

ON THE BALL

Issue 73



Hi Everyone

Hope you are all having a good Summer.

Over the past few months there have been quite a few opportunities to see Michael, we've just come to the end of Michael being Il Divo's special guest during their Castles and Country tour; before that we think everyone was blown away by Michael's portrayal of Anatoly in Chess at the London Coliseum. We know we certainly were. The only down side is that it was all over far too quickly.

A couple of weeks ago we were lucky enough to have a catch up with Michael in Wogan House. While we were there, we gave him a copy of the 'Michael's Letters' book along with a congratulations card for winning the Classic Brit Award for Album of the Year and Group of the Year (photos on page 13). He was really thrilled, and as this was a joint award we were able to hand him a duplicate card to pass on to Alfie, as he said he would be seeing him shortly.

He also told us that he is very happy with progress on his new solo album which will be released at the beginning of next year. We asked if there was going to be any concerts and he said nothing is confirmed yet so keep your fingers crossed.



Thank you goes to those of you who contributed the lovely photos and articles for this edition and as always thanks to James for another superb edition of On The Ball.

Love
Maureen and Gill

Dear Everyone,

So, How are you enjoying this amazing summer so far? I'm absolutely loving it. One of the biggest treats for me was the unexpected pleasure of doing some live sets with Il Divo.... they weren't planned and only came about while I was doing 'CHESS' and I just thought... Why NOT? It's been ages since I'd done a proper solo set so thanks for coming if you managed to make it.

So, now let's talk about Chess!! It was one of the best experiences I've ever had in a theatre. That glorious score, the wonderful cast and the unbelievable response from audiences every night. Amazing!

All memories of Kismet with the fantastic ENO orchestra and Chorus are forgotten and forgiven. It makes me want to do something at the Coliseum again.

Now then, the rest of this summer is going to be taken up with making my wait for it, 21st album!!! Unbelievable and I'm so excited about it.

We've chosen some beautiful songs and finally I've been writing some new material that I think will be good enough to be included and I can't wait to share them with you. We're hoping it will be ready for release early in the New Year but, of course, you will be the first to know when we have a definite schedule.

I have to take a bit of time to thank James and of course Gill and Maureen for putting all my letters for 'On the Ball' in one beautiful, memory filled book. What times we've shared and places we've been and things we've done. Just amazing. Over 25 years of them and such a brilliant idea. Until you see everything in one place you forget everything we've shared and it was the most wonderful treat - I was really moved by the care and thought that went into putting the collection together. The only downside was realising that my handwriting hasn't got any better 😊.

And you've been there with me,

encouraging me and supporting me on this extraordinary journey and that is the overwhelming sense that comes through as I re-read them. You have been there for me and each other through thick and thin and God willing we will still be sharing these things for many years to come.

So I shall sign off now by saying I bloody love you. I will see you in a concert hall, theatre, Arena, field or on water sometime very soon I hope and if we meet in a shop or a street or anywhere else, don't be shy and say a quick hello.

Take care, my lorties, and as always, thank you for making this life so special.

God bless always



X



AN OLD FRIEND AT THE O2

BY HELEN EASTON

First of all, imagine meeting up with a friend you haven't seen for a while at a concert by chance. I had a message from my friend Julie Pagnier from Guernsey saying that she was over here for the concert in the O2. So I text her to see where she was sitting and told her where I was sitting and that I was with my sister Annette and friend Darren. She text back and said she wasn't in the venue yet but she would be there soon.

We decided to take photos on my phone to show that we were there. Just as we were finished doing that and talking about making sure that our programmes and T-shirts that we bought were okay, a voice said "Hello Helen how are you?" It was my friend Julie! "I said "Julie, its lovely to see you," with a surprised look on my face. I

introduced her to our friend Darren and he took a photo of us together. She said "I better go and find my seat for the concert now, hope you enjoy the show, I will text you again soon". I said goodbye and then we were waiting for the show to start.

Michael and Alfie were just fantastic – their first tour was amazing but this one was even better. Michael and Alfie did 'Love Changes Everything' together which was lovely, but when they sang 'The Rose' I thought back about when Michael first sang it and why, and had a tear in my eye.

'He Lives In You' from *The Lion King* was amazing with a choir and I really enjoyed the version of 'Bring Me Sunshine' with the children and their single for charity.

The concert had too many songs to list but they were all amazing and lovely too. My favourite parts were the *Les Misérables* segment as that is my favourite musical, but I also enjoyed the *West Side Story* medley which opened the second act.

The pair ended the concert with 'The Prayer' which is so beautiful, along with a tribute to Wham! and George Michael. Alfie was very funny, putting his winter coat on and suitcase in his hand as if they were finished, while Michael carried on before saying "He's behind me isn't he?" We all shouted out "Yes he is!" and Michael turned around and saw Alfie was behind him. He said "You didn't want to sing this though" and Alfie took his hat and coat off and changed into a 'Choose Life' T-shirt. So did Michael and they started the Wham! songs. We didn't want them to go home!

It was a fantastic evening, thanks to Michael and Alfie. I am so glad that I booked this show – I got to see an old friend and the concert was one not to be missed!



WE FINALLY GOT OUR PHOTO! by Fiona Gardiner

These photos were taken at the O2 on Thurs 14th December. Words can not describe what an amazing night that was - it was unforgettable! I went with my husband Graham and we had finally got our first ever photos with Michael and Alfie - a very special moment!





As Charlie's 10th birthday was on a Sunday, I sent a birthday request for him to the BBC and was thrilled when Michael read it out. We braved the cold weather, including snow, and made it into London.

When Michael appeared Charlie was very excited. Michael held him and was smothered in 'kisses' from Charlie who absolutely loves him.

I managed to get some great photos and really appreciated the time Michael spent with Charlie. Here you can see their meetings throughout the years!

CHARLIE'S 10TH BIRTHDAY TREAT

by Sharon Scarrott

Earlier this year, Charlie, our Chihuahua turned 10 years old. I decided to take him to the BBC to see Michael as a special treat, as Charlie has a bit of history with Michael.

In 2008, when Charlie came into our lives, I sent an email to Michael's radio show to say we had a Chihuahua puppy. Michael read out my message and said 'I don't know about Chihuahuas'. I thought it would be nice to introduce him to Charlie. This happened at The Shaftesbury Theatre before *Hairspray* one Saturday afternoon – Charlie was 4 months old.





The Land of the Rising Sun

by Jen Garner

As I write this, I'm looking out of my window in Frodsham, Cheshire on a bitterly cold, snowy day. Nothing could be more different from two weeks ago when we were in Japan, the sun was shining and it was warm—well it was 10 degrees and felt warm compared with the freezing U.K. We saw only the slightest shower of rain one evening and this soon cleared up. It certainly made us feel we were in 'The Land of The Rising Sun'.

