

# **PART ONE**

A Sequined Resolve



This image of Cynthia the Silhouette captured the teenaged Bella Sin's imagination and never let it go. Circa 1950, Maurice Seymour.

**ON A RAINY DAY** in 2000, Bella Sin, then a student at Denver's Abraham Lincoln High School, did something scandalous: she skipped class and celebrated the errant behavior with a trip to the library.

Immediately spotting a potential truant, the librarian asked her if she was there on account of a free period. With her response, Bella committed the second misdeed of the day. She fibbed: of course she was. The librarian's arched eyebrows relaxed. She believed Bella, who headed to the stacks, where her love of old books drew her to pluck the 1956 tome *A Pictorial History of Burlesque* by Bernard Sobel from the shelf.

The images spilled out before her. Claire Luce smoldered beneath a feathered fan on one page, Amber Halladay sat ready to pounce from a zebra rug on another, and right beside her, Lotus Dubois struck a pose Rita Hayworth would have envied, from atop mile-high legs. Then there was Cynthia the Silhouette. She was perched on the back of a chair, clad in a barely-there brassiere and drape of sheer fabric. Her chest was thrust defiantly forward and her lips were frozen in a breathy sigh.<sup>1</sup>

The teenaged Bella blinked at the image, enthralled. "She was Hispanic," said Bella, recalling that moment. "Seeing Cynthia, I saw the costume, I saw the hair. I saw her." Something clicked and a eureka moment bloomed—and endured. The images ignited a lifelong mission.

Born in Juárez, Mexico, in 1984, Bella immigrated to the United States with her mother when she was fourteen, but her fair complexion and Latino heritage defined her as an odd-girl-out in the Mile High City. "I couldn't hang out with Mexican kids because I was too white and I spoke English and I didn't listen to the same music," recalled Bella. "I couldn't hang out with the American kids because I was *not* white and didn't listen to their music. I was kind of a lonely kid, really."

The curvaceous ladies pictured in Sobel's book, however, were different. She connected with them, immediately identifying with their lush bodies. She admired their satin and sequined

glamour and how their states of undress didn't expose their vulnerabilities, but only served to empower the women. Obsession took hold. Bella scoured every library in Denver for more books on the topic. She became fascinated with the history of burlesque and the beautiful women who defined it. The decline of this unique form of entertainment over the years saddened her—and then filled her with steely determination. Even though burlesque was seen by many as a fading art, Bella set her sights on the world of boas and stilettos, bright lights and come-hither moves.

“At that moment in time,” she recalled, “I said: ‘This is what I want to do.’ And if I say, ‘This is what I want to do,’” she added, “you should probably move out of the way.”

A year and a half after that fateful day in the library, Bella saw an ad for an eight-week burlesque course and signed up. Then in January 2003, she performed her first burlesque act at Club Onyx, an alt venue in Denver's edgy Capitol Hill neighborhood. She was barely eighteen.<sup>2</sup>

**THE PERIOD FROM 2000** to 2003 was both tumultuous for Bella Sin and profoundly transformative in every sense. For much of that time, an abusive stepfather characterized a difficult home life that included verbal and emotional abuse as well as physical incidents, one of which left Bella with a broken leg. She escaped her domestic troubles by engaging at school and taking jobs: one as a maintenance staff member at a health club and another as a carhop at Sonic. Capitalizing on her fluency in English and Spanish, she eventually landed a position at an answering service after graduation.

Meanwhile, an online romance established her connection to Northeast Ohio, but cyberspace wasn't immediate enough for the smitten pair. Bella took a Greyhound bus to meet the Akron man. A snafu, however, rerouted the trip through Cleveland, where she first saw the city's skyline. “It felt familiar to me,” said Bella of her initial impression of the city. The connection was immediate and so

indelible that she would later have an outline of the skyline tattooed on her forearm.

