained how we come from several groups of fans, but we're all friends and enjoy coming together to see Lee and catch up with each other.

Funny that her questions should have set me considering the friendships we've formed. It became something of a theme for the evening.

On to the second set which started, as usual with Lee's cover of Robby Williams' 'Feel'. (Look at that! I've remembered another title!) I've not really said much about this song in my other reports, probably because I had so many other things to tell you about. So I'm going to moment to explain how I feel about 'Feel'.

I like it. I've always enjoyed the original version. I like the unusual melody line which, wanders between major and minor, and I like Mr Williams' singing it. It's a damn good pop song

When Lee sings it though something strange happens. All the nuances of the lyrics hit me. They're vaguely disturbing. "Come and take my hand, I want to contact the living..." Oooo it's almost creepy. Lee doesn't simply sing the words, he engenders them with their full meaning – however disquieting that meaning may be. I don't like 'Feel' when Lee sings it; I love it!

Lee's first link after the interval, focused as always, on his audience. Are we having a good time? Did we have a nice glass of wine? He'd changed his shirt for a very sexy, dark blue one. A costume change due to the heat. Did I mention it was WARM?

On this occasion Lee had a confession to make.

"As I came in I saw someone with cheese cake. Now I want cheese cake!"

You can't have cheese cake Lee! Not yet. You have a set list to perform.

I'd hoped that Stephen would come back on to duet on 'Ain't That a Kick in the Head'. I'm sure the brand-new SRH fan on my left would have just loved that! Unfortunately he didn't reappear, so we had a Lee solo – which of course was lovely, if not as funny.

We did get a chuckle a little later.

“Gary Barlow wrote a song for me. It's on my second album.”

“Ahem,” came a barely audible voice from near the front, “first album.”

“It's on my first album.” He grinned down at the speaker. “It's a good job I've got my super-fans to put me right.”

Ooo – I've just remembered another really funny bit.

Lee was talking about singing in the shower.

“You don't want me to do a concert when I'm in the shower!”

Shout out from someone in the audience : “Yes we do!” Oh yeah. No arguments here!

A few songs into the second act, Lee introduced the James Arthur track 'Say You Won't Let Go', (No I didn't remember that title. But I did remember the line “I held your hair back when you were throwing up” and Googled it).

The band mumbled. Lee turned around to them. Then...

“We'll have that song later. First let me introduce my second guest...” Anyone who went to Lee's concert at Leeds City Hall is bound to remember the great “forgetting Niamh” incident. Yep! He's gone and done it again. This time though he had a really good reason. He was thinking about cheesecake.

So tittering away to herself, Landi Oshinowo came onto the stage.

Now get a tissue. This is really heart-warming.

Landi came to the mike.

She thanked Lee for inviting her to sing at his concert, and apologised for the limited chance she'd had to rehearse. So far, so normal.

But then she started talking about Lee's fans, and how we welcomed her before the show. So many of us saying “Hi Landi”.

Then she talked about how much Lee appreciates us all. How he told her how we meet up whenever we can, and have made friends with one another – and some really close friendships - through following him... Oh she said so much! I can't recall exactly what she said, but she really understood what drives us, and I think Lee gets it too...

Then she opened her arms wide as though she wanted to hug the whole room, “You’re *all* friends,” she said, “Thank you for welcoming me!”

AAAAWWWwwwwwwwwww!!!!

Then Landi sang ‘My Funny Valentine’, and she was fabulous! You can imagine the applause we gave her. Landi – you’ll be welcome anytime!

Could the evening be more lovely? Well as it happens yes.

One of the Northern Ladies celebrated a significant birthday (27. Would I lie to you?) that evening. One of her friends just happened to mention this to Lee at the interval.

And Lee just happened to mention it from the stage – then sing a couple of lines of ‘Happy Birthday to You’ for her. Made up? I’ll say. I saw her afterwards and she was grinning so widely I thought the top of her head might fall off. Who wouldn’t be the same?

