

Toni Savage BEM QSM

7 July 1919 - 23 Dec 2011

With thanks to Guy Cater for his eulogy in the Jan 2012 *Inside Entertainment*



Laura Joan Savage was born in Leicester, England, to Laura (b. Betteridge) and Leslie Savage. Les had been employed for 22 years on the *London Midland Scottish Railway* when the family emigrated to Auckland in 1929. He then worked at the *Farmer's Trading Company* and *L D Nathan*. He retired several times, once returning to help with a stock take and staying on; but finally giving up working in 1970.

Joan took piano lessons for a year but became entranced by the sight of some accordions in a Queen Street music shop window. Later she heard one being played at a friend's party and missed her supper to spend time questioning the musician and trying out his instrument. Seeing such interest her father purchased his 12-year-old daughter a *48 bass Alvari*. By the age of 16 she was playing at functions around town; in 1937 she was persuaded to enter a talent quest at the *Prince Edward Theatre* (later the *Mercury*) and came 2nd which led to a 3 month tour of the provinces; Taranaki, Waikato and the King Country, and a new full size accordion. Sadly the show went broke.

She attended *Seddon Memorial Technical College* and write stories and poetry which were published in the school magazine, *New Zealand Woman's Weekly* and *The New Zealand Herald*.



In 1938 Toni and the *Santos Brothers* were featured around Auckland as *The Three Mexicanos*. They played during intervals on the *Amalgamated Theatre* circuit and toured the North Island, playing; the *Hilux* in Wellington, the *Opera House* in Palmerston North, *The Regent Theatre* in Wanganui and so on until the trio folded in 1939.

Toni then joined *The Acardian Revellers*, performing with them in the evenings and doing her own act during the day. Other members of the *Acardian Revellers* were; Snow Beacham, Flo White, Lofty Woolford, magician Allan Matthews and Russell Middlebrook (aka *Biko* the trick cyclist). At the outbreak of WW2 in 1939 they were the first group to entertain the troops at the *Papakura Military Camp*. The group was kept busy, playing on the backs of lorries up and down Queen Street and adjacent side streets, raising funds for the *Patriotic and Sick and Wounded Fund*, and also performing up in army camps and air bases around the country.



In 1942 American forces 'invaded' New Zealand and the workload doubled. Toni entertained during the day at the *USA Navy Hospital* in Market Road and the *30th General Hospital* in Green Lane and later performed at the *Auckland Hospital* military annex, and at the *Downtown Club* and the *Welcome Club* at *St Matthews Church*.

The *Trocadero Dine and Dance* opened on Queen Street, featuring the *Johnny Madden Band* with Pat McMinn as vocalist. Female impersonator Johnny Hunter was also on the bill. 'I did floorshows there nearly every night from 1943 until it closed in 1951 to make way for the new *MLC* building', said Toni. Showtime started at 10.30pm, allowing her time for other performances earlier in the evening. All her shows were done free of charge except for the *Trocadero*. 'A girls gotta eat you know!' Toni reckoned.

She used the stage name Toni Savage but off-stage, after her first marriage, she was always known as Toni Swan. She made numerous appearances at *His Majesty's Theatre* including; *The Follies of 1943*, *Let's Go Places* and the *Switzerland Ice Show* which starred world champion ice skater Phil Taylor.

In 1944 Toni studied ventriloquism with the help of Allan Matthews aka *Allamatt the Magician*. Allan gave her a dummy which she named *Joe* and taught her the basics before heading off to New Caledonia to join the *Kiwi Concert Party (South Pacific)*. She branched out into comedy. '*Joe* worked really well for years but then I changed him for *Wonki Wolf*'.

After the war Toni was awarded a special *Certificate of Merit* by the *U.S. Navy* for 'exceptional co-operation and outstanding service.' It is interesting to note that only seven such awards came to Auckland and Toni was the only entertainer to be honoured in this way.



She began losing her sight when she was 18. Her first husband Chippy took her to England on their honeymoon in the hope that her eyesight could be saved but the specialists said nothing could be done and she faced inevitable blindness, which did occur in the early 1950s. Nevertheless, for 22 years Toni continued entertaining, arranging and promoting her own variety shows for clubs, senior citizens homes and various charities. Although blind she continued to make costumes for her concert party, even a pearly suit for herself and Chippy.

She was awarded the *British Empire Medal (BEM)* in 1969, receiving it personally from Queen Elizabeth II a year later. In 1971 Toni was a member of the *VAC Royal Command Performance* at the *St James Theatre*, produced by Les Andrews and Alma Woods. She was awarded the *Queens Service Medal (QSM)* in 1982 in recognition of her services in entertaining, fundraising and supporting many charitable organisations. The *VAC* presented her with a *Scroll of Honour* in 1973 and granted her Life Membership in 1980. She received the *Benny* in 1985 from Sir Robert and Dame Thea Muldoon, and a second *Scroll of Honour* on 2008.



In 1973 Toni started with the *NZ Guide Dog Association* and helped sponsor over 20 pups. She herself used guide dogs as her sight failed but stopped after her last dog aged. She had 4 from 1973; Relda, Belinda, Donna and Wendy. Toni was one of the first people to be trained with a guide dog at the newly built *Royal New Zealand Foundation of the Blind Guide Dog Centre* in Auckland.

She outlived two husbands, marrying Chippy Swan in 1949, who passed on in 1986, then Lloyd Canning in 1991 who she taught to play the accordion; he quickly joined *Toni's Troupe*. She and Lloyd travelled overseas several times including a world trip in 1995. He died in 1997.



June 1992 marked 50th years since the Americans had arrived in Auckland and a reunion concert was arranged by Sylvia Reilly. Toni brought our *Willy Wolf* and performed a number of songs from 'the good old days.'

Over the years she founded many variety troupes including *Toni and her Hillbillies* and *Toni's Gang*. *Toni's Troupe* performed it's last show in 1999. It had started at the *Query Social Club* where Toni organised a group of friends to perform regularly to raise funds for patients at *Cornwall Hospital*. Toni worked out the program, dance steps and costumes and even sewed all the costumes. The full variety show included comedy team Sylvia and Jack Rielly, Jack Read who did a chalk-talk act; magician Harry Leigh, who had been doing magic for over 40 years, and Taffy Davies who at 84 was a relative newcomer to entertainment.



After living in Mt Eden for most of her life, Toni moved to *Crestwood Village* in New Lynn where she continued performing at rest homes until a year before her death on 23 December 2011.

Her funeral celebration was advertised as 'Toni's Last Gig' with the subheading, 'This will be a celebration of Toni's life and in accordance with her wishes it will not be a gloomy affair!' Her many friends gave her a standing ovation, a *Variety Artists Club* tradition. VAC President Tom Sharplin pointed out, 'She always had a great energy that she brought to the room. People liked her very much, respected her and admired her talent. Ray Columbus said of her, 'Toni was an inspiration to us all.'

Toni's Last Gig 2011

