

30th April Pheasantry

by Jane W

It's 1st May 2017. I have just returned home from London. A couple of lovely ladies asked if I would be writing a report so I'm not wasting any time. I got straight onto my PC...OK *after* I made my second attempt at cooking vegetable lasagne. (Which was quite successful. Lasagne is supposed to be crunchy isn't it?)

OK, ok – on with the report...

As we all know, Lee had to cancel his February concert due to being poorly sick. Fortunately for me, I could go to the rescheduled matinee concert, so re-booked immediately. The very helpful and chatty lady from the Pheasantry mentioned that I was 'near the top of the list' and felt sure I'd be given 'a good table'. As you can imagine, I looked-forward to this weekend with even more than my usual Lopyish excitement. A 'good table'? Perchance one of those tables right at the front, so close to the Meadster? Who among us wouldn't be excited by that prospect?

That said, the past few weeks though have been difficult, difficult enough to blunt that excitement somewhat. Still, what better antidote for the doldrums than another dose of Mead?

Planning for my trip, choosing what to wear, discussing what to do on Saturday evening (I had a room booked at a friend's house ☺)...these little things buoyed me up as the time approached. I'd be ready for my dose of Mead.

So when the train company announced a strike on the day I intended to travel south, I got a wee bit frantic. After putting in place five (that's not a typo, FIVE) contingency plans, I calmed down a bit. It would be OK. I'd get there somehow. Then another announcement. The strike is cancelled. Woohoo!! A nice, easy journey – no fuss, no worry.

WRONG!

Thank goodness for a friend's thoughtfulness. She sent me a DM. "Chaos at Kings Cross. Check your trains." I did so – and sure enough my train, along with every other London train on that line, had been cancelled.

After I stopped swearing, I read the advice about alternatives. OK. This could work. Chopping a long story short, I managed to reroute myself and arrived in London safe-and-sound. Phew!

Good job it wasn't the show day!

But back to Saturday. A curry and a pint of Cobra, a good old chin-wag with my mate, and all the frustrations of the last few days became a series of funny anecdotes to share. Time to get on with enjoying ourselves.

Next day, no further travel problems. We breakfasted al fresco, then while my friends headed straight for The Pheasantry to claim the tables, I headed to the TL, preferring to check in to my room before the matinee rather than scurrying back between shows, or waiting until we returned at the end of the evening.

Actually when I say *no* further travel problems, I mean no further problems except those caused by a simple lass from Yorkshire who doesn't know which direction to take on the Circle Line. I can't blame anyone else for that one. That was me being a numpty.

As the tube speeded through London, I wondered how the others were getting on. There's a proverb about not counting chickens before they're hatched. In expecting a really good table I wasn't just counting chickens – I'd sexed them and picked out names.

In fairness, most of the tables in the Pheasantry do have a nice view of the stage. There are some poor places to sit though; the back corner, and behind the staircase aren't great. In February the staff seated us at a great table, right in front of the stage, close to the bar. I'd have been delighted with that table again, but tried to "manage my expectations" as we're told to do at work.

My friend texted. I read the text twice. Ooo.

I raced along Kings Road as fast as my stumpy, little legs can go. I arrived at last, rushing through the doors, and down that oh-so-well-known staircase, into the jazz club. There she was, smiling broadly, sat on the table for two right in front of the mike. 'Up Front and Centre' took on a completely different context. SSQQQUUEEAAAALLL!!!!

Not only that, being the bloody good friend she is, she'd ordered my pizza and a large glass of white... she knows me so well!

The usual pre-show anticipation, and the traditional pre-concert game of spotting familiar faces, and firm friends and loads of other happy, fans, waving their hellos to one another, and pausing to chat with their particular mates.

Scattered about, other tables seating people I didn't know, but that same sense of excitement permeated right through the room. This was going to be one helluva show.

The band climbed on to the stage to set up their instruments and mikes: violinist John (with a new shorn haircut), Mickey on piano and Tommy on guitar... then lights dimmed. The clink of cutlery stopped, conversations hushed.