She didn’t share any cheesecake with him though.

Back to the singing. I’ll just mention a few more particular memories for me.

‘Love is All Around’ seemed particularly appropriate that evening given everything that had been said on stage. I was quite surprised that Lee hammed up the first verse, singing in a cod-operatic style for a line or too. I wondered if giddy-Lee had returned, but he dropped into his normal style and sang the remainder with his usual gentle sweetness.

But the two stand-out numbers were both classic musical theatre: ‘Why God Why’ and ‘Bring Him Home’.

Both have been pretty impressive at every show he’s done this year. Last week his ‘Why God Why’ was phenomenal. The strength of lower register; the power of his money notes; the passion! I sat spellbound, utterly intoxicated by his supreme story telling. When his final high note faded several people jumped to their feet. I have never seen that happen at the Pheasantry before.

As for ‘Bring Him Home’...Again, faultless. This time he showcased his beautiful falsetto. His voice soared, then swooped, as he stared towards the unseen heavens, pleading for God to save the young man gone to war. And the stage lights shone gold on the trail of tears coursing down his face. He finished, and while we cheered, he wiped his cheeks, so matter-of-factly. Yeah coz every performer who sings BHH cries through it, and there’s nothing special in Lee doing so. I don’t think so!

Ostensibly the show ended with ‘Fix You’, but none of us were fooled.

“One more?” said Lee.

“Yes!” we shouted.



“OK. Just one more. Just one. I want my cheesecake.”

Cheesecake must wait for ‘Any Dream Will Do’ and, of course, everyone singing along with the ah-ah-ahs. And with the last line the audience stood. A standing ovation at the Pheasantry. Well done Mr Mead!

The show had ended. Those rushing home bundled up their belongings and departed. Others could afford more leisurely farewells, while those of us staying over in London lingered over our drinks, chatting. I don’t doubt we all hoped for a few words with the Meadster before the evening ended.

He returned to the room as I was standing near the entrance, saying goodbye to various friends.

I noticed Lee sit down at his parents’ table. They seemed to have food ready for him. I knew I wouldn’t get a chance for a word with Lee that night. That’s fair enough. It’d had been a fantastic evening, and I was looking forward to getting back to the hotel and having drinkies with a few friends.

But I still had lots of goodbyes to say. As did we all. Lots of us clustered around together, giving each other hugs.

Llandi was sitting on a tall stool by the sound-desk, and between her well-wishers talking to her, and those of use saying ta ta to friends, the area around the exit had got pretty crowded. I took a step back to allow someone passed me, then turned back to continue my farewells.

A figure stood next to me: a lean, dark-clad figure, with beautiful curls, holding a dish of desert. I looked up right into Lee’s face.

Now I suffer from intermittent Mead-Mush. There are times when my tongue stops functioning in Lee’s presence. (It’s not just Lee. I have a friend whole I’ve known for 20 years, and I still can’t speak to him in a rational manner.) This was a classic mush situation.

I amazed myself by saying, quite calmly “So you got your cheesecake then.”

He smiled. Between mouthfuls he explained that he often can’t eat before a show. I empathise. I’ve commentated on battle re-enactments and tournaments for more than two decades and I still can’t eat a proper meal before I pick up my microphone.

I opened my mouth to say “I have just the same problem before shows”, realised that would be a really stupid thing to say to a professional performer, and clamped my lips shut.

Others took up the conversation. We talked about voice-training, and how to escape from walk-in freezers. Eventually he returned to his family (another course had turned up for him) and we had a chance to chat with Llandi, who seemed to be thoroughly enjoying herself.

At last, our gang was ready to leave and headed out into the blissfully cooler-than-indoors-but-not exactly-cold-night air, and back to our hotel for those drinkies.

What a wonderful way to spend an evening wrapped up in the Lee-Bubble.

The last word goes back to Landi. “We’re all friends.” Really – great ones. Thank you all.