Last year, when we first heard that Michael and Alfie were planning to do some concerts in Tokyo, my friends Donna and Rose asked me if I was interested in a trip? At the time I wasn't in a position to make many decisions and the only thing I knew was that I very much wanted to go! I said that if they would organise everything, I would go along with whatever they decided. I'm so glad I did and thank them very much indeed for their superb arrangements. We were joined by Jay, Donna's friend and colleague, the fourth member of our 'Tokyo Team'.

At the time Michael and Alfie were only doing Saturday 10th February in the evening and Sunday 11th February matinee and my only contribution was to book the Sunday matinee tickets. Later, of course, another concert was added on Monday 12th but unfortunately it would have been too costly to alter our flights. We knew we had to make the

most of our time there and we did and had the most brilliant few days.

We flew out from Birmingham, arriving Friday lunchtime. Our hotel proved to be great – not huge, but clean, friendly and definitely authentically Japanese. The location was perfect, only a five minute walk from the lovely shopping mall which housed the beautiful Orb Theatre. It had a fabulous little restaurant and a bar where all the locals seemed to congregate. No one seemed to speak much English so half the fun was trying to communicate with them and learning a little bit of Japanese, doing our best to integrate!

Friday and Saturday were mainly spent exploring the city itself. There was some shopping, sampling some of the Japanese delights such as sushi and drinking coffee overlooking the busiest crossing in the world, generally finding our bearings... and of course the stage door!





The first evening we found a fantastic restaurant which had been recommended to me. It was called 'Gonpachi' and served the most amazing Japanese cuisine. We ate sitting in a private booth at very low tables, Japanese style! Afterwards, we drank cocktails in the Sky Bar above, soaking up the sights of Tokyo at night, with the majestic buildings and the Tokyo Tower in the background, rising high, all illuminated and looking totally magical.

At last I reach the main reason for us being

there which I know you know was Michael... not forgetting Alfie!

For various reasons we missed seeing them arrive for Saturday's concert, although Donna did catch a glimpse of Alfie's head disappearing through the stage door. We weren't thrilled with our seats as we were up on the third tier. Having said that, we had a 'birds eye' view, the sound was fantastic and I think for the first time ever I saw the whole set! In fact it was really great to watch the



predominately Japanese audience go literally wild with excitement and enthusiasm for what I am sure you have gleaned from all the Facebook and Twitter accounts was a truly amazing concert.

I can't stress enough just how brilliant both Michael and Alfie performed and the collection of songs from 'Together' and 'Together Again' worked to perfection, with standing ovations for both for of their solo renditions.

Alfie was as intrepid as ever with his venture through the stalls during 'Run'. Upstairs we thought we'd lost him on the Saturday night as he was so long somewhere at the back of the auditorium beneath us!

As briefly as I can, 'The Best of Both' included 'Somewhere' and 'Tonight' from *West Side Story*, 'For Once In My Life', 'You'll Be Back' (*Hamilton*), 'Music Of The Night' (*Phantom Of The Opera*), 'Not While I'm Around' (*Sweeney Todd*), 'The Rose', 'Anthem' (*Chess*), 'Hero' (*Bohemia*), 'A Thousand Years' (*Twilight Saga*), 'Tell Me It's Not True' (*Blood Brothers*), 'He Lives In You' (*The Lion King*) and the first half finishing with 'You're The Voice'.

Act two began with 'Stairway to Paradise', 'Me and My Shadow', followed by 'New York, New York', 'The James Bond Medley'. Alfie sang 'Keep Me In Your Heart', 'Bring Him Home' and 'Run' solo. Michael sang 'Stars', 'Gethsemane' and 'Love Changes Everything'.

They performed the *Les Misérables* medley and 'The Prayer' was an encore ending inevitably with the Wham! medley and everyone going crazy!!





Afterwards it seemed like hundreds of very excited people were waiting at the stage door. We all had to queue up in an orderly fashion and wait for our turn – it felt a bit like afterwards at The Royal Variety Performance. I think I said something to Michael like “I’ve nearly lost my voice with cheering” which I knew he would be pleased to hear!

We waved them off, met up with Joan, Sue, Hilary and Itchiko. Joan very kindly offered me a stalls ticket for the Sunday matinee and as Rose managed to get an odd one too, I gratefully accepted. After all, it’s always nice to be ‘up close and personal’ isn’t it?

Donna and Jay had decided against another concert and instead had a trip up The Tower, visited a temple and a beautiful park and had afternoon tea, Japanese style. They took some amazing photos too for us all to remember the trip.

Rose and I again savoured the delights of Tokyo and enjoyed a second phenomenal concert, managing to say our ‘Goodbyes’ to Michael and Alfie.

In the evening we all met up and found a delightful ‘Japanese, Italian,’ restaurant where there again no one spoke a word of English but again were so friendly, polite and as helpful as possible and my ‘Number 10’ from the menu was to die for, as was the saké!

The following morning before leaving this beautiful country we caught the train to a lovely park just outside the city. Here we walked among the gorgeous gardens,



pergolas, lakes with Koi carp and various features including a shrine to Meiji and his wife Shelen – one of the great Emperors of Japan who apparently opened up Japan to The West. This nestled within the tranquil green forest next to Harajaki Station. The saké barrels, wrapped in straw in the wall outside the shrine are called Kazaridaru. They are empty physically but signify a spirited connection and relationship between the gods and the people of Japan and prosperity. This was certainly a peaceful sanctuary in a busy and bustling city.

All too soon it was time for home but nothing goes quite smoothly does it? Our flight was delayed for eighteen hours in Amsterdam. The good news is they managed to get us on another flight via Germany but

we weren’t all sat together. Well, Donna and I were, as she hung on to me for dear life as we took off. The calming down pills just didn’t kick in and she wouldn’t believe me that we were still taxiing as the plane bumped along! Eventually a very understanding stewardess came to our rescue and invited Donna upstairs into the cockpit with the three pilots. That seemed to do the trick! They said there wasn’t room for me too but I did get a little goodie bag as a consolation prize!

All’s well that ends well and we arrived back on terra ferma safe and reasonably sound.

No more to say really, except ‘Arigatou’ Michael and Alfie for the memories!



THE STORY OF CHESS

By Gosia Bartram. Main picture by Sharon Fellows, inset picture by Lisa Hooper

I have never seen *Chess* before, nor did I ever listen to the full score. So, when it was announced that Michael Ball was joining the cast of the revival, I was even more excited to not only see him on stage but also appear in a show that was new to me. I ended up seeing two matinees on the 5th and 16th of May and I was blown away both times.

