

La Coterie Café

The La Coterie Café located at 32 Avenue Road was one of the oldest and longest running of the Toronto coffee houses of the 1950s/60s. Located more or less across Avenue Road from the intersection of Avenue Rd and Yorkville Ave., it was well situated within the perimeter of the most active part of the Yorkville Village of the 1960's.

Daniel Tate and Rob Bowman in their book *The Flyer Vault: 150 Years of Toronto Concert History* (2019) outline the origins of La Coterie. In 1955 Messrs. Dewhurst and Bolger owners of the Concerto coffee house at 89 Bloor Street W. opened an offshoot at 32 Avenue Road calling it the Concertino. In early 1956, Denys Sterio and her husband purchased the Concertino from Dewhurst/Bolger and renamed it La Coterie Café.

It wasn't however, just a coffee house. It appears to have started as a somewhat Bohemian hangout for writers. Live music was probably offered earlier but direct references don't appear until early 1957. Nor was it a bare bones coffee house; it attracted at least in the early days, the "well heeled". Although only one musician (folk singer Greg Curtis) was identified by name in the Toronto Star, Globe and Mail or Toronto Telegram, the café embraced a broader range of music as indicated in the August 31, 1958 reference below. Compared to other coffee houses however, it was poorly advertised.

La Coterie café was not mentioned in the press searched, after January 1965

Updated: March 14, 2021

Picture from City of Toronto Archives as found by Mike Daley



1956

- Mar 30 Article in the- Mary Walpole's *Dining About the Town* G&M Mar 30th p.14 A description of the café and its attraction as a coffee house with "over 20 fabulous coffees are served". No music is mentioned but management is. "One of the reasons for the popularity of La Coterie, which is recently under the new management of a young husband and wife team is that the place has much charm."
- Oct 27 - Dec 15 Toronto Star classified advertisements In the Women's Section: Oct 26th p.53, Oct 27th p.42, Nov 16th p.57, Nov 17th p.43, Dec 15th p.40 "Anna, now at La Coterie Café, reading 2-7 daily, 32 Avenue Rd. WA 1-7371"

1957

- Feb 23 G&M classified advertisement G&M Feb 23rd p.38 "Where fashionable women meet. La Coterie, 32 Avenue Rd. Free entertainment by Toronto's foremost outstanding readers. John Irving and others hours 2-9."
- Mar 2, 5, 6, 9 G&M classified advertisements G&M Mar 2nd p44, Mar 5th p.32, Mar 6th p.29, Mar 9th p.43 "John Irving now reads at La Coterie, 32 Avenue Rd."
- Apr 5 An article by Zena Cherry titled *After a Fashion*: referencing **Greg Curtis** G&M Apr 5th p.13 "Up Avenue Rd. to La Coterie, closest thing we have to Montmartre's Lapin Agile in Paris where guests join in the singing. I'll bet **Greg Curtis** and his guitar know 300 folk songs, and in a dozen languages. Nice crowd too - university and art college students and young marrieds. Dr. and Mrs. Lipman came in after an evening of dancing at the Park Plaza, she in an expensive dress of champagne hued silk with all-over embroidery in Wedgewood blue, and her Alaska seal coat."

Apr 28	An article by Barbara Whalen <i>Sing A Song of Folk-Singing</i>	Tely Apr 28 th , p. 20 The article mentions that the “meetings are an outgrowth of an almost unknown Toronto club which meets once a month.” While the ‘unknown club’ “has a closed membership of twenty-five” the gathering at La Coterie is open to the public. The article also mentioned that Greg Curtis and Edith Fowke had been among the original members of the ‘private’ club and that it had been organized by Ruth Garten and Vivienne Stenson . The article went on to say that Greg Curtis was singing nightly at La Coterie. “Each Thursday Greg does double duty- spending half his time entertaining the customers and half leading and accompanying the club singing.” The article stressed that “Anyone interested in folk music and would like to join is welcomed, especially if he (I’ll assume she too) brings a new song... Within half an hour song choices may include Canadian ballads, songs in American dialects, Hebrew songs, and numbers which originated in South Africa.”
Jun 14-15 and subsequent weekends	Mike Snow and his Quartet	Music World Jun 22 nd “.... opened a two-night-a-week stint at La Coterie Café on Avenue Road, Toronto, June 14.” and “the group’s line-up is Mike Snow (piano); Russ Ferron (drums); Alf Jones (trombone), and Russ Grant or Johnny Jones (bass). This entry thanks to Mike Daley
Aug 31	An article by Patrick Scott titled: <i>Squares May Not Know It, but Toronto’s Hip</i>	G&M Aug 31 st p.A21 “The success of live jazz as entertainment has benefitted its local practitioners. They are finding after hours havens all over the city: a dixieland quartet at La Coterie on Avenue Road.”

