Walter Cole (Darcelle)

By Valerie Brown

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
Darcellle, in 2010, which he also staged as a one-man show performed as Cole.

In 2019, impresario Don Horn created “Darcelle: That’s No Lady” aided by noted Portland
musicians Tom Grant, Storm Large, and Marv and Rindy Ross. Starring Kevin C. Loomis as
Darcelle, the show celebrated Darcelle’s 51 years as a performer and her status as the oldest
working drag queen in the world. In November 2020, Darcelle XV was added to the National
Register of Historic Places.

Sources

