

They called her The Body

She was built like a double order of pancakes — sweet and stacked. The only light in the room bathed her as she emerged from a thick velvet curtain, incandescent, platinum hair piled high on her head. As the band struck up a slow, seductive wail, her intricately beaded gown glimmered with each step. By the end of the tune, the dress was gone, and she wore little more than heels, a few strategically placed rhinestones, and a smile.

Her playground was Paradise Valley, the now long-demolished entertainment district on Detroit's old Lower East Side, and her signature shimmy held sway in that earthy realm. She rubbed elbows with Louis Armstrong and Aretha Franklin, she dined with Dinah Washington and strutted alongside Billie Holiday. When she and her Harlem Globetrotter husband Goose Tatum lived in a villa in Cuba, she was chummy with Fidel Castro. And one notorious racketeer in Indianapolis was so taken with her legendary proportions that he built an entire club just for her, naming it the Pink Poodle. Many times she was issued proclamations by City Council, noting her significant contributions to Detroit's thriving entertainment culture.

Lottie The Body was — is — the Motor City's most famous exotic dancer, an ecdysiast for the people. Almost 40 years later, she hasn't lost an ounce of charm — and a whole new generation of burlesque neophytes could learn a thing or two from her.

Burlesque is back — this is the headline you've probably read in every publication from Podunk Weekly to *The New York Times*. Within the past five years, the new burlesque movement has exploded across the country, with young women picking up boas in droves in an attempt to re-create the classic stripteases of yesteryear, often with a modern twist.

As the popularity of the movement careens toward a critical saturation, attention is now turning toward the past as well as the present, with the burlesque stars of yesteryear finding themselves in the limelight once again.

Recently, HBO aired the documentary *Pretty Things*, in which filmmaker Liz Goldwyn tracked down and interviewed such burlesque legends as the sharp-tongued firecracker Zorita and the legendary Sherry Britton. Exotic World — the world's only burlesque museum, located in the middle of the Mojave Desert — has grown from a relatively obscure roadside attraction to one that grabs national headlines with its annual Miss Exotic World burlesque pageant (see sidebar). The museum is dedicated to reuniting the living legends of burlesque, and functions as an emotional and vital liaison between the new performers of today and the tassel-twirling starlets of decades past.

It's a strange and moving phenomenon; many of these legends have been forgotten by society, cast aside as their youthful beauty faded. Their days of fame, glitter and Champagne are long gone, preserved in a few grainy photos and perhaps a withered feather boa. Some of them are fondly reminiscent and a few are just plain bitter — after promoters and agents cashed in on their curves, leaving the performers themselves shortchanged.

Then there's the brand new generation of fresh-faced ingenues — frequently sporting numerous tattoos or rainbow-colored tresses — who are completely entranced by these women, hoisting them atop glitter-encrusted pedestals as their divine muses. But, sadly, as we creep forward in the new millennium, those aging muses continue to disappear, one by one.

Detroit is fortunate enough to have two living legends of burlesque still kicking. Here are their stories.

The Body

Lottie "The Body" Graves is one of the most colorful figures in the city's history. Known as Detroit's answer to Gypsy Rose Lee, Lottie's fabled, glittering past is interwoven in the rich fabric of the city's musical heritage and the musicians who built it.

Even today, Lottie hasn't lost a bit of her trademark charisma, bursting with joy and vivaciousness. Like a true showgirl, Lottie does not reveal her age; but anyone who saw her hoofin'

in the acclaimed documentary *Standing in the Shadows of Motown* knows she's still got it.

Opening the door to her condo near Lafayette Park, Lottie squeals "Hello, my boo boo!" and offers a warm hug. This, apparently, is her standard response for a first meeting.

Her gray and black hair is short and spiky. She wears a bright red tank top that says "SEXY" in big bold letters. The hallway is adorned with the framed proclamations, recognitions and honors Lottie's received from local organizations and city and state governments. A sepia-toned painting of a sultry Lottie in her heyday hangs next to photos of her family.

Born in Syracuse, N.Y., Lottie was schooled in Brooklyn and started her professional dancing career when she was only 17. Classically trained, she soon found herself traveling across the country. She says she landed in Detroit around 1960, first arriving at the legendary Twenty Grand nightclub on West Warren Avenue — one of the most popular nightspots at the time.

"I fell in love with Detroit," Lottie says. "It was such a warm place, so many beautiful places to go and see and do. The music was my number one love, though."