The couple traveled cross-country for visits as the relationship smoldered. Then in the spring of 2003, Bella noticed that “something was not adding up with my body.” In fact, an addition was well on the way—a baby. Her mother was furious and her boyfriend was pushing for the easy way out. Although Bella stood by a woman’s right to choose, she recalled, “That was not my choice.” Nor did she want her baby to be subjected to the wrath of her stepfather, so in August 2003, she headed east once again with more

Bella Sin in 2016.



permanent intentions. Welcomed by her boyfriend's family, she moved in with them. With that as a safe and nurturing haven, Bella, just days after her nineteenth birthday, delivered a healthy baby girl in December 2003.<sup>3</sup>

It didn't take long for the new mom to find an accommodating stage in the Buckeye State. Immediately on arrival, she began networking to form the fledgling Le Femme Mystique Burlesque troupe. Then in March 2004, less than a year after moving across the country and after some preliminary hiccups, she teamed up with fellow performers and new Le Femme members Venus Ecstasy, Black Rain, and Morgan Eire to rock the crowd at Akron's short-lived R/E nightclub, where they performed with another local troupe, the Rubber City Bombshells. The event marked Bella's Ohio debut as a performer and, perhaps more indicative of the future, her first effort as a producer.

Having had enough of shows populated with "skinny white girls parading around," Bella initially intended to bill Le Femme as a plus-sized burlesque troupe. "When I first formed the company," she said, "I wanted it to be about curvy and plus-sized women." After all, she had encountered plenty of outright rudeness and exclusionism in her quest for performance opportunities. "People would tell me I'm too fat to do burlesque and I was like: Why is that a problem?" She was also barraged with doubts about her capability as a businesswoman. All of the uncertainty was further compounded by discouragement on account of her ethnicity. When people learned of her Mexican heritage and status as an immigrant, she'd be told, "This is not for you."

In the face of unabashed racism, sexism, and body shaming, the vision of a plus-sized troupe expanded and Bella's indefatigable persistence kicked into high gear. "I kept on trucking because I wanted [the troupe] to be a standing platform of something visually diverse and inclusive." Considering her background, the impetus was innate. She didn't have to try to invite diversity. It came naturally. "It was about showing people that everybody's different—just like me."<sup>4</sup>

Bella Sin evokes Xochiquetzal, goddess of flowers, love, pleasure, and beauty, at the sixth annual Sweetheart Showcase in 2017.



**THE FORMATIVE YEARS FOR** Bella Sin's Le Femme Mystique Burlesque troupe spanned 2004 to 2010 and were marked with growth as well as the associated pains. Things did not work out for Bella and her daughter's father; the couple split. Bella, however, continued her pursuit of all things burlesque, learning as she went. She garnered entertainment experience from across the country, traveling to Chicago and New York to take burlesque classes. New performers signed on to Le Femme while others left. Some years Bella was the sole member, but the troupe soldiered on just the same, performing at area gay and drag clubs (the Voodoo and Interbelt in Akron, Cleveland's Bounce, and Youngstown's Utopia Video), as well as mainstream venues such as Cleveland's storied Peabody's Downunder and Luxe in the city's Gordon Square Arts District. Other opportunities took Bella to Columbus and Detroit, among other towns.

While shows weren't regular, the gigs kept coming and Le Femme survived while other troupes did not. Another troupe, the alt-burlesque/vaudeville Pussyfoot Girls, disbanded, as did the Rubber City Bombshells. Local interest in Le Femme, however, continued to grow. Given the lack of sources for burlesque training, Bella tutored Le Femme performers herself, offering six-week courses in a venture that would eventually become the more formal Cleveland Burlesque Academy.

So it went until 2010, when on an otherwise uneventful autumn day, Bella Sin's phone chirped. "I got a weird call from *Cleveland Magazine*," she recalled, adding that she initially thought it was a prank. It was anything but. She had been chosen as one of the periodical's "Most Interesting People" for its January 2011 issue. The honor was distinctive on its own, but it delivered unto Bella yet another definitive development for Le Femme. The magazine hosted a party for everyone on the list, including Cindy Barber, co-owner of the funky Beachland Ballroom and Tavern in the Waterloo Arts District in Cleveland's gritty Collinwood neighborhood.<sup>5</sup>

Cindy recalled the meeting. There were "a lot of people in that group that I kind of knew or knew about, but I didn't know this

*Facing page:*  
Signed show poster for the fifth annual Roxy Remembered memorial from 2015. (Photo courtesy of Ohio Burlesque.)

