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## LBC CenterStage

### Long Beach is my Muse

#### A Conversation With Lee Adams

by [Sander Roscoe Wolff](#)



Musician, author, and voice artist Lee Adams began her career at the tender age of 4, singing and dancing on the bill with a variety of acts. This scene, a throwback to Vaudevillian days, often included contortionists, magicians, strippers, and ventriloquists. An accomplished keyboard player, she's played in and subsequently fronted a variety of groups, most

recently a self-titled project that resulted in the acclaimed CD, *Champions and Lunatics*. In 2000 she completed her first novel, *5<sup>th</sup> and Vanguard*. A gritty bohemian rhapsody, it explores the mysterious inner and outer worlds of her heroine, Julie Page, a writer who must face her darkest fears in order to recover her lost muse. Lee was recently awarded a grant to finish the sequel, *Nighthawks*, and is already thinking about a third book with the same characters.



**LBC:** How did your career begin?

**Lee Adams:** I started out in the International Children's Choir. You know, those folks who sing "Let There Be Peace on Earth." Bless their hearts, I believe they're still doing it. Anyway, I represented the United States. They dressed me up as the Statue of Liberty. I had these tiny gold lame sandals that my mom had taps drilled into. Don't think it's easy to tap dance in sandals, because it ain't. Then at six, I went solo. I started doing Jimmy Durante, Al Jolson, and Eddy Cantor impersonations. I was in a tux by then.

**LBC:** Too Cute! So, how long did this continue, or are you still impersonating Mr. Durante?

**Lee Adams:** No, I had to give it up because there are only 15 people left who've ever heard of him. I worked the variety circuits until I was about 15 or 16.



**LBC:** So, when you finally left that stage, then what happened?

**Lee Adams:** Well, at around 16, I was already sneaking into clubs and hearing all this great R&B music and soul music, stuff I hadn't been exposed to. At eleven, I was singing songs like "Suspicious Minds" and "Harper Valley PTA." Ridiculous. So, here was this whole world of contemporary music I'd fallen into. I eventually got up the nerve to sit in with some of the bands I was sneaking in to see and soon after that, I started writing my own songs. My first band was called Twenty-Four Carat. Before that, I worked with piano players only. Twenty-Four Carat was a Bob Seager-esque cover band. We had a drummer that was so messed up that he'd wander off during the breaks and we'd have to go find him. "Where's George?" "I don't know. I thought you had him." Stuff like that. We played a lot of biker

joints, mostly in Pedro. I've stepped over chalk outlines on more than one occasion to get inside a club I was playing at.

**LBC:** So, you were doing the cover thing... What led you to make the big change to originals?

**Lee Adams:** I wrote original songs so I thought I should be singing them. I worked with a guy named Craig Dooley for a while. In that duo, we did originals and covers. We drove out to...God, I don't know where it was but it was far away. We get set up and Craig starts off with "Peaceful Easy Feeling." The manager comes rushing in clutching her ears and screaming, "It's too loud! It's way too loud!" How can you piss anybody off with "Peaceful Easy Feeling?" We had to pack up and leave that gig right then. Everybody's a critic.

**LBC:** Actually, I can see how that might happen with that song... So, do you remember your first public performance of a Lee Adams original?

**Lee Adams:** No. I'm sorry but it's been a long life. I remember saying I'd do this guy's show, sing with him and do a couple of bits, if he let me sing an original. Anyway, as part of the agreement, he had me do this duet with him wherein I had to come in on this paper moon. They hoisted me up into the rafters of this theatre (in a crepe pant suit, I might add) so that I could be lowered onto the stage singing, "It's Only a Paper Moon." It was truly horrifying. My song went well, though. So well, in fact, that he didn't allow me back on the stage to take a curtain call. Bastard.

**LBC:** Wow! That's a beautiful story. So, after playing your originals in a variety of settings, what made you decide to abandon the lucrative business of singing other peoples' songs, and start singing your own?