Overall the production really comes together well in terms of the score, cast and the wonderful ENO orchestra with choir as a support. The music kept its 80's feel but gained depth and the vocal strength of all of the main cast members made it into a streak of very powerful songs – nearly all of them could be a chart hit. The set was very clever with its big screen, helping us

in the 'cheap' seats to see the actor's expressions clearly, but also adding the unexpected elements to the basic scenography, like the plane that Freddie was arriving in and his 'promotional' clips. The neon squares brought us straight back into 80's, especially when the two players walked in at their tournament, I couldn't stop thinking about *Knight Rider* enough, but with a few layers to it. The chess is only one of the games going on: the political gambles and the relationships in turmoil are all as important to the story.

Michael injected a real depth into the character of Anatoly. From the first song you could feel what the character is about – brilliant, clever and decent but obsessed to the point,



that nothing else matters to him anymore, even his family. He portrayed so well the detachment of someone quite deeply depressed, all alone with his obsession, unable to set himself free, with the political pressure adding to the burden. And you could see him change when he met Florence. As usual, Michael got the emotions spot on in his acting and, most importantly, in his singing. Anatoly is a character very close to my heart, not only because I grew up in Eastern Europe and still remember the Cold War, but because of his persona. The pride and power when he sang 'Anthem' is only one side to his character and he really shows what the song is about (so moving for me personally, having sometimes being accused of betraying my roots). But there is a darker side to Anatoly, which Michael showed well in 'Where I Want To Be' where you can almost feel his clenched fists, gritted teeth and a good dose of hatred for himself for what he became. His scenes with Florence are so natural and 'You And I' was just perfect. It is so hard to pick a fault with your favourite artist, but trying to be objective, I did think he was rather outplayed by Tim Howar in 'The Deal', which is understandable, the song being much more of Tim's usual rock style.

Tim was just great, a real rock star, good intensity, brilliant humour and the powerful 'Pity the Child' will stay with us for a long time. Kudos to the choreographers for allowing the character of Freddie to show his full swagger in 'One Night In Bangkok'. Cassidy Janson is a vocal powerhouse and there is such a fierce character in that little body, so perfect for Florence. I couldn't help to compare her to Idina Menzel. Her duet with Alexandra Burke was so good, their voices simply melted together. Alexandra as Svetlana was very moving, vocally flawless and it is a shame that this character is not developed further. Cedric Neal sang the role of The Arbiter with such power, the roof of the Coliseum nearly lifted, making a minor character memorable. And the rest of the cast – perfect. The highest quality performances, no obvious weak points.

I could write so much more about it, but the most important thing was, that every time leaving the theatre there was only one thought in my head: 'I want to see it again!'. And looking at the standing ovations at each performance, what other review is needed?



BALL AND BOE WIN BIG AT THE BRITS!

Michael and Alfie had a great night at the Classical Brit Awards, where they scooped the prizes for Album Of The Year and Group Of The Year. Michael also made good on his Twitter promise to “snog Alfie Boe” if they won, much to Alfie’s dismay! Michael later tweeted out a picture of himself happily chilling out with the awards, although the pair didn’t get two each, they had to share the statues – as a result Michael and Alfie decided to walk off with one of the giant prop Brit statues during the evening!

After the news broke in the Fan Club Facebook Group about their win, Julie Vidler sent in a message asking if it would be possible to send a card to Michael and Alfie from MBFC, congratulating the pair. Fans wrote messages and then either posted them in or took a photo of their message and emailed it to James, who used the photo of Michael and Alfie with the giant Brit for the front of the card. The insides were filled with messages from the Fan Club members, and on the back was a painting sent in by Pat Webb.

Once the artwork was completed, James sent it off to www.snapajack.com who specialise in printing giant personalised cards with handmade envelopes. Two copies were made and sent to Maureen and Gill, who delivered the cards to Michael at Wogan House, along with a copy of the *Michael’s Letters* book. He was very pleased, as you can see, and he said he would give Alfie’s card to him personally.

To make things even better, Julie, who came up with the idea in the first place, happened to be at Wogan House that same day hoping to say hello to Michael in celebration of her birthday. She got a great picture with him which was a well deserved reward!

On top of that, when placing the order, Snapajack contacted James to ask if the card was going to Michael directly. When he explained he worked for the Fan Club, they told him they had a sister company that make lifesize cardboard cutouts called www.celebrity-cutouts.co.uk.

They have a wide range of celebrities to choose from, including masks, and they offer lifesize cardboard cutouts of Michael and Alfie! To prove their point, they sent a complimentary pair of cutouts to James and as you can see from the photo, lifesize they most certainly are! They are printed in high resolution on thick corrugated card and are self standing. They do mini versions priced at £14.24, and the full sized ones priced at £34.49.

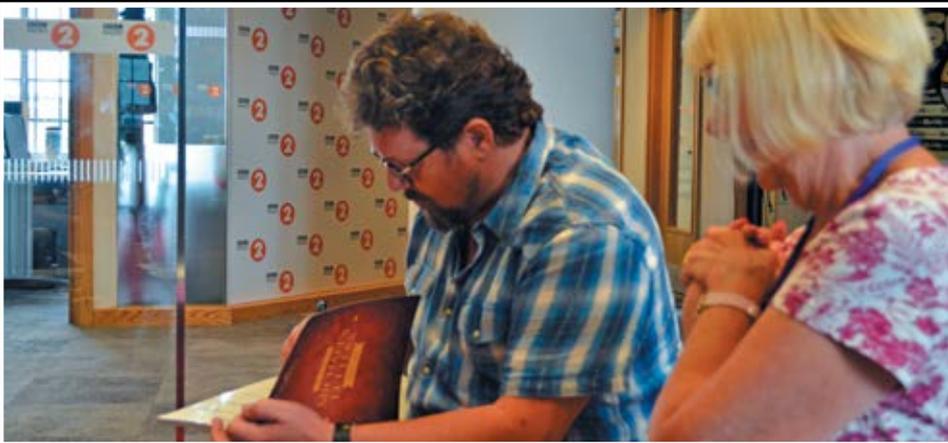
If you wish to own one simply visit the website www.celebrity-cutouts.co.uk – or check out the raffle on page 25!



A happy Michael with the awards, and an unhappy Alfie receiving a snog!