1959

Aug 11 and 13 Toronto Star classified advertisements
Star Aug 5th p.53, Aug 10th p.40, Aug 11th p.43 , and Aug 13th p.52 *“Waitresses ... experienced 5-2. Apply in person to La Coterie Café, 36 (an error in the listing?) Avenue Rd.”*

1963

Apr 13, 19, 20 G&M classified advertisements
Apr 13th p.48, Apr 19th p.50, Apr 20th p.52: *“La Coterie Café Continental Kitchen Famous Turkish Shish-Kabab, 20 different kinds of coffee, entertainment.”*

Nov 29-30,
Dec 6-7 and
13-14 **Greg Curtis**
Tely Nov 30th in its Saturday-only “What’s Going On” section first lists “Le” Coterie as *“who introduced Toronto to after hours folk singing”* returns week ends only. After the Dec 7th and 14th listings in What’s Going On, La Coterie disappears from this section until the Jan 25th edition.

1964

Jan 24-25, Jan 31-Feb 1 Feb 7-8, 14-15, 21-22, 28-29 **Greg Curtis**
The Tely for these four weeks lists “La” Coterie in the What’s Going On section with *“Greg Curtis, first of Toronto’s folk singers on Friday and Saturday nights”*. The telephone number is listed rarely but remains WA 1-7371 per the Jan 25th listing. After the 29th the listing disappears from the What’s Going On listing, moving to the After Four section

Feb 19-20 until
July 24-25 **Greg Curtis**

The Tely starting Feb 20th in the second edition of the *Chum About Town* listings in its new After Four section, lists Greg Curtis with the now familiar "*Toronto's first folk singer*" message, on Fridays and Saturdays (from 9).

Jul 30

Tely Jan 30th continuing La Coterie's listing in its After Four section, now promotes La Coterie as "*One of the earliest European coffee houses to perk up in the village, the Café has candles and folk singers for atmosphere*". But no specific reference to Greg Curtis.

Aug 13

Tely Aug 13th - the last listing for La Coterie in After Four for a while

Sep 25-26 and
subsequent
weekends until
the next entry **Greg Curtis**

Tely Sep 24th - still in the After Four Section (p.4): Greg Curtis "*Toronto's first folk singer returns to sing Friday and Saturday nights 9-2*"

Nov 27-28,
Dec 4-5, 11-12 **Greg Curtis**

Tely Nov 26th After Four p. 2 - the message changes: "*Greg Curtis strums and sings on Friday and Saturday*". La Coterie does not appear in the Dec 17th or 24th listings (a Christmas break?)

1965

Jan 1-2, 8-9,
15-16, 22-23,
29-30 **Greg Curtis**

Tely Dec 30th, Jan 7th, Jan 14th, 21st, 28th in the After Four section. The After Four "About Town" listing itself ends the following week with the Feb 4th edition.

After that there are no further references to La Coterie in any of the three press outlets, beyond the odd look back.

Data collection

These listings are a composite of what appeared in the Toronto Telegram's (the Tely) *What's Going On* listing in the Showcase Section and the *Chum About Town* listings in the After Four Section (Feb 1964 - Feb 1965) augmented by electronic searches of the Toronto Star (Star) and Globe and Mail (G&M) archives from the mid-1950s on. Where I take words directly from a listing I use "quotation marks" and often italics to separate their words from mine. Where I cite an article I reference the reporter if identified. Sometimes scans and electronic records are hard to read or mistakes in spelling are made by writers.