



Above: Lottie today. Right: In one of her signature costumes.

white — is sweltering. Her collection of stuffed animals — she takes battered, abandoned ones from the street, cleans them up and gives them a home — are stationed in various corners of the room. Toni's gray curls are pulled into a neat bun, and dots of moisture bead her forehead. She excuses herself to get a cloth.

"I'm not perspiring, I am sweating," she announces with a regal tone and textbook perfect enunciation. "That's what I used to tell my audiences: This is not perspiration, it is *sweat* because I'm working hard."

She emerges from the kitchen with an armful of binders, and decades of memories spill out over the lacy tablecloth on her dining room table. She points to a grainy image of her svelte young figure, gracefully swirling across a stage in gossamer trails of white.

"There I am, at work," she says, as nonchalantly as if she'd been behind a desk or a service counter. "There I am in all my unclothed glory. ... Oh, that's me showing off my white mink. I *did* show off a bit sometimes. And that's how Mr. Ellington saw me, with my silver wig on."

Toni describes herself as Duke Ellington's protégé — her stage name obviously derived from his — and refers to him as "a great friend." She says Jackie Wilson helped her pick out her first "lobby," or publicity still. Then she unearths a photo of herself in the Elmwood Casino in Windsor, chatting it up with Sammy Davis Jr.

"Here I am with my friend Sammy. We were singing," she says, her voice sweet and thick with nostalgia. "He had Sundays off, so we went to go see Dinah Washington."

Toni's pathway into the world of striptease came in the form of her friend, a famously statuesque exotic dancer named Rita Revere. "She kept telling me, 'You can do this, you can do it,' and she told me how much money she made. But I was so bashful."

She got over her shyness. Once she began working, she left Detroit and made Los Angeles her home base, traveling across the country and into Canada. Echoing Lottie's sentiments, Toni stresses that dancers back then were treated with respect, like true entertainers.

Well, most of the time.

"Once a man grabbed my pastie, and he almost got *killed* because I was so upset. I was near the end of my act and he got up and reached up and snatched my pastie off! And I stood there and I patted my foot and I counted out loud to 10. You see, I was always known for my cool demeanor and my elegance, and I felt like calling him a bunch of you-know-whats. And, of course, I grabbed my bosom. And then he held it out and grinned. Oh, I felt like killing him!"

After leaving her traditional job because of prejudice, Toni still had to face it as a dancer. "I had a harder time than a lot of girls because of my blackness. It was very hard for a black stripper in those days. We weren't paid what other girls were paid, and we weren't allowed to work at certain clubs."

She recalls a time when her agent tried to get her a glitzy job in Las Vegas. "I told her I can't work in Vegas, they don't want black people in Vegas." Her agent persisted, so Toni went along with her to meet the manager of the club. He asked to speak privately with Toni's agent, who responded that anything he needed to say he could say in front of Toni. The manager insisted, and finally he and Toni's agent disappeared into an adjacent room. After a few minutes, voices began to escalate, and Toni

heard her infuriated agent scream, "Toni is *not* a nigger!"

"Oh, she threw a fit, and she told him I was the best act she had," Toni says of her agent. "She came storming out, and I just looked at her and said, 'I told you so.'"

Still, Toni persevered with dignity, and doors began to open for her, and other girls. "I was a class act, and I ended up working at places black girls didn't work at. They took a chance on me."

Toni has pulled her bag of costumes out of the attic, and digs into a well-worn blue garment bag. Her boas, 30-some years old, are molting; limp ostrich feathers spill onto the cream-colored carpet. She pulls out each costume and describes the act it was designed for; she attached all the rhinestones by hand on these gloves, you see, and she made these pasties herself, and did she tell you about the first time she learned how



to twirl them, causing her drummer to botch a beat when he first saw the spectacle? "I didn't know you could do that," he'd said. "Neither did I until just now," she responded.

She holds the sequined pasties against her chest, the tassels dangling over her pink button-up blouse, and laughs.

Go Go ... Gone

Go-go dancing ushered in the death of burlesque. As the '60s trickled into the '70s, the Rat Pack and big band gave way to disco, Studio 54-style indulgence and sex, drugs and rock 'n' roll. Pasties were replaced by the pole, and subtle tease was abandoned in favor of more explicit displays. Dancers had two choices: Conform to the new standards — or quit.

