

# AUSTRALIAN IN PARIS

Val Myers, of Melbourne, finds her freedom dancing in a Latin Quarter cellar. She knows a few words of French.

ALONG the Boulevard Saint-Michel, in Paris, saunters a young, beautiful, strangely-dressed girl. Her long, flaming red hair is flying loosely in the cold wind. She is wearing thin khaki trousers and sandals and a big camelhair coat. People wave and smile at her across the wide boulevard. Valerie Myers, 20-year-old, Sydney-born and Melbourne-bred, once a prominent member of St. Kilda's bohemia, nude artists' model while still a teenager, creative ballet dancer, and part-time painter and poetess, has become one of the best-known figures in the Latin Quarter of Paris.

Val's philosophy is that she "doesn't expect anything from life." But since she arrived in France in August last year she has lived happily knowing little more than a dozen words of French, eating only when she has had money to spare, dancing through the night and sleeping "when there was time for that sort of thing."

When she is not wearing khaki trousers and sandals, it is sure to be black slacks and riding boots. Sometimes a black blouse hangs loosely about her slim waist, or if the mood takes her she tucks a boyish shirt into her belt. When it is cold Val borrows an overcoat from one of her friends, not caring how big or small it is, whether it's a boy's or girl's, as long as it keeps her warm. But in spite of this strange collection of clothing she usually manages to look attractive.

Wherever she goes she carries an ancient black satchel full of photographs, drawings and poems. The drawings are mostly of sad, wistful faces with big eyes and full lips, profiles, sketched portraits, caricatures. The photographs are of Valerie Myers—nude studies alive with movement, and close-ups of her unusual face. The poems are about life and dancing.

Dancing is Val's ruling passion. It has been since her childhood. She danced when she was four, and today her dancing, mostly at a small, dim Paris cabaret called *Tabou*, in Rue Dauphine, right in the centre of the Saint-Germain-des-Pres quarter, is as fiery as her red hair.

Down three steps from the street is a little bar with high stools around it and not much light. In the background are tables and chairs, and several very dark, private-looking corners. That is the *Tabou*. At the bar thick, steaming-hot onion soup (red wine inclusive) is 125 francs (about 2/6). A big notice says *Ouvert toute la nuit* which, translated into a simpler tongue, means "Open all night."

Val is hardly ever in the bar. She haunts the underground "dance floor" of the *Tabou*. A narrow, wooden staircase leads downstairs from the bar; a guard standing at the top to make sure that only those who are known reach the cellar-like cabaret. It is the kind of place which people say is "full of atmosphere." But the atmosphere is hot, smoky, dim and jazzy. There are tables and benches along the walls, and the floor space for dancing is a tiny

rectangle, not much more than one yard wide and six yards long. The band blares noisily from a platform at one end of the rectangle and the music echoes loudly from the low, curved ceiling.

Whereas strangers have to pay fantastic prices to gain entry to this dive (it costs more than £1 apart from eating and drinking) Val comes and goes as she pleases, without any charge at all. Sometimes she even gets a free meal. She is considered a regular attraction at the *Tabou*, even though she dances there non-professionally. Almost any night she is there from 9 p.m. till early hours of the morning. She performs in bare feet, and even students and artists who inhabit the place stare as the hot rhythm sends trembles of delight through Val's dancing, writhing body.

Mostly Val wears tight black or khaki slacks and a red woollen shirt, almost skin-tight. Around her 22-inch waist she sports a wide leather belt. She loves dancing most to negro tunes. "Negro music has always appealed to me," she says. "The sad, sobbing notes of the blues move me, and when I dance it's not only my body which dances but my soul, too. It's just as though my soul is talking with the music."

## She expects nothing from life

At the *Tabou* Val has met people from the theatre and other, bigger Paris nightclubs. Once after she had danced a man from a cabaret in Milan had wanted to sign her on. She turned the offer down. She loves Paris and wanted to stay there. Anyway, things were looking up and Val could afford to share a small room, which she hadn't always been able to do. She believes that some day she will dance in little black tights (to show off her shapely legs) and "a bit of something on the top," and get paid for it. But her heart isn't in it. "I will probably fail to become a public success because of my inability to make plans for the future," she says. "I get too much pleasure from dancing spontaneously. I like to sip off my sandals wherever I am and dance just when I feel like it. I hate the idea of going to the same expensive cabaret each night, doing the same set dance before the same well-dressed, wealthy, smug audience."

When people ask Val what her ambition is, she laughs. "Why must everybody have a set ambition?" she asks. "I merely want to live, to dance, to get as much out of life as possible, to experience as many things and feel as many feelings as possible. I'm not like other girls. I don't expect anything from life, or from anybody, for that matter. That is really my whole philosophy. Older people can't grasp this. But they can't expect much more from young people today because the whole world is so unsettled and the future so uncertain."