Michael with the card (above), the collection of messages inside and the painting by Pat Webb that went on the back (opposite)



Maureen gives Michael a copy of the 'Michael's Letters' book



Julie Vidler, pictured with Michael at Wogan House, celebrating her birthday



James with the life-size cutouts of Michael and Alfie.



DREAMS COME TRUE!

BY SHARON FELLOWS

I've been a fan of Michael for 33 years, but had never had the opportunity to see him sing live, or meet him. My first dream came true when I was lucky enough to meet him outside Wogan House in January.

I had chance to fulfil my

second dream on 5th May 2018, as I'd booked to see *Chess*. I made an early start and met up with Julie Vidler, we travelled to London by train together. It was a hot, sticky day, we arrived in London and wandered up to the theatre around 11.30. We made our way round to the stage

door, stood chatting with few other fans that we didn't know, but we soon got into the flow of talking about Michael. A little after 12pm, the two ladies we arranged to meet, Lisa Hooper and Gosia arrived, it was an incredibly hot wait as we were trapped in the sunshine.

Gradually more people arrived, and at around 1pm, Michael's car pulled up. He walked towards the crowd, started speaking to everyone, he had a few pictures taken with others, then Lisa asked him if we could have a photo, and he obliged. He was outside quite a while.

Fast forward to the main event, we went into the theatre, not knowing what to expect! Inside the auditorium, we all thought it was just a stunning theatre, and the stage looked amazing, all we needed now was the show to start,

At 2.30, the orchestra started to play and the show began, I was totally enthralled. Then Michael made his appearance,

and for a moment I held my breath.... he then began his part... amazing! I watched the story being played out, then came the magical, spine tingling delivery of 'Anthem' at the end of Act One. WOW! Michael sang it like I'd never heard him sing it before, so much emotion, and feeling.... stunning!

As the curtain fell, you could feel the amazement of the audience, Michael had blown the roof off the place!

It was time for second act, and the ultimate love story... Alexandra Burke and Cassidy Janson were amazing, the emotion was evident all the way through. Tim Howar I knew nothing about, but he was superb as The American. When it came to the final song between Michael and Cassidy, 'You And I', I had tears in my eyes, it so powerful and the emotion on their faces said it all... just stunning!

All too soon the show was over, with well earned standing ovations, cheers, and applause



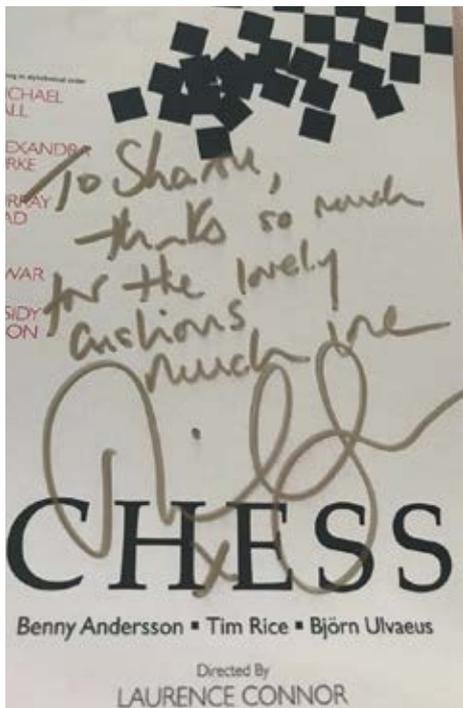
that seemed never ending, but so richly deserved.

As my first time seeing Michael perform live, it was utterly amazing... he left me speechless... I was totally in awe of the whole experience, it went over and above all my expectations. Of course I knew he'd be outstanding, but I never expected what actually happened, I was so emotional!

We went round to stage door as Julie wanted to get some pictures, the crowd was buzzing. We couldn't get close to barriers, so I took all the bags and souvenirs whilst Julie started snapping – a gentleman behind me kindly took our programmes and reached over for Michael to sign them. All too soon we were back on train home.

I loved it so much I went back two weeks later, this time with a present for Michael – two cushions I had made for him by a friend called Olly Hammond, with his beloved dogs on them. I managed to give them to him at the stage door before the matinee and looked forward to the performance. Again, it was a stunning show, with such an amazing main cast, ensemble and orchestra.

I thought that was an end to my *Chess* adventure, but a few days later I was amazed to receive a signed flyer from Michael, thanking me for his present! What an amazing thing to happen!



THE CHESS SET

by Helen Easton

Wow! What a most enjoyable evening out on Wednesday 30th of June in London. Accompanied by Annette and our friend Darren, seeing our favourite performer, who we have been fans of for a long time now, is always a thrill. We couldn't wait to get tickets to see *Chess* as soon as we heard that Michael would be in the show and that it would be at the home of the English National Opera.

At last the day came to go and see Michael again in the West End. We had seen him in *Sweeney Todd* last time and in concerts with Alfie Boe (another of our favourites) but we just couldn't wait to see Michael again. I had endured a long day at work and just couldn't wait to get on the train to London, have a meal and get to the theatre. I had been looking forward to seeing this show very much – even though our seats were up high, the view wasn't too bad.

The show itself was just amazing. The ENO did a great job and I thought Alexandra Burke was brilliant. Of course our Michael was just fantastic and wonderful as ever.

The story telling was just done so well and I really enjoyed watching it all play out. The music, by Tim Rice and Benny and Bjorn from ABBA was terrific, as I only



knew three songs from the show, 'You And I', 'I Know Him So Well' and of course 'Anthem' which we have all heard Michael sing before, both on his own and with Alfie.

We really had a most enjoyable evening out and as I said at the beginning... wow! What a show! It was a real spectacle. I hope Michael puts some of the songs on his new album when he goes back to recording it.

To top it off, we saw our friend Julie from Guernsey just for a few minutes after the show, who we last saw at the O2 as reported earlier! It was great to see her

again but must meet up for longer next time!



MICHAEL MADE MY DAY!

By Christine Godfrey



What a fantastic time I had seeing Michael in the very last matinee of *Chess*. I had been looking forward to it ever since Alastair gave me the ticket for my birthday in March. Much to my delight, it was a dry day and as Michael arrived at the stage door the sun came out, so my wish came true and I was able to have my photo taken with Michael! I also asked him to sign my *Phantom Of The Opera* program from when he played the part of Raoul, Vicomte de Chagny in October 1987. Michael was surprised at seeing an old photo of himself.

All too soon Michael went into the theatre after posing for photos and signing autographs for everyone there. The actual show was brilliant, especially Michael singing 'Anthem' at the

end of the first act. After the show, I went to the stage door again in order to get my *Chess* program signed by Michael and the other main characters. It was great seeing Michael both on and off stage and I always appreciate the time he spends with all of us. Thank you very much Michael for a wonderful day!