THE 5TH ANNUAL

# ROXY

## REMEMBERED

THE ANNUAL MEMORIAL TO THE ROXY BURLESQUE THEATER

FEATURING LIVE MUSIC AND ACCOMPANIMENT FROM

**MISS ALEXANDRA HUNTINGDON  
AND THE GENTLEMAN'S INTERMISSION**



SPECIAL GUEST APPEARANCE  
FROM BURLESQUE LEGEND

**TONI TELLING**



### STARRING

**LUSHES LAMOAN (DET)  
BELLA SIN (CLE)**

*17/20/11*

*Doll!*

*Bella Sin*

*Lushes Lamoan*

### CAST

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DAPHNE DANGERFIELD  
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7PM \$20 DOS**

*Ken Schneck*

HOSTED BY ABBY DOWNTON AND KEN SCHNECK

## BEACHLAND

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THE PARTY PEOPLE

*Daphne Dangerfield*

*Slim Pastie*

crazy red-headed vibrant person. We ended up talking because that's who Bella is. She's just a networker and outgoing and we ended up getting along really well." The relationship offered other possibilities. Cindy had a unique stage for which she "was always looking for new things." Bella had a unique act, one that hit a note for the club owner, who remembered the iconic Roxy Burlesque Theater from her childhood, when family trips downtown would have her peering out the window as the car glided by its exterior, which was lined with images of headlining performers. The "fancy ladies that were kind of provocative" fascinated Cindy. "Everybody knew about the Roxy, so I thought: This is great that she's bringing this back and I'll give it a shot." And on January 1, 2011, the Beachland hosted Le Femme. While the audience was scant, to say the least ("We had like five people," said Bella), that humble reemergence of burlesque in the Rust Belt would launch the rarest of phenomena: a second act in American life.<sup>6</sup>

After the New Year's Day show, things ramped up for Bella and the troupe. Show dates peppered the calendar. Audiences grew. Bella headlined the "Peek-A-Boo Review" at the Closet Door in Canton. A Sweetheart Showcase marked Valentine's Day at Akron's Musica Club (the mid-February show would eventually move to the Beachland and become an annual event). The troupe played the Warehouse in Canton in April. The Kent Stage booked Le Femme, as did the Garage Bar in Cleveland. Interest spread as far as New York and Pittsburgh.

Meanwhile, the connection between Bella and Cindy deepened both personally and professionally, with the Beachland becoming the de facto home for the troupe, particularly when it hosted the first of what would become an underdog success story: the Ohio Burlesque Festival. The concept for the show first emerged as Bella watched the popularity of her craft swell in 2011. "I had this crazy idea of starting a festival," she recalled. "So I did." She got the legal paperwork under way, launching Ohio Burlesque to serve as the production arm, and started soliciting performers from across the land.<sup>7</sup>

*Facing page:* Ms. B LaRose of Chicago dazzles the crowd at the first annual Hispanic Burlesque Showcase in 2017.



Following a kickoff party at Twist Social Club on the eve of the big event, on August 5, 2011, Bella and performers such as Miss Anna Sassin of Detroit, Cleveland's Rubi~nesque, and Steele Starling and Horchata Dentana, both from St. Louis, slinked, teased, and lured before a rollicking crowd at the Beachland. A portion of the proceeds from the sold-out show went to support the Domestic Violence Center of Greater Cleveland, illustrating a quieter component of Le Femme's efforts: championing local causes.

