



# coffee WITH A Coastie

**TONI STEVENS**  
VARIETY CABARET ENTERTAINER

Clubland's first theatre restaurant show at Canterbury Hurlstone Park RSL

Welcome to Coffee with a Coastie. I had the pleasure of sitting down with one of the Coasts most beloved entertainers, Toni Stevens. Toni has travelled the world as a professional entertainer, though chose to call Australia home in 1972. With a career spanning decades, the list of talented individuals that Toni has worked with are endless. She was the first to introduce Theatre Restaurant into registered clubs back in the early 80's and her heart for giving back is evident in the work she does with the many charitable organizations, and in the establishment of The Australian Ladies Variety Association. Being described as a 'One woman party' and 'a truly great entertainer', who shows no signs of slowing down, it was with great pleasure that I got to sit down with Toni.

*When reading about your life it sounds like it has been full of adventure at every turn, though it was in 1964 after appearing on a show called "Opportunity Knocks" that you became a professional entertainer. Can you share a memorable moment from these early years?*

Just after I became a professional entertainer in December of 1964, I was sent to Manchester for an audition to entertain American troops in Europe. I was accepted and within a couple of months I was on my way. My fellow performers and I were all put on a train bound for Rome. From there we were to go on to the Libyan Embassy to pick up our Visas and proceed to the Wheelus US Air Base in Tripoli. It was a public holiday in Rome, so the agent told us to just get on the plane and deal with it when we got there. Arriving late at night, we ended up being held at the airport over night until King Idris got out of bed and gave us all the all clear. It was hot and sticky, and I was introduced to cockroaches. When you've seen the cockies in Libya,

the ones in Australian are very small in comparison.

*You were born in 1944 in the UK and you celebrated being in Australia for 50 years in 2022. Before arriving in Australia, you travelled to many places around the world performing including the UK, Germany, France, Libya and South Africa to name a few. What is it that triggered the decision to board the SS Ellinis and arrive in Melbourne, Australia on the 14th of November 1972?*

I left Southampton on the 19th of May 1972 because I was going around in circles in the UK. I thought I'd spread my wings and go and have a look at the world. I got in touch with P&O in London and said that I wanted to go to South Africa. They put me on "The Australian Women's Weekly World Cruise" without auditioning me and charged me £40 just in case I wasn't any good. I had absolutely no work to go to, but I soon found work. After I had been working in South Africa and Rhodesia (now Harare) for four months, I was ready to set sail again. So,

from Johannesburg, I called Chandris Line in London. They were the ones that did the £10 tourist boats, they put me on the SS Ellinis at Cape Town on the 31st October 1972 bound for Australia as an entertainer. I then arrived in Melbourne on 14th November 1972.

*Having worked with so many talented and amazing people in the entertainment industry, who has been the most memorable and why?*

Most memorable was Dame Vera Lynn, who I actually didn't work with us such, but she was the most memorable. She was the one I got closer to than anybody. There's a whole load of amazing people that I've worked with on my website. But she was just such a high-profile lady, the whole of Britain celebrated her hundredth birthday. I was so thrilled when I wrote to her and said, "I'd love to pop in and see you" and she said, "come anytime you're welcome", she always made me feel welcome. Vera passed away at 103 mid Covid, so it was a very small family funeral. Though a lot of people lined the

streets, like a royal funeral. Then last year I received an invitation from the Dean of Westminster and the family to join them to celebrate her life and work at Westminster Abbey in London. When I received the invitation, my kids said you're not going to miss this mum. They got on their computers and booked me into Premium Economy, cost me a bloody fortune. But it was an experience I'm never going to forget. It was amazing, I was just so honoured.

*You were the original founder in 1978 of ALVA The Australian Ladies Variety Association, as you noticed a void in the industry for female entertainers. What's the proudest moment achieved through the formation of ALVA?*

The fact that it's 40 odd years now since it was founded in 1978 and Dame Vera Lynn was there at the original banquet. Along with the fact that it is now one of the most respected charitable associations helping entertainers within the variety industry in Australia. The original idea was actually to provide accommodation for retired entertainers, but nobody wanted to go in there, they were too proud.