CHEEKY MICHAEL!

By Holly Barber. Picture by Janet Delasalle



Having taken a trip to Wogan House last Sunday I thought I'd share this photo with the other fans. Michael was being very cheeky on Sunday (mainly at my expense) - but as you can clearly see from the look on both of our faces - we both found it very funny!

I'm very grateful to Janet Delasalle for capturing this moment perfectly and for Claire Shorter for sharing it with me!



THREE GENERATIONS OF FANS

by Vehbiye Yoncu

Well where can I start? *Chess* was a phenomenal, fantastic show. Michael Ball as Anatoly was amazing – when he sang ‘Anthem’ with such power and emotion, it made me cry! Cassidy Janson as Florence was such a petite lady on stage, but she had the most powerful, beautiful voice. When Michael and Cassidy sang ‘You And I’ it brought real depth to such a beautiful love story, they took my breath away.

Alexandra Burke was very good as Svetlana. You could feel the emotion when she sang ‘He’s A Man, He’s A Child’. When Alexandra and Cassidy sang ‘I Know Him So Well’, the rendition was just absolutely beautiful, strong and powerful.

Tim Howar as Freddie was someone who I knew nothing about, but he really left his mark, especially with ‘One Night In Bangkok’ and ‘Pity The Child’.

Cedric Neal as The Arbiter made me want to get out of my seat and dance along, and as for the fabulous Phillip Browne as Molokov – wow, that voice of his!

To be fair, the whole of the ensemble cast were fantastic, the orchestra were out of this world and the whole show is worthy of a five star rating.



I have made such wonderful memories seeing it with my Mum Zalihe, my daughter Zalihe and my wonderful friends Anne Smith, Angie Taylor, Lesley Smith, Janice Lakey, Janice Lazarus and Gill Tee. I also saw a lot of other friends plus I made some new ones, which is one of the things that makes the Fan Club such a great place – it helped make my *Chess* adventure unforgettable!

STAGE DOOR SHOTS

While Michael spent five weeks appearing in *Chess*, many fans waiting by the stage door in order to say hello, get an item signed or get a photograph. Here's a selection of some of the lucky fans for whom patience paid off!



Picture by Sissel Nyman



Clare Lewis



Joan Riddle



Mandie Lee



Sue Ashton



Shona Hartnett



Sue Gellett and Pat Collier



Sharon Fellows



Helen Grenville



Janice Lazarus



Photo by Janice Lazarus

WHERE I WANT TO BE:

London Coliseum, May 2018 by James Gaden. Photos: Brinkhoff/Mögenburg



When Michael announced he was going to be appearing in a new version of *Chess* for just five weeks in London, I made up my mind early to go, for a variety of reasons. The first was I had missed *Mack And Mabel* and hadn't seen him in a musical since he played *Sweeney Todd*. I prefer Michael as a touring/recording artist but there is no denying his brilliance when playing a role, so the second reason I was interested in *Chess* was because I already knew and liked a couple of songs from it, despite not being massively familiar with the whole works. The third reason was I wanted to say hello to Michael at the stage door. Contrary to popular belief, even though I've been in the Fan Club and producing *On The Ball* for thirteen years, I had actually only met Michael to talk to on one occasion, which was at the stage door for *Hairspray*. That was all the way back in 2007. Since then, my only other communication

with him was he said "hello mate!" once when leaving the Royal Albert Hall, winked at me at the last Fan Club Event (although my partner Sara insists he winked at her - I don't think so, toots) and waved at me from his bus on the last concert tour for 'If Everyone Was Listening.'

The other reason was I really needed a day off, because some of my clients are tyrants... particularly Maureen and Gill, who basically dumped this entire magazine in my lap and told me to get on with it so they could swan around enjoying themselves, as if they'd somehow earned it by running the Fan Club for twenty five years.

I asked Sara if she fancied going to see *Chess* but she wasn't sure, saying if it had been a concert she'd have happily come with me, but she was even less familiar with the show than I was

and she wasn't sure it would be her thing. I asked my business partner, also called Sarah (it makes things much easier for me) if she fancied it as she loves ABBA and I pointed out Benny and Bjorn has written the score, but she declined, muttering something about how she sees enough of Michael when we're packing up copies of *On The Ball* to send out. So I thought sod the pair of them, I'll go on my own then.

The advantage of going solo was I could see a matinee, meaning I could go to London there and back in the same day, avoiding the cost of staying over. It also meant Sara wasn't sat pining for me too long and I doubted my business would collapse if I left it alone for just one day. On top of that, I felt my chances of getting to say hello to Michael would be much greater if I could catch him prior to the matinee starting. I worked out what time to get there from

other fan's posts on Facebook, booked my trains and had it all worked out.

I set off from Hull to head to Doncaster where I would change trains, get to Kings Cross, hop on the Tube and be at the Coliseum in plenty of time to wait for Michael. I go to London quite a lot and knew just how to get there. Nothing could go wrong. Except for when I got off at Doncaster and find my connecting train is cancelled.

I was not best pleased (I don't want to spend any longer in Doncaster than I have to at the best of times) and discovered another train was on its way which I could catch, but the delay was eating into the buffer zone I'd allowed. I finally boarded the next connecting train and got to King's Cross about 45 minutes later than I intended.

I dashed to the London Underground, embracing the warm London tradition of barging past anybody in the way – women, children, the elderly, I didn't discriminate. I raced out of the station and made my way to the Coliseum and saw some fans gathered by the stage door. One of them was Sharon Fellows, who I have been Facebook friends with for a while but had never met in person. She recognised me, said hello and introduced me to Gosia Bartram, again somebody I'd befriended online but had never met in person. They told me Michael hadn't arrived yet and I was relieved. We had literally only been chatting for a minute or two when Michael's car pulled up, so I couldn't have cut it much finer!

He got out smiling and the fans started taking pictures with him and he signed some items. He saw me and said hello. I'm pretty sure he communicated with his eyes that he wished all the other people would go away so he could talk to me and tell me what a fab job I'm doing, but ever the professional, he declined to say anything out loud. I asked Sharon if she could take a picture on my phone. She duly obliged and Michael quickly moved to allow another fan a photo. I checked my phone and was gutted to see the image was blurred, I assume Michael moved too soon. Fortunately Gosia had saved the day because she had also taken a photo at the same time (presumably as a keepsake to remind her of the day she first met me, which is understandable), so I was relieved and most grateful when she sent it to me!

