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Tributes to dazzling Donie, allegedly murdered by Carlisle nightclub king Tom Foster



Tom Foster with his wife Donna (Donie) Vee



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A charismatic former Carlisle nightclub boss has appeared in court charged with murdering his 67-year-old wife.

Tom Foster, 75, once the driving force behind successful nightclubs that included the Twisted Wheel and Pagoda, is accused of fatally shooting his wife of 35 years Donie Vanitzian at their Los Angeles home.

At the LA Superior Court, Foster denied murder.

News of the tragedy has shocked the many people in Carlisle who knew - and in some cases worked - with Foster, who was widely respected as an inspirational figure in the development of the city's nightlife.

“ The girls loved Tom, when he left, the club scene changed ”

Charming, intelligent, and kind, he made a positive impression on just about everybody he met. For years, this saxophone playing former teacher was Carlisle's Nightclub King.

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You need only talk to a few of his former friends to know why he was able to make such a success of it.

“Tom was gorgeous,” said Carlisle guest house owner Adele Forster, who knew Tom during the 1970s and 1980s.

Like others from Carlisle who knew this glamorous couple when they lived in Carlisle is staggered by the news from Los Angeles.

“He had big brown cow eyes and all the girls loved him.



Tom Foster with Donie, left, and Adele Forster

“Everyone wanted to marry Tom. He was dead funny and dead clever, but could be really cutting at times.”

She recalled Tom as a devout Catholic, regularly attending Our Lady and St Joseph’s Catholic Church in Warwick Road.

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"In the days when you'd put 10p in the collection, he'd put £10 every week without fail," said Adele.

"We were all broken-hearted when Tom announced he was leaving. He called a group of his close friends together at Fantails, and announced he'd got married and was moving to America.

"It was like he died when he left Carlisle. The club scene changed overnight: nobody could do it like Tom."

Before he became a legend of Carlisle's nightlife scene, Tom had been a PE teacher, working at various schools in Carlisle. But it was his love of popular music that was to dominate his professional life.

He played saxophone for a successful band called the Cavedwellers.

Adele added: "For his 21st birthday, his parents bought him the lease on The Twisted Wheel."

That present was the start of a career that transformed Carlisle's nightlife as Tom opened a series of successful clubs.

They included the Pagoda and Flopps.

Meanwhile, Tom's personal life was shaped by a chance meeting in Crosby Street when he bumped into a young American lady, left stranded because her car had broken down.

Tom offered to help her.

Ultimately, that chance encounter with Donie Vanitzian led to romance, marriage, and a new life in the United States.

"She was just amazing," said Adele.

"She had big hair and long nails and she was quite dazzling. Donie and I used to go shopping in London every weekend. I remember her buying an £800 Christian Dior dress from Harrods. "This was in the 1980s.

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"She used to make me go running with her in Hyde Park.

"I remember her typing away an article to *The Lady* magazine with her long nails. She was extremely clever and extremely well-read. Hearing about what happened... I'm just heartbroken.

"Tom wouldn't hurt anybody, he's not that kind of person."

Carlisle music promoter Andy Park also recalled Tom as the handsome, charming, savvy nightclub owner who transformed the city's night life after he took over the Twisted Wheel.

"If it hadn't been for Tom Foster, and the Twisted Wheel," said Andy, "there'd be no Andy Park Promotions.

"Tom was a sax player who played in many Carlisle bands, the most well known being The Cavedwellers. His idea of a nightclub was to get the best of everything – bands, beer, door staff. When I heard about events in Los Angeles, I was shocked."

Also shocked was 72-year-old former Carlisle man Eric Freeman, who now lives in France.

He said he will never forget the kindness Tom showed him when as a young man he was at a low point in his life.

"I'd gone professional as a drummer but things hadn't worked out,"

said Eric.

"I'd picked up my former engineering trade in a factory and wasn't in a good place.

"One day, after work, Tom was waiting for me at the factory gates.

"He said he's heard I'd packed in drumming, and then said: 'If you want a job I've got one waiting for you.' I declined, but he didn't have to stand there in the pouring rain to do that. It was a lovely gesture."

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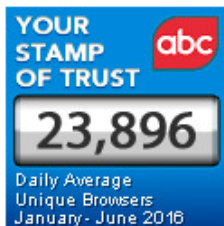
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