

If she ever decided to change her image and become a Spice Girl, Linda Lee would definitely be Old Spice. At 70, Linda is the oldest regularly performing female impersonator in Portland—and perhaps all of North America.

Don't let that fool you, though. You'll never see her do songs like "Help Me Make It to My Rockin' Chair." Linda easily has the energy of a performer half her age and appears several nights a week at Embers Avenue in Old Town.

She has quite a repertoire, but mostly lip-syncs country classics like "Harper Valley P.T.A." and "Why Haven't I Heard from You."

And Linda really gets into it, bouncing down from the stage and having fun with the audience, shaking a finger at one gentleman and blowing a kiss to another.

"I enjoy playing up to the audience," she says, flashing her luscious lashes. "I start off with the guys, teasing them and sitting on their laps."

But, Linda jokingly adds in her Polish accent, "I'm really a lesbian at heart and also like to play with the ladies!"

Once, a bride-to-be asked for Linda's blue lace garter so she could wear it on her wedding day. Linda slipped the garter off and gave it to the soon-to-be newlywed, who then stuffed a \$10 bill into Linda's blouse.

Giving up one garter didn't put a dent in Linda's extensive wardrobe, which, she says, includes more than 40 wigs and enough dresses to fill a rack the length of the Embers showroom.

She definitely knows how to mix and match, too. One of her most colorful outfits is a blue miniskirt and a green silk blouse, set off by a two-tone neck scarf and over-the-knee black boots that reveal just a little leg—girlfriend, this lady has style!

While most of the entertainers in the Embers cabaret shows are in their 20s and 30s, Linda didn't debut until she was in her 50s.

She was introduced to female impersonating in 1981 at the old Dahl and Penne's at Southwest Second Avenue and Alder Street, where the Bank of America building now stands.

Since that magic moment, Linda has been a "kept woman"—kept by Al Zwolinski, the man who lives beneath the makeup.

Unlike many female impersonators, Zwolinski is not only a husband and father, but is also a heterosexual. Following a divorce in 1980, friends introduced him to a different side of life.

"One of them liked to cross-dress, but the others just liked to bounce around to different bars," Zwolinski explains. "We went to Dahl and

## QUEEN OF COUNTRY

Now in her seventh decade, female illusionist Linda Lee continues to wow Portland audiences by Robert Rusk



Linda Lee has wigs and outrageous fashion sense—what more could one ask of a straight, married father?

Penne's and saw the show. It was fun and interesting, so we went back several more times. I got to know Vanessa, who was the hostess, and some of the other 'ladies' there.

"They were planning a fund-raiser for Baloney Joe's [a homeless shelter that was located at the east end of the Burnside Bridge] and were looking for some new faces. They asked me to join them, and I did," Zwolinski continues with a chuckle. "They did my makeup and I performed one number: 'You're Gonna Hear From Me' by Dionne Warwick."

And hear from Linda we have. Since that premiere performance, she has appeared at nightspots throughout Portland, including Darcelle XV, Dirty Duck and Three Sisters, as well as long-gone establishments JR's West, Pa's Cellar and the Chocolate Moose.

Linda has taken her show on the road, too, and has appeared throughout the region at fraternal lodges such as the Elks and American Legion.

Though she rarely uses it, her full stage name is Linda Lee Lawson. Zwolinski chose "Linda" because the name means "beautiful," and he liked the smooth sound and scroll of the l's.

In the mid-1980s, Linda began hosting a Wednesday night show at Embers and a few months later switched to Monday. She held down Mondays for 12 years, until 1997.

And for those who say you cannot find true love in a bar, the Embers is where Zwolinski met the woman who is now his wife.

Zwolinski's beloved, Shellie, who is bisexual, recalls: "I went into Embers for the first time in 1990. The third person on stage was Linda, and I said, 'I'm gonna marry her.'"

Understandably, that statement caused a big fight between Shellie and the girlfriend she had come in with.

Complicating the situation, at 23 Shellie was less than half the age of Zwolinski—who, at first, wasn't interested in a relationship with someone so young.

Nevertheless, they were married two years later, on gay pride Sunday in 1993, in a ceremony at Embers. Zwolinski, dressed as Linda, wore a bridal gown; Shellie wore a tuxedo.

The minister said, "Do you Al, Linda Lee, take Shellie?"

With a laugh Zwolinski says, "He wanted to make sure it was legal."

For Shellie, the marriage meant she was now living the straight life. Zwolinski, however, encouraged Shellie to seek the Imperial Sovereign Rose Court position Ms. Gay Portland VI.

Using the stage name Jasmine Rose Lee, the title was bestowed upon her in 1994.

For Zwolinski, being so immersed in the Portland gay scene is, to say the least, far different from the life he led before moving to the Rose City 20 years ago.

Zwolinski was born in 1928 in Depew, N.Y., near Niagara Falls. Both of his parents worked, so he spent a lot of time with his grandparents and quickly learned to speak their native Polish.

He graduated from college in 1950, then served in a stateside U.S. Army Airborne Infantry unit during the Korean War. After being honorably discharged from the service, Zwolinski began his career in the aerospace industry. Various jobs took him to California, Texas and Virginia. He eventually settled in his favorite part of the country—Oregon—in 1978, when he decided to change careers. He went back to school and became a licensed insurance agent and tax preparer.

It was shortly after that when Zwolinski realized a lifelong dream to become an entertainer, and created Linda Lee.

On a trip back home to New York, Zwolinski packed a dress and introduced his family to Linda. Much to his relief, the relatives were very supportive. Linda was even asked to do a show for the

locals. The venue was a funeral home; she was good-naturedly dubbed the Madame of the Morgue and the Countess of the Crypt.

Back in Portland, she's never had any monikers quite as macabre. At Dahl and Penne's, Linda did songs from the 1940s and '50s and was billed as the Lady of Nostalgia. These days she's known as the Queen of Country.

"She's such a dear friend," says Darcelle, Portland's most famous female impersonator, who, at 68, is two years younger than Linda.

The current Ms. Gay Oregon, Lady Redd, chimes: "I admire what Linda does for the gay community...and seeing her perform gives me inspiration to continue what I'm doing."

Maria, Rose Empress XXXVI, says of Linda: "She's taught us a lot about show business, about giving your all to the audience."

And Linda intends to keep giving her all, whether at a club, the annual Peacock in the Park benefit, or in a living room at a private party.

"I have fun as Linda and enjoy seeing people have a good time at the shows," Zwolinski says. "I'll be doing this till I die."

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