

Newbury & Milton Keynes

by Jane W

Ladies; Lee fans, I must confess. I have a new obsession.

This obsession has all but ousted Lee from my thoughts.

A certain double act has entered my life and I cannot stop thinking about them. What are they doing? When will they contact me?

For those of you who don't know, I'm buying a house. The new men in my life are Kevin the Electrician and Neil the Builder. After two aborted purchases I'm hoping this little place will become my new home.

I have been somewhat lackadaisical about everything else of late. Even planning for this weekend had to fit between conversations about rewiring and the finer points of tanking a cellar.

No wonder I forgot I'd arranged to stay at one friend's house after Milton Keynes and booked my train tickets home from another's. A good job the ladies are the patient, understanding sort!

So after stuffing a few essentials (yes the purple velvet jacket IS an essential) into my rucksack, I set off on the long journey to Newbury, mind full of important questions: what will Lee sing? What will Lee wear? How many plug sockets do I need in the lounge?

At least once I reached Maidenhead I had the pleasure of meeting up with my friend, listening to the album, and playing that favourite game of any traveller, 'Guess what the sat nav is talking about.'

We reached the Corn Exchange. In we went, found our dinner table, and watched as fans, and the good people of Newbury trickled in. Of course there was much greeting of friends, in particular those good friends who joined us for dinner. While most of the meet and greeters disappeared for their encounter (we could hear their laughter from where we sat), we took turns visiting Wendy on the merchandise stand. Then back at the table we battled with the cellophane wrapping on the CDs we'd just bought. Better now than in the signing queue!

I finished sighing over the lovely CD pictures, and pulled myself back together after reading Lee's heart-melting message to his fans - time to head into the theatre.

We found our seats. Nice!

We were in the first raised row of the stalls, our heads well above those in front – almost on a level with the high stage – slap bang in the centre. Around us the crowd assembled. Lots of familiar fans, many of whom I can call friends – and some who might be friends-in-waiting. I checked for empty seats. Precious few. The first gig of the anniversary tour had all but sold out. Way to go Lee!

The house lights faded and with them the chatter.

Adam, Lee's pianist and MD discreetly emerged from the wings.

A moment later Lee appeared, dressed for the occasion in a dark blue suit, curls frothing over his forehead, eyes sparkling.

"Come with me, and you'll be in a world of Pure Imagination" he crooned.

A smile crept over my face. This is exactly what I need - a world of pure imagination for an hour or two. A world revolving around this beautiful man with the rich, sensual voice. A world inhabited by friends linked by the same feelings of admiration and child-like joy. I let the cellar and the bathroom light-switch slip from my mind to be replaced with Lee's music and infectious smile.

It's inevitable that this 10 year retrospective will cause us all to draw comparisons between the hope filled lad who won the role of Joseph and the mature performer on stage now.

How has he changed in ten years?

Generally he's more confident. Mature Lee exudes a calm, cool ease his younger self couldn't match.

Oh he still gets jittery. We know because as soon as Pure Imagination finished he giggled and told us how nervous he felt.

I bet the good people of Newbury and the newer fans, drawn to the prospect of hearing Lofty sing, would not have known.

Come to think of it I didn't notice. He didn't fidget, or cling on to his mike stand as he tended to in those early concerts. My more eagle-eyed companion, spotted a couple of 'tells', but by enlarge his nerves were concealed behind the self-assured exterior.

His voice has changed. It's better. It's stronger, richer - and it sounds superb no matter whether he is powering his way through Bring Him Home or mesmerising his audience with Hushabye Mountain.

What hasn't changed is the way he performs. That stage presence; that ability to act his way through a song which drew me to him in the first place, are still integral parts of the Lee Mead experience.

OK. So I've talked about the grown up stuff. Let's talk about the shallow stuff. Is he still as gorgeous as he was back in the day? Hell yes!

He does keep pointing out he's not as buff as he was when he had to wear the loincloth (pauses for pleasant visual memories) but he's in very nice shape. The curls, tamer

now than formally, still frame his face in that classic Greek hero manner. His features have matured somewhat...in short, the young lad has become a man – and a very handsome one at that.

Lee's set list included every song on his album apart from As Long as You're Mine. Well he didn't have anyone to duet list. No guests at these performances – it's 100% Mead.