Since the Ohio Burlesque Festival's inception, the annual show has brought in national headliners and talent from across the continent as well as from around the globe, earning it international status. It's grown from a one-day event with twenty acts to three days of performances, sister events, workshops, receptions, and after-parties. In 2017, the seventh year of the festival, eighty different acts came from points near (Noella DeVille of Akron, Ohio) and far (Ruthe Ordare from Vancouver, British Columbia; LeopardLass from Port Adelaide, South Australia) and several points in between (Kougar DeVille of Colorado Springs, Colorado; Chicago's Boobs Radley; and Dolce Dream out of Austin, Texas). The eighth festival in 2018 followed suit with more than five dozen performers. Production upgrades along the way included professional lighting and videography by Sub Par Studios' Bryan Mravec and Cory Gottron, which elevated the look of the live shows and then delivered them to the world via YouTube. The festival has also supported an array of charities over the years, such as Equality Ohio, the LGBT Community Center of Greater Cleveland, sexual health care center Preterm, the AIDS Taskforce of Greater Cleveland, and Dare2Care, which aims to stop LGBTQ bullying.

Bella's endeavors at the Beachland soon extended beyond the annual festivals. When the audiences proved to be dependable, Cindy offered Bella first choice at calendar slots. Over the years, she has filled those dates with a host of shows with vintage movie themes such as *Some Like It Hot* and *Pin Up Girl* (homages to



the 1959 and 1944 films) and holiday and seasonal offerings ranging from the “Spring Fling Strip” and “Tease the Season” to “A Midsummer’s Night Strip.” Shows venturing out of the box have included “Odditease,” Nerdlesque “Stranger Things,” and annual Star Wars Burlesque shows.

“It’s our family at the Beachland,” said Bella of the venue’s owners, Cindy Barber and Mark Leddy, “and it’s because of them that we’ve had the success that we’ve had for the past seven or eight years.” The feeling is mutual. “It’s been a great association,” said Cindy, adding that the Beachland hosts the steady shows throughout the year and the large audiences rack up, per Cindy, “a pretty decent bar.” She also marveled at how Bella has cultivated a new community—the Cleveland burlesque scene, which includes volunteers, audience members, support staff, and performers who

Doll Bambino performs at the Third Annual Día de los Muertos Undead Burlesque Ball in 2014.

represent all genders and orientations. “It’s just amazing to me how nurturing she’s been to all walks of life,” said Cindy.<sup>8</sup>

On a more personal level, Bella has promoted shows in honor of her homeland with, among others, a Hispanic Burlesque Showcase in 2017 that coincided with Cinco de Mayo and another recognizing Día de los Muertos (Day of the Dead), a holiday that honors one’s dead kin and friends. “That was me as a producer, as a Mexican woman, trying to showcase how you should properly celebrate Día de los Muertos. I walked the girls through what they should do,” said Bella, noting that she included her personal altar honoring loved ones lost, and invited performers to add their own homages.<sup>9</sup>

Throughout her journey, Bella has performed in hundreds of shows, and her efforts have amassed an array of accolades, including those one might expect, such as the top prize of the 2015 Ohio Burlypics regional competitions, held annually in Columbus. The alt weekly *Scene* dubbed Le Femme Mystique as Cleveland’s best dance troupe in 2017. That same year, Bella also fulfilled a lifetime achievement, one she called a “dream come true.” Organizers of the prestigious Burlesque Hall of Fame Weekender show, held annually in Las Vegas, invited her to perform in the Movers, Shakers and Innovators Showcase, where she moved with “matador-like momentum” to the sounds of “Malagueña Salerosa” by Chingon. Billed as the “world’s sexiest fundraiser,” the popular four-day event supports the nonprofit Burlesque Hall of Fame Museum, which is also located in Las Vegas. “The fact that I got accepted with a number that was about me, my heritage, my family, made everything different in my life,” said Bella.<sup>10</sup>

The honors have stretched into a more formal, if not downright surprising, realm. The Cleveland City Council presented the Ohio Burlesque Festival with a certificate of congratulations sponsored by Ward 3 councilmember Joe Cimperman for its 2014 motto of Diversity, Unity and Inclusivity as representing “a community that is present and thriving world-wide.” That same



year, the Ohio House of Representatives extended its special recognition with a certificate stating, “We are certain that as this worthy endeavor maintains its dedication to diversity, unity and inclusivity, it will continue to grow and prosper and will follow in the tradition of excellence that has been its hallmark.”

