

Lee Stanley:

An everyday hero leading with music

By Amanda N. Wegner

Music is a powerful medium. Throughout history, music has united people, told stories, conveyed emotion, kept time, celebrated moments. It has also been used to teach. From the simple *ABC Song* to *Schoolhouse Rock*, music has taught and touched all people.

After 18 years of working as an everyday hero, Madison's own Leotha "Lee" Stanley is teaching and reaching out to young people in a new way, sharing knowledge and being an everyday hero through song.

A shot in the arm

In the Madison area, Lee's name has long been synonymous with jazz, spiritual and R&B music, though his list of pursuits most certainly does not end there. In addition to playing gigs around the area, his "day job" as assistant to the director of community relations in the UW - Madison chancellor's office takes him into classrooms around the district, where he uses music as a medium to teach young minds about literacy, as well as human dynamics.

"I've written a lot of songs that talk about education, getting along with one another, being proud of who you are, having good

self-esteem and appreciating people who may be different than you," says Lee. "I highlight those aspects of human dynamics with songs."

Lee spends between six and eight weeks in a school that has been identified as needing a "shot in the arm, some positivity, reinforcement." He teaches the students his songs about friendship, having a positive attitude and more. For good measure, he invites people from the university and community to talk with students. The learning culminates with a program at the Overture Center.

Music works two ways: It brings people together and uses repetition, says Lee. And because of those key characteristics, the students learn and retain the messages in Lee's music. In fact, during a recent visit to a local flower shop, the cashier, upon taking Lee's credit card, said, "Oh, you came to my school, and we sang those songs. Matter of fact, we had a CD and we were just listening to it. You were at Randall in 1995."

"It's stuff like that that lets me know that I need to keep doing what I'm doing," says Lee. "Now, did it have an impact on their life? Some it did, and some it didn't. People are who they are. I'm just there to help untap potential!"

Learning to swim

Lee was first introduced to music in the 1960s when his parents bought a piano. Though one Ms. Kupisak, his tough-as-nails dollar-an-hour piano teacher who smelled of mothballs and had a penchant for rapping her students' knuckles with a ruler (wrists up!), drove him away from the instrument, his mother bought him a drum set, which kept the music alive.

"I didn't purposely do this," says Lee of his entry into music. But between rolling on the drum set and tinkering on the piano, Lee says he became "very skilled at listening and playing" music, recreating tunes from records without written music. He eventually started working with his church's young adult choir, "tinkering out the tunes to accompany what they wanted to sing."

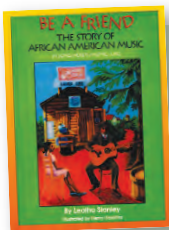
"That's where it came from," he says. "The rest was just responsibility. They wanted something, I did it. I was in the water, so I learned how to swim."

Swimming can be tiring though. That was the case for Lee in 2000, when he resigned from his position as firefighter-paramedic with the Madison Fire Department.

"For 18 years, I was looking at other people's calamities to be my paycheck. You can only take so many catastrophic things," says Lee. "I was real compassionate when I first started the job, but that got old real fast. I got calloused real fast. We'd go out on a call where someone would die, then come back to the station and eat lunch like nothing happened."

The last time Lee saw a child who had been hit by a car, he knew it was time to call it quits. In 2000, he joined the university's Fetzer Center for Athletes. In 2004, he moved

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The latest on Lee

Lee Stanley has authored two books, *Be a Friend: The History of African American Music Through Words, Pictures and Songs* and *Spread My Wings*, a songbook with original songs.

In November, Lee was chosen as Wisconsin Academy's 2008 Minerva Laureate. Lee, who remarried last August, is exploring ways he and his wife, Tamara, can bring their musical talents together.





Photo by Michael Krakora

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Stanley sports

Lee Stanley, a Milwaukee native, came to UW-Madison as a track-and-field athlete. Lee's coach told him that if he could high-jump seven feet, he could give him a scholarship. Lee, who'd jumped six feet, seven inches to win the state meet, hit the mark his freshman year.

"I never jumped that height again," says Lee with a laugh.

After college, his running career took him to Los Angeles, where Carl Lewis beat him for a spot on the Olympic team. As serendipitous compensation, he landed a spot on Wheel of Fortune.

While with the department, Lee became the man to beat at the biennial World Fire and Police Games, the Olympics of the police and fire field.

to his current position with the chancellor's office. Lee's current work with the university is a natural extension of something he began in 1991. While working for the fire department, he'd spend his days off in the school as an artist-in-residence, teaching students about the chronology of African-American music and sharing his songs.

Sharing talent, knowledge

With so much energy and talent, it's rare that Leatha Stanley sits still. How can he when he's teaching students about being a "F-R-I-E-N-D, indeed," playing his own gigs or serving as music director at Mt. Zion Church?

"I've gotten good at deciding what hat to put on," he says.

But none of what Lee does is to put himself on a pedestal — he's an everyday hero, someone who just does what needs to be done, not for the recognition it brings. It all goes back to compassion and responsibility, to share his talents and knowledge with everyone else.

"I am not blessed by myself," Lee confides. "All I have is a God-given talent, and it makes no sense to hoard it and not share with someone else."



Amanda N. Wegner is an editor and freelance writer in Madison.