

Labassa *lives*

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NATIONAL
TRUST

Labassa



Myriad of up-and-comers



Labassa was a locus for musicians in the mid-1960s to late 1970s. Among the stream of partygoers and performers was Myriad. Resident, Jane Clifton, a band member at the time, recalls: "Myriad was a folk-rock band led by Carrl and his wife, Janie who was of the famous Conway family, sister of Mick and Jim of the Captain Matchbox Whoopee Band. Steve Murphy went on to live in Sydney and become a celebrated jazz guitarist with outfits like Galapagos Duck.

Above: Pictured on Labassa's staircase are:
Back row: Phillip Smith, Carrl Myriad (deceased), Janie Conway, Rob Glover.
Middle, seated with guitar: Steve Murphy.
Front: Jane Clifton.
Photo: Jane Clifton.

Inside this issue

Myriad of up-and-comers	1
Vale Antoinette Starkiewicz	1
Portrait of a Pastor	2
Vale Pam Swain	3
The Lure of Labassa	4
The Heart of Labassa	6
Vale Gerry Grabau	7
New Life for the Belinskis	8

Vale Antoinette Starkiewicz

30.06.1949 – 01.01.2023

Antoinette Starkiewicz, artist and internationally recognised animator, was among the most generous supporters of the Labassa Lives project. Antoinette exhibited some of the works she created while a Labassa resident at an *Artist in the Drawing Room* Open Day in June 2019. Several of her works were also exhibited as part of the Labassa Women exhibition in May 2022.



Above: Antoinette Starkiewicz, circa 1969.
Photo: Antoinette Starkiewicz.

continued page 2

Vale Antoinette Starkiewicz (cont.)



Antoinette moved into Labassa in 1969 and shared Flat 7 (Original Kitchen) with her then boyfriend Randall Bouchier. At the time she was majoring in painting at the National Gallery of Victoria's Art School under John Brack. Her passion, however, was animation. Her first animated film, *Secret of Madam X* was created in Labassa's cellar which she used as her studio. Three of her illustrations – a series of faces – remain on the cellar wall foreshadowing her career in film making.

Antoinette was one of Australia's most internationally recognised and award winning animators. Her films won AFI awards and were entered at film festivals such as Cannes and Annecy.

Antoinette passed away on New Year's Day 2023.

Above: Antoinette Starkiewicz at the Labassa Women Exhibition in May 2022. **Photo:** Andrea Jean Baker.

Portrait of a pastor

Another oil painting by art decorator Peter Hansen has been identified. Max von Schramm (1828-1908), pastor at the Doncaster German Lutheran Church, was painted by Hansen around 1900. Although born in Denmark, Hansen had strong ties with the German and Lutheran communities and painted several of its leading identities. He married Anna Marie Fankhauser, daughter of a prominent Doncaster orchardist family who were parishioners at the church. Architect J. A. B. Koch who worked with Hansen on the 1890 redevelopment of Labassa designed the church where Schramm pastored.

Hansen's signature appears on the bottom right hand side of the portrait. The inscription on the back of the painting identifies the location of Hansen's studio as "Flinders Buildings, Melbourne" which Hansen occupied from 1897 to circa 1903.

Von Schramm had at least eight living children and the number "5" on the reverse of the canvas suggests it may have been one of several versions. A duplicate hangs in the dining room of Schramm's Cottage in Doncaster East.



Above: Max von Schramm by Peter Hansen.
Photo: Glenys Wollermann.

The provenance of the portrait was revealed when Glenys Wollermann, former Secretary of Trinity Lutheran Church Doncaster, removed all the pictures from the walls of the church hall in preparation for building renovations.

As very little of Peter Hansen's art decoration has survived, his portraits provide insight into his techniques and may help to identify which of the decorative features at Labassa are from his hand.

Vale Pam Dorothy Swain

25.06.1946 – 18.06.2022



Left: Pam Swain.

Photo:
Andy Marinos.

As a trailblazer for women in the performing and creative arts, Pam Swain was a generous, fierce and much-loved friend and colleague in Australian radio and TV. Pam's love of music started in her formative years in Sydney – she saw the Beatles as a teenager in 1964, and continued her great passion for music and theatre at Sydney University where she joined a number of theatre groups. It's here she met her first love, Lex Marinos and they moved together to Melbourne in 1973 – Lex for work at the Melbourne Theatre Company and Pam at Radio Australia. Pam found them a room at Labassa.

Their brief time at Labassa was a very happy time for Pam and Lex. In fact, their son Andy was conceived in the Drawing Room! On returning to Sydney 'Pammi' became one of radio DoubleJ's originals, working with the foundation team that created DoubleJ in 1975 and subsequently became a well-known radio presenter at the station, and a great champion for Australian music and the Australian voice. From radio, Pam's career moved into television, firstly as part of the education unit, then as a producer for groundbreaking comedy and entertainment programs including *Blah, Blah Blah*, *The Money or the Gun*, *McFeast*, *The Doug Anthony Allstars*, *Live and Sweaty*, *Good News Week*, *The Glass House*, *Salam Cafe* – and *Parkinson* in Australia, the iconic Australian-based series with revered BBC broadcaster Michael Parkinson.

Pam said of Labassa: "We fell in love with it ... as everyone does. We had great times there and many house guests, often actors from Sydney. It was a vibrant time – singer songwriter, Graham Lownes, and his wife Ginny lived nearby and would regularly drop in. Other visitors included entertainer Jeannie Lewis, actor Bruce Myles, playwright Nick Enright and pioneering radio broadcaster and first voice on DoubleJ, Chris Winter."