"Please welcome Lee Mead!"

And we did. Loudly, as he bounded through the audience and up to the mike stand. Right – in – front – of – us – oh – my – word!

Straight into his first song – 'Everything'. (Hurrah I remembered the opening number. Mind you it helped that I could read the set list from where I sat.)

At his last show I could tell he'd been ill. It's not that he gave a poor performance; I only noticed a slight weakness in his falsetto, and thought the rest of his range excellent. As he started "Everything" I realised I had been wrong. The difference now, hearing a fully fit Lee using his lower register staggered me. Ooo, so rich and deep and sensual. The aural equivalent of sinking into a couch full of soft, velvet cushions. (Purple velvet. Possibly with gold trim. And tassels.)

He was sporting the smart casual look on Sunday in a dark shirt and brand new chinos. No belt though. At the first pause he told us he'd forgotten the belt, as he ruefully pulled at his waistband. I couldn't help but notice that he's not put on weight since joining Holby, and he's still very trim, with his curls short and neat. At least the curls were neat till he inadvertently mussed them up into a soft, brown cloud.

Ah, giddy Lee was back! It seemed at times he could hardly stop giggling. He admitted that when he cancelled the February show he was afraid no one would turn up to the rescheduled one, so he thanked us very sincerely for coming. (Obviously many of those booked for February weren't available for April, but come on. Like those of us that could come would abandon him. Bless!)

On to the second song. No, I can't remember it properly. Something about growing old together? Not sure. And song number three... I'm wracking my poor little brain... ah yes. He introduced it with his story about Jodie, his first love (a different first love to tall Louise) who heartlessly dumped him for his best mate. Cruel vixen! ☺. 'Forever Love' was the song. Again thanks to whoever placed the set list near enough for me to read.

The next one blew me away. 'Maria'!

'Maria', with Lee at the height of his vocal powers. Oh that note, the masterful sustain that resounded around the jazz club! (I need some more exclamation marks for this. Here we go!!!)

Time to introduce the band, and the audience, there for Lee but always appreciative of those supporting him, gave each one of them a big cheer. They are such talented chaps. As Lee said numerous times throughout the day, many of the songs he sings are traditionally accompanied by a 40 or 50 piece orchestra. These guys managed with a piano, a guitar and a fiddle. It just goes to show that gifted musicians can achieve with very little.

From 'Maria', on to John Legend's 'All of Me' (beautiful, sigh!) onto Wham!

Lee giggled as he realised what extraordinary, eclectic set list he'd put together. "Maria to Wham," he said "who else would give you that?"

Who else indeed? And who else would be able to carry-off such extremes, and make each one of them delightful.

In my last report I described the Wham! number as an “inoffensive little poppy ditty”. I wouldn’t have minded if he dropped it. That was before. Giddy Lee turned it into a wonderful jokey routine, with comedy dancing and asides to the audience. I howled!

Non Lee-Fan friends insist on asking me why I go to the same show over and over again. My stock answer: “Why do you listen to the same CD over and over again?”

When it comes to live shows, any live shows, even the slickest vary somewhat from performance to performance. With Lee’s solo shows the variation is pronounced and purposeful, largely because rather than using ridged well-rehearsed scripts to introduce his numbers, he chats to his audience. His impulses on the day, odd little incidents in the theatre (or on the way to it), banter from the crowd, all affect his stories – and the songs themselves. He’s not afraid to joke about, and the unexpected laughter he engenders is, to me at least, delightful.

And he has another good reason for mixing things up every show.

“So where’s everyone from?” he asked, “Chelsea?” His eyes twinkled. He knew damn well many of us had travelled further than that. Various people shouted out names of towns.

I raised my voice.

“Yorkshire!” I called out, thinking not only of my own journey but of the Northern Ladies sat close by.

He looked down at me and smiled, “Yorkshire?” he said, pretending to be surprised. “You’ve got a long journey home this evening.”

