

Stephen and Lee – Pizza Live Holborn October 2018

Every Meady event, every concert, every visit to a show, every TV appearance, is special to us fans in some way or another. But the intimate Pizza Express Live appearances hold a particular place in many fans' hearts. I've adored each one of the Pheasantry gigs I've been lucky enough to attend, be they preceded by weeks of wondering whether I was quick enough off the mark booking to nab a great table, or by the legendary three-hour queue on the stairs. Each has produced some marvellous moments, laughter, songs and wonderful memories to keep us smiling when real life gets a little grim.

So when Lee announced a couple of intimate concerts in a new Pizza Live venue in Holborn, I immediately rushed to the phone and...oh bugger! I couldn't go. I'd be in the South of France. Not a bad alternative, I'm sure you agree, but in the words of Freddie Mercury "I want it all."

C'est la vie.

Patience, Jane. No doubt Lee will return to Pizza Live again. Maybe next year eh?

Ah but as it turned out I didn't have a year to wait. An announcement: Lee would be teaming up with his great friend Stephen Rahman-Hughes for another venture to Holborn. This time I'd be there!

Mind you, the big pink and purple balloon of my excitement deflated a bit when I looked at the bus and train schedule. The torturous and completely unjoined-up public transport system in this green and pleasant land makes travelling on a Sunday tricky – and expensive if you don't book three months in advance. Fortunately, I have some bloody good friends, all of whom offered to put me up on the Saturday night to give me an easier and more economical journey.

So Saturday evening dinner at a quirky little place. The quaintest and most peculiar dining experience I've had outside of Tallinn. I loved it! We finished the night nattering over a glass of wine. This is my idea of a good night out.

The following afternoon we set off for London.

Goodness knows, our travel plans weren't complicated, and journey about as stress free as you can imagine – light traffic to the station, train on time, big red London bus drawing up two minutes after we arrived at the bus stop – but for whatever reason as soon as we reached the hotel my whole world started pitching and rolling like the Bilboa ferry in a storm.

Fabulous – not! After a summer almost completely free of them my MdDS symptoms (Mal de Debarquement Syndrome. It's quite rare, not dangerous but a bloomin' nuisance) are back. Oh well, there a people out there with far worse problems. We decided to call a cab, so we arrived at the Pizza Express Holborn in style, with plenty of time to eat before showtime.

As soon as I walked in I spotted two Stage Loppies happily ensconced on a table by the door. We had a very brief chat before I joined our table.

The Stage Loppies have been swapping their experiences of eating at Holborn Pizza Express. The consensus seemed to be that the service leaves a little to be desired. I concur with that. It wasn't bad service; the waiter was pleasant enough. We managed to eat before the jazz club underneath opened its doors – but seeing as the four of us only wanted straightforward main courses I'd have expected to be finished and paid up in less than an hour. As it was, one of us was still sorting out the bill when the jazz club (I'm calling it a jazz club, though I don't know whether the Holborn branch of Pizza Express Live badges itself that way) opened.

We headed down the staircase. OMG I would so not be able to queue if I had to wait on it! The staircase at Holborn is a wide shallow spiral. With its open treads and swish black and white tiles, it looks amazing. For anyone suffering a condition like mine which gives you balance issues, it's the nightmare staircase from hell. I walked down step-by-step, clinging on to the banister rail, attempting to simultaneously place my feet carefully at the widest point of each stair and avoid looking down. Please do not try this at home.

We had a short wait (mercifully at the bottom of the stairwell) before the staff opened the doors and began showing people to their tables. The nice lady led us inside to...ooo it's Lee! Looking very relaxed and utterly delectable in that black coat of his. He was talking to a group, I assume of family and friends though I didn't clock who – I was busy scurrying after the waitress.

She indicated two round tables, and we divested our selves of coat and settled in.

OK so. There has been a lot of discussion along the lines of Pheasantry v Holborn – which is better? Here's my two penn'oth on the subject.

Holborn is bigger than the Pheasantry. This is naturally an advantage. The room is a long rectangle with the stage pretty much in the centre of one of the longer sides. The front row, rather than being a series of small tables for two, is a long, curved counter just wide enough for a pizza plate. The stage (I can't remember if the stage is a raised dais as in the Pheasantry or whether the performers just stand on the floor – but I think it must be raised) protrudes into the room. It's wider than the Pheasantry, but not so deep. On this occasion a grand piano took up the left side.

I think of the Pheasantry as a room with two parts. The lower area wraps around the stage so the performers have audience on three sides of them. Unless you are tucked away in the back corners or behind the wrought-iron staircase, the seats offer good views – with those in front of the stage being excellent. I haven't sat in the upper area, but I have been told by friends that the tables by the balustrade also have great views even though they aren't as close.