Then in 2017, Bella received a Certificate of Recognition from Mayor Frank Jackson stating, “Bella Sin, dubbed Cleveland’s Burlesque Queen, is a community activist who has served causes for the LGBTQ community, women’s rights and immigrant outreach. An immigrant and devoted Clevelander, she continuously promotes inclusivity and unity among burlesque artists, locally, nationally and internationally.” Later the same year, the Ohio House of Representatives also personally recognized her for

Mr. Tuesday and Red Velvet help Bella Sin display her numerous accolades at the seventh Ohio Burlesque Festival.

her fourteen years of dedication to community activism and revitalizing a movement “that was thought gone.” House District 13 representative Nickie J. Antonio sponsored both state documents. The mayor also followed up in 2018 with yet another proclamation recognizing the Eighth Annual Ohio Burlesque Festival as a celebration of “87-plus years of Burlesque History,” as well as the event’s support of area nonprofits that “promote peace and human rights in Central America and Colombia.”<sup>11</sup>

Throughout it all, Bella has quietly nurtured the art of burlesque by way of the Ohio Burlesque Academy. As of summer 2018, it boasted more than 150 graduates, including students of all genders and orientations. As for the Le Femme troupe, it officially rebranded in 2019 with the new name of Cleveland Burlesque, and its ranks include more than 50 active and inactive members and staff, a far cry from the lean years when it was just Bella.

Of course, other burlesque troupes and shows have launched in Northeast Ohio: the Red Hot Heathens (self-billed as “a merry band of burlesque and variety performers”); Shrimp’s Oh! Strip! Show; Something New and Different (“a variety show set inside of a burlesque show”); Snapped Stiletto Productions helmed by performer/producer Ms. Fever Blister; Akron’s fledgling Midwest Nerdlesque Festival; and the more established Toxic Burlesque, which launched at Cleveland’s venerable Brothers Lounge in 2012.

Bella welcomes the competition. “It’s necessary to have multiple burlesque shows performing and producing and people being in the scene for me to be successful. It’s healthy,” she said. “Being the only show is the worst idea that anybody’s ever had because people like different things.”<sup>12</sup>

While her efforts are outwardly adorned with lipstick and rhinestones, Bella’s support and fostering of the burlesque movement are sometimes subtle and quiet—and always tireless. In order to preserve the history of the rebirth of burlesque in Cleveland, she creates a physical file for each new burlesque performer who comes to town and fills it with whatever pertinent



information she can amass, such as photographs and show flyers. Then a few times each year, Bella travels to Ohio State University's Jerome Lawrence and Robert E. Lee Theatre Research Institute in Columbus, which houses the Charles H. McCaghy Collection of Exotic Dance from Burlesque to Clubs among many others, and adds new files to the archives. "I'm obsessed with burlesque history," she said.<sup>13</sup>

Bella Sin has definitely made her mark, but the road from Juárez, Mexico, to becoming Cleveland's Queen of Burlesque has not been easy. After all, the American experience is formed differently when viewed through the eyes of an immigrant. "The American dream is nothing that you're handed," said Bella, noting that nationals are happy to welcome immigrants as nannies or

*From left: Ava Adore, Sable Starling, Doll Bambino, Peggy de Lune, Eliza Sidecar, Bella Sin, Constantinople Darling, and Twiggy Stardust (back) join Little OwlLee (kneeling) in a backstage celebration of the Roxy in 2013.*



hospitality and agricultural workers, but attitudes change when those same immigrants move to empower themselves. “Being enough for American people at times feels exhausting,” she added, citing high expectations of language, appearance, and behavior. “Nobody tells you about all that stuff and you get really frustrated and lonely.” Those feelings were particularly difficult to manage during the times when her daughter was with her father and his family and Bella’s kin was far away, in either Denver or Juárez. In those lonely stretches, she utterly immersed herself in her obsession.

“I clung to it,” said Bella, “and made my American dream work out.”<sup>14</sup>

*Facing page:* Bella Sin performs at the Beachland Ballroom in 2014.