While all this was going on, a small Chinese lady appeared and stood next to me, rattling off what must have been twelve photos of Michael as he was signing stuff. She then tugged at my sleeve and asked me who he was. I stared at her and said



"It's Michael Ball. He's the star of this show." She smiled at me, took another picture of Michael and asked "What show?" I can only imagine her showing the photos to her family and friends - "Here's a guy I don't know that's in a show I've never heard of. But all these other people like him, so I took loads of pictures." Madness!

Sharon gave Michael the cushions she had brought as a present for him (which you can

read about elsewhere in this issue) and he did a couple more pictures, then went in. I thanked the ladies for the photos and dashed off to do a couple of errands while I was in London, then headed back to see what the show was like.

I took my seat and the neon chess squares that made up the backdrop didn't look that exciting and from my vantage point, the chess board at the front looked a long way away. However, those

squares actually hid large video screens which acted as backdrops and provided close ups, depending on the scene being portrayed. The true scale of the production was only just coming to light.

With my limited knowledge of the score, I was captivated as to how the music could segue from an ensemble song like 'Merano' into a Pop Rock number like 'What A Scene, What A Joy!' with ease. I was hugely impressed



with Tim Howar, who was absolutely brilliant as the arrogant, brash American champion Freddie Trumper. He and Michael were polar opposites in this show, with Michael portraying Anatoly as a stoic, rather dour Russian. The scenes where Freddie and Anatoly play chess were full of tension and the video screens came into their own, so you could clearly see the expressions on Anatoly and Freddie's faces. It was unusual to see Michael in a role that needed him to downplay his natural charisma and stage presence in order to properly counteract Tim Howar's more flamboyant character, but as usual Michael nailed it – and there was no denying who owned the stage when he delivered the show stopping 'Anthem' to close the first act.



drop out, because I'm a big fan of his. However, his replacement, Cedric Neal, did a great job as The Arbiter - not that I doubted him, because I saw him in *Motown The Musical* at Christmas and he was amazing. The second cause for complaint was that I only got to see such a spectacular production once!

When I got back I told Sara how good it was and how close I came to missing Michael. She said it was a good job she didn't go with me, considering the week prior she'd broken her ankle and would have been hobbling along. I thought it was sweet that she thought I would have walked at her pace or waited for her.

The second half was even better, opening with 'Golden Bangkok/One Night In Bangkok' which was truly spectacular with dancers, pyrotechnics and acrobatics. Between that, the popular ballad 'I Know Him So Well' which Cassidy Janson and Alexandra Burke (both of whom were excellent) absolutely owned, the thumping rock of 'The Deal', the more typical emotional musical theatre fare of 'You And I' and the incredible powerhouse number 'Pity The Child', this show took a big chunk

of my eclectic musical taste and wove it all into one cohesive production.

The audience were on their feet several times throughout the show and the ovation at the end laughed in the face of some of the rather bizarre bad reviews it had received. I loved it and only had two possible causes for complaint. The first was the fact that Murray Head, from the original cast recording, had to

I put the photo Gosia took on Facebook and said what a great day I'd had, and one of my friends who doesn't follow Michael or musicals at all messaged me and said "You went all the way to London just to play chess?" I said "No. I went all the way to London to watch two other people play chess, in the eighties." She thought I had gone mad.

It's a shame we didn't get a cast recording of the show, but I made do with grabbing a copy of the original album on my way back, which wasn't a bad replacement - although nobody sings 'Anthem' like Michael!



MICHAEL ON OUR DOORSTEP

by Gillian Squires

I remember the first time I met Michael – November 2004 in Birmingham HMV, along with my two shy babies then aged 2 and 4... waiting in the freezing cold for two hours to meet my celebrity crush! It was worth it.... despite being ridiculed by colleagues seeing me queuing on their way to court! (And handing me some money to buy an extra CD for them I may add!)

I remember having a conversation at that time about the village where I live in rural Warwickshire, and Michael telling me about his parents having lived there. I of course knew this, but sadly it was before my time.

Never did I imagine then that I would be attending a concert to see Michael within walking distance of my home! Ragley Hall! I'd dreamt about Michael performing here on many occasions, having attended many of Michael's outdoor concerts and having travelled many miles for the totally awesome experience. I just couldn't believe it when Il Divo announced it, no way I could miss the opportunity... despite it not being a full concert and not being keen on the 'main' group. But I was throughly thrilled!

He didn't disappoint! Looking blummin' edible in a cream (what looked like) linen waistcoat and jacket, he sang his heart out with many of us dancing and singing along with a bevvie in hand. He was on top form, funny and gorgeous as ever.

My chuckle sister and I (AKA Michael's Gravy Girls) ventured to the back of the stage once Michael had finished in the hope that we might have a chance to say hi. The security guard was bemused at our confessions of being sad stalker types and humoured us that he would be driving off soon and we hoped he would stop to chat. Yeah, right?!

So a suspiciously likely car drove towards us from the stage area and as it drew nearer I could see Andrew sat in the front passenger seat... we waved our little hands off... but the driver slowly drove on... Git! Ha!

Watching with bemusement the brake lights came on and then the reversing lights... and the back window slowly wound down. "That fooled ya!" came a familiar voice from inside! I can't print what I called him, but I was so happy that he'd stopped. Michael never disappoints his fans... he's so blummin' good to us! Michael kindly agreed to have a photo in front of the stunning Ragley Hall that Nicky and I know so well – and pinching ourselves that we were there with him! "Still catching criminals?" he said to me. No... I'm about to move to a job in London for six months so watch out! It never ceases to amaze me how he remembers his fans...

We chatted about my receiving an MBE in the Queens Birthday Honours – Michael high-fived me and retorted "Not as good as an OBE!" Hilarious! Gotta love him! I was delighted to be able to chat

to him about my work passion, Female Genital Mutilation, and the reason for my award. What a true gent, that's what our Michael is... and it was all topped off with a kiss to boot! I'm still on cloud nine – and still being teased by my colleagues about Michael needing a restraining order! That's quite ironic considering we work in safeguarding!

Here's hoping that we haven't scared Michael off returning to Ragley in sunny Warwickshire soon – we promise you a bevvie in the Bulls Head and a dip in my hot tub Michael!



MICHAEL BALL ROCKS READING!

Words and pictures by Mark Wittchell

On Saturday 7th July I had an unexpected trip to see Michael at Englefield House, Reading during the 'Summer House Sounds' concert series. Michael only agreed to take part during his time in *Chess* in May when he was approached by multi-national classical crossover vocal group Il Divo to appear as a 'Special Guest' at a select number of dates on their 'Timeless Castle and Country' Open Air Summer Concert Tour during July. As Michael had a free spot in his schedule he agreed to perform at Euston Hall Thetford (5th), Englefield House, Reading (7th), Ragley Hall, Warwickshire (14th), Alnwick Castle, Northumberland (15th), Stansted Park, West Sussex (17th) and Belvoir Castle, Grantham (20th July).



