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Lost voice guy

Talking the talk

What Stephen Hawking has done for quantum physics, Lee Ridley is aiming to do for stand-up and for disability. **Annie Makoff** meets the man for whom an iPad is an essential part of his act

He panic buys pasties, he likes to pretend he's an answering machine and he obsessively tracks mentions of himself in the media.

Lee Ridley or Lost Voice Guy as he is more commonly known, is not your typical stand-up comedian. For a start, he can't speak.

"When I realised I would never speak

again, I was speechless", the po-faced stand-up tells his audience. There are howls of laughter and Lee, speaking through his iPad continues. "I've looked everywhere for it: down the



The 31-year-old Geordie is relatively new to stand-up. Not that you'd know it. Having performed at over 20 venues across the UK since February 2012, the London gig which *Disability Now* attended in April was seemingly a doddle for the budding comedian.

Lee was born with cerebral palsy which has affected his balance and walking ("I walk like I'm drunk") and he uses a communication aid to speak.

Having trained as a journalist several years ago, Lee began writing for pleasure (and laughs) as well as for business. He reviewed local bands, went out to gigs and submitted hundreds of articles to the local media.

But it was his blog which he wrote with tongue-in-cheek humour that would ultimately lead him to a new career in comedy.

"I've always enjoyed making people laugh," he explains "and being a stand-up was my dream job. But I always thought it was just a dream – I never thought I'd actually do it."

“I've been told I'm a role model and an inspiration, but I'm really not a fan of those terms. I'm just a bloke telling jokes on a stage”

Yet barely a year later, Lee has appeared on the BBC, Sky, CNN, Radio 4, Radio 5 and has had countless articles about him in national newspapers. People are clearly fascinated with his calling, which, let's face it, is a strange choice for someone who can't speak for toffee.

"My inability to speak was always going to be part of the act," he concedes. "It defines me whether I like it or not. I can either play on it or

ignore it completely. I like to think it helps me get away with a lot."

Like his comments about disabled people using their benefit money to buy iPads? "Yes, exactly that."

In fact, one of his opening lines draws attention to what the audience assumes is about his disability but then does the exact opposite. "Let's deal with the elephant in the room," he begins. "I know what you were thinking when I walked up on stage. It's OK, it happens all the time. Here comes another wanker with his iPad." An iPad, which he jests, was bought using his DLA.

It's a joke that won't be lost on any disabled person today. "Scroungers" and "benefit cheats" are both terms that the media have often used to describe disabled people – which Lee uses as part of his act – not just for laughs, but to make an important political point.

"I guess it's about having a point to prove," says Lee. "I want people to realise that us disabled do actually have a sense of humour. At the same time, I want people to see us in a positive light: we don't go round stealing benefits off the state."

Not many would have imagined it would have been possible to pull off an impressive stand-up routine without speech. But Lee, ever practical, delightedly tells of how he spent just £1.49 on an iPad app which reads out his script. The voice which he describes as a "quintessentially English storybook voice" may sound "a bit posh", but he believes it makes the act even funnier.

Even the issue of spontaneity (something you'd consider essential in a comedian) doesn't infringe on his performance.

"It's trial and error really. I'm still



back of the chair and behind the washing machine. But on the bright side, I did find the television remote control, £3 in change and a used condom."



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Lee recalls one of his most successful jokes which involved a deaf-blind man on a train who had asked Lee to give up his seat. Lee attempts to use his communication aid to respond with: “I wasn't aware we were playing disabled top trumps” but because the man can neither hear nor see, the stand-off continues for some time.

Lee's act may be unique, but he's conscious of not wanting to stereotype himself, nor to become “like one of those comedians who just concentrate on their race or size.” But at the moment, getting laughs out of disability politics is a useful taboo to start with.

“Without my disability I wouldn't have an act. All of a sudden, I don't want to be cured – how convenient, right? I think it's better to embrace my disability – the good and the bad – and let people see what it's like. Eventually, I want to move on to do other stuff, not disability related.”

But as far as Lee is concerned, the Government, in appearing to stigmatise disabled people, have actually done him a huge favour: “Their attitude is really helpful for someone like me. It means I can take the piss out of what they're doing. Well done, Dave!”

But for all his jokes, Lee wants his stand-up to help dispel the state-endorsed myth which demonises disabled people by labelling them as

getting used to when to pause to allow for laughter, even though of course, every audience is different. And I do have some good comebacks stored just in case I get heckled, which hasn't happened yet, but I'm sure it will. But I think the long pauses while I type out a response will make it even funnier. Like slow motion comedy. Almost.”

And what has been the reaction so far to his performances? Does he think

people laugh because they should, because they are embarrassed, or because he's a genuinely funny guy? But Lee, who so far hasn't had any bad experiences, isn't too fussed as to the psychology behind the audience's reactions.

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cheats and scroungers. "Although it seems that petrol and pasties are more important to the media, anyway," he muses, before freely admitting to panic buying pasties, such is his love for them. "You can't go round taxing pasties!"

Lee's new-found talent on the stage has enabled him to take the seemingly ridiculous responses to his disability and turn them into something to laugh at. Nearly every disabled person will have at least one or two anecdotes where people have asked them odd questions or reacted to them in an odd way, and Lee's experiences are no exception.

"My everyday communication aid sounds a bit like Steven Hawking, so I can really synthesise with him," he jokes. "But sadly, on the telephone, it's



caused a few problems. People don't believe they are talking to a real person, even though I try and engage them in conversation, but they do leave their name and number..."

Naturally, Lee plays along, asking them for all kinds of personal bank

details or intoning for them to speak more slowly.

"But it's great if I don't want to speak to them anyway. I can then pretend I am an answer phone, and they are none the wiser."

So what's next for Lost Voice Guy? He's toured all over the UK, from Aberdeen to London, his blog, lostvoiceguy.com is receiving over 300 hits a month and he's been in the media "more than Princess Di".

"Now I want everyone to buy a T-shirt," he says. "A Lost Voice Guy T-shirt. And after that, who knows? Maybe I'll one day tour with Ross Noble – my all-time favourite comedian. Actually, that would be amazing. I'd love that."

Maybe he will. But he better stock up on the pasties first. ■

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