

**KITTY VON QUIM**

is a burlesque performer from San Francisco who describes herself as being 'straight out of a John Waters movie'. She considers the older burlesque legends her idols

THE BOA VETERANS

Every year, the legends of the burlesque world convene in Las Vegas, many of whom are the former stars of the original scene 40 years ago. **Kate Salter** meets the women who are still spinning their tassels (and more) in their 60s, 70s and even 80s. Photography by **Jane Hilton**

IT is dusk in Las Vegas and as the sun sinks behind the horizon, the lights go up on the hundreds of stages across the city. At the Orleans hotel, a few blocks from the main Strip, five male dancers wearing sequinned thongs and thigh-high white boots, and with oiled chests gleaming, take to the stage and begin their routine with a blonde dressed in a floor-length satin skirt. As the music starts she begins to undress slowly and the crowd erupts into wolf whistles and wild applause. So far, so Las Vegas. Except the star of this show is April March, an 80-year-old burlesque dancer headlining one of the most jaw-dropping spectacles in town.

Over the next three hours, women ranging from their 50s to their 80s strip to varying degrees with a gusto that has to be seen to be believed. There is Judith Stein, a 67-year-old Canadian burlesque star who skips around the stage dressed as a Wild West showgirl with the energy of a teenager, before tossing her ➤

 Explorations / Las Vegas

PENNY STARR
*aka 'Miss Bump and Grind 1963'; now 82,
pictured with her granddaughter*

PENNY STARR JUNIOR
*has performed with her grandmother as
part of a burlesque double act since 2007*

underwear into the audience. Gail Winds, 80, zips into view on a mobility scooter to sing *The Lady is A Tramp*, accompanied by her elderly husband on the piano. Dusty Summers, 68, 'Las Vegas's only nude magician', manages to combine a striptease with two vanishing white doves, and Dee Milo, 'the Venus of Dance', born in 1930, gets down to her bra and fringed red knickers with startling dexterity.

This is the second night of entertainment at the annual Burlesque Hall of Fame Weekend, the biggest festival of its kind in the world. The acts include upcoming and established burlesque stars too, but it is the Friday night show that most of us are here to see. Many of these women were once famous cabaret stars, the so-called 'Legends of Burlesque' who reunite once a year to perform at this, the 'Titans of Tease Reunion Showcase'.

'I've been a star since 1951,' April March tells me when we meet. 'I was 16 when I got into burlesque and I lied about my age to get a union card. I can still remember when the Las Vegas Boulevard was sand.' March, whose real name is Velma Fern Worden, has been crowned 2015's Legend of the Year and is Vegas royalty. Known as 'The First Lady of Burlesque' since the 1960s, due to her resemblance to Jacqueline Kennedy, March is still beautiful at 80, with large wide-set eyes, lips lined neatly with red lipstick and the giggle of a young girl. 'I don't feel 80 and they say I don't look 80,' she says. She certainly has the stamina of someone much younger: the night of her performance she was celebrating until four o'clock in the morning. Like many of the 'vintage' stars here this weekend, a long career in show business has meant a colourful life. March talks of learning gin rummy from a gangster in

Chicago, of climbing out of windows in Mexico when the club owners tried to hold her hostage and of shoot-outs in nightclubs in Miami. She's also been married eight times. 'I adored Elizabeth Taylor, she was my idol,' she says smirking. 'She's been married eight times and so have I, although I have to say I'm not proud of it.'

The weekend began life as Miss Exotic World, held on a goat farm in the Californian desert until its popularity resulted in a move to Las Vegas in 2006. It is essentially a fund-raising exercise for 'preserving the art of burlesque', as the website says, but a sizeable chunk of its budget goes towards the travel and accommodation expenses for the 'legends', most of whom are now living on limited pensions.

For the fans who come to the Orleans hotel every year, March and her contemporaries are megawatt stars. Before and after every show, they can be found sitting at the bar being bought endless rounds of drinks by adoring fans (most of whom are dressed in basques, suspenders and high-heels, including the men). The night I arrive, Gina Bon Bon, a 78-year-old Cuban star who still oozes a Sophia Loren sensuality, is being reprimanded by Judith Stein for having too much of her impressive bosom on display (what she actually says would be too rude to print). They are laughing, drinking, smoking, and relishing being back in the city where their names once shone in lights. Amid the ringing of the slot machines and flashing lights of the Orleans casino floor, they are quite a sight and the other guests at the hotel look on in astonishment.

