

FOREVER YOUNG

The Call Boy meets up with Lee Young



Lee Young as Frazer in *Dad's Army The Musical* (2005)

When *Dad's Army: The Musical* was staged in Australia just a few years ago, the role of the undertaker Frazer (played in the BBC TV series by John Laurie) was taken by Lee Young, a veteran of the British variety scene in the '40s, '50s and '60s. The character in the musical was supposed to be of a certain age and required to sing and tap dance and when Lee auditioned for the role he was quickly given the part. "Let's face it", laughed Lee, "how many tap dancing actor/singers in their late seventies are there in Australia?!"

Now resident in Oz, Lee spent a few days in London last year and I was delighted to meet him one morning for a coffee in Soho and a chat about his lengthy and fascinating career.

Lee was born James Stevenson Young in Scotland in 1928. His mother was a concert soprano and his father an amateur actor and Lee became stage struck at a very early age, fascinated by his father's make-up box and collection of false beards. "Academically I was not over bright", remembers Lee, "and it was evident I would not make it as a brain surgeon!" He did, however, enjoy dance lessons, especially tap, at Lilian McNeill's Dancing

Academy. After about a dozen lessons he felt he was ready to dance professionally and with a girl friend auditioned for ENSA. They were rejected as too young but the auditioning agent, Joe Collins, was also handling Scottish variety dates for a visiting continental band and wanted a dance act to open the show. Lee and friend got the job at £7 a week and opened at the Gaiety Theatre in Ayr in 1944. Their dance was performed in front of the Star Quintet, whose pianist was none other than George Shearing.

From there Lee moved to the Edinburgh Palladium for a twenty-six week twice-nightly season of *Victory Parade* and ended the year playing the Cat in the pantomime *Dick Whittington* at Hamilton. It was here that a girl acrobat from London recommended Lee to her agent, Cecil Buckingham, who offered him a job in the touring revue *In Civvies Again*. "I was billed as Jimmy Young - the forces favourite with the twinkling feet", recalls Lee, "and the cast was a mixture of drag artistes and ex-military girls and boys, who had been invalided out of the forces for some reason or other. The leading 'lady' was Pat Joyce, who had previously been a strong man act called The Amazing Wilfred Briton. Pat was a vision in pink chiffon, bending iron bars and pulling grand pianos with his teeth!"

Lee was now keen to appear in a West End show and at a party a beautiful actress and dancer who had worked at the Windmill suggested that he should try there. That actress was Jean Carr who, of course, found great success under the name of Jean Kent. Lee successfully auditioned and there met a dancer called Moy Wong. As there was a successful pop singer called Jimmy Young at that time, Moy suggested the name change to Lee Young and together they worked for a time as a duo in various London clubs and revues.

A spell in national service resulted

in Lee forming a double act with Billy Chillmaid and touring in variety. Lee recalls, "The happiest weeks were supporting Dorothy Squires, an idol of mine. Through Dot I formed great friendships with Norman Newell, her recording manager, and Frankie Howerd. I remember one night in 1953 when Norman was visiting my flat for supper, he received a phone call from Marlene Dietrich, who was appearing at that time at the Café De Paris. She asked us both to her apartment at the Dorchester Hotel and when we arrived she was stretched out on the floor, in leopard skin pants and a black sweater, writhing to a Jackie Gleason record. For the next three hours we talked, or rather she talked, entirely about herself. She was witty and amusing and frequently had us in hysterics but utterly self-absorbed. I found it intriguing that this world famous star was unable to make it through the night without company or was it an audience she craved?"

In 1949 Lee appeared in *Starlit Serenade* at Bournemouth where the star was Terry-Thomas. "He was super and had the stamp of international stardom even in those days," remembers Lee, "but his wife was an absolute bitch! During



Lee Young with Rosemary Squires in *Dick Whittington* Sunderland Empire

the season my health gave me problems and the doctor diagnosed emphysema. I gave up performing for a while, working in the box office of the New Theatre (now the Noel Coward Theatre). Whilst working there I met George Carden who offered me a job in the Crazy Gang show, *Knights Of Madness* at the Victoria Palace. The highlight of my time with the Gang was appearing with them at the London Palladium in a big charity show that was a tribute to Sid Field. Also on the bill were Orson Welles, Noel Coward and Judy Garland."

One unhappy memory of that charity gala was when Lee plucked up the courage to ask Danny Kaye, who was also appearing, to sign his programme. Kaye refused, saying curtly "If I sign yours, all the others will start."

In the early fifties Lee formed a steady relationship with Frankie Howerd both personally and professionally. He first worked with Frankie in 1952, acting as road manager and feed in sketches, for a BBC Light Programme series visiting the Middle East. His roommate on the tour was Eric Sykes who was Howerd's scriptwriter at the time. "It was an eventful tour," remembers Lee, "as besides being shot at by snipers in Suez, Frank got sick and was hospitalised and Eric took over and died the death with the military audiences." Lee appeared with Howerd in his radio and television shows at that time as well as playing small roles in the films *The Runaway Bus* and *A Touch Of the Sun* and appearing with him in both the 1952 London Palladium pantomime *Dick Whittington* and the following year's *Pardon My French* at the Prince Of Wales Theatre. They remained firm friends long after their relationship had cooled and in the seventies, Lee featured in Frankie's series *Whoops Baghdad* and the Australian series *Up The Convicts*. "When Frankie



Lee Young with Woolf Phillips recording *Rock, Rock, Rock* (1953)

died in 1992," recalls Lee, "in true Howerd fashion I was willed a return air ticket to England to attend his funeral."

In 1953 Lee made what he thinks was the first rock and roll record issued outside of the States when he recorded *Rock, Rock, Rock* with Woolf Phillips and the London Palladium Skyrockets Orchestra. On the strength of that recording Lee's agent sent him around the number two variety theatres topping the bill. At the Garrick Theatre in Southport he shared top billing with Gladys Morgan and a young comic, who Lee said "walked off every night to the sound of his own footsteps. His name was Peter Sellers. Fellow artists adored him but the public found him far too subtle and ahead of his time."

The rest of the decade and the early years of the sixties found Lee playing principal boy in pantomime each Christmas, his last being *Dick Whittington* in 1963 with Tommy Trinder and Rosemary Squires.

During the sixties Lee kept busy with a tour of South Africa with Mrs Mills, where one of his records got into the hit parade, and cabaret engagements on cruise ships including the Queen Mary's final voyage, when on the last night he was joined at the microphone by

President Roosevelt's son to sing *Auld Lang Syne*. For a time he based himself in Bermuda but in 1971 he travelled to Sydney for some work and decided to settle there. The years that followed found Lee in a variety of jobs in Australia: entertainments director for a cruise line, ringmaster of *The Stardust Las Vegas Three Ring Circus*, television appearances with Benny Hill, stage appearances in revues and touring in plays such as *Stepping Out* and *Blithe Spirit*, the last named playing, much to Lee's delight, a season at the Sydney Opera House. He also toured with two Australian legends, Gwen Plumb and June Bronhill, in the play *Arsenic And Old Lace* and in 2003 Lee was honoured with a Life Achievement Award.

Recent times have found him playing *The Fool* in a production of *King Lear*, acting as arts and entertainment reviewer for a radio station and being elected President of the Australian theatrical organisation The Glugs. Now in his early eighties, Lee shows no sign of slowing down. He hopes to return to this country again for a short holiday in March and doubtless that Soho coffee shop will echo to the sounds of laughter and chatter as he updates me on his latest ventures!

Geoff Bowden