

THE PHOENIX

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Lee Genesis at Johnny D's, January 9, 2008

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Lee Genesis

Even among the greatest soul singers, there are probably few who can work a sermon about the evils of the sub-prime-mortgage fiasco into a song and make it hip. But Lee Genesis did it in the first of his two sets at Johnny D's a week ago Wednesday. He had sung a couple of verses of his original "Reachout," with his excellent band and two back-up vocalists cooking behind him, when he got to the part of the song where soul singers traditionally take it down and talk to the people. With spare keyboard accompaniment, he flowed through the state of the election year, the mortgage mess, and the need for something different ("I don't care *who* it is, just bring the difference!"), and without dropping a beat he came out into the song's lyrics about the need for people's voices to be heard: "Here we are!"

Genesis came through Boston like a comet more than three decades ago — landing at the Wilbur Theatre with the touring company of *Godspell* in 1972 and sticking around through the Blizzard of '78 before heading back to New York. In the meantime, he was everywhere: with his soul band Heat, with the jazz-funk group Ghetto Mysticism, showing up at clubs all over

town to sit in with the night's band and bring down the house with his electrifying gospel falsetto.

The years have taken a little bit of the power off that falsetto (he's worked in and out of music since his Boston days), but he still commands the stage like a man imbued with the spirit. Handsome and trim at 65, with the shiny bald pate he had 30 years ago, he kicked, danced, and joked, and he pushed the falsetto for all it was worth at the climax of his songs of uplift. The line-up included two musicians from Heat, guitarist Dave Acker (now in New York) and bassist Tim Ingles (the George Porter Jr. of Boston), plus keyboardist Frank Wilkins, drummer Jim Arnold, and tenor-sax Chuck Langford. Along with his own pieces from his new *The Soul of Lee Genesis* (Burger Platters), Genesis sang Steve Winwood's "Higher Love" and Al Green's "Love and Happiness." For a night, Johnny D's was a soul church.