

THE OBSERVATORY

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WHERE'S LOLA NOW?

During its heyday in the 40's and 50's, the Copacabana was known for its chorus girls, w in turn were known for their 'Copa legs.' Nostalgic for the glamour days, some of the former chorines have formed their own alumnae association. ELIZABETH HANLY discovered the curious twists and turns—posing for Playboy, wildcatting, playing a mom on Pi Hut commercials—of life since those glory days under the fake palms at East 60th Street.

Toni Carroll lowered her voice. "Once you have those legs," she said in a conspiratorial tone, "you never lose them." She was talking about Copa legs—the legs of the chorus line at the Copacabana in the 40's and 50's, when the club was arguably the chicest of its type in Manhattan. A former Copa chorine herself, Ms. Carroll, who prefers not to give her age, does indeed have those legs. She wore a diaphanous short skirt that showed them off, and sat in her West Side apartment in the kind of pose one would expect to see on a miniature babe atop a 1950's swizzle stick.

Ms. Carroll—the onetime Mrs. David Wolper—flushed a big smile as she talked about a deal her agent recently put together with Republic Pictures: a \$250,000 deal on the story of her days at the Copa and beyond. A TV movie of the week is in development.

According to the project's executive co-producer, Tracey Alexander, "We wanted to go with the story not only because it tracks the most glamorous era of New York City, but because the material itself is full of surprises. So many of the showgirls were not necessarily what they appeared at first glance."

Ms. Carroll is putting Republic Pictures in touch with other women from the Copa chorus lines. She has a Rolodex full of names and phone numbers, for in the mid-1970's, Ms. Carroll and her friend Terri Stevens, a singer from the 1950's Copa, began what is surely one of the most unconventional women's clubs around: the World Famous Copacabana Girls Inc. alumni association, informally known as the Copa Club.

The Copacabana itself still exists, although last year it moved from its vintage setting at 10 East 60th Street a little further west to 617 West 57th Street. And vintage the old place was. The Copa had been there for 53 years; it opened in 1940 out of the ruins of crooner Rudy Vallee's speakeasy. But by 1969 the famous chorus line was gone. The cabaret, too. The place had become sort of seedy. Barry Manilow's 1970's hit, referring to the Copa as "the hottest spot north of Havana," seemed a cruel reminder of the passing of time.

These days, the club is an after-hours disco on certain nights, and on others it's a Latin club for perhaps the only group in the city committed enough to old-school glamour to return the Copa even for a few hours to anything approximating its golden days. Yet the club's legend seems to have strange staying power: That Barry Manilow song has been resurrected as the centerpiece of a show on the Copa being mounted in London.

"Were your Copa days the best days?" I asked Ms. Carroll. "Not the best but the beginning," she said. And more than the beginning. "Those were the days when everything seemed possible," Ms. Carroll, who was waiting to hear if her Lindy had won her a soon-to-be-shot Tums commercial, passed me a tablet.

She grew up in St. Louis, before the years when radio hookups brought Saturday night at the Copa into millions of American homes. The announcer would say, "I'm here at the fabulous Copa—where are you?" "The basement," might have been Ms. Carroll's reply. She spent a lot of time in the basement. Every Saturday after a singing lesson, down she went for the weekly laundry ritual. Poking around the room, trying to amuse herself as the clothes spun, she found piles of old newspapers. Ms. Carroll began cutting out articles about St. Louis natives who had made good, especially in show business. Before too long, she had one whole scrapbook on St. Louis-born Doug Coudy, choreographer at the Copa for nearly all its showgirl days. Ms. Carroll didn't tell anybody about her clippings, but at age 18, scrapbook in hand, she took a train to New York. (The only person she actually knew in the city was her second cousin, Sister Felicitia from Our Lady of Pompeii Parish.) The afternoon she arrived, she took herself to the Copa. "Toni Carroll is here to see Doug Coudy," she told the receptionist. Coudy hired her on the spot. And so began what she calls "20 years of charmed life."

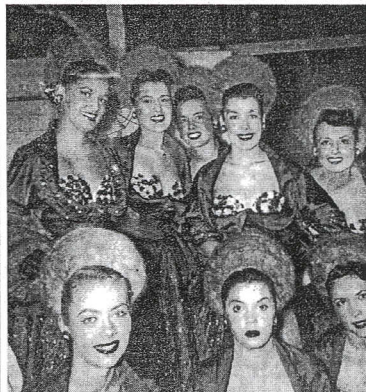
Nearly all the Copa girls with whom I spoke (eight in all) talked about similarly charmed, nearly effortless beginnings. The only struggle Terri Stevens had starting out was getting her dad to agree to let her go to an open call for Copa singers. Parochial school girl Joan Wynne—she wore bloomers and white gloves by day and feathers by night—became a showgirl in spite of herself. (Her stage-floor mom had heard of an open call for dancers after a very public catfight over Desi Arnaz had led to the firing of several Copa chorines, and sent her daughter for a try.) Ms. Wynne was hired even though she explained she'd never danced a step.

