

# Bill Lee — an author before his time

by Mark Spector

Bill Lee is never at a loss for words. Over 13 Major League seasons with the Boston Red Sox and the Montreal Expos that became somewhat of a trademark for the left handed pitcher who was nicknamed The Spaceman.

A scrappy competitor, Lee is not the type of person that will never admit defeat. Never, that is, unless approached with the topic of a return to the Big Leagues.

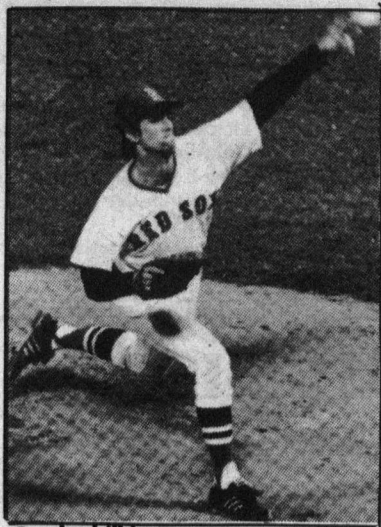
Lee will be at the SUB Theatre Thursday night promoting his book which is appropriately titled *The Wrong Stuff* (Viking Press).

A reporters dream, the native of the San Fernando Valley answers every question exactly the same way — with his most honest opinion.

But ultimately the interview must broach the subject of a comeback. And it is then that the lively, noticeably American voice on the other end of the line becomes slightly less enthusiastic.

Asked if he could ever see himself appearing at the Triple A level, a la ex-teammate Steve Rogers, his answer was simple: "Well, there's no one who will let me.

"I tried a year and a half ago with the Giant organization," says Lee, unravelling a tale that sounds practiced only because of the number of



On the hill in Fenway.

times that he has told it.

"I threw ten scoreless innings against Triple A competition, I had the most endurance, I was well liked by the Minor League organization (Phoenix). But a guy named Bill Haller wouldn't give me a chance to get my foot in the door. He forced the owner to release me from Triple A.

"It was just an all around bad situation because, and I found out later, that Expo GM John McHale and Haller got together..." And thus the blackball.

Always outspoken, sometimes

outstanding, Bill Lee, it was decided, wasn't going to be allowed to play anymore. And as the only game in town, Major League Baseball can do that.

And so he has retreated to New Brunswick, where he fishes for brown trout and keeps in shape for a less than noteworthy group of fellows called the Moncton Mets.

And although a dream may now be dead, Bill Lee, the character, lives and thrives on controversy and self-righteousness, as he always did.

In Boston, Lee admitted to sprinkling marijuana on his pancakes because, he said, it made him impervious to bus fumes while jogging.

In Montreal, incensed at the treatment of good friend and second baseman Rodney Scott, Lee left the ballpark before the game, requesting that manager Jim Fanning rendezvous with him at a local club "... because I'm going to clean your clock."

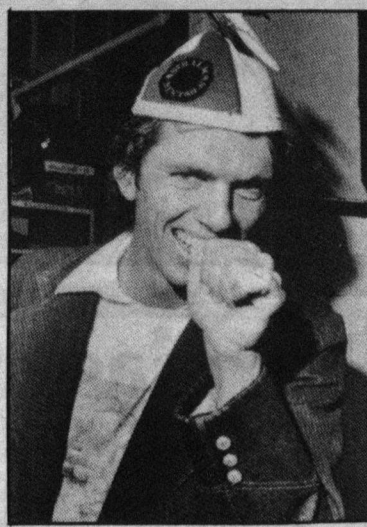
Now in Moncton, Lee continues to speak his mind, spilling his guts on anything you might care to chat about.

On Fanning's quote that drugs cost him a National League pennant and a shot at the World Series — "Jim Fanning bringing in Rogers to face an old left handed sinkerball hittin' outfielder named (Rick) Monday is what cost us a pennant.

"He's a scapegoat (Fanning). Hell. There was a guy named Lincoln and he had a bunch of generals and they complained that one of them was an alcoholic. He said 'Which one?' And they told him it was that Ulysses S. Grant fella.

"He said 'Well, find out what he's drinking and give a case to the other generals.'"

On baseball's drug fiasco at the court house in Pittsburgh last summer — "Well, they hurt a lot of



Bill Lee. In saner times?

people and a lot of people got off scot-free, and it was a shame that it had to boil down to that. But heck, that's the nature of life. The drug dealers are going to look for people with a lot of money, and ball players have a lot of money and a lot of free time, so they're gonna be susceptible to getting caught.

"You've just got to learn that you have to have other things in your life other than drugs. You have to love something more."

On any changes that he would make if he were to publish *The Wrong Stuff* today — "The first

thing I'd do is shoot Richard Lally so he wouldn't be in there as co-author. I'd have done it myself. I wouldn't have had a publisher put all those restrictions on my language and everything else. It would have been totally different."


"What would have been nice is the fact that I could have still been playing, you know. 'Cause I would have (short pause) won a lot of ballgames in these last six years that I haven't played."

His voice hits that low again here. If only for a moment, Bill Lee's response is hesitant, wistful.

He quickly regains his train of thought, going on to say that he's enjoyed a chance to give something back to the grand old game. Although genuine, this statement doesn't seem to sound right coming from The Spaceman. Too many other mouths have spoken the same words. Uncharacteristically, Bill Lee is not original.

Talking with him, he sounds like an unfulfilled man. The author of a great career, who is now writing books before his time.

Talking with him, you get the feeling that he would now trade all of those times when he was playing hardball in the press, for just one more chance to play hardball for real.



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