One of the biggest stars here this weekend, in both senses of the word, is Big Fannie Annie, burlesque's most famous – and at one time the only – obese performer. At the height of her fame in the 1970s and 80s, she was 450 pounds. Now 63, Annie rarely performs. 'I opened the door for all body shapes,' she tells me. 'Before me, if you were five pounds overweight you didn't work.' With her blonde hair teased into a towering halo, there is something regal about her as she is accosted by fans, and – despite a turn of phrase that would make a squaddie blush – she is articulate and bright.

Because of her size – she is also 6ft tall – Annie became something of a sensation on the burlesque circuit, at one point earning around £22,000 a week. 'The men would have this look, these glossy eyes. I used to call it "goo goo eyes".' She recognised the same goo goo eyes in her husband, Tony, a Chippendale dancer who makes feather boas, to whom she's been married for 35 years. 'He's 50 and he still looks hot', she says.

All the women I speak to describe how important it was to have a unique act, and this is one of the things that distinguishes burlesque from stripping. It is not just about how many clothes you take off, but how you do it – the tease. Many of the acts have a kind of innocence that is quite touching. Isis Starr, 67, a burlesque star from San Francisco has an act that

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BIG FANNIE ANNIE
*The burlesque world's first obese star, Annie
has travelled the world performing her act*



Photograph (previous page): Shutterstock

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APRIL MARCH
(above) is one of the original stars of the scene from the 1950s. She is considered to be the 'First Lady of Burlesque'

ISIS STARR
who defied her strict Baptist parents to become a burlesque dancer is pictured (right) in the desert outside Las Vegas

involves intricate cape twirling that is captivating to watch. Dusty Summers, whose magic/striptease act is also relatively tame, says she began using magic in her show to deflect from the fact she was taking off her clothes. 'You wouldn't think I could be inhibited, but I make myself do what I do. Magic helped me avoid the things I really didn't like.'

Gina Bon Bon's acts have included a retelling of Salome, a *Pink Panther* themed show and, when *Star Wars* was first released, 'a space show with robots' (Annie also did her own *Star Wars* show, wearing a gold lamé shower curtain). They may be the height of kitsch, but these women took great pride in perfecting their acts, of creating the right costumes, and the importance of 'being professional' as Annie puts it. And after decades of working up to four shows a night, winning over the crowds at small mining towns as well as New York's glitziest joints, they are brilliant at what they do. Once you have adjusted your eyes to the sight of so much sagging flesh, as well as being uproariously funny and rude, a show filled with older women taking off their clothes with such gay abandon is strangely life-affirming. As the compere for the evening says gleefully into the microphone, 'These women are redefining what it means to age in our society!'

Glory Pearl, a burlesque star from Tonbridge, Kent has travelled to the weekend for the first time for some inspiration. 'They have always flown beneath the radar because burlesque used to be much more socially unacceptable, but these women are pioneers.'

It's true. At a time when the done thing was to get married, have babies and keep a tidy home, the legends broke with convention. Most of them have



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*Based on World Traveller. Excludes reward flights.
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for the rest of your life to make a living.'

'I've had an amazing life,' says Stein, lighting up another Marlboro by the side of the Orleans' swimming pool. 'I got to travel, I got to entertain people and see the world. You talk to any of the other legends: yes, you can be a feminist and a burlesque star. You're independent, you're making your own money, and you're not answering to anyone. Isn't that feminism?'

The finale of the 'Titans of Tease' show is the Walk of Fame, when the stars that are not able to perform any more get their moment in the spotlight. Holiday O'Hara, a curly-haired blonde with tattooed arms has dressed as a mermaid for the occasion and glides across the stage in a rhinestone-covered wheelchair. Gina Bon Bon throws off her long black cloak with great



DUSTY SUMMERS
at home in Las Vegas with the doves that form part of her burlesque magic act

overcome a lifetime of disapproval from parents, husbands, and society, which is why they are, as Judith Stein says, 'a bunch of feisty old broads'. Summers, who has a bachelor's degree and was running her own casino at 33, says, 'All I've done is try to tell my daughters you cannot count on a man, no matter how in love you are or how wonderful he is. You cannot count on him

theatricality to reveal a show-stopping diamante bustier and gets one of the biggest rounds of applause of the night. Toni Elling, 87, who was given her name by her friend Duke Ellington, stands at the front of the stage and bows as she receives a standing ovation. Mariah Carey may be performing down the road at Caesar's Palace, Britney at nearby Planet Hollywood, but if you want to see some show business divas in a class all of their own, come to the Orleans. ■

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The Burlesque Hall of Fame Weekender is on 2-5 June 2016. For more information, including ticket prices, go to [bhofweekend.com](#)

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