The Australian
Women's Register

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Tilley’s Devine Café

(1984 -)

Born	19840101
Occupation	Caf?©

Summary

Tilley’s Devine Café may not rival its namesake in the arenas of vice and criminality, but in Canberra and beyond, this institution has been celebrated for providing originality and flair for over twenty-two years.

Details

Named after the colourful Tilley Devine, Sydney's infamous madam and 'Bordello Queen' of the 1920s, the café was established on the corner of Wattle and Brigalow Streets in Lyneham in January 1984 by owner and manager, Paulie Higgisson. On opening night a seating capacity of 60 was swamped by an eager crowd of 420.

With elegant, dark wood fittings, a moody, deep red colour scheme, and soft jazz wafting between the old-fashioned booths lining the walls, there are some things essentially nostalgic and cinematic about Tilley's romantic atmosphere, reminiscent of a Hollywood film noir. Its timeless in a way that's hard to emulate in a youngish, fickle town like Canberra, where high turnover of night spots seem inevitably dictated by the relative hip-factor of the décor, the DJ and the cocktail menu.

However, Tilley's has achieved more than just create a creative ambience and space of effortless charm; it has been blazing a trail on multiple fronts from its inception. Initially established to create a safe and comfortable environment for women, Tilley's caused its first commotion by banning groups of men drinking inside unless they were accompanied by at least one woman. 'I just didn't want a room full of blokes', Higgisson told the *Canberra Times* in 2003. Despite the uproar (generated generally by men) this door policy was maintained for two years, solidifying a non-threatening atmosphere, a considerate client base, and in the process unintentionally racking up a good deal of free publicity.

Tilley's is also in a field of 'firsts', being the first licensed outdoor venue in Australia and the first bar to ban smoking indoors, eight years before any laws were introduced to enforce such a scenario. As a mecca for serious music appreciation, Tilley's has over the years developed a formidable reputation within the industry and wider public. An awesome array of Australian and international artists have presented a continuous program for twenty-one years. Again an idiosyncratic policy of not serving food or drinks during performances so as not to detract from the show through the hubbub of drinking and dining marked Tilley's as a connoisseurs' choice.

While not originally conceived as a live music venue, Higgisson's skill and background as a music producer and sound engineer meant this side of the operation grew almost by osmosis. As an offshoot it became a remarkably strong trump card with Higgisson maintaining, in keeping with the Tilley's legend, that in the last eighteen years she has never had to try and book a musician. Instead there has been a steady stream chasing her – among them have been guitarists Jose Feliciano, Slava Grigoryan and Karin Schaupp, Canned Heat, Screamin' Jay Hawkins, legendary acts like the Animals, and songwriters like Jimmy Webb.

Unfortunately, this approach has become a victim of its own success – 'Keeping Music Live', at least on a regular basis, is now untenable. As Higgison explained in an article in the Canberra Times, 'The day the music died', 'We've had a fabulous reputation for our concerts and one of the reasons is that we keep the place pin-drop silent. It's an environment that both artists and audiences won't get anywhere else, except perhaps in a theatre. But by definition, it's financially an unproductive time for us, all in the name of the civility of the gig.'

For this reason, plus escalating overheads and the unrelenting nature of planning such a series of events, Tilley's famed weekly schedule of concerts ended with the 'Last Hurrah' on Sunday 30 October 2005. The news of Tilley's live music demise has been greeted with much dismay across Canberra and beyond. However the stage has remained and Higgisson intends to stage live gigs from time to time, such as for the Multicultural Festival in February 2006.

This entry was prepared in 2006 by Roslyn Russell and Barbara Lemon, Museum Services, and funded by the ACT Heritage Unit.

Published resources

Article
Brief biography of Tilly Devine, The Australian War Memorial,
http://www.awm.gov.au/fiftyaustralians/15.asp

Prostitution regulation in colonial and early federal Australia, Perkins, Roberta,
http://www.aic.gov.au/publications/lcj/working/ch2-1.html

Resource Section
Transcript of 'Razor Gang Feuds: Tilly Devine vs Kate Leigh',
http://www.abc.net.au/dimensions/dimensions_in_time/Transcripts/s485143.htm

Site Exhibition
From Lady Denman to Katy Gallagher: A Century of Women's Contributions to Canberra, Australian Women's Archives Project, 2013,
http://www.womenaustralia.info/exhib/ldkg

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