Val writes poems when the urge takes her. She has written one about herself. It



Val Myers has a sultry look and unorthodox clothes that fit the Parisian scene more than the conservative Australian cities she quit.

is like a strange self-portrait, painted in words:

*Like a puppet moved by unseen hands,  
I wander in and out of nights and days.  
Is it an eternity?  
God! It tears my soul apart.  
They call it music.  
I dance.*

Valerie's long hair, often unkempt, is a fiery red color. It is quite natural, and has a golden tinge in the sunshine. A fringe covers the best part of a high, intelligent forehead. Her blue eyes, large and sad and expressive, are accentuated by long black eyelashes and dark eyebrows. She wears little other make-up than mascara. The full, well-curved lips are more often than not without lipstick. Her high cheekbones, straight nose and delicate chin all help to make her face into a perfect subject for a professional photographer.

Sometimes a mysterious, wistful smile plays on her beautiful, oval-shaped face, but sometimes it can look hard and cruel. Val says that often artists along the left bank of the Seine have begged her to stand still while they paint or draw her. "In Australia people thought I was different," she said. "Perhaps some called me attractive. But here in Paris everyone says that I'm beautiful."

Valerie Myers was born on August 2, 1930, in a little house in Tincombe Street, Canterbury, Sydney. When friends and relatives came to look at the new Myers baby, the first thing they noticed was her bright red hair. The baby grew into a thin, energetic, imaginative child. "Even when I was very young I lived in a world of my own," she says. "The only clear thing I can remember about life in Sydney was that I used to lie awake in a great big bed and look at the world through old colored windows."

She used to dance around the lounge room to radio tunes when she was four, her mother always told her. "But I never jiggled," she says. "I didn't like to watch people jiggling up and down to jazz at parties when I was young. I could always feel the music inside me, and moved according to my feelings. I still do. I remember getting very excited about certain music."

Then the Myers family moved to Melbourne. Valerie recalls that she was then old enough to go to school. She didn't get on at school. She used to find herself in trouble



An artist and a poet—as well as a dancer—Val Myers created this big-eyed, self-portrait.

for drawing weird, ugly faces on the backs of exercise books, and wasn't interested in most of the things being taught. Often she sat and dreamed.

When she was 12 she started learning classical ballet, but she didn't like that either. "It was too stiff and unexpressive for me. It wasn't what I wanted." She gave up her classes for a time. Then she spent a year with a Viennese woman "who helped me develop powers of self-expression in my dancing." She was given special rates because she was talented, and paid only 2/- a week.

With people who were running a creative ballet school in Melbourne Val spent three years, on and off, finishing with them only just before she left Australia. She made her dancing debut in the Union Theatre, Melbourne, to wild Spanish music, has also danced in Melbourne's Town Hall and the Assembly Hall.

During her dancing studies Val left school for good, and took rooms in St. Kilda with student friends because, she says, she was restless. In Melbourne people took Val for an exhibitionist. She walked around the city in shabby green corduroy slacks, a black polo neck jumper, a faded green corduroy jacket, and old flat-heeled shoes. When it rained, a bright green beret was perched on top of the bright red head. "They were about the only clothes I had because during my dancing studies I had no money to buy others," she says. "I became attached to them and still wear them in Paris, where they are appreciated more and people don't look at me unkindly. Lots of young students in Paris have no money and go around in quite ragged clothing."

In Melbourne Val was a bohemienne, and didn't care who knew it. But she remained restless. With other restless young people she got together often to talk, write poetry, read, draw weird faces, play records and dance queer, self-invented dances. "I loved Australia, and still do, but I couldn't settle down there and was unhappy," Val explains. "It's too conventional for me. Perhaps you can make a life of your own, but you're running into opposition all the time."

Her parents, her two sisters and her brother had got used to the red-haired, trousered girl and her quaint mode of living. Sometimes they did not hear from her for a long time. In Paris these days Val goes to the Australian Embassy to pick up letters from home. That is the only permanent address she has given her family and friends in Australia. Her mother sends Val a few pounds occasionally. "A great help at times when I've been down and out," she comments. She writes back thanks to her mother, and then not another word from her for months.

### The first time she saw Paris

In June 1950 Val finally decided to leave Melbourne. "It was unbearable to feel people's eyes drilling into me and hearing nasty things whispered about me as I walked past. I did not flee from Australia, really, but I wanted to find some other part of the world where I could lead a more undisturbed life." She wanted to work her way to the Continent, but her mother gave her the money to buy a ticket, and a month later Valerie Myers was on a tourist ship bound for Marseilles, France.