She performed with the best. As Lottie rattles off the list of musicians she co-starred with over the years, it sounds like a wing from the Hall of Fame: T-Bone Walker, B.B. King, Billie Holiday, Maurice Taylor, Solomon Burke; at places like the Flame Show Bar, the National Theater on Monroe Street, the Brass Rail on Adams, the Elmwood Casino in Windsor — all now reduced to flickering memories, decaying ghosts or weedy parking lots.

Back then, strippers preferred to call themselves "exotic dancers," a term that evoked an image of class and glamour. Burlesque generally referred to the vaudeville shows in theaters, which included comedians and chorus girls along with strippers — in other words, the package deal. There were also shake dancers, who shook but didn't strip.

But the Body? The Body was her own category.

"Lottie was a star in her own right," local historian Beatrice Buck recalls. "Some of them just took their clothes off, and Lottie was not that. Lottie was a dancer, and therein lies the difference."

Motown giant Martha Reeves, also Lottie's neighbor and friend, says, "She held her own. Lottie had skills that were superior to all of her competitors. She outdanced them all. She had body movements that only she could pull off, and very elaborate costumes. And I know she can still dance, and does a high kick that shows a lot of young ladies down."

Lottie's mastery of the tease led her to glamour, glitter and luxury. "Exotic dancing was classy," Lottie says. "It was the top of the shelf, the Champagne of dance, with some of the most gorgeous women in the world, like Tempest Storm."

"I met her in L.A. and we worked together. You made very good money, and you weren't looked down on. When you went into a hotel they brought in your luggage and there were flowers and Champagne in the room. They didn't look down on you as a prostitute because you didn't expose your body, you weren't giving yourself away. You were representing yourself as an artist — it was show business!

"I'd travel from club to club and star with big artists. I had a lot of beaded long gowns. All my undergarments had rhinestones that were made in Montreal. I had this rhinestone bra and G-string, and when I hit the stage it would just light up."

She gestures up toward imaginary stage lights, eyes twinkling.

"And on top of that was ostrich feathers — and feathers, and feathers, and feathers," Lottie says. "And then one costume was all white fox that would just wrap around me over and over."

But despite her star power, racism sometimes tarnished her charmed life, especially in white clubs. "It was never shown, but you could feel it," she says. "I ignored it. And you know, anywhere you go in the world, you're going to find it. So you overlooked it, because you're the one up on that stage and they're looking up at you, and if they don't like it they can leave."

One time when she was performing outside of Boston, another dancer's boyfriend refused to acknowledge that Lottie, a black dancer, was headlining the club. "So all the gangsters in Boston told him he could either accept it or pay them their money back," she says.

"I was in Madawaska, Maine, and I think I was just about the only black person they've ever seen. I was walking down the street and the little children would say, 'Mommy, look at the walking chocolate bar.'" Instead of bitterness, the moment triggers a flurry of infectious high-pitched laughter, as Lottie slaps her thigh.

The giggles continue as she recounts stripping bloopers. "Oh, my G-string popped. Yes, my bare hiney was out. And then there was the time my ponytail came off ..."

Inspired by all the reminiscing, Lottie disappears to dig through her closet. She returns with a billowing mass of ash-grey and white chiffon. It's a sheer overcoat with armholes that snap around the neck. She demonstrates how to wear it, slipping it over her shoulders and launching into an impromptu dance routine in her living room.

She spins and the gown blossoms into a giant swishy flower of movement. Lottie starts up her own accompaniment: "Da da, da da, ba dum dum da da!" She spins, she winks coquettishly, she shimmies her shoulder and flutters her pointed toes with the elegance and effortless poise of a professional.

When she removes the garment, she sternly points with a manicured finger as she lectures sweetly, "You never throw your stuff on the floor." Then she saunters off her makeshift stage, the filmy fabric clutched in one hand, trailing a wake of chiffon behind her.

Ellington's Ecdysiast

Toni Elling was born and bred in Detroit. At 18, she was selling flowers at the swanky Gotham Hotel, and later went to work for the phone company as an operator. But after nine years there, she says racism prevented her from being promoted. So, in 1960, she became a stripper — at the age of 32.

Toni Elling is her stage name; she asked that her real name not be used since she now works as an aide in an elementary school. She's not ashamed of her past — she's quite proud of it — but worries that others may not see it the same way, given the negative connotations some associate with stripping today.

The midsummer humidity is unbearable, and Toni's home on Detroit's West Side — the decor monochromatically cream and



MT photo: Cybelle Codish

IDs left: Clockwise: The National Theater in 1964; Toni; Lottie; Toni.
ID right: Lottie in front of the National Theater today.