

THE BIRD WITH THE FEATHERS

A look at the career of Lee Stevens



The time is the early sixties, the scene is the Astor Club in London's West End and Lee Stevens, the female impersonator, is feeling nervous. He has just heard that the glamorous singing star Alma Cogan is in the audience that night and he is rather concerned about her reaction to his impersonation of her in his act. After the show Alma calls Lee over to her table and, much to his relief, tells him that she thoroughly enjoyed his act, adding "You're more like me than me!" She, however, pointed out that there was one thing missing from his impersonation and that was one of her dresses. The following day Lee was invited to Alma's flat where she presented him with one of her flamboyant gowns to use in his cabaret spot. Soon Lee became a friend of the Cogan family and after Alma's tragically early death, her mother gave Lee more of her costumes to wear in his act. Lee was a leading female impersonator at this time using the bill matter *The Bird With The Feathers* and as well as West End nightclubs, he played the Baileys circuit, the Palladium, the Royal Festival Hall as well as weeks in variety and pantomime seasons. He also enjoyed successful cabaret seasons abroad in Ontario, Toronto and Cannes. *The Stage* once said 'Most impersonators are near the knuckle but while we have Danny La Rue and Lee Stevens, we have nothing to worry about.'

Liverpool born Lee, real name Bernard Lee Allan, was always destined for a theatrical career. When he was just a lad he used to enter talent competitions on family holidays at Blackpool and later, still in short trousers, pestered the manager of the Picton Hall in Liverpool into allowing him to sing a song on a concert bill topped by the famous impressionist Beryl Orde. The song he sang was *Cookhouse Serenade* and it obviously impressed Miss Orde, who told the audience that this young boy was going to be a star and brought him back on stage. She also asked Lee to join her when she played the Argyle, Birkenhead.

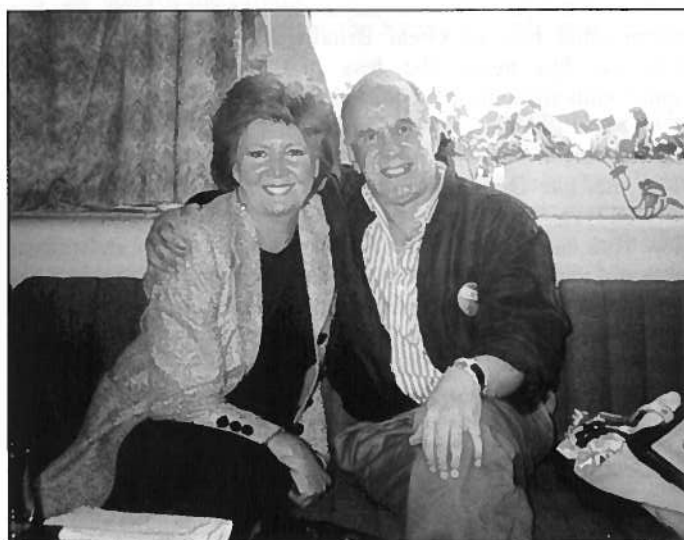
After gaining some stage experience in summer concert party Lee was called up into the RAF, based near Warrington. One evening he travelled over to the Palace Theatre, Blackpool where he saw a singer called Phyllis Robins, who was sharing the top of the bill spot. In her act she asked for a young man to

assist her and spotting Lee in his uniform said, "Young airman, you come up." Phyllis sat on his lap on stage and they sang *Tea For Two* followed by a dance to the tune of *I Want To Be Happy*. Pleased with the audience reaction, Miss Robins asked Lee to come back for several further performances that week pretending to just be a member of the audience. She later wrote to Lee when she played Preston and on that occasion he became 'the airman in the front row'. Lee remembers that she paid very well!

As well as being stage struck young Lee was also star struck and a great autograph hunter in his early years. He met Mae West in Lime Street when she was in Liverpool on tour in *Diamond Lil*. He had seen the show the previous evening and told her that her version of the song *All Of Me* was the highlight of the show. "She was a very slight, small woman", recalls Lee, "and signed my autograph book. She then asked if I liked ice cream and invited me back to her dressing room."

Lee also met Kitty McShane at the Empire, Liverpool. He had written a song called *A Tear, A Sigh, A Smile* and offered it to Kitty. She took him down to the orchestra pit and the musical director played the tune. She then turned to Lee and asked, "What made you write this?" to which the young Lee brashly replied, "I don't like the songs you sing". It obviously did the trick because McShane gave Lee £20 for the song and on the Friday evening performance sang the number when Lee and his mother were in the audience. She later used about 20 bars of the number on a commercial recording to finish off a comedy sketch she had recorded with Arthur (*Old Mother Riley*) Lucan. This early success started Lee on the path of writing song parodies, which he used to great effect in his later solo career.

Lee attended the Edith Clark Theatrical School in Liverpool. Edith knew the impresario Jack Gillam who was touring a show called *White Blackbirds*, starring Norman Savage, father of Joan, and Lee auditioned as a singer. At this stage Lee was using the name Alan Avid. He moved to London but work was scarce. Having seen a production of *Soldiers In Skirts*, Lee bought a wig and costume and auditioned for the company. He was unsuccessful but he did get a job in the revue *Forces In Petticoats* and stayed with the production for two years. He struck up a working partnership with Gary Webb and soon they



Lee with Cilla Black

were appearing in pantomimes together as Ugly Sisters. The couple also toured as a double act, Avid and Webb, in variety and cabaret, adding impressions of such stars as Sophie Tucker and Nellie Wallace to their routine. They got bookings at many of the West End clubs and Lee remembers on Coronation night in 1953 they actually performed 15 shows starting at 7pm and running right through to 6am the following morning. Not surprisingly he missed a club date the following night, as he was completely exhausted!

They eventually went their different ways when Gary had the chance to go into the revue *This Is the Army* and Lee decided to find work as a single act featuring songs, patter, impressions and even magic with live doves. It was at this stage that he became Lee Stevens. Lee, of course was his real middle name and 'Stevens' he acquired when he saw the production of the musical *No Strings* and was impressed by an American singer called Marti Stevens. Some years later he met Miss Stevens and actually booked her for cabaret at the Pizza On the Park, for Lee had added another string to his bow – running a theatrical agency. He booked such names as Ruby Murray, Diana Dors, Joan Regan, Dennis Lotis and a great friend of his, Dorothy Squires.

Lee gradually tired of the cabaret scene. "Everything was changing", recalls Lee, "with lots of drag acts miming and using blue humour". Although he still did the occasional pantomime and cabaret booking he was turning more and more to broadcasting and writing. He contributed articles to various magazines and also supplied the occasional sleeve note to CD



Don Ross presenting Lee with a portrait of his stage persona at a BMHS concert. The portrait was painted by the variety artiste Sally Barnes

issues. He could also be heard regularly on LBC's Steve Allen Show. "Later", remembers Lee, "I worked for some years on the 3 hour Pete Murray show, which was a real career highlight." In recent years he has been a regular voice on Shalom Radio, and although a life threatening illness in 2007 found him hospitalised for almost a year, you cannot keep an old pro down and his enthusiasm for all things show business remains as infectious as ever.