I managed a shrug and a giggle.

He raised his eyes and addressed the whole room. “But you’re not going home tonight, are you? You’re staying for the evening show.”

Tittering all around, and several cries of “Yes!”

I believe he was genuinely overjoyed. “How lucky can one man be!” he sang, dancing, almost skipping, across the stage. Oh he knows his fans.

So, from ‘Maria’ to Wham! From ‘Ain’t that a Kick in the Head’ to ‘Blackbird’.

Ah ‘Blackbird’. Bear with me. I’m going to bore you stupid about this.

I’m a Beatles fan. Being 27 (SHUT UP!) I wasn’t around for the Fab Four’s heyday. (No – honestly I wasn’t!) but thanks to my lovely Uncle Peter I possess an original pressing of The White Album. His gift, my first piece of vinyl, not only saved me from the embarrassment of having to say “The first record I owned was by Bucks Fizz”, but gave me hours and hours of pleasure. My favourite track? A simple, achingly sweet McCartney ballad: ‘Blackbird’.

And Lee had decided to sing it.

In his introduction he explained that he'd only recently come across the piece, when watching The Boss Baby with Betsy. He'd not heard it before.

Ah. Hmmm. The Meadster does tend to put his own spin on his choices... how would he deal with this?

The familiar guitar intro, intricate and delicate, perfectly executed by Tommy. I could have been listening to The White Album, his fingering was so meticulous. I held my breath. Lee's voice, caressing the lyrics "Blackbird singing in the dead of night..."

I adore 'Blackbird'; I adore the original, McCartney version. Copying its arrangement so exactly was a risk, inviting a comparison between Lee's voice and one of the most iconic pop stars in the world.

Lee won.

Truly. Yes, at this point you're expecting me to admit a bias, but in this case I'm not. When Lee revealed he'd be singing 'Blackbird' on Twitter I mentally prepared to write something like "Almost as good as Paul McCartney." I'm sorry Sir Paul, this was even better.

Utterly exquisite.

Thank you for reading my rambling. I'll go back to the rest of the concert.

Let's see. What else happened in the matinee?

Oh yes, an impromptu Q&A. I wish I'd plucked up the courage to ask about the World War One short that's been mooted, but I couldn't.

Instead the first question was about whether he's planning to go back to musical theatre (a question which I think confused him seeing as he only finished Chitty Chitty Bang Bang in September), and the second about whether he'd play in Horsham again.

This second question caused much laughter, not because there is anything intrinsically amusing about Horsham (it's not Skegness after all) but because of the gender of the questioner.

"A man!" Lee exclaimed, "There's a man at my concert! A member of the MALE species!" Actually there were a few, but they didn't out-number those on stage.

No doubt some of you will be pleased to know that Lee's answer was a very determined, "Yes!" Keep your eyes open for that!

By now a flurry of hands raised. Lee picked on just one more. She asked about... arrghh I want to say somewhere being with W, I'm not sure... anyway Lee accepted that as a good choice but his answer suggested it wasn't on his list.

Other highlights: ‘Need You the Most’, from his first album, which was another new addition to the set list, ‘Why God Why’? (More exclamation marks needed!!!), ‘Being Alive’ (!!!!!), ‘Close Every Doo’r (!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!) (Hey, after my ravings about ‘Blackbird’ I have to do some succinct reviews.)

‘Hushabye Mountain’, which gave us a huge Aaaaawwww moment. A little girl who’d been in Chitty in Canterbury sat in the audience. When Lee realised he dedicated the much loved lullaby to her. Melt!

More silliness with sing-a-long-a ‘Want You Back for Good’. Again Lee trying to all to capture the harmonies on his own, causing much uproar as we joined in for the chorus.

But probably the funniest moment in the matinee came during ‘Ain’t That a Kick in the Head’. Lee delivered the line “She’s saying we’ll be wed,” to John. Lee’s music stand obscured my view of John’s face but he must have gurned at him or something because Lee collapsed laughing against the piano. That got the audience laughing...which got him laughing more. I’m amazed he managed to finish the number.

