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Lee A. Genesis' joy in what he does is infectious.

Lee Genesis makes the mundane magical

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The air was charged even before Lee Genesis took the stage. "This guy is a serious performer,"

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gushed one patron, spreading the word like a press agent on hyperdrive. A television camera crew discreetly set up shop at the corner of the bar. Backup musicians mingled importantly, comparing notes over and over again in nervous anticipation. Even the pre-show chatter was a beat above the usual, as if the audience knew it was in for something special.

Indeed. Boston favorite Lee Genesis was back on his home turf, and his followers were in evidence.

Genesis was a Hub mainstay in the '70s, when he sang with pop/R&B groups, fronted the band Heat and appeared with jazz musicians George Russell and Jaki Byard. While searching for his niche, he dabbled in disco, house music and musical theater, finally settling for a comfortable mix of cabaret and soul. He has lived in New York since 1978, but considers each trip back to Boston a homecoming.

And so it was with Thursday's opening at Scullers. From the time Genesis leapt to stage center, crooning "Blues in the City" - a song designed to showcase his vocal bag of tricks - the crowd nestled neatly in the palm of his hand. After he engaged in a playful dialogue with each of the instruments in his quintet, busting a perfectly good microphone in the process, Genesis moved into a gritty rendition of "Man in the Mirror" that could teach Michael Jackson a few things about soul.

The singer, a product of strict religious upbringing, has fortunately retained the best of that past. Strong gospel inflections define his style, and that - combined with a gleeful musical abandon that Genesis has no reason, or desire, to control - turn overworked classics such as "Since I Fell for You" into entirely new experiences. Once the singer stamped his signature on that song, helped by spirited backup from saxophonist George King and guitarist Andre Carriere, it was hard to remember that the song has always been a rather languid affair.

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LEE GENESIS

At: Scullers last night (shows tonight, Saturday and Monday)

Genesis is a master of turning the mundane into the magical. He filled Scullers tiny stage, flailing his arms and kicking up his heels, taking Al Green's "Love and Happiness" - a song I once believed no one but Al could touch - and twisting it to meet his specifications. A long bridge in the song was yet another occasion for Genesis to stretch his vocal chords and set forth his uplifting message with a series of soulful squeals.

"The only reason I'm not rolling around on this floor is because I don't want you to think I'm that crazy on the first night," the singer admitted, but his exuberance was thinly veiled at best. By the time his Scullers stint ends on New Year's Eve (there's a show that should set off a few fireworks), he may be doing his entire set in the horizontal position.

To say that the wiry, energetic Genesis leaves one wanting more is an understatement. His joy in what he does is infectious and, for my money, anyone with the chutzpah to do Robert Cray's "Smoking Gun," "Stormy Monday" and "Put It Where You Want It" in the same set just isn't subject to the same limitations as the rest of us.

Lee's back, and Boston's got him. Basking in his rhythmic heat is the perfect way to welcome in the uncertainty we call 1991.