The 40's and 50's at the Copa were a time and place of contradictions. The club was filled with the aroma of sex and scandal, yet its showgirls were chosen for their fresh-off-the-farm looks. The Copa was home to every conceivable vice, yet the chorines were not permitted a drop of champagne. (Lena Horne would regularly send a bottle backstage and owner Jules Podell would just as regularly spill out its contents.)

The club, as Martin Scorsese recorded in *Good Fellax*, also was a Mafia hangout. Yet the Copa girls have tales not of thugs but of wise-guy Galahads. (Cindy Martino, who came to the Copa after major success as an aquatic dancer with the "Water Follies" and with Esther Williams, has only kind words to say about Meyer Lansky. During a stint in Havana swimming underwater in a giant champagne glass, Ms. Martino occasionally received unwanted attentions. But Lansky, she recalled, was always Johnny-on-the-spot, discouraging patrons with a quick tap of a crap table stick.)

Copa girls may not have been allowed to join patrons at tables, yet they danced in such close quarters that a breast from the line often ended up very near a diner's face. And when Jules Podell did break his own rules—Joan Wynne, for one, was invited to join both Howard Hughes and Frank Sinatra—very often the girls declined, citing involvement with some boy next door. Copa girls were dressed modestly, at least in comparison to the Copa's biggest competition, Lou Walters' (Barbara's dad) Latin Quarter. Yet always there was that tension: a peek of mink undies, for instance, under the skirts of one dance routine.

Perhaps it was the shift in sexual mores in the 60's that destroyed the Copa and its allure, rather than what *Newsweek* suggested in 1969: the overabundance of glamour queens selling toothpaste and the like on TV. And maybe the Copa retains the hold it does on our imaginations because so many of the contradictions it embodies remain deep within our culture. In any case, Ms. Carroll is the only Copa girl I met who manages to evoke such innocence today, and this after making and losing a fortune as a wildcat in oil fields. Did the Copa girls want to become movie stars? Did they expect to? For all their denials, a great many chorines, including Ms. Carroll, did go West with starlet contracts. A few made good. Edna Ryan Murcott, for one, was launched on a 15-year dancing career that included production numbers with Bing Crosby, Betty Grable, Cyd Charisse and other big names. (She also became the Alka-Seltzer girl on TV.) "I might have gone further," Ms. Murcott said. "But



The Copa girls, then and now: Top, left to right, Joan Wynne Errico, Cindy Martino, Terri Stevens, Toni Carroll and I Ryan Murcott at the new Copacabana on West 57th Street (Photo: James Hamilton). Below left, Terri Stevens, left, and Carroll in front of the "girls dressing room" at the old Copa, 10 East 60th Street; right, the gang in costume backstage

during those years, everything in Hollywood was based on types. Apparently I looked too much like another blonde with very powerful protectors." (Marilyn Monroe, that is.) Many of the Copa girls who did go to Hollywood returned to New York within a year or two. As Paula Lamont, one of the youngest of the chorines, put it, "I couldn't cope with the power plays. I got to ride in a wagon train, and after that I was ready to come home."

Back East, many pursued what became solid careers as singers, fashion designers, visual artists, choreographers and even, eventually, like entertainment account executive Terri Stevens, in business. (It was Copa girl Julie Wilson, with only very modest success in the early days, who was able to take her career the furthest. The other Copa girls speak about her with something like reverence. But Ms. Wilson recalled how low things could get: At one New Jersey dive, she, the singer, was to come on after the stripper, "and my only accompaniment was a drum." Ms. Wilson finally turned things around "after I discovered that sweetness wasn't necessarily the way to go." Her breakthrough song: "I've Had Enough.")

The Copa girls had lives outside the club world, too, many of them juggling their careers with marriage and children. Terri Stevens recalls the pictures of her small daughter her husband would send her when she was on the road singing, with captions that read, "Look how she's growing." "It broke my heart," she remembered. Some ex-chorines had stickier problems. Cindy Martino, the bathing belle who after marrying happily abandoned show business for painting, found that as far as her daughter was concerned, it wasn't always easy to be a mom who had been not only a Copa girl but a very evocative *Playboy* centerfold. Several Copa girls, moreover, raised children alone. Joan Wynne brought up three boys, separately from her husband, jockey Consuelo Errico, after finding \$100,000 in cash in a closet. Ms. Wilson also raised her two boys alone, one of whom died as an adult. "Everything else is easy after that," she said.