As attendance gradually declined, many burlesque theaters were turned into movie theaters, usually showcasing X-rated films. Once associated with a grandiose spectacle, burlesque theaters became seedy, disreputable places linked with crime and grit, and were often pressured to close by city government.

"I got out because what was being done wasn't to my liking: girls going all-nude, pole-dancing, contact with the customers; it was getting raunchy," Toni says. "I guess people's morals have changed."

Lottie the Body feels much the same. "There's no imagination, and they're giving it all away," she says of modern strip clubs. "When you had to go nude, I stopped. I couldn't deal. The owners would tell you, 'If you don't take it all off, it's over.' And I thought too much of myself."

After she quit dancing, Lottie worked as a receptionist for the city of Detroit for about a decade. At the same time, she

began to emcee jazz shows, her bubbly personality providing the perfect segue from her dancing past. Through rich connections in the jazz community, she was never hurting for appearances. Dr. Teddy Harris helped her land a regular gig at Bomacs, where she stayed throughout the '90s, and she also made appearances at Bert's Marketplace. She's retired today, and enjoys cooking, gardening and volunteering, helping out seniors at an assisted-living center.

As for Toni, she opened up her own boutique in Portland, Ore., selling boas, hosiery and pasties. She came back to Detroit after the death of her father, and soon after quit dancing for good, working odd jobs as a waitress, barmaid, switchboard operator and manicurist. "I adapt well," she says of the transition from glamorous stripper to waitress, "but I missed it. I still miss it to this day."

For a while, she even toyed with the idea of starting a class to teach girls how to strip in the classic fashion. But she couldn't find a venue; everyone she approached balked at the idea. Except one.

"You ever heard of a fella named John Sinclair?" she asks, honestly curious whether anyone might know who he is. "Well, he was a radical, you know, and, oh, he thought it would be a *hoot!*"

Over the static of his cell phone, Sinclair says, "Toni? Oh, yeah, Toni, Toni Elling! I haven't heard that name in a while. Yeah, she was named for Duke Ellington. She wanted to do something at the jazz center, I think. I remember her, because she was from the old-school [of stripping]. High-class, with the band ... not like they do now. Hey, give her my regards, will you?"

Sinclair can't remember why the class never happened, but Toni says it was because one of his partners thought the idea too scandalous.

Few memories of burlesque remain in Detroit. The Twenty Grand and the Brass Rail are long gone. The last operating burlesque theater, the National on Monroe Street, closed in 1975 and has remained shuttered ever since, quietly rotting away while frenzied development goes on just footsteps away in Campus Martius and Grand Circus Park.

Most of the great exotics, both here and nationally, are gone. All neophytes have to cling to is a handful of senior women with a few dog-eared snapshots, maybe a collection of withered costumes smelling of mothballs, and hours of stories.

When told of the new burlesque movement, Lottie is skeptical at first. But she squeals with delight when shown a copy of Michelle Baldwin's book *Burlesque and the New Bump and Grind*, a collection of today's prominent burlesque performers. Flipping through the pages, she points and gasps gleefully at photos of modern starlets like Dita Von Teese, Kitten DeVille and Dirty Martini, commenting on the authenticity of the costuming and the diversity of acts.

"This is so delightful," she says, beaming, flashing her thousand-watt grin. "I am so happy to see this! I wish I could see more of it." Now she's making plans to attend Exotic World next year, to meet these new starlets face to face, and maybe run into an old colleague or two.

Lottie thinks burlesque is just what this town needs.

"I would definitely like to see a classy exotic club in downtown Detroit, the way that the Brass Rail was. When they served dinner and there was a big show with a chorus line and comedians and a vocalist ..."

And, of course, the classic striptease.

"It was so classy, I really believe it would sell. The wives would come and drag their husbands. Before, when we were doing our shows, the couples would come and enjoy themselves; they loved it. And a lot of the wives would be watching, learning for their husbands so they could do it at home.



Click tease

Curious about the new burlesque? Check out these Detroit troupes. (Full disclosure: The author has been involved with each, both past and present.)

Hell's Belles Girlie Revue
www.hellsbellesdetroit.com

The Bottle Rockettes
(formerly known as the Spagettes)
bottlerockettesdetroit.com

Causing a Scene Burlesque
www.causingascene.com