The most moving moment? Definitely ‘Bring Him Home’. He’d hardly started the verse when, staring up at his beautiful eyes, I noticed a glimmer of light on his eyelash. A tear formed. Enraptured I watched it swell, until it dropped on to his cheek, where it tricked down his face unheeded. A second quickly followed. He made no pause. His voice, soft and perfect, rose to its crescendo, and finally died away leaving – silence.

He shook himself and wiped his hand over his face.

“I got a bit emotional there,” he said.

Yeah, Lee. You weren’t the only one.

What else can I tell you?

Still no news about the panto. He hopes to hear in about a week, and promises to tweet when he does.

The anniversary ADWD with a West End concert is proving a bit problematical as they’re having trouble finding a theatre, BUT there will be a tour (up to 30 shows). He’ll be dusting off his dream-coat for the occasion, but not despite several requests, his loincloth.

He mentioned the potential West End run for Chitty Chitty Bang Bang again, but not, I thought with much certainty.

Expect publicity for his debut in Holby City soon. It’s going to be a two-parter and he sounded really excited about it.

And so we came to the end of the matinee and ‘Fix You’, followed with ‘Any Dream Will Do’. I think it’s become a legal requirement that he perform it at every concert. Good. Well done audience for some very enthusiastic backing singing.

No one rushed to leave. Lee stayed on the stage for a while to chat to the little girl from Chitty Chitty Bang Bang. The waiting staff collected the bills. Those with trains to catch, pulled on their coats and said their goodbyes. The rest of us gathered in groups chatting then drifted outside.

Lee didn’t drift. He hurried passed, with the air of a man who’s after his own lunch.

A few of us nabbed a table outside. A bottle of wine joined us. It was feeling lovely in the fridge.

As the gang of us chatted, a familiar figure strode through the Pheasantry courtyard. It’s always a pleasure to see Stephen Rahman-Hughes. We called out teasingly and he answered back.

“I’m just here to watch!”

Ha! Right! Why have you got a suit-bag then Steve?

Eventually we headed back for the stairs, and the still novel game of guess which table we’ll be on. Again, we were lucky enough to be on the front row. In a lovely piece of serendipity, they’d seated another of the Stage Loppies next to us. Across on the other side of the room I could another of my SL friends, just a little further back. A shame she didn’t have a friend with her – but wait! Who’s that come to join her? Another friend! Serendipity times 2!

The little Jazz Club had been full for the matinee. In the evening we were packed in. Great to see all these people there for Lee, including several men this time. And great to see lots of unfamiliar faces alongside those I have come to know so well. New fans perhaps? I hope so!

Lee had lost none of his giddiness between shows. He looked relaxed and happy as he brushed passed me to get on the stage.

He greeted us, as usual, after the first number.

“So who of you were for this afternoon’s show?”

Cheers from voices scattered around the room.

“OK then, for those of you who weren’t...”

On with the show.

He continued with more or less the same set, and more or less the same stories but embellished. At a couple of points...I was going to use the word “hecklers” but that has rather unpleasant overtones, let’s used the word “wags”... called out. Lee dealt with the

interruptions with the self-assurance of a seasoned performer who knows that whatever this audience throws at him, it won't be cigarette packets, and bottle tops. One woman made a cheeky comment. Lee mimicked her rather well, and offered her the mike.

The other... well the other was one of my mates. You minx! Asking for Lee to wear the loincloth. How did Mr Mead respond? By undoing his two top buttons. Tee hee. Thank you!

And he was totally unfazed when his microphone came apart, though he seemed to think it very funny. He seemed to find everything funny that day.

Again, two guests joined Lee for the evening show. The first, we knew about. Of course Stephen hadn't come just to watch! Lee introduced him, and I let a whoop just as he raced passed our table. The cheeky b*gger turned round and stuck his tongue out at me! The nerve of the guy! OK I forgive him.