Michael had worked with Il Divo twice before, both in 2013. They recorded a duet of 'Love Changes Everything' from *Aspects of Love* which featured on Michael's 2013 CD 'Both Sides Now' and Il Divo's 2013 CD 'A Musical Affair'. They then performed the duet of 'Love Changes Everything' during an ITV Special Tribute show to Andrew Lloyd Webber during Easter 2013. As Michael was 'Special Guest' he wouldn't be duetting with Il Divo on this Summer tour, but have his own 45 minute solo concert set.

Englefield House is a truly beautiful Elizabethan country house with surrounding estate in the lovely county of Berkshire. The temperature was soaring as England continued to bask in its recent heatwave. I think Michael and the orchestra were sweltering on stage in the heat!

The evening began at 6.30pm when we were treated to about half an hour from the support act Bring It North - four talented youngsters who were semi-finalists on this years *Britain's Got Talent*. There was then a short break and around 7.10pm the orchestra, accompanied by Michael's Musical Director Callum McLeod, walked on to stage. As the beats of the orchestra started, Michael was introduced and bounded on to the stage with his 1995 hit

'Something Inside So Strong' made famous by Labi Siffre.

Earlier in the evening England has just beaten Sweden 2-0 to progress to the World Cup Semi Finals. Michael then said "The next song is a song I would love you to join in with. Hopefully the boys will be able to hear you all the way over in Moscow". He then sang 'You're The Voice' from his and Alfie Boe's second platinum selling album 'Together Again'. The song was originally recorded by Australian John Farnham and it was strange hearing it sung solo instead of Michael and Alfie's usual duet but it was a rousing performance! Michael then said "I

think the people of Sweden will be saying these words from the next song when they wake up tomorrow". He then sang 'Tell Me It's Not True' from Willy Russell's hit musical *Blood Brothers*.

Michael then sang 'He Lives In You' from *The Lion King 2: Simba's Pride*. It was an incredible performance and again it was a treat to hear Michael singing this solo. We were also lucky to have Alfie Boe's drummer John Tonks with us for his solo section during this song. Michael then said "On a beautiful evening such as this and with the success in the football, this next song is perfect to sing." Michael then sang 'Anthem' from *Chess* which had an even greater resonance after his stunning performance as Anatoly in the London Coliseum Revival of the musical earlier this year.

The orchestra then played the overture to *Jesus Christ Superstar* before Michael sang a powerful rendition of 'Gethsemane'. I will never get tired of hearing Michael sing this song. Michael then paid tribute to *Les Misérables* by singing 'Empty Chairs At Empty Tables' and then 'Stars'. It was nearly the end of Michael's set but not before everybody joined in to sing 'Love Changes Everything' from *Aspects Of Love*.

Michael Ball Summer House Sounds July 2018 Concert Set List

Something Inside So Strong
You're The Voice
Tell Me It's Not True
He Lives In You
Anthem
Gethsemane
Empty Chairs At Empty Tables
Stars
Love Changes Everything
The Wonder Of You



Michael said he had time for one more and finished with a song from the King – Mr Elvis Presley! ‘The Wonder of You’ followed before Michael left the stage to a well deserved standing ovation!

I must mention the photo I have included where Michael and Callum are laughing. During the line ‘Your kiss to me is worth a fortune’ from ‘The Wonder of You’ where Michael usually kisses somebody’s hand,

he pretended to stroke Callum’s arm which was hilarious when Callum was still trying to conduct the orchestra! A great way to end Michael’s set! There was then a short interval before Il Divo came on stage for their ‘Timeless’ Concert. They were good but Michael definitely was the star of the evening and I think he has converted some Il Divo fans into wanting to see Michael in concert now! A great evening in the summer sunshine!

ALNWICK CASTLE

These pictures of the performance at Alnwick were sent in by Claire Stockil.



WIN BALL & BOE!



As reported on pages 12-13, the wonderful www.snapajack.com produced the giant congratulations cards for Michael and Alfie’s Classical Brit wins.

Their sister company www.celebrity-cutouts.co.uk also offer lifesize figures and two of the stars they provide are Ball and Boe!

They sent a complimentary cutout of each one to James and as you can see from the photo of him stood with them earlier, they are indeed life sized and very impressive. They usually retail for **£34.49 each** but the Fan Club are running a raffle for a lucky fan to own the pair.

All you have to do is go to www.mbfanclub.co.uk and make a donation to the Fan Club (or post a cheque to Maureen and Gill). For every £1 donated you will receive an entry into the draw. At the end of August, Maureen and Gill will draw a name and James will dispatch them to the winner via courier. (Frankly you’ll be doing him a favour because having both of them staring at him all day long can be a tad unnerving and his office ain’t big enough for the three of them.)

Second prize is an full colour A3 print, encased in a matt black wooden frame, depicting Michael with key elements from his career, both in the theatre and as a recording artist.

Good luck!

HELPING PAT REALISE HER AMBITION

This lovely story concerns Pat Moores, an 86 year old resident at the Bupa Elmstead Care Home in Chislehurst. A huge fan of Michael since his early years, Pat had seen him in action several times but never had the chance to meet him. Sally-Anne Taylor, Administrator at the home, wanted to do something about that, and this is her account of what unfolded...



Pat and Michael, with Pat's daughter Allison (left) and Sally-Anne (right)

Pat has been a fan for a long, long time since seeing Michael in *Les Misérables* in 1985. We try to make our residents wishes and dreams a reality and Pat's was to meet Michael Ball.

I scoured the internet during evenings and weekends in search of a means of contacting him and after several attempts with different emails I found for agents, etc and to the BBC radio show I finally had a response from the lovely and very kind Andrew Ross, Michael's PA. We talked via email and then he gave me his number to correspond via WhatsApp.

I asked if Michael could find the generosity of heart to meet Pat. Unfortunately at that time Michael was very busy with rehearsals for *Chess* and asked if a video message would be good enough.

Obviously I jumped at this and then very cheekily asked

for a signed photo or CD and Michael very kindly obliged. Once I received the video message and gift, a few of us went to Pat's room with her daughter Allison. I sat down with her and briefly explained about her wish and what I had for her, then we videoed Pat watching her personal message from Michael.