In 1950 Val saw the mountainous Cote d'Azur for the first time, and some hours later her ship, *RMS Maloja*, had berthed in Marseilles. Three days later she arrived in Paris after standing all night in the corridor of a packed train. She got off the train with no friends to visit, very little money, few clothes, but a great desire to live as she had always wished to live—her own life, nobody to worry her, nobody to answer to. She spent her first week in Paris looking around the Latin Quarter. She stayed for a few days at a place called *College Franco Britannique* in the grounds of the City University, but didn't like it there, and moved into a very cheap room. "I fell in love with Paris straight away. My first impressions were

that here was a place full of color and full of life."

But before settling down in Paris she paid a visit to London. In Regent Street and Piccadilly she was met again by cold British stares. So she decided London was not a healthy place for her, and used up most of the little money she had left to buy a ticket back to Paris. She returned to the Latin Quarter. "That is where I feel at home most."

Then Val had bad luck. She was short of money, didn't eat enough and fell sick. She had to visit a hospital, was told to take it easy for a while. "Malnutrition isn't at all uncommon among students in Paris," she says. "Especially in the first few months of living there it's hard, because you don't know your way about. You have to learn the ropes and find out where to eat well and cheaply. Then later you get to know the student restaurants, where you get some kind of a meal for 60 francs (1/4). And when we're very broke we go into a dirty old place which sells soup at 10 francs a bowl. Our meal would be three bowls of awful soup."

Soon after her return from London Val made some close friends. In most cases she doesn't know their second names, or exactly what they do. But they all stick together and help one another, buy each other meals, and lend money when the need arises. Her best friends are Margot, an attractive American girl, who is a poetess of sorts, and whose father is a rich New Yorker; Gerard, a tall, lean, dark-haired French artist; and Pepita, a young, raven-haired, slant-eyed beauty who sings Spanish songs at the *Tabou* cabaret. She speaks to her French friends in animated sign language. She has no desire to learn French, says it is necessary to know only some colloquialisms and slang to get along. She retains a broad Australian accent and is proud of it.

Because of her unusual appearance, Val believes, she was grabbed by police during a raid on the well-known *Cafe du Pont* in the Boulevard Saint-Michel. She had been spending a lot of time there, sketching patrons, selling the drawings and buying food with the money. With her drawings and dancing Val still manages to eke out a meagre living. One evening police raided the cafe and about 30 students, Val among them, were bundled into patrol cars and whisked to the nearest police station. Their papers were examined one by one after they had waited in a large room for several hours.

When it was Val's turn she told police that she had been sketching the cafe's patrons, and asked whether there was anything wrong with that. The policemen said, no, there was nothing wrong, it was merely a routine check-up, but would the young Australian "Mademoiselle" please show them her drawings? "Our interview finished with my sketches strewn all over the big desk in the police office," she says. "Two inspectors closely examined them, praised my work highly and politely showed me out the door telling me they were great lovers of art."

It seems that Paris infuses into people like Valerie Myers an almost superhuman vitality.



Down a narrow street that breathes Paris she walks in pants, sandals and an old coat, carrying always her old artist's satchel.

Some days she has nothing to eat, and after hours of dancing and walking the cold streets, seeks refuge in an all-night cafe because she can't afford to rent a room for the night. Yet she counts these sleepless nights among her most valued experiences. "It's super," she says. "Lots of students with bags under their eyes walk the streets all night or sit in cafes because they haven't any money for rooms. We talk and sketch and write till the dawn rises, but we mustn't fall asleep because then the cafe proprietors have the right to throw us out, and they usually do it, too."

When people ask Val what she has seen in Paris she usually replies, "Nothing, except life." She hasn't been to the Louvre. "Art galleries are a bad place to see art." She refuses to go up the Eiffel Tower. "Not a bit interested in the usual tourist attractions." She says she loves the narrow, cobbled streets and the way the stones shine in the lamplight at night after rain; the very old houses, their walls crooked and cracked with age; and at nightfall the blue mist over Paris.

And so life goes on for Valerie Myers, a strange life, an exciting life, a hungry and sleepless life, but a life she has been searching for and loves, a life of her own. "It's the type of existence only some people enjoy," she says. "For those who don't mind uncertainty, and don't worry too much about the morrow, life here is perfect." Of the perfect life, and Paris, and the blue mist in the evenings, Val writes:

*We sit in the dusk  
on the stairs below the Sacre Coeur,  
Gazing out through the blue haze  
on the lights of old Paris.  
We sit as a million others have sat before,  
on the stairs below the Sacre Coeur.  
To the ghosts of those who are with us now,  
tomorrow we are the ghosts of yesterday.*