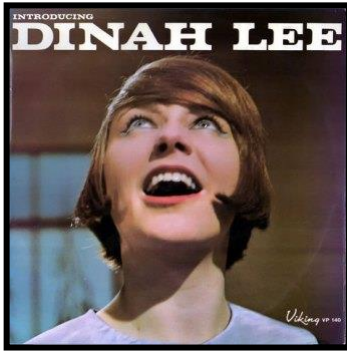


# Dinah Lee



**Diane Marie Jacobs** was born in Waimate on 19 August 1946 and brought up in Greymouth where her parents owned a hotel. They divorced when Diane was 10 and she moved through a number of foster homes until she finally went to live with the Hamiltons on a little farm in Christchurch. 'I used to get out in the concrete shed where they used to cool the milk – fabulous acoustics – and warble away. I had a radio and loved listening to the hit parade once a week and the Sunday requests where you would hear the latest pop stuff. I saved up and bought a little gramophone and records; Lonnie Donegan's skiffle group and of course *Rock around the Clock*. I adored seeing Elvis Presley in the movies.'

Her father moved to Christchurch selling carpets in a department store and on weekends he ran a teen dance venue called *The Country Club*. He encouraged Diane to perform. 'I learned songs like *Splish Splash*, the Bobby Darin hit and some Connie Francis and Brenda Lee material. I used to starch all my petticoats; big skirts and tight belts and little sweaters or shirts and pedal pushers with long shirts or jumpers. I had the Toni home perm. You'd have your hair set every week and go to bed every night in hair rollers.'

As a 15-year-old she had her first professional gig with *Bobby Davis & the Dazzlers* in a small hall and they later worked in a coffee lounge. After leaving *Cashmere High School* in 1961 she worked as a shorthand typist at *Princess Margaret Hospital* and began working with Christchurch group *The Saints*, dating their guitarist and vocalist Phil Garland. By year's end Lee and Garland had formed *The Playboys*.



'*Max Merritt and the Meteors* had travelled up to Auckland to do the *Top Twenty Club* and when they went on a tour they asked the *Playboys* to come up and fill in for a month, playing lunch hours and every night. All of a sudden we were full-time musicians. I got a job in *Farmers* and then became an instructress at *Silhouette Health Studios* where I would sneak out to the *Top Twenty* because they had lunch-hour gigs with *Max Merritt and the Meteors* or *Ray Columbus and the Invaders*. I'd sit there and have a cup of coffee and they would let me

sing a few songs.'

Jackie Holme cut her hair into a new mod look then redid her face with very pale foundation and lots of mascara, no lips. Wearing one on Jackie's little shift dresses that night at the *Top Twenty*, Diane had her new image. '*The Casual Shop* started making me long mod dresses to perform in and for shots. People would literally stop in Queen Street and stare at you. I started wearing white nurses' stockings and they became a big thing. My friend Bobi and I bought bushmen's singlets and wore them with a pair of boots and called them mod dresses. Same with football shirts. We did all these crazy things just to be completely different.'



'I got a phone call from Jim Haddleton who was on tour with Peter Posa, Lou and Simon, *Max and the Meteors* and Lynn Barnett. One of Lynn's parents had died so they had to get another girl singer. Jim talked to Ron Dalton from *Viking Records* and he arranged for me to do some demos to send to Wellington. Wellington liked them so I recorded *Don't You Know Yokomo?* and *Reet Petite* with *Max Merritt and the Meteors*. I'd found them myself on albums. In those days no one really wrote material, you covered other people's material. In the sixties you changed your name so we wrote down names and threw them in a hat. Diane Lee!!!!!! *Don't You Know Yokomo* went out as Diane Lee then Wellington announced, 'We've changed her name to Dinah Lee' and the record was re-released in 1964 under Dinah Lee.'

Jim Haddleton became her manager and she joined the *C'mon* and *Let's Go!* Television shows. 'I made an album before *Bluebeat* came out. Making an album only took two days; it was the time when dances were all the rage and I made one up for *Bluebeat*, bending my knees, swivelling my hips and putting my hands in the opposite direction. It was all quite spontaneous but it really caught on.'



She was on tour when Haddleton said to her, 'You've just gone to number one in Australia, knocking the Beatles off.' 'All of a sudden I had my own touring show, *The Dinah Lee Spectacular*. Then I went to Australia for *Sing Sing Sing* and was picked up at the airport in a Rolls Royce. Later *Channel Nine* flew me over for a whole month and put me up at the *Chevron* in the Cross. I did *Saturday Date* and *Bandstand* and another Saturday show every week. And everywhere I went I got mobbed. When I performed with Millie Small at the *Meyer Music Bowl* in Melbourne there were 60,000 kids screaming.'

'I went to America in '65 to do *Shindig*. I did a duet, *Hit the Road Jack*, with Glen Campbell and sang with Ray Charles and the *Righteous Brothers*. I released records over there but they were through smaller independent labels and that was a mistake. Also I was a mod and they hadn't seen that look before. I saw one weird couple in long hair and furs. It was Sonny and Cher but they weren't in the show. They hadn't made it yet.'

In 1965 Dinah won the first *New Zealand Entertainer of the Year Award*, went back to America for *Shindig* again then returned to do her *Dinah Lee Farewell Tour* before moving to Sydney in October. 'We were the in-crowd in Sydney; we set the trends and we were in the papers all the time. One day I bought a *Union Jack* flag and made a top out of it and wore it on television; it was discussed in parliament that I had defaced the Queen's flag. I went from a pop singer to club singer, did the hotel circuit and toured Australia. During the day she represented *Yardley Cosmetics*, did store appearances and appeared on TV ads.'



'I went to Vietnam in '66, sponsored by the Australian government and they gave me a medal.' At the end of '67 she moved from Mod to Hippie. In '69 she went to England but it did not work out and she returned to Australia broke then sued her manager who finally settled out of court. 'In the seventies I went to Mexico City and did a thing with the *Vegas Revue*

for eight months. Then I came back and joined up with Johnny O'Keefe who used to host *Sing Sing Sing* and we did these fabulous shows called the *Good Old Days of Rock and Roll*. I did a whole year with Dick Emery in '78, throughout Australia.

She married her manager Doug Jansen and moved to Bangor, New South Wales. In the nineties Dinah joined a country rock band called *Astro Cowboys* and went back to school taking a public relations course, then a business and computer course. 'I started running and then the gym thing happened. I won the Australasian body-building over-thirty-five section.' She is still singing, returning occasionally for gigs in New Zealand.



On 24 March 2007, Lee was inducted into the *RockoNZ Rock Hall of Fame*, alongside Ray Columbus and Max Merritt. She released a new album, *Islands*, in 2006 on *Waterfront Records* and from December 2010, Lee became a board member of *Phonographic Performance Company of Australia*. She received the *VAC President's Medal* in 2019, was inducted onto the *NZ Music Hall of Fame* in 2020, and her star on the *Orewa Walk of Fame* was unveiled on 30 June 2024. Dinah received the *VAC Benny Award* on 9 November 2025.