

Memories of Glitz and Glamour

In contrast to the nightlife in present day Beirut, the city's late night entertainment was in full swing in the sixties and seventies. Paris Franz writes about her mother's memories of Beirut in that period, when she worked as a dancer at the Casino du Liban...

Photo: The Casino du Liban, overlooking the Mediterranean — Photo: Sherry Wilson

FRESH from rehearsals in a grey and wintry Paris, Sherry Wilson arrived in Beirut in November 1968. She and her fellow dancers were to perform in the latest extravaganza from impresario Charley Henchis at the Casino du Liban, and they were happy to be there. Paris was cold and tense, battered by rioting students, while Beirut was sunny and chic, a fully paid-up member of the Swinging Sixties club. Sherry, complete with tousled Brigitte Bardot hair and mini-skirt, was not out of place.

Opened in 1959, the Casino was the centre-piece of Beirut's glitzy nightlife. Inspired by the casinos of Monte Carlo, it had a grand marbled entrance, two gaming rooms and an underground lounge, the Baccarat, which hosted spectacular floor shows.

The dancers were a cosmopolitan crowd. British, French, American, Polish, they all confess to a certain nostalgia for the good old days in Beirut. Sherry remembers the bewildering mix of peoples selling their wares in the souk at the Place du Canon and Babidriss, among them Armenians, Palestinians and Syrians.

Beirut was not a pretty city, but it was stylish. The women were always impeccably turned out, and the shops and boutiques of Hamra Street had the latest fashions. Beirut was at its most attractive towards the coast, an area of wide boulevards, palm trees and cafes on the Corniche, overlooking the sea with the waves lapping the curious rock formation in the bay known as Pigeon Rock.



Sherry backstage in her elephant riding costume. Photo: Sherry Wilson

When not performing at the Casino, Sherry and her fellow artistes enjoyed Beirut's many attractions. Every hotel had its lounge with entertainment, such as the Paon Rouge at the Hotel Phoenicia, with its Italian band and the Alexandria-born belly dancer Nadia Gamal. The in-place in the city was the Caves du Roy, a dimly lit underground cellar with rock walls, American dancers and the obligatory Italian band.

Sherry also visited some of Lebanon's other attractions, such as the Roman temples at Baalbeck. In those days Baalbeck was known, not for Hiz-bullah, but for the annual festival which attracted every kind of performer, from the Bolshoi Ballet to Miles

Davis.

