

Meek tribute sell-out

Wyllyotts Theatre Potters Bar February 3
By Ralph Gowling

The star-studded Joe Meek Fest concert was sold out weeks in advance – a fitting tribute to the legendary producer – exactly 40 years to his death.

Many of the biggest names from Meek's stable were in the line-up – John Leyton, The Tornados, Cliff Bennett, The Honeycombs. They wowed the audience with chart-toppers like "Telstar", "Johnny Remember Me" and "Have I The Right". The music underlined the a genius, pioneer and maverick Meek in creating those sounds, especially when his studio was a small space in a flat over a shop in London's Holloway Road.

One of the biggest hits of the night with the crowd was Craig Douglas. He wasn't in the Meek stable and had been added to the bill as a guest artist. What a voice and what a charming personality. No sooner had he launched into "A Teenager In Love" than the words came floating back to him from the audience. He makes it all look so effortless.

Some of Meek's lesser known acts had their night in the spotlight too, with instrumental groups The Packabeats and The Scorpions lining up with full teams of original members. They kicked off the first half before The Honeycombs, led by original leader Martin Murray, took the stage in striking gear of pink shirts with black waistcoats. Martin has assembled a talented bunch of musicians to recreate those stomping and swirling sounds that everyone associates with the band.

Lead singer Tony Harte doesn't pretend to be another Dennis D'Elil but carries off the tough role well -- "Colour Slide" was a stand out - and is full of character and fun as the group's front man.

There is no Honey Lantree on drums but Jim Green's drumming fits the Honeycombs sound perfectly, as does the lead guitar work of Terry Conway. But what do you do when one of the Honeycombs' biggest hits was sung by Honey and you don't have a girl in today's group? The Honeycombs pulled off one of the highlights of the concert by welcoming on stage a gorgeous 16-year-old blonde, Sophie.

What a great voice and charisma too. You could have closed your eyes and imagined it was Honey up there singing "That's The Way". Sophie is apparently working with the band regularly. Make her an honorary mem-

ber and put that honey of a girl in the group's pictures. She has serious talent.

The Honeycombs backed a Meek artist who should have made it in the charts, Bobby Rio. Still endowed with a powerful clear voice, it must have been lack of quality songs that let Bobby down.

The Tornados opened the second half with sparkling versions of instrumental hits and some of the 40 No.1s Clem drummed on as a session man. They also reminded the audience they were Billy Fury's backing band by doing some of his hits too.

These days, The Tornados have two good vocalists in curvy blonde beauty Polly Raymond and lead guitarist David Graham. But it was when the band filled the theatre with the sound of "Telstar" that they drew the loudest applause.

The crowd also clapped their approval when Clem had a few pointed words to say about other acts that tried to trade on the name of The Tornados.

The man with the big booming voice, Cliff Bennett, made an all too brief appearance but thrilled the audience with his worldwide smash "Got To Get You Into My Life". Another class act.

Finally after Craig had weaved his magic, Meek's most successful solo artist, John Leyton, closed the concert in style. Clad in a leather motorbiker's outfit, John is a performer who gives his all.

Backed by The Tornados -- who never wilted despite being on stage all through the second half -- John was in fine form with his big hits "Johnny Remember Me", "Wild Wind" and "Son This Is She". The stunning voice of the stunning looking Suzi Jari provided the ethereal touch to John's hits.

John took time out to recall his days with the greats of Hollywood when he starred in films like "The Great Escape" and "Von Ryan's Express". The ladies love him. Bunches of flowers were thrust into his hands as he took his bow, and he was still signing souvenirs of the night nearly an hour after the show.

The legend of Joe Meek is more alive than ever. 40 years on. Shadow Bruce Welch appeared on stage to thunderous applause to praise his old friend Clem Cattini, The Tornados leader and drummer.

To huge laughter, Bruce admitted The Shadows were "p***d off" when "Telstar" went to No.1 and recalled how Clem always loves to remind him that The Tornados also reached the top spot in the US - something the Shads never managed.