*I read, in your dear friend Kerri Dyer's book, 'My Corner of the Sky' that your name used to be Christine McLean. What made you decide to change your name?*

When I became a professional entertainer in December 1964, there was a lady in England called Christine Keeler, who brought down the British Government in The Profumo Affair, so "Christine" wasn't a particularly popular name at the time. So I changed my name to Toni, which was the name of the British telephonist Toni Gardner, who had just married King Hussein of Jordan. My boyfriend at the time was Brian Stevens, so hence the second name. I tried scribbling it a few times and it seemed to



Loves doing things for others  
Luke with the talented Toni Stevens

work. So, Christine Hill (later McLean) became Toni Stevens.

*Another name that you are synonymous with is Aunty Molly. I wondered who Aunty Molly is, and how did Aunty Molly's Entertainment come about?*

My husband and I had purchased Olde Bakehouse at Morisset to continue where we left off at Second Hand Rose in Ryde, buying and selling second hand furniture & antiques. The Olde Bakehouse had a little café that was called Aunty Molly's tea shop, and at the time I was still working at the Argyle Tavern with most of my money going towards the renovations of the Bakehouse. Though along the way, I was asked if I could do a morning tea for a bus group and I said, why not. So, we got as many tables and chairs as possible, borrowing a few from the Masonic Hall across the road and we started doing morning tea. Then I was asked if we could do a lunch for a bus group. I thought, why not. I would cook in my kitchen and then take everything over; I did everything myself. I would then go on stage with pumpkin under my fingernails. This got me thinking, there is a niche here. Then one day I met Joe Clarke, an old piano playing colleague in Lake Haven Shopping Centre. He was retired but I asked him if he would be interested in playing a few gigs at the Bakehouse. He agreed and I set to work promoting it as The Olde Bakehouse. Over the years we have been nominated for several tourism awards and won quite a few including The Hunter Valley Tourism Award and the Outstanding Business Achievement from Lake Macquarie Business Awards. But unfortunately, we could only hold 68 people. So after some years, we ended up having to move to Wyong Golf Club and became Aunty Molly's Seniors Entertainment Events along the way. Now we are at two venues Wangi District Workers' Club and Davistown RSL Club.



*You have done and continue to do so much for charity including the Clown Doctors. What is it that drives you to continue to help others?*

Abraham Lincoln said, when I do good, I feel good, and I've always maintained that despite the fact, that over the years I've been paid to do many jobs. I've never enjoyed anything more than when I'm doing something for somebody else.

*Finally, I have read you said, "You believe that everything we do in life, whether good or not so good, is a learning curve". So, I would like to ask what your advice is on navigating the good or not so good in life?*

When I'm selling raffle tickets I say, 'you never, never know, if you never have a go'. You gotta be in it, to win it. If someone said to me, can you do this? I'd say, 'why not'. If it works, fine. If it doesn't, you've learned something from it. One of my other favourite little quick quirks is if you're asked to take on a job that you don't know if you can do, take it on and then learn about it afterwards, that's been my policy all along. If you think it's do-able then say "why not", because at the end of your term here on earth, no one can write on your epitaph "what if" and you won't know unless you give it a go.

If you would like to find out more about Toni and watch her perform at Wangi Workers or Davistown RSL go to [auntymollys.com.au](http://auntymollys.com.au)

So be sure to scan the QR code or go to [coffeewithacoastie.com.au](http://coffeewithacoastie.com.au) to hear the full conversation where we talk about:



- The people who have influenced Toni
- Toni's arrival in Australia
- Her most memorable show
- Toni refusing to make her show ruder when requested.
- How Toni learnt phonetically to sing in six languages
- Toni's love of antiques and her antique business and much more!

This interview has been edited for readability and length.