

The Musician`s Tale

JEFF DONERT (KINGSIZE KEEN)

Milton Keynes is still a wilderness as far as entertainment is concerned. Mostly, it`s down to the efforts of a few dedicated individuals who care enough to want to do something about it.

Over the years, Jeff has made numerous attempts to organise concerts and regular venues. But one of the symptoms of new town blues is apathy – and Jeff keeps coming up against it. No one could blame him if he decided to call it a day. So far, he hasn`t.

I`ve had the nick-name `Kingsize Keen` since I was in the army in 1960. Kingsize because I used to weigh eighteen stone and the `Keen` because I`m a musical nut.

I went to Malaya for three years with the army. I arrived at this brand new Commonwealth Camp and got together with some of the lads. We formed a band called `Kingsize Keen and the Blue Stars` because there was no entertainment there. We performed all over the place and as long as we kept the sergeant`s mess happy once a month and played for them for nothing it was OK. They took their ten per cent. We were one of the first bands in Malaya to have Vox amplifiers, the same as the Beatles and everybody were using over here.

I was professional from `66 right through to 1970. I had four years on the road. I started off doing rock `n roll but it was suggested by my agent that if I switched the rock `n roll pianist for an organist and started playing soul he could get the work backing the American soul artist when they came over. So that`s what we did. The first guy I backed was Percy Sledge, the guy who did `When a man loves a woman`. I backed all the big names, The Drifters, The Ronettes, Clarence Frogman Henry who did `I wonder why I love you, but I do`. I couldn`t get to the top rung, I was always one below. I had a good band but just couldn`t get there. So that was it. I moved back to Southport, my home town, couldn`t find a job for a while and almost became a recluse so far as music was concerned.

I worked for National Car Parks in Southport for about four and a half years as a manager. I won the car park competitions every year. You wouldn`t find a dog-end on my car park. I had registered disabled staff working for me and they worked twice as hard as anyone else to prove a point. The money wasn`t brilliant and I got about as far as I could there so I became a bit discontented. There was this guy, a season ticket holder and a mate of mine who told me he was off to live in Milton Keynes. So I said `I`ll tell you what, Harry, if you hear of any jobs down there let me know` Two weeks later I got a phone call off him about a job as car park superintendent at the city centre. The wages and conditions sounded great so I wrote away and got an interview. I fell in love with the city centre as it reminded me of places I`d visited in America and I was determined to get the job.

A Load of Flannel

Pauline came to visit me. She heard all the promises, so that was it, I got the job and we moved down. It was the biggest disaster of my life, because it was all a load of flannel.

I worked here, walking around on foot, running eight thousand parking places on my own for eighteen months before they gave me a van and it was twenty months before they gave me anyone to help. In fact it went from the sublime to the ridiculous. They came up with the bright idea of using wheel clamps on cars that were wrongly parked and gave me six staff to put the scheme into operation. For the first few weeks we were clamping twenty cars a day and the drivers had to pay a five pound fine to get it removed. Gradually as time went on it got down to about two cars a week. The word was out. All my lads were dressed in green uniforms and the CB sign for them was the `green meanies`.

Then the cutbacks came. A year ago last November, I went to the States for a holiday, came back twelve days before Christmas and the Corporation told me my job would be finished on July 1st. It was a big come down. To have been promised all these things and for them just to disregard the whole business.

If you walk around the city centre now it's chaos. There aren't any height barriers up and I signed for thirty four of them. They're in a store in Norfolk House and people are too bloody lazy to put them up. I used to do an inspection every month to see how many litter bins were hanging off the lampposts. They get smashed in because the brilliant architect who designed this stupid city centre decided to make it different from everywhere else by not having any kerbs, so people pull into the parking bays, don't know the length of their car because they're lousy drivers and go smack into the litter bins on the lamppost because there isn't a kerb to stop them. It cost forty pounds to replace a bin and every month I used to put a requisite for forty or fifty bins to replace the smashed ones. Since I've left, bins have just been left to hang on the lampposts. It's all changed. Cars park on the grass verges or on the disabled bays. Nobody gives a damn.

Once I knew I was being made redundant I wrote off for forty-two jobs. I only got three replies, one was for an interview but I didn't get the job. I didn't know what the hell I was going to do and I ended up in the catering business, running a mobile burger van. The caravan I've got was parked behind the civic offices getting vandalised and dirty so I found the guy who owned it and made him a bid for it, did it up and decided I'd go out doing catering on the markets.

I regret ever having come to Milton Keynes but I've really tried to make the best of it. After I'd been here five months and was missing Southport like mad, Pauline said, `Why don't you get a band together?` Whereupon I nearly had a heart attack! She's the first woman I ever met who's given me any encouragement in that direction. I said `Are you serious? D`you realise what you've said? It'll take up a lot of time you know'. I advertised for the musicians and `Kingsize Keen and his Rocking machine` was born about three months later. We often used to play at Muzaks which was a great music club at the New Inn at New Bradwell. When it

closed down I really missed it so I went to see the people who were previously involved with the running of it and started it up again.

And Boy Did it Rain

This town is `el Floppo`. Have you heard about my flops? Well, Muzaks flopped but it wasn't my fault. It was really sad. The local National Front mob obliterated New Bradwell and Wolverton one Friday night. It was in the papers the following Thursday and after that the attendances at Muzaks fell dramatically. The last night cost me sixty quid out of my pocket because I had to pay the band and nobody came.

Two weeks later I held the Charity Music Day at the Groveway Stadium. I had two stages, seven bands and in all the years I've been associated with anything to do with music I've never put so much into one particular project as this. It was to raise money for four local charities and lots of people worked their guts out to make it a success. And boy did it rain! There was a gale blowing and I can remember people up on the stage scaffolding holding plastic sheeting over the speakers to try to keep them dry. We had to switch off the juice because the bands were too frightened to play. They thought they'd die. Having said that, it didn't start raining until an hour after it started so there should have been more people there than there were.. It's back to the old apathy of Milton Keynes people who scream that there's nothing to do and usually they're right. But even when people like myself pull their guts out to put something on they still don't come and support it.

I must be mad, but I'm trying again. I want to get Milton Keynes people interested in music. I found this great pub in Southend where it's all happening. Loads of bands playing, musicians in there drinking, people of all ages, it was great. I thought: `If only I could get something like this going in Milton Keynes.` I found that the stadium where we held Charity Music Day and I worked on the market has a really good, big bar and it's not used on a Wednesday at all. I staged a `one off` night there and seventy people came so I'm going to make a go of it once a fortnight. I've wondered if it is the music that puts people off so I'm going to vary it from week to week.

Being out of work and having no money isn't easy. I should know, but some of these people who have been taken out of the rat infested squalor in London just turn their brand new Milton Keynes house into the same kind of dump they came from. They can't see further than the fact they've been given a bit of a break. I'm always having arguments with people about it. Perhaps the Corporation have provided plenty of sports facilities but what does that prove? They've built a wonderful up market shopping centre full of John Lewis and Waitroses but it's surrounded by forty five working class estates. I'd like to live in America. I still reckon it's the land of opportunity.