Holborn divides into three parts. The area immediately in front of the stage is again excellent – except for a table stuck behind a wide pillar, which, I am told, obscures the view completely.

Those on the tables close to the door (Lee's family on this occasion) could surely have seen little more than tops of heads over the piano. And I imagine the view from the opposite corner must have been equally poor.

There's no separate access to back stage at Holborn. The performers have to pass between our tables to reach their dressing room. I'm sure none of the audience mind this but I expect it's a bit odd for Lee and Stephen.

Our tables for the evening were immediately behind the counter. Of course I'd have loved to be right at the very front, but on reflection I think I was better off just that little further back that evening, so I didn't have to crane my neck.

And our table had another benefit. Stephen had set up a video camera just behind and to the left of me. He kept coming over to set it up, check it, turn it on etc. We had the chance to do a bit of Stephen taunting, and get teased in our turn.

"Careful now ladies. It's recording everything. Mind what you say!"

"Nah, we're not worried," I said to him, "We're going to use it as a coat stand as soon as you go!"

Lee came through the room a little later. He paused to have a quick word with some of the fans, smiled and said 'hi' to us, and left a host of happy faces in his wake as he headed to his dressing room.

The room filled up. It was very pleasant to wander around, catching up with old friends and making some new ones. Lovely to meet a lady I'd been chatting to on Facebook about Aberdeen. She'd been sat at the counter, right in front of me, in a prime spot. And all around us plenty of friends: Stage Loppies, Meadaholics, the Northern ladies and so many others.

Thank you very much all of you who asked after my poorly toe. I can report back that it is pretty much healed, and wearing my nice boots all weekend hasn't hurt it a bit!

Fun as having a natter with other fans is, we of course had a more important reason for being there. I returned to my seat by the time John appeared. We said hi, of course. Having John involved in a gig is a nice plump cherry on the cake.

The stage filled. I mean filled. They had quite a band. As well as John, the welcome return of Tommy. They were joined by a pianist and ooo a double bass too. (Many apologies to these talented musicians; I didn't catch their names.)

Finally our two leads entered, and the show began with 'Luck Be a Lady'.

No surprise there. 'Luck Be a Lady' has been a corner stone of Stephen and Lee collaborations since West End Men, and it's a perfect opening number. It's well-loved, lively, and gives the two friends lots of opportunity to dance about and banter with each other.

"A lady wouldn't make little snake eyes at Mead," I don't think that's quite the lyric is it SRH?

Next up, another duet: 'Everything'. I've seen the two of them perform this once before at one of Lee's solo concerts where Stephen guested. I wouldn't have thought it would work as a duet, but it does. I was very happy to hear them both perform it again.

The first solo of the evening fell to Stephen: a very jazzy version of 'What's it All About, Alfie'. I'm not a great fan of jazz and would have preferred to hear it sung straight, but I am sure most of the crowd enjoyed it immensely.

He also gave us....arrghh no I can't remember its name. He said it was a jazz classic, and I seem to recall it had a two word title – and that one of the words might have been mood... anyway I'd not heard it before and I don't have a hankering to hear it again. Did I mention I'm not a fan of jazz?

Anyway Lee returned with a superb performance of 'Maria', all the more welcome as it appears to have been dropped from his 10th anniversary set list. Lee soared on that top note, commanding the stage with dazzling confidence. Hard to believe that only last year, he was nervous about getting up to that big note, slightly out of range for a second tenor. Now he just nails it. Every time. Fabulous.

I think it was about this time that Stephen, returning to the stage, commented on the heat. He didn't seem comfy.

"Look at me!" He said, "I'm pouring with sweat. And look at him! How does he do it! He doesn't sweat at all!"

Lee standing there, so debonair with his tux nice and fresh, turned to the audience, smiled and shrugged, as if to say "Coz I'm so cool."

Oh yes you are indeed Mr Mead.

OK – so I managed to remember the start of the evening quite well, but from here on I'm a wee bit fuzzy.

At some point Lee's microphone misbehaved, sliding down from its upright position, giving Stephen an excuse for some Carry on style innuendos about Lee not being able to keep it up.

Stephen had another solo in the first half, but I can't remember what it was – other than it was a favourite of Lee's mum and he dedicated it to her.

I do remember Lee's other first half solo. Vividly.

“Any fans of Alison Moyet?”

“Ooo yes!” I cried (adding silently to myself, except her jazz numbers. You might have picked up that I’m not a fan of jazz.)

“I’ve wanted to learn this song for a long time. This is ‘Only You’.”

Oh. I’m surprised. I thought Lee would go for something from Moyet’s later solo career. I like ‘Only You’, but it’s a lite little piece. It’s one of those tracks that help form the musical backdrop of my school years. Other bands take the centre position but Yazoo (back in those days when we called Alison Moyet ‘Alf from Yazoo’) forms a small patch of fading colour somewhat along the border.