Oh sorry, no. 100% Mead and Band – Adam, Tommy, Iain, Ricky and of course John, whose forthcoming album Lee plugged as assiduously as his own.

With all bar one of his album tracks to sing, plus extras, and no guest slots to rest in, I wasn't surprised Lee needed to take several short water breaks. Lee being Lee, he didn't just pause to sip a little water. Oh no! Each time he called for 'musak' from his band, and turned his water top-ups into mini comedic interludes – to everyone's delight!

And the music? Well for the most part they were quite serious offerings, be they the big musical theatre numbers (like Why God Why?) or sweet lyrical tracks (like Let Her Down Easy).

The exception was his second song – Dancing Through Life, performed as always with that playful smile, and a few of those weird, stylised dance moves he learned for Wicked. (Oh crickey now I'm thinking of those jodhpurs again. Happy memories.)

I have to mention his opening to act two – Feeling Good.

He took that song, and made it all about himself. "I've been through some cr*p but I've survived." There was always a hint of defiance in Lee's Feeling Good, but last weekend the overwhelming motif was jubilation - that huge extended note, just before the end, became a triumphant fanfare of sheer joy.

But without the trumpets.

Any nerves he might have felt during the first half of the show had well and truly dissipated by the second.

It might have helped that he could evidently see some of his fans in the front row. I often wonder whether he can see enough of the front row to recognise anyone. Seeing as he pointed right at some of his most determined devotees I can only gather that the answer to that question is 'Oh yes!'.

In the second half he checked out where the rest of us all were.

"Anyone here **not** from Newbury?"

Hands shot up beside me and in front of me. (One or two raised behind me too, but the main body of fans sat towards the front.)

“Oh yes, of course. The first four rows!” he said grinning. I really hope he’s not come across the term ‘DNA Zone’. 😊

The show continued on, songs interspersed with Lee’s stories of himself, and of his career...

This being the first performance of the concert tour no one had any idea of the running order, so couldn’t guess how many songs were left.

Far, far too soon Lee was telling us that his concert had almost finished.

He launched into his story about meeting Tim Rice and Andrew Lloyd Webber when auditioning for Any Dream Will Do (it’s a story he’s often told us but this time with extra details – and a mime of walking down a corridor). I wasn’t really listening. I was squirming in my seat thinking ‘Goody, goody Anthem!’.

And indeed, the story preluded his extraordinary, rousing, rendition of the Chess classic. Oh – my – heart!

I can best describe Lee’s version by explaining how it makes me feel. It has the same effect on me as The St Crispin’s Day speech (as delivered by Kenneth Branagh. Do not get me started on where Tom Hiddleston went wrong). It makes me want to leap to my feet, screaming ‘Yes!’ and fly off into...erm...well I was going to say ‘battle’, but that’s entirely inappropriate, so errmm – some sort of sporting event? Hmmm I’m no good at sport...how about a competitive writing competition?

Yeah – that loses something doesn’t it?

Despite telling us this would be his last song, we didn’t believe him. We’d not had Blackbird yet – and sure enough he sang that beautiful ballad afterwards.

“Do you want one more?” he asked after he’d taken a bow.

“YES!!YESS!! More!!!” the audience shouted.

Oh what could his encore be? As if we didn’t know.

Of he trotted for his coat (much off-stage huffing and groaning and ‘this thing’s shrunk’) to return a moment later properly attired as Joseph. Awwww!! What a lovely sight to see. Years rolled away. Mind you he might have done better getting into his dream coat had he taken his jacket off first! 😊.

“I haven’t got the choir. So I need your help.”

No problem Lee. The whole audience is ready for ahh-ahhing duty – and waving of arms not, quite in time.

At Christmas Lee sang the ‘real’ Any Dream Will Do ending – and for a moment I was disappointed as he softly allowed his voice to fade – “Any dream – any dream will...”

Then from nowhere – “Give me my coloured coat!” Oh wow! His voice soared, and as it rose in the final note so did we. A whole theatre standing and cheering.

Well done Mr Mead!

He promised us a signing. Several times he mentioned it.

Our little gang didn't rush. Though of course we all wanted to tell him just how fabulous his new set is, we didn't need to hurry. Lee, we felt sure, would sign for everyone and we could take our time (and visit the loo) before joining the queue.

As I stood in line I noticed rather more men than I'd expected, and younger fans too. I imagine that's the Lofty effect. It's great to see.