**Lee Adams:** You joking, right? Did I make a concerted decision to stop making money when I started doing all originals? I had retired my microphone at some point (I do that periodically) and was working at a friend's coffee house. This trio was booked to play there, two girls and a guy. But the guy didn't show up. The girl's were very distressed. I sheepishly came around the counter and said, "You know, I know most of the songs you two play and I can play a little piano. Would you like me to sit it?" They said yes, and that was the beginning of Boho. That threesome became a foursome and then the gal who was singing up front left and I was asked to step up front. The band went through two more changes in line-up before we said goodbye. We had a lot of fun over the four years we played together, and at that point, it was all original and it was all my stuff.... as I was the only writer in the band. After that, I went into the studio and recorded Champions and Lunatics. I did that one with some really great session players. In fact, I believe it's still available.



**LBC:** If you don't mind shifting gears a bit, please tell me a bit about the voice-over

work you do.

**Lee Adams:** I think it started with a musician friend of mine who was scoring industrial films and cable commercials and such. He gave me the number of the Educational Television Network (for which I did a PSA this morning) and I've been the on-air voice of ETN for about 6 years now. "This has been a production of the Los Angeles County Office of Education," you know, stuff like that. I also do a lot of CD ROM's that they produce and training videos, it's all over the board.

**LBC:** Didn't you recently do a book as well?

**Lee Adams:** Yeah. Books On Tape asked me to read a Sue Henry novel called Death Trap. That was the hardest work I've ever done.

**LBC:** What was challenging about it?

**Lee Adams:** They just roll tape. Nobody slates it, no "take one," "take two." They just roll the tape and you sit in the booth and read, and mess up, and read, and so on. There were about fifteen male characters in this particular book and after establishing about the fourth one I only had Daffy Duck and Big Bird left to offer up as inflections. But they loved it. They claim they'll be asking me back. Between you and me, I hope I have Nighthawks wrapped before I get the call. I also got to do a character voice in a wonderful pilot for a kid's show that I have every confidence will sell. That was great fun.

**LBC:** Why don't you tell me about how you got the idea to write a book, and why you decided to actually write it?

**Lee Adams:** The first book came as a bit of a surprise. I was just doodling at my job and started writing this scene in front of a liquor store that entertained me. The next day on my lunch hour, I picked it up and eventually it started looking like a novel - which it was. I didn't have an outline for 5th and Vanguard until maybe 3/4 of the way through.

**LBC:** Were you discovering the characters and events as you went along?

**Lee Adams:** Yeah, exactly.

**LBC:** Was there an "a ha" moment, when it all came together for you?

**Lee Adams:** Well, there was a point, maybe three chapters in, where I thought I had to finish it because the characters were very real to me by then.

**LBC:** But, as far as the arc of the story.... how did it feel when you began to understand what needed to transpire for the characters.

**Lee Adams:** 5th is primarily about Julie's arc, you're right, much more the point than the whodunit aspect of it. And her journey to find herself back to her artistic edge was one I, coincidentally, was going through myself at the time.

**LBC:** But you didn't need to suffer the same way she did, thankfully.

**Lee Adams:** There are a lot of metaphors in 5th - fire being the predominate one. And I think I've walked through plenty of fires.

**LBC:** Please tell me about other metaphors in the story.

**Lee Adams:** Drugs. She's a reformed pill junky. Maxine [another character - ed] is a full-on junky. Being driven artistically is much like addiction - I think. I've had this argument with plenty of folks but I believe it's true.



**LBC:** Is art something you're compelled, for no good reason, or even to your own detriment, to pursue? Do you have an art jones, Lee?

**Lee Adams:**  
[Laughing] I'm as hard as a rock!  
Yeah. I don't think I'm alone in that, either. I think we pursue whatever art we pursue in

some attempt to express ourselves, primarily. And hopefully not to no one. We're always trying to share what we've built with somebody who will dig it as much as we do.