Funnily enough I have another version among my long forgotten ’45 collection – The Flying Pickets a cappella cover (I had to look that up on Google). I could already hear their bom, bom, bom pause bom, bom, bom in my head.

Either way ‘Only You’ rates as nice, but not exactly a classic.

Until, of course, you get the Mead effect.

The pretty electronic backing (or somewhat comedic a cappella ‘accompaniment’) was stripped away to be replaced by – well with violin, double bass, piano and guitar, something pretty close to a chamber orchestra. Over this, Lee’s rich voice imbued those pretty, new new-romantic lyrics with melancholy and regret.

I listened transfixed. Lee had managed to transform a song I’ve known for decades into something new and heart-achingly beautiful.

I was impressed!

For the rest of the first half I think we had two more duets:

‘Let her Down Easy’ – an unexpected choice, but very nicely done; and ‘Make You Feel My Love’ which was wistfully romantic, until the last line when Lee in the moment forgot himself and sang to Stephen. That got both of them giggling.

I’m not even going to attempt to put the second into any kind of order but I seem to recall they started with an exemplary performance of ‘Feeling Good’ as a duet. Just stunning.

Then more solos: an exquisite ‘Blackbird’ with Tommy’s wonderful intricate guitar accompaniment, and a rousing version of ‘Being Alive’ from Lee.

And of course ‘Close Every Door’, so familiar but so beloved. It still has me enraptured. I will never tire of his interpretation. And that night it was phenomenal .

An excellent (for that read not too jazzy) 'Impossible Dream' from Stephen, along with a lovely Scottish Folk song which he sang in honour of his Welsh roots. Errr OK! So my standout moment of the evening? Well I have two, both duets.

'Music of the Night': unexpectedly one of the funniest moments of the evening. Firstly, Stephen reminded the audience of the anniversary concert with four Phantoms. Our two lads held their hands up to their faces, Phantom mask style...it's impossible to describe why properly, but it had the whole room in giggles. Then – serious. Swapping as Lee can so often from ridiculous to sublime without an effort. I felt the sinister charm of his Phantom again flood over me, and Stephen matching in tone and mood, balanced Lee's remarkable performance...at first.

The big money note went to Lee. He hit it beautifully, powerful and rich it resounded throughout the little club. I'm not keen on breaking the enchantment of a piece like MotN by applauding during the song, but several of the audience started to clap, and I couldn't help but join in. The noise around me increased, I could hear cheering even. Lee dropped out of character momentarily to acknowledge this spontaneous wave of admiration with a mocking prima donna smile. Stephen looked around the room with pretended envy – then hit the same note himself, leading to more cheers mixed with howls of laughter. Only two great friends with barely an ego to share between them, could pull off such a stunt with such grace. This is why I love it when Stephen and Lee perform together!

The second was a completely new song in Lee's repertoire, learnt, he admitted, in the car on his way to the event. I need to give you some background.

My best mate is really into Sondheim. One of her favourite musicals is Into the Woods. She often sends me YouTube videos of the songs she finds particularly amusing. I love the concept of Into the Woods, lampooning nursery rhymes and fairy stories, but I'm not keen on Sondheim's tunes (too jazzy perhaps?). My bestie particularly likes a one-up-manship duet between two Prince Charmings, both of whom are nursing battered egos after being rejected by their fair ladies. She's told me several times how much she'd love to see Lee sing it.

So when Lee announced that they would be singing 'Agony', well I bounced up and down with excitement.

And oh my, was my bestie right or what?!

I'd been quite amused by the YouTube link she sent me. In the hands of two such ego – unencumbered performers as Stephen and Lee it was hysterical. Stephen, wooing Cinderella, Lee courting Rapunzel, both stung by their ladies' indifference – "Agony! So much greater than yours!"

The funniest moment came from Stephen inadvertently altering the lyric: "Am I not handsome, intelligent, charming, domesticated..."

Domesticated? After the song both had a good old giggle about that goof. Sheer joy!

So to their last number. Fittingly a big musical theatre one, naturally performed as a duet – ‘Don’t Rain on my Parade’. A perfect finale to a damn near perfect show.

With friends and family to see Lee had little time to speak to his numerous fans.

His path took him right passed me so I took the opportunity to congratulate and thank him for the show. He paused to thank me before heading towards his family.

We also had friends to talk to – bye byes, hugs, before we headed back to our hotel.

So there you have it: my report on Stephen and Lee at Holborn. I hope you enjoyed it. I hope it brought back some lovely memories for those that were there, and provided a little window onto the fun for those that weren’t.

Now excuse me, I must leave you. I have to get ready.

I’m heading out.

To a jazz festival.

Errr...