As Michael was appearing in the West End in *Chess*, Allison decided to book tickets and take Pat to the show. At the risk of pushing my luck, this prompted me to get onto Andrew again and this time I explained that Pat and Allison would be coming to the show in the hope of securing a meet for Pat with Michael. Andrew was, again, incredibly helpful and with a few messages back and forth it was set.

Allison asked me to join them as she felt that I should be there to see Pat's reaction meeting Michael, so I bought

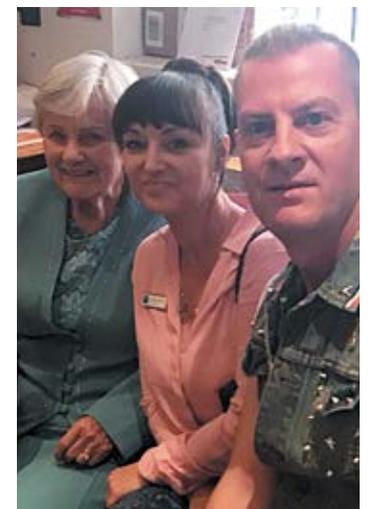
myself a ticket (unfortunately not seated together, but only 2 rows apart), booked an afternoon of leave from work and we all went along.

As soon as the show ended, Andrew called me and directed us on where to go to reach the stage door. Michael greeted us all, gave Pat a kiss, took her arm, walked her to a seat, presented her with a red rose and sat chatting with her, whilst having photographs taken.

Pat also met Alexandra Burke, who she recognised

from *Strictly Come Dancing* and Tim Howar of 'Mike & The Mechanics'. All in all we got to spend around an hour with them.

It was the most wonderful, heart warming experience to be a part of it all and watching Pat like a giggly teenager at times was just great!



Pat with Alexandra Burke, receiving a kiss and a rose from Michael, meeting Tim Howar and pictured with Sally-Anne and Andrew who set everything up

PENPALS



LILA LINDEMANN

Long term Fan Club member Lila Lindemann was visited recently by friends, who took this lovely photo of her. Lila would frequently travel from the States to the UK to watch Michael perform in concert. She is still as Michael-mad as ever, and would love to hear from any fellow fans who might like to get in touch with her.

Lila Lindemann
c/o Island View Family Care
715 Route 213
Rosendale, NY 12472
Phone: 845-332-9997

LINDA STROUDE

Linda Stroude would like to hear from any lady who she could go to Michael's concerts with. Her email address is lindastroude1997@gmail.com and she lives at 97 Five Acres, London Colney, St Albans, Herts AL12 1HY.

SARAH FROM STAFFORDSHIRE

Sarah from Staffordshire is looking for ladies or gents to talk about Michael and other subjects. If you would like to email her, she can be reached at: tinypop37@gmail.com

PAT ALEXANDER

Pat is looking for people, ideally in the Kent area, who will write or email her to talk anything Michael related. She is located at 27 Beach Court Park, Faversham Road, Whitstable, Kent CT5 4FE. Her email is alexanderpatricia20@yahoo.com

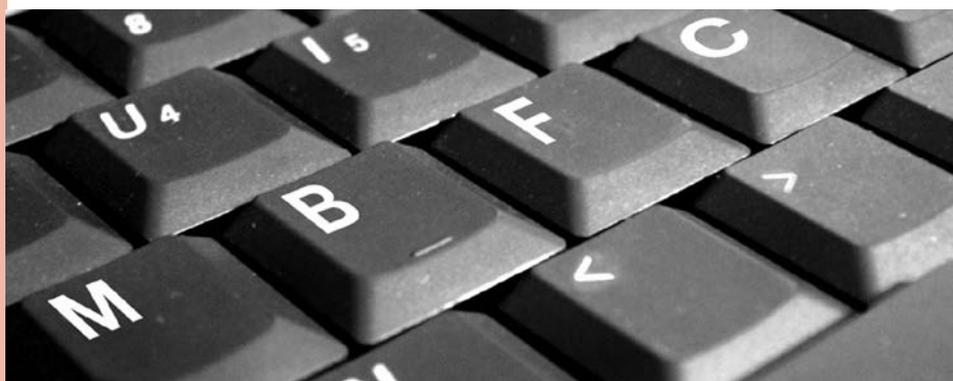
If you want to be featured here for like minded fans to contact you via email or post, then please send in your details to james@halo-graphic.com and they will be printed in the next issue of On The Ball.

THE MICHAEL BALL FAN CLUB ONLINE

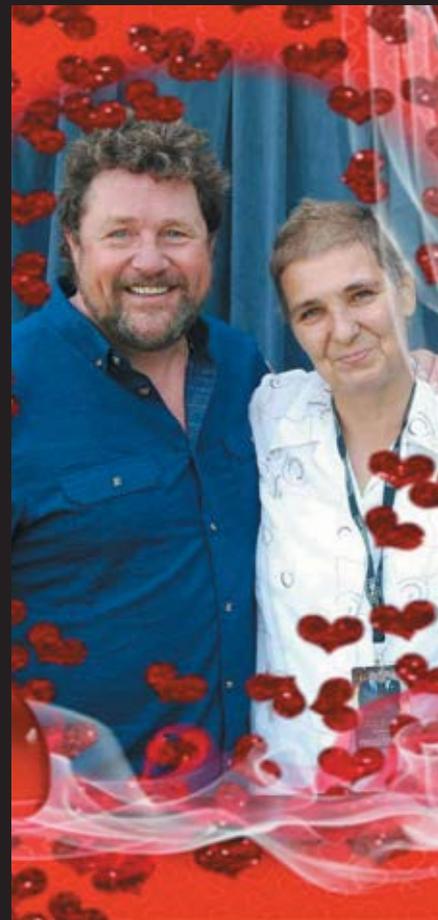
www.mbfanclub.co.uk

The Michael Ball Fan Club is now completely free to join – simply visit the website address above and register your email address and you will receive notifications every time there is some Michael Ball news to report. There is also a members area where you can download past issues of On The Ball and access Michael's past Infoline messages.

The password to access it is: **MBFC25**



IN MEMORY OF KAREN JENNINGS



The Fan Club are sad to report that Karen Jennings, a long term fan of Michael, passed away after her battle with cancer. Her daughter Helen states that Karen discovered Michael and his music around twelve years ago and attended many of the concerts over the years, including meet and greets.

Her niece Kelly said Karen made many friends via the Fan Club and her love of Michael, and several of those friendships provided great support to her during her period of illness, offering her comfort and hope.

After Karen passed away, Kelly joined the Fan Club herself as a way to feel closer to her Auntie, and said she found posts that made her smile and helped her and the family remember Karen's fighting spirit. The family also appreciated the fact Michael spoke about Karen on his radio show when he heard the news.

