

# ‘Why I can’t think of myself as either male... or female’

One in 500,000 babies cannot be clearly labelled male or female at birth. Lisa Lee Dark, 28, was one of them. Here, the opera singer from Swansea, explains what happened next...

**W**rapped in a blue blanket, I can imagine the midwife handing me to my parents, telling them “You have a little boy!”. They named me Lee but, amazing though it sounds, at the age of 19 I discovered the truth – that I was actually a girl.

How did it happen? I can only guess. I was my parents’ Roy and Cathy Dark’s, second child, but I didn’t resemble their first – my sister Tracey, who’s five years older. I was born with an enlarged clitoris and the no-doubt-

busy midwife mistook my genitals for a penis. Mum and Dad didn’t doubt my maleness, or question the midwife’s opinion, and as the years passed, somehow I just slipped through the net.

It didn’t help that Mum wasn’t well, and my father was always at work – he had a day job with British Steel in Port Talbot, and by night he drove a taxi – so I didn’t get as much attention as some children might have done. Then, when I was eight, my Auntie Frances

died, and we adopted her baby, Hayley, and I spent a lot of time looking after her. As a shy child, and a loner, this was a way of escaping my uncomfortable time at school. I refused to play rugby or football, and had only a few friends, all girls.

Because of my unusual home life, I didn’t have time to dwell on the fact that I was different from other boys. I knew I preferred the company of girls, and was unusual in sitting down to use the loo (I never used the toilets at school). But, having been raised as a boy, it didn’t occur to me – until I hit puberty – that maybe I wasn’t one.

Then, at 14, and enduring the torture of the roughest local all-boys school, where my peers spat at me for being effeminate, I started developing breasts. The other boys had already nicknamed me Lisa, and I was relieved when my burgeoning bust became hidden by a layer of fat. If

anyone had noticed, the bullying would have been unbearable.

I had my first period too and, looking back, I’m amazed that I didn’t feel scared. All I can imagine is that by then I knew I wasn’t a normal boy, so nothing came as a surprise.

My school attendance dwindled to just 50 per cent, and I left at 15 without any qualifications. My only escape was through music. I loved to sing and after a record producer spotted me singing a Kylie song alone on a swing in the park, he saw my potential and offered me the chance to sing on pop compilation records.

With the money I made, I paid to see a private specialist. I’d never had the courage

to see my local GP, and was shocked when this specialist told me I had a rare hermaphroditic condition that meant I would be dead at 25. Now, I know he was a charlatan, but when he persuaded me to take hormones to be more male, I accepted what he said and started paying out for the drugs he sent me.

Over the next few years

I put on seven stone, and hid any sign of my femininity. My periods stopped, my facial hair grew so much I started shaving. I never questioned what was happening. To anyone who saw me, I was a boy. But when I started training as a hairdresser, the girls I worked with commented how like them I was. Although I looked male, they said I had a female personality. I wasn’t camp, but I was more gentle than the average man. That made me start questioning things again, and I found another intersex specialist – a proper one this time – who ran tests and explained

**‘Then at 14, enduring the torture of the roughest local all-boys school, I started to develop a bust’**



ABOVE: Lisa Lee as ‘Lee’ at six – before the horrific bullying he endured in his teens





Today, Lisa Lee finds her sense of self through her music



RIGHT: Lisa Lee, four, with her sister Tracey, nine  
BELOW: At two, with Tracey and their parents  
BOTTOM: With a typical boys' Christmas gift, at age seven



that I wasn't a hermaphrodite, and I wasn't destined to die young. (Although, if I continued on the drugs the other doctor had been despatching me every month, there was a good chance they could kill me.) The condition I had was rare – Congenital Adrenal Hyperplasia (CAH), which meant I was a girl, with a womb and all other female internal organs. But, because of my enlarged penis-like clitoris, a feature of CAH, I'd been mistaken for a boy.

This was a lot to take on board. I gave up the hormonal drugs as I didn't want to make myself unnecessarily masculine. But, at the same time, I didn't feel female either. I found it impossible to think of myself any differently to the way I'd thought of myself all my life – as neither male, nor female, just me. The drugs can take years to leave your system, so I still have facial hair, but this will correct itself in time. As I stopped taking the medication, my moods improved and I had much more energy.

And then there was the other question: how would I tell my family? The method I chose may seem cruel, but it seemed the only way. My music career blossoming, I'd recently recorded a solo album of dance music. The local newspaper was interested – and, when they interviewed me about it, I took a deep breath and told them what I'd just discovered about my gender. When the paper came out I showed my parents and waited for

**'I was a girl, with a womb and all other female internal organs. But I'd been mistaken for a boy'**

a reaction – but they barely uttered a word, and the subject was never discussed again.

Apart from stopping the hormones, I continued as I was; not trying to be one sex or the other, and just trying to adapt to what had happened to me. One thing changed though. I called myself Lisa Lee – neither Lisa, nor Lee, but both.

I continued singing – it was a release from the emotional turmoil that had engulfed me – and somehow one of my CDs found its way to a small Italian opera company. When I was 23, I was contacted to see if I'd work with the company. I was trained to sing properly, and discovered my voice had a range which went from feminine soprano down to baritone. When I was 26, I performed the lead role in its production of *Madame Butterfly*, which toured around Britain. Still overweight and masculine looking, I was no classic Butterfly, but everyone loved my voice, and the praise I received did wonders for my confidence.

Two years on, my career with the opera company is blooming. I've started losing weight – but I still have five stone to shift. I sometimes wonder if I'm being deliberately slow in losing it, because I know that becoming slim and losing my facial hair will make me look more female. I don't take any

female hormones to speed up the process because I would rather develop at a slower pace, and give myself time to get used to things. I'm not sure I'm ready just yet to face the world as a woman.

The truth is that I have 'degendered' myself, making myself neither one sex nor the other. I could have corrective surgery to repair my genitals, but I have put this off too.

Choosing to be all woman, although medically that is what I am, will mean a whole host of other decisions. It will lead me into a world of personal relationships and even the potential to become a mother one day. Although I've never dated or had a relationship, I'm attracted to men, and I'm now starting to think it would be nice to meet someone.

Spending the first two-thirds of my life as a boy, and having the truth thrust upon me, has been hard. But it's taught me that whatever labels other people want to attach to us, none of us should ever feel pressured to conform. What matters is that we feel comfortable in our own skin – and that we are as accepted as individuals first, and men or women second.' □

**Lisa Lee Dark's new EP, *Almost Nothing*, is currently available free with her solo album, *Solo Perduta Abandonata* (£14.99), available from good music shops.**

## What is CAH?

**Congenital Adrenal Hyperplasia is a condition of the adrenal glands, affecting the balance of hormones these glands produce. In Lisa Lee's case, an excess of male hormones caused her to be born with an enlarged clitoris and fused labia, resembling male genitalia. For more information, go to [www.livingwithcah.com](http://www.livingwithcah.com).**