It was Ms. Carroll who stood apart from the group. She has no children. And after a taste of marriage with David Wolper, it would be 15 years before Ms. Carroll would allow herself another serious romantic involvement. While on the road, she did do her best to promote her audience's fantasies of the life of a torch singer. She never permitted room service to actually enter her room; all trays were to be left outside the door. But instead of frolicking, Ms. Carroll was actually studying occult works, which has been an interest of hers for some 40 years.

That, in fact, led to her stint as an oil wildcatter. As she tells the story, she was on the road one day, heading for an engagement at St. Clair, a Michigan resort, when she read that the Edgar Cayce Foundation, named after the American mystic, was in financial trouble. She wanted to help. St. Clair, when Ms. Carroll visited it in the early 1960's, was still rich terrain for oil and natural gas, and she saw possibilities in the rigs visible on the drive from the airport. As it happened, several fans at the hotel where she was singing were highly successful wildcatters who apparently found the idea of teaching her the business quite amusing. After a few weeks, Ms. Carroll, accompanied by an Indian spirit guide named Black Foot, decided where to dig. Then by chance Ms. Carroll was booked into an oilman's club in Louisiana. By the time her engagement was over, she had the investors to go ahead with the St. Clair venture. And apparently Black Foot knew his stuff. Ms. Carroll hit oil. On Sept. 22, 1966, Toni Carroll, the ex-Copa girl, was on the front page of *The Wall Street Journal*. A series of subsequent, perhaps naïve business decisions would see her shut out of Positive Mental Attitudes, as her company was called. She came away with a few hundred thousand dollars rather than the millions she had hoped for.

During a subsequent stint as a singer on a luxury liner, Ms. Carroll met jazzman and musical director Ken Kenniston. Together they sailed the world. She calls him "the love of my life." They eventually married.

The hard times for Ms. Carroll came in the 1980's. Her investments shriveled after a family business turned into a family nightmare. With less demand for torch singers, her bookings were drying up. Ms. Carroll was broke. And so, one day, Ms. Carroll got up and found work selling sofa beds. But the boss ended up firing the tall, buxom saleswoman wandering among customers with her pitch pipe. A subsequent liquid-diet sales adventure fared better. In the meanwhile, work with commercials had begun. (You may have seen Ms. Carroll as a Pizza Hut mom.)

It was a little before Ms. Carroll's charmed days became suspended—in October 1977 to be precise—that the Copa Club, the chorines' alumnae association, was born. Apparently part of a publicity ploy—the Copa had just come under new management—Earl Wilson ran an item in his *New York Post* column, an open call to breakfast for all former Copa girls. A few dozen middle-aged women responded, all of them, I'm told, with those trademark legs. Ms. Carroll and her longtime friend Terri Stevens ran around taking names. "We all grew up together," Ms. Carroll explained. "We thought it would be great fun to find out what became of everybody." And so the club was under way, officially dedicated to "artistic expression, camaraderie and benefit to the needy." Paula Lamont, whose mother was then vice president of a parallel Ziegfeld Club, helped the Copa girls set up the organization. The club still manages a few parties a year, a trip or two to Belmont and one annual bash with proceeds going to AIDS research or arthritis, among other charities. This October, for the first time in years, the chorines are taking the party home to the Copacabana itself.

Like the Ziegfeld Club, the Copa Club extends its membership—now 100-plus—to "friends": any and all who wish to get close to its glamour. There have been some rough spots, such as a rancorous debate as to whether a member who claimed to have been one of the earliest Copa girls had really been only a cigarette girl. Even Ms. Carroll, who takes such controversies with a grain of salt, showed me the pictures of the questionable chorine and asked, "Are those the legs of a Copa girl?" Catfights have taken their toll as well. One Copa girl described another recently admiring her boyfriend's cologne: "Next she had invited him home to try her marinara sauce."

What have the years brought to this group? The still-stunning Joan Wynne has taken on a life of piety, working with prisoners, homeless women and the dying. Paula Lamont by day is a Kodak executive, by night the director of her own theater company in Westchester, which she dreams of expanding to include handicapped performers. As for Ms. Carroll, her pet project is a history of the Copa she's co-authored, including interviews, profiles and the recollections of many who lingered among the fake palm trees: George Burns, Sammy Davis Jr., Jerry Lewis, June Allyson and others. Whatever else she's done with her life, the girl from St. Louis is still busy with her scrapbooks.