In front of me two blokes stood. One praised the length of Lee's set.

“Mostly your lucky to get an hour and a half. That was over two hours. I'll say this for him – he gives you good value for money.”

I can't argue with that.

Others waiting strained to see the signing desk. Is he there? I bumbled over to have a look. My view was obscured by the number of people clustered around.

“Is he there Jane?”

“If he is my Lee-dar isn't working.”

Then out of the auditorium Mr Mead swept, greeting familiar faces as he passed us by.

Excellent!

It took rather while to reach the signing desk. It seemed that most of the audience wanted a CD and a signature. I was well entertained chatting with my friends.

My turn! Ah. Somehow I had to balance handbag, CD and winter coat. Well done Jane. You could have organised that better.

He looked up at me.

“Hello!”

Why is it I feel like a schoolgirl in his presence?

I put the CD in front of him. And gabbled something complimentary about the show. I can't remember what I said. I know I was enthusiastic. And he thanked me as he always does, as he swiftly signed the CD's cover.

“That one’s for Grace from New York,” I told him (lest he wonder why I keep turning up with CDs to sign).

“Oh right!” and he added ‘To Grace’ above his signature. The lovely man.

“Is she coming to the concerts?”

“No, she can’t unfortunately, but she’s going on the...”

He looked up again, and this time I wasn’t prepared. I was gazing straight into his eyes.

“eerrrrr thing...errrr” my arm did a windmill impression as I struggled to remember the word.

He wasn’t helping. He was grinning.

“CRUISE!!!” Phew. I’d got it.

“Oh good. That’s going to be fun!”

“I’m sure it will be.”

And I withdrew before my brain ceased to function again.

The drive back passed pleasantly – chatting about the concert, listening to Lee’s CD, discussing the pros and cons of integral fire alarms...

On to Milton Keynes. I know! Two concerts in one weekend. Outrageous!

How lovely not to have to worry about getting to a concert. With my friend driving, I felt nice and relaxed. We’d left ourselves plenty of time to get into Milton Keynes, collect another friend from the train station, and head over to The Stables to meet the others for dinner.

My husband has driven me through Milton Keynes. It wasn’t a pleasant experience. But with my friend at the wheel, calm and unflustered, I had no qualms.

We reached MK still with bags of spare time, and followed the sat nav’s directions to the train station.

“We need the drop off and pick-up point,” my friend as she swung around a roundabout, “keep you eyes out for car park signs.”

“Sure!” I said, then after a pause “I would have thought we’d be seeing signs for the station by now.”

She swung around another roundabout.

“Take the third exit,” said the sat nav.

“Ah. Station parking. Straight on.” I said.

“Hmm, that’s long stay. We’ll just follow the sat nav.”

“Take the next left.”

My friend indicated, then cancelled it.

“That’s staff and disabled parking. Let’s try up here.”

I looked at the clock, we still had oodles of time, no need to rush. She drove us down a long straight road till she came to a roundabout.

“At the roundabout take the second exit.”

“Second exit?”

“It’s straight on,” I said checking the pink line on the map.

“OK – ah good. I can see parked cars.”

“Hmmm. I can’t see a car park sign though. You’d have thought there would be a sign.”

“Yes...but those are definitely parked cars.”

We’d slowed down as we entered what we hoped was the station car park. Behind us, someone sounded their horn.

“Thank you,” said the drivist to the reflection in the driver’s mirror, “that’s very helpful.”

We pulled into a space.

“We’ve still got some time,” I said, “I’ll message our mate– let her know we’re here.”

“Good. It’s says pay and display. I’ll go and look for the machine.”

My driver got out of the car. I was about to do the same when my phone chirped.

“Oh she’s here. She got an earlier train. She’s at the main entrance.”

“We’re in the wrong place,” said my driver “this is the Long Stay car park. I’m going to drive on.”

She got back in the car and I messaged our friend an update.

We drove down the down the long, narrow, car park.

“Look there’s the station. I can see the platforms. Where’s the entrance?”

“It must be around here somewhere. Let’s park up,” I said.

“No, I’m just going to see what’s up here.”

It turned out to be a roundabout.

“At the roundabout take the second exit.”

We ignored the sat nave and did a U Turn.

“There’s no entrance!” said my friend as we retraced our path.

“There’s a fly over.” I said.

