

Excerpted from “Forever a Dame” by Vanessa Carlisle. *NinthLetter*.
Spring/Summer 2006. Vol. 3, No.1

There is nothing quite like the Toledo Show—no zoot-suited jazz band, no burlesque troupe, no lounge act has the Toledo Show’s sultry appeal. Toledo Diamond brings Los Angeles a musical deliverance while his Cats play slow and his Dames dance in the shadows.

We Dames wear stretch-satin opera gloves in black, long ones that cover our elbows. Sunday nights at Harvelle’s, our gloves look sinister against the red velvet curtain, the hands of criminals arriving through the back door. The gloves creep across the red curtain and people wonder who we are, and what we’ve done, but we do not tell them. During the show, a Dame in a broken chair runs a gloved hand from her ankle to her hip and the blackness on her fishnets captivates the audience. They do not see the elastic springing from the fabric of the glove. They do not see the dirt from a hundred stages, dance floors, dressing rooms, caked in the fingers. They do not know that she is wearing gloves she had to borrow, because she lost her own in the basement of the last club. They hear the rhythm of her breath, a brush against drum, in the song. They see black gloves, red curtain, long legs, and smoke.

A Dame is an extension of the music, and the music is lithe as a snake. The music is a dark, funky jazz. The music is a saxophone, a guitar, an upright bass, a drum kit, a trumpet, and Toledo’s whispered song. The music is a musk that everyone wears home. *Going downtown for my baby*, Toledo sings, *everything’s going to be alright*. But the bass walks slowly, the saxophone weeps, and the beauty bleeds from what we know: everything is not alright. *Take me to the red light baby*, he says, *I need to be punished tonight*. *In the madness baby, in the sadness baby, in the horror baby, just let me hold your ankles tight...* Toledo closes his eyes and the band keeps talking. Watch your back girl, says the bass, I’m coming for you.