Cole, Walter (Darcelle)

When Walter Cole was discharged from the military in the late 1950s, he had little idea that his alter ego, the female impersonator Darcelle, would emerge and that he would become the proprietor of the longest-running drag cabaret on the West Coast.

Born in 1930, Cole spent his childhood in the scrappy northwest Portland neighborhood of Linnton. After his military service, he created a conventional life in far southeast Portland as a married man with two children. He worked at a Fred Meyer store and was, as he told an interviewer in 2005, a guy with "a crew cut and horn-rimmed glasses."

But the military had put $5,000 in his pocket at discharge, and it was starting to smolder. On an impulse, he bought a coffeehouse near Portland State University called Caffé Espresso and plunged into a bohemian world that was just starting to change from a beatnik to a hippie scene. With live music at Caffé Espresso, Cole nurtured the transition of the local music scene from folk troubadours to acid rock bands.

When urban renewal swept through southwest Portland, Cole moved Caffé Espresso to Southwest Third and Clay, across the street from Civic Auditorium. He opened an after-hours jazz club called Studio A in the basement, where many locals, including Tom Grant, and touring musicians jammed all night. When the new location was threatened by urban renewal, he sold it. In 1967, Cole used the $5,000 urban renewal compensation as a down payment on a derelict tavern called Demas on Northwest Third and Davis. The space became Darcelle's XV.

Cole had a long-standing interest in acting and had worked in Portland Civic Theater productions for years, but it wasn't until he bought the tavern that Darcelle emerged and Cole accepted that he was gay. In 1969, he left his wife of eighteen years to form a permanent relationship with Roxy Neuhardt. He remained married, and despite years of uncomfortable relationships with his son and daughter, the family connections survived.

As Cole's alter ego, Darcelle was a glamorous and witty performer—false-eyelashed, wreathed in jewelry, and draped in shiny fabric. When Darcelle was born, dancing and performances involving more than one musical instrument were forbidden in Oregon taverns. To skirt the rules, performers at Darcelle's lip-synched and mimed to recordings. When Roxy Neuhardt did a ballet-like adagio with another man, the club received a fine from the city. As Oregon's liquor laws were liberalized in 1973, Darcelle's became a regional magnet for those who liked drag cabaret. After San Francisco's famous drag club Finocchio's closed in 1999, Darcelle's inherited the title of oldest female impersonator cabaret on the West Coast.

Over the years, Darcelle became part of the fabric of Portland culture. She appeared at many benefits and social functions, serving as grand marshal for the 2011 Rose Festival Starlight Parade and receiving the city's Spirit of Portland award. Cole published an autobiography, *Just Call Me Darcelle*, in 2010, which he also staged as a one-man show performed as Cole.

Written by Valerie Brown

Further Reading:

Clarke, Kelly. "Walter Cole, Just call me Darcelle." *Willamette Week*, February 16, 2011.
http://www.wweek.com/portland/article-16953-walter_cole_just_call_me_darcelle.html

Williams, Lee. "Darcelle uncovered: Q&A with Walter Cole." *Oregonian*, April 1, 2010.
http://blog.oregonlive.com/ent_impact_performance/print.html?entry=/2010/04/darcelle_uncovered_q_and_a_wit.html

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