“Right. Let’s follow the road around.”

“At the roundabout take the...”

“Shut up!” The driver cancelled the navigation.

“I’ll try Googlemaps....oh errr....”

“What’s the matter?”

“According to Google maps, Milton Keynes doesn’t have a station.”

“We need to ask someone.”

But the population of Milton Keynes had gone into hiding.

We drew into Toys R Us car park.

“There, there! There’s a bloke!”

We stopped the car. More or less in a parking bay. I opened the door.

“Excuse me? Hello! Excuse me?”

The man, stopped and turned towards me. I struggled out of my seat.

“Can you tell me where the train station is?”

He sniggered. “Yes of course. It’s just over here.”

He started to walk away quite quickly. My friend was still getting out of the car. I dithered for a moment, then followed our guide.

“There,” he said, pointing towards a glass and steel building that looked like an office block.

“There?”

“Yes. There’s an underpass.”

“Err thank you.”

He stalked away apparently enjoying a joke. My friend caught up.

“Allegedly it’s there.” I pointed.

“That looks like an office building.”

“There’s supposed to be an underpass.”

There wasn’t an underpass.

There was a young Chinese lady.

“Excuse me,” I said “can you tell me the way to the station?”

She sniggered. “Yes, you see, just over the road. You follow the yellow.”

I squinted to see, as the lowering sun was right in my eyes.

“The yellow?”

“Oh I see the yellow,” said my friend.

“OK, thank you.” I said to the lady, who walked off chuckling.

“Oh wait no, that’s green.”

We crossed the road anyway. The lampposts had yellow bands painted on them. In the absence of anything else yellow, we followed them.

“This isn’t a train station.” I said as we approached.

“Perhaps it’s on the other side.”

We passed through an archway. The other side turned out to be a square full of bus stops, surrounded by more anonymous steel and glass buildings.

“Excuse me,” I said to a man pushing a bike. “Can you tell me where the station is?”

He sniggered.

I get the impression, that the main source of entertainment in Milton Keynes is bemusing visitors.

“It’s there.” He pointed over the road. I could see nothing that even vaguely looked like a station.

“There she is,” said my friend.

Thank f**k for that!

Having picked up our friend from the station, we headed for The Stables, and with only a minor diversion, arrived just a bit behind schedule.

The theatre had only just opened but fans were already gathering – including two flustered Northern ladies who’d walked for half an hour from the closest bus stop. (The venue is lovely, but a nightmare for public transport users.)

We milled about nattering with each other (and in my case explaining ‘looped electrical circuits’ to anyone who made the mistake of asking about my new house) until a member of staff opened the door to the restaurant.

I do wonder what went through the theatre/restaurant staff’s heads as table after table filled, accompanied with cries of “Hello! Fancy seeing you here!” We do seem to take places over.

My mate, Julie had driven from up North to join us, and I enjoyed a catch up with her (she’s already had the lesson in looped electrics) until the auditorium opened.

As we filtered in I was delighted to see some of the Stage Loppies among the crowd. But we didn’t have long for a catch up – barely time to discuss the form of light-switch for a bathroom – we had a show to see!

Oooo. A front row seat, and a stage that’s hardly more than a step. Lippy heaven! Behind me row after row filled up as fans and locals took their seats. A sell-out. Perfect!

Just as on the previous night Adam took the stage and the opening bars of Pure Imagination drifted through the auditorium. The audience began to cheer – a ripple of appreciation starting in the back, swelling into a wave. For a moment I stared perplexedly at the stage.

No. Mr Mead hadn’t somehow snuck on while I was watching Adam. So he must be...

Ah, he'd entered from the back of the stalls sauntering down the centre aisle, bright smiles and bouncing curls. Here we go!

The set list followed the same order as Newbury, but this time Lee appeared to be totally at ease. He told his stories, sang, laughed and danced a bit with such evident pleasure, that I couldn't help but grin like an idiot right back at him.

He's always complimentary about the town, or the venue he's performing in, but he really seemed to love The Stables. Sat in that front row seat, head barely raised to watch him – I had to agree.

I'm humming All of Me as I write this – "What's going on in that beautiful mind..." Mmmm. The gentle tones of that wonderful voice, the beautiful expression of those eyes – I'm back there. Sigh.

End of the first half, and as at Newbury 'Close Every Door'.