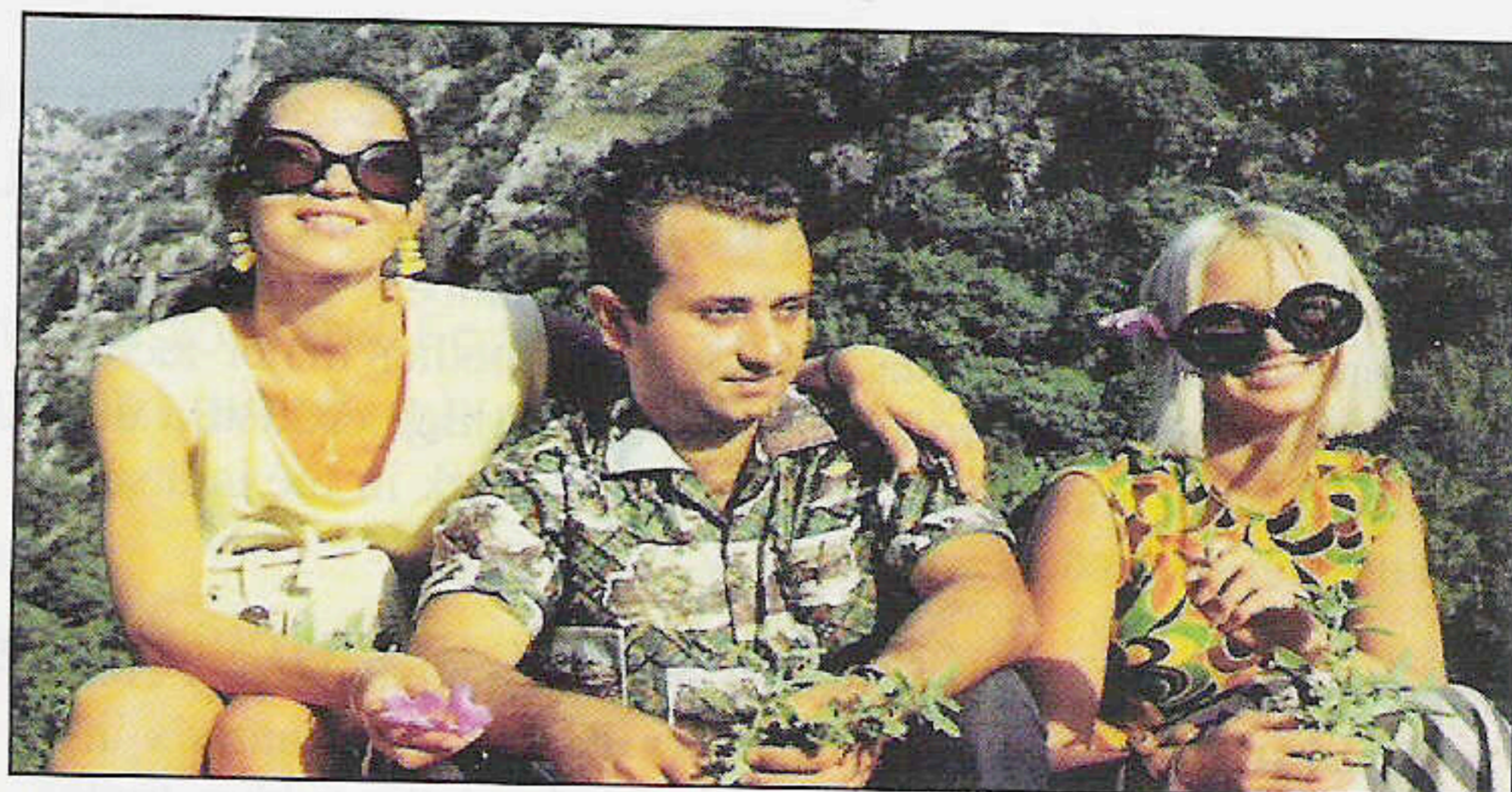
Lebanon had mostly managed to stay out of the wider problems of the Middle East, but they were never far away. Sherry recalls hearing a story that, although not directly involved in the Six Day War of 1967, the country adopted a precautionary black-out which gave rise to ironic enquiries as to the efficiency of the Lebanese electricity supply system.

Lebanon's delicate balance between Christian and Muslim began to unravel in the early 1970s. Tensions between the government and the Palestinian refugee camps, which had become virtually a state within a state, were increasing. An Israeli incursion into the heart of Beirut in pursuit of Palestinian leaders led to a blacked-out city and a jittery Lebanese Army.

Many Christians who usually lived in Muslim areas began to move, and road-blocks became more common. Sherry and her Italian boyfriend Carlo, a musician, had their marriage documents prepared in an office in the Muslim district of Sin-el-Fil while the sound of gunfire rang outside. On another occasion, Sherry found herself taking cover behind a parked car as shots were exchanged before warring factions.

Sherry and Carlo knew they would soon have to leave, although that proved to be easier said than done. The airport was still functioning, but they couldn't get to it as the road was blocked. Eventually managing to find passage on a Syrian cargo boat - it carried sheep, among other things - they arrived in Larnaka in Cyprus after sailing all night. A few days later they found themselves on their way back to Beirut, this time by plane. "It was the only way to use our plane tickets back to Europe," Sherry said with a certain bemusement.

They spent the night at Beirut's airport, sharing a meal of meatballs and rice with 300 Nigerian pilgrims on their way to Mecca, and then they were finally on their way home. They were confident they would be back before too long, that a solution would be found and Lebanon would revert to its normal playful self. As Sherry mused some 30-odd years later, "Who could have known that it would go on and on and on ...?"



Sherry (far right) and friends in the mountains near Beirut. Photo: Sherry