

# Performer owes career as impressionist to influence of Rich Little

By ASHTAR ANALEED MARCUS

It took a well-timed jackpot win at a casino in Coral Springs, Fla., for Tom Stevens and his wife, Perla, to move to Las Vegas and begin his showbiz career.

Stevens, 48, does more than 100 impressions through songs and acts at the Suncoast Casino in his show "An Evening with Dean and Friends," named after his key tribute to Dean Martin.

He writes, produces and stars in the one-man show.

"We came out here with the money and a 16-show promise and that's it," Stevens said. "And those 16 shows led to more shows and more shows and more shows."

Stevens began practicing his celebrity tributes at age 12 and continued through his teenage years while participating in high school plays. "I did impressions back then," he said. "I used to impersonate a lot of teachers at school, and it got a lot of laughs."

He performed in "Guys and Dolls," "Oliver Twist" and was the master of ceremonies for the high school talent troop.

"I played all kinds of sports, but I always loved to be in the plays and the productions," Stevens said. "I started doing impressions at a very young age. I got my first tape recorder when I was 14."

Stevens said he used the recorder to listen to himself doing impressions of presidents and singers and to make improvements.

He credits his inspiration for his achievements in the business.

"Rich Little was my idol," Stevens said of the popular Las Vegas impressionist. "He was my mentor. I did impressions of Rich Little doing impressions. I truly owe a lot of my craft to watching Rich over the years."

Stevens said his biggest thrill was meeting Little and having him at one of the shows.

His methods elicit laughter from the audience. And he adheres to his system of hours of research through repetitive listening and video viewing of facial expressions and voice intonations to master each character.

"An impression is an exaggeration, it's a caricature of somebody's voice," he said. "You try to pick out distinctive characteristics and mannerisms in their voice, and you exaggerate it."

His wife of nearly 10 years,



MIKE STOTTS/NEWS STAFF PHOTO

Impressionist Tom Stevens performs in the Suncoast.

Perla, has been acting as his sound manager, running all the tracks backstage.

"Oh my god, I never get bored, never get tired," Perla Stevens said. "We've been doing this for eleven years. I still laugh after 11 years. I love watching him."

The two, who live in Garden Glen, each had an interest in the entertainment industry and had their first date at Perla's improvisational theater class in Florida.

Tom was a professional cosmetologist with more than 20 years of experience, which he said helps him style his hair to match his characters including growing sideburns, curling and spraying it gray.

The couple was determined to perform in the area. While in Florida, they bought a Great Pyrenees dog and named him Vegas for good luck, Tom said. Shortly after, Perla struck the \$29,000 jackpot on the slot machines that funded their move across the country.

Perla continues to be supportive and involved, designing his compact disc covers and doing the computer work.

"I'm always more nervous than he is," she said. "He's like in his own living room when he's on stage. He's just so relaxed, and he loves to look at the audience's reactions. And I'm a nervous wreck; I just want it to go right for him."

And Perla has competition as his biggest fan.

"Why, when he does Tony Bennett, it's better than Tony Bennett, himself!" said Julie Paradise of The Lakes, who has not missed a show since

its inception.

"He actually becomes that individual, and I feel that he's in his soul," Paradise said. "When you go in there, you are removed from the reality of chaos. You go into an era where everybody appreciated everybody. And you're just being mesmerized by his talent."

Tom Stevens' 90-minute show is packed with jokes and songs from the Rat Pack actors of the 1960s, including Sammy Davis, Jr., and Frank Sinatra.

"Vegas should not lose touch of where it started and who started Las Vegas," he said. "I tributed all these people that started Las Vegas, and I feel that there should be a show or showroom available that would allow me to bring this whole era back."

Stevens changes the show for his repeat audience members and loyal fans by staying aware of current events in the media and incorporating them into the show. He is sympathetic to his audience.

"I bring them back to a time when they were necking in the car listening to Andy Williams or driving down the beach listening to Paul Anka," Stevens said. "If I can make them laugh, and for that split second you're forgetting about your problems, you forget you have a sick mom at home and have a bill to pay, to me, that's

worth everything. That's why I was put here."

A highlight of the act is dubbed the Hollywood karaoke party where Stevens impersonates celebrities "that love to sing but can't," he said. The twelve famous voices that sing include Peter Faulk, Arnold Schwarzenegger, Kermit the Frog, Richard Nixon, Bill Clinton, Jimmy Stewart, Clint Eastwood and Truman Capote.

"When he does Jerry Lewis, it's hysterical," said fan Arlene Farwell, 78. "And when he does Tom Jones, we all throw thongs and bras on the stage. I furnish them to all my guests. It's a fun night."

Farwell said she and her friends have become part of the hysteresis of the show, throwing 32 DD bra and bloomers on stage.

The fans who frequent the show have gotten to know one another and become friends, making the show as much an

interactive social gathering as a viewing experience.

"It's just like a family," Farwell said. "It makes your life so nice that you can do these things and be friends with all these people."

Stevens said he recently made it through two rounds of auditions out of 7,700 people to appear on the popular "Deal or No Deal" TV show next season. He finds out if he has been selected for the show in September.

The Suncoast Casino show is on two days a month. Stevens next appears as his cast of characters on July 10 and July 24. Tickets are \$15 per person and the performance begins at 7 p.m.

Samples of Stevens' music and character photos can be viewed at [www.deanofdeans.com](http://www.deanofdeans.com).

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