He gave us two songs; the same two he'd sung in March. Eek! Sorry, sorry Steve I can't remember what they were (although the first featured the word 'baby' a lot) but I can't fault his performance. Mr Suave.

The second guest came as a complete surprise. We'd come to that point of the concert where, a month ago, Rhydian Roberts joined Lee on stage for 'Bring Him Home'. Given that a second mike had been laid out, I knew to expect another guest, and initially thought Rhydian might return.

Then Lee started talking about the Any Dream Will Do experience, and the friendships he formed on that show. This lead to a charmingly candid aside, which gave some insights into the oddities of life as a performer. Lee's dad has been a postman for many years. He works with the same people day-in, day-out, and colleagues have become life-long friends.

For a performer, in a theatre show or on a TV set, every new job brings new colleagues. Friendships form fast, and become intense. Then the job ends and those friends move on. It's easy to lose track of each other, and efforts have to be made on both side so you don't lose touch.

Such it was with the ADWD gang. Most of the lads are doing their own things, but one or two of them have kept in touch. Over the years they've become very close friends.

Ah – He's meaning Keith. We know from their tweets to one another how close those two are, and of course Keith joined Lee at the Pheasantry for the last gig.

Keith has a pretty voice, but can he summon up the passion for 'Bring Him Home', I wondered.

"Please welcome – Daniel Boys!"

Hurrah! I admired Daniel in Any Dream Will Do but I'd not had the opportunity to hear him live. On he came...

Gosh – there's a fashion among Lee's friends for shaving their heads going around. I hope Lee doesn't conform to it!

Daniel embodies charm. He told his own self-deprecating story.

"The last time I sang 'Bring Him Home' was on Any Dream Will Do. In the sing off. When I was kicked-off." Daniel stood with his back to me, but I could see the expression on Lee's face register surprise, realisation and then embarrassment. Doh!

I'm so glad I have now heard the two of them duet together. Despite his bad memories of the song, Daniel rose to the challenge. Well done boys! (And Boys!)

I've missed out loads I know. The Robin William's number (which I still can't recall the title of, even though I woke up humming it); 'Let Her Down Easy'; the one Betsy likes (which includes the line about holding his girlfriend's hair back while she threw up – a perfectly romantic line thank you!); 'Ain't That a Kick In the Head', this time as a duet with Stephen...but I'll be writing for days if I try to cover everything.

He's certainly giving us our money's worth. I wasn't surprised when towards the end he admitted to being tired, and in desperate need of a glass of Prosecco.

Don't worry Meadster. Not long now before you can relax. Just a couple more...

'Fix You'. Lee clearly loves this song. He said that it saw him through a very dark time in his life, and indeed, in the past he's imbued it with a good deal of angst. This was a sweeter, lighter rendition, appropriate for a man in a much happier frame of mind.

And the encore, 'Any Dream Will Do'. The packed room performed all the ah-ah-ahs on cue as Lee grinned his way through the performance. The last verse turned into an ode to the Pheasantry and Prosecco. Did I mention the guy was giddy?

The show finished. More farewells and big soppy, Lopy hugs.

Can pause here to say a very big thank you?

First of all than you to all those of you who have been so supportive to me. Lee really does have the best fans - lovely, kind and thoughtful people, who really care about one another.

And thanks as well to those of you who asked me to keep on writing. It's so encouraging to know you are reading – and enjoying – my waffle-full reports. Thank you ladies!

And thanks to Mr Mead – the reason we all come together, and one beautiful person, in so many ways.

He got his glass of Prosecco. Stephen brought to him, while Lee chatted to those audience members who gathered around him.

He had a chat with our little gang too – largely about these concerts, and how he hates cutting out songs.

After a few minutes he remembered that others were waiting.

“I’d better go. See you soon?”

“See you in May.” We said in unison.

“Of course! May!”

He smiled.