**LBC:** So, is it more about expressing ourselves, or is it more about receiving attention from others?

**Lee Adams:** Well, the first book, this second one, and there will be a third, all deal with that very question. So, I guess I'm just not sure.

**LBC:** Having finished the first book, do you have a better idea of where the second book, and the characters, is headed or, as you write, you're still discovering?

**Lee Adams:** I thought when I started Nighthawks that it would be the last of the Julie Page stories. But as the characters introduced themselves and as I saw more clearly where Julie was in this book, it became apparent that I can't leave them in

this state so, there will be one more after this to set things straight. I have an outline for this one so it is moving along more cohesively than 5<sup>th</sup>, but it's all still a mystery. And I've had to revise the outline several times already.

**LBC:** Which process is easier: The first, where you were discovering in the writing process, or the second, working from an outline, albeit an adjustable one?

**Lee Adams:** The first was a delightful adventure but I was sort of falling forward constantly: "Why would she do that?" "Oh, maybe this is why." "How did she get there?" "Oh, maybe this is how." That sort of thing. With Nighthawks I know where everybody is going (more or less) so, on that level it's easier. Is it better? I don't know. I don't have much to compare it to yet.

**LBC:** And, at the same time, are you thinking ahead to the 3rd book and all the machinations therein?

**Lee Adams:** Not all the machinations, no. But I do know the focus of it and that it will be a hell of a lot lighter than Nighthawks. When people ask me what I write I say little beatnik mysteries but I had no idea how low I could go until I got into this book. So the 3rd will be good fun.

**LBC:** Is your goal to get published, self publish, or...?

**Lee Adams:** I've been around too long to say "I'll never do this" or "I'll only do that" but I would prefer to get the series published by an established house. The work would find a larger audience. On the other hand, who the hell knows? I may turn 5th into a screenplay and make the movie before it gets published.

**LBC:** So, tell me about your process.

**Lee Adams:** I'm trying to be very regimented. It consists of getting everything else off my plate for, like, three days at a time, and then sitting in front of the computer, walking to the porch for a smoke, urinating, making more coffee, and sitting back down at the computer. I do this maybe forty, fifty times a day until I feel very accomplished, very blind, or I run out of smokes.

**LBC:** Do you act out the scenes, speak the dialog aloud, and dress your dog up like the characters?

**Lee Adams:** Yes. Sometimes, if there are several characters in a scene, I go through the neighborhood and collect other people's dogs so I can dress them up, as well.

**LBC:** When writing the first book, you worked on it a bit here and there, in dribs and drabs, until you were nearly finished. Now, you've adopted this more 'regimented' approach of

sustained effort. I was wondering if it made your work more focused, or if you tend to burn out after the 2nd day...

**Lee Adams:** Yes, the regiment (if you can call it that) works very well. Some days I'm more clever than others, but the book gets written.

**LBC:** When you've finished this book, are you going to take both back out to market, or just jump right into the third?

**Lee Adams:** I think I'd like to do both as simultaneously as possible. It takes a lot of work to shop books but I do want to at least start the 3rd pretty quickly after this one. Once they are in the hands of a house, they will all change some and I'd love to have three in my pocket before that happens.

**LBC:** You set the story in a fictional town. How much of Long Beach is in your stories?

**Lee Adams:** The town is Berle. It's a morph between Long Beach and Santa Monica. Very Long Beach but there's an active boardwalk and a lot of money up in the hills. One of the nicest compliments I get when people read 5th is that they're sure they know what liquor store I'm talking about or what street I'm talking about. But the truth is, even though Long Beach is most definitely my muse, all of the locations are fictitious.

**LBC:** I understand that you were recently awarded a rather sizable grant. First, congratulations and, second, tell me what this means on a practical level?

**Lee Adams:** Yeah, well it means I have a tiny bit of literary clout I didn't have before the grant. It also means I need to finish this book by March - as that was the deal. Hopefully, these inroads will move the work a little closer to a contract but life's funny. You never know.

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