Graham Norton once said that Joseph isn't a difficult sing. That's true. The show was intended for schools after all. Consequently the leading man is more often than not a boy-band type, with a poppy voice. For years Close Every Door was my least favourite song in the show. It seemed to be a interlude to up the title character's on stage time and give the chorus a bit of breathing space.

Until I heard Lee sing it. Mr Mead understands the song, and as always, turns music into drama.

And that's still the case. I suspect when he sang at Milton Keynes, all dressed up in his smart new suit, in his mind's-eye he still saw the bars of the prison. Self-pity, sorrow, anger, defiance - gradually building, into that amazing crescendo, and the certainty of faith.

"We have been promised a land of our own!"

As the final note echoed about the theatre the audience started jumping to their feet. Believe me I was with them. Utterly fabulous!

The second half came. One and a half concerts in the weekend and his voice gave no sign of tiring. Only those water breaks to his band's musak gave any hint of the effort he was putting in.

Lee's concerts are always funny, but this one had a moment of hilarity right out of the Sid James handbook.

This was what Lee said. And I'm not punctuating much on purpose.

"I have an early start tomorrow so it's straight to bed for me after the signing I hope you'll join me."

Behind me two fans who shall remain nameless (but they have the same name), started to snigger like a Milton Keynes resident giving directions to a tourist.

That set me off.

Around the auditorium muffled tittering, started to get just that wee bit louder.

Lee had turned his back to the audience but as the giggles became more audible he turned around.

His bemused face as he looked round the audience had me in pleats.

“What?” he said “What is it?”

By now giggles had turned into guffaws.

Now it’s always lovely to be on the front row of a Lee gig and to get a little bit of Meady eye-contact. In this case he found me, and looked straight at me.

“What is it?”

I couldn’t speak. My laughter was completely out of control.

He looked around the audience, then again back at me.

“Go on! What IS it?”

All I could do by way of an answer was point to the ladies in the row behind me, as though that could possibly help. Perhaps it did.

At any rate the bemused expression turned into mock-horror.

“Join me at the SIGNING! Not in bed. You’ve got dirty minds.”

Yep Lee. You’re not wrong there!

It seemed only a few minutes before we’d got to Anthem again. And again that stirring blast of patriotism.

Blackbird was still to come. Such a contrast, with it’s beguiling sweetness, and Lee’s hushed tones delicately caressing each note. Sigh.

And of course to finish – another contrast – Any Dream Will Do, complete with swirling coat though this time he’d wisely ditched the jacket. The audience choir were in great voice, and yet another standing ovation followed as we all whooped and cheered.

We fussed about a bit after the show. With coats and jackets to collect, and travel arrangements for the public transport users heading back to Milton Keynes to check, we were among the last to leave the auditorium.

That put me towards the back of the signing queue. I said my goodbyes to **Julie**, who had a two and a half hour journey home, and other friends who had to go, and finding myself surrounded by strangers I moved even further back to join my mates.

The queue snaked forward. Like the people of Newbury, the locals of Milton Keynes showed themselves very willing to hang around for a few minutes with Lee. He must have been knackered, but he greeted every queuer with that trademark smile, and a few charming words. He has a way of giving each individual a few moments of his absolute attention. The lass in front of us had a Joseph programme for him to sign, causing him to reminisce with her for a couple of minutes.

She moved away. It was our turn.

Three of us stood together. He looked up, saw us and the smile ramped up a notch.

“I know when I see you guys I’m nearly at the end of the queue.”

AWwwwwww!!! What a lovely – OK on paper it doesn’t sound like a lovely thing exactly but that recognition had me glowing.

“Yeah – that’s because we have to go to the loo,” said my friend.

She had a brief chat as he signed for her.

I handed him what was about to become a friend’s CD.

“That,” I said “was even better than last night.”

“Oh thank you. I really had fun tonight.”

“We could tell!”

He gave me a big grin.

He wished us a safe journey – and I think I said something like “You too. You must be exhausted.”

“I am,” he said, but he grinned again.

Leave now Jane – while you’re still possess the power of speech.

With many backward glances I returned to the Stage Loppies, one of whose husband was on coat minding duty.

Time to say our goodbyes to Milton Keynes, our excellent friends and the beautiful man we travel the country for.
Good bye Mr Mead!

Now excuse me – I need to phone Kevin and Neil