The artistic energy in the house was further elevated when Pam alerted colleague and friend Jacqueline Lesage to a vacancy in Flat 9. Jacqueline and her partner Igor Persan were involved in the establishment of Melbourne's first French Theatre. When they 'inherited' the Drawing Room flat from Pam and Lex it continued as a lively gathering place for Melbourne's theatre scene.

Pam also added to Labassa's permanent pet population with a cat "who stole a piece of steak from the kitchen bench as I unpacked one Saturday after a big shop at Prahran markets. Not long after, we had a big party – lots of drinks and chatter – and the cat turned up. He socialized furiously. I was delighted. 'Boy' was adopted as part of the household. We took him back to Sydney. As he aged I promoted him to 'Captain'."

Captain, a much-loved cat who enjoyed Pam's absolute adoration, lived to an old age with her and son Andy in their home in Sutherland Street Cremorne. Over the years, Pam's house became a mecca for actors, musicians, artists, broadcasters, journalists and creative souls. And Pam's dinner parties were the stuff of legend – Peter Garrett met his wife Doris over dinner at Pam's, and one of the last events Pam hosted in her garden was a performance by the revered singer/songwriter Neil Murray from Warumpi Band fame. A passionate lover of music all through her life – even in her final months – Pam had her last dance to Midnight Oil, travelling to Orange to see the band on their final tour just a few months before she died.

Pamela Dorothy Swain died on 18 June 2022, 18 months after her diagnosis with ovarian cancer and just one week before her 76th birthday. Pammi was universally adored and is acutely missed by everyone who knew and loved her.

With additional reflections from Lex Marinos and Pam's friend Tracee Hutchison, who delivered the eulogy and memorial service for Pam in Sydney on June 30, 2022.

The Lure of Labassa

By Russell D. Clarke

"Creativity is magic. Don't examine it too closely."

Edward Albee

My first night at Labassa was low key and strangely subdued. I had moved into a large room in Flat 3¹ and felt it might be appropriate that evening for some muted celebration. Grappling with a vinyl LP, I eventually placed it on the old turntable. *Transformer* by Lou Reed quietly drifted from the speakers and as I sat on my second-hand sofa, it seemed that album was a metaphor for my life. I was 23, had just had a haircut and was happy to finally find stable housing.

It was September 1977 and I'd recently met my housemate John Harland. His passion for photography was a surprise and probably why he kept an extensive collection of vintage 35mm and medium format cameras in his room. A talented portrait photographer, his bedroom also had mauve painted walls and large windows. Konrad Dorn, my other housemate could often be heard playing the piano, usually the blues. He was a master of the ivories but only stayed for a brief time at Labassa.

My room had lime green walls, very high with a leaking ceiling but I considered these flaws as part of the charm of the house. Large bay windows framed a night sky. Stephen Hall, the previous tenant, had wisely installed an industrial heater in the room, a necessity in the winter time. Labassa could get bitterly cold at times.

I'd got to know Howard Watkinson and Ann Weir in Flat 10² from previous visits. I had been living in Inkerman Street, St Kilda and often went to life-drawing sessions run by Ann. Ann would run the social and house keeping aspects of the evening, and Howard would often be in another smoke-filled room, entertaining the non artists. Ann was constantly laughing and this created a convivial atmosphere, particularly on cold nights. The drawing sessions were never taken too seriously.

¹Upstairs, west side flat.

²Drawing room flat.



Above: Russell D. Clarke, filming *An Edwardian Sonnet*.

Photo: Russell D. Clarke.

I had always had a desire to move into the house, and when Stephen Hall offered me his room, I took it. In an unusual confluence of events, the production of the film *Patrick* started soon after I arrived. Being an aspiring filmmaker I sometimes watched the film crew and production. As I was living above the mayhem of the production in Flat 10, I was advised by the crew to be discreet and tread lightly during recording!

A few months after settling in, a slow but discerning trickle of visitors were arriving at my door. Howard wanted me to make a Super 8 film with him. It ended up being a two year project called *La Vie Ignoble*. Howard was a great raconteur, highly sociable with a great sense of humour but even I was bemused with certain dark aspects of his film.

In one scene in the backyard, a great deal of tomato sauce was sprayed all over his head and it had to be re-shot because I accidentally left the lens cap on the camera. His long blonde hair was caked in tomato sauce but he was not fazed by it, and so we re-shot the scene.

I also made a Super 8 film with Ann in 1978 and it used the hallway and spiral staircase extensively. Luckily on the day of the shoot, it was sunny and this provided rainbow type light through the stained glass window and into the hallway. Konrad Dorn was the sole actor in it and it was shot in one day. It ended up being called *L'escalier* (The Staircase).

continued page 5

The Lure of Labassa (cont.)

Ann would often have social get togethers in her flat and that's where I first met Louis Irving. I was impressed by his knowledge of cinematography and filmmaking in general. He had graduated from the Swinburne Film and Television School. We talked quite a lot about cinematography and he was passionate about it.

On one occasion Ann and I negotiated to hire a 16mm film for a soiree. I hired a Luis Bunuel film from Sharmill films and it was projected that evening in Flat 10. Despite being a black and white film, the atmosphere was similar to being in an old cinema, light and shade enhanced by dialogue and music, quite magical.

Louis Irving eventually moved to Sydney and worked full-time as camera operator and cinematographer. I wrote to him to get advice on light meters and he replied advising I buy a Sekonic. The meter turned out to be huge asset for the cinematography on my first 16mm film *An Edwardian Sonnet*.

Experiencing the Bohemian lifestyle of Labassa was creative and stimulating, but I found working in the public service as a clerk exceptionally tedious. A large multi-story building in St Kilda road was my workplace with hundreds of others. The only saving grace about the offices was the large range of unusual and often wacky people who worked there. I met a few artistic types over the years but Karl Steinberg, whom I met in 1979, was a person I got along with. He was highly confident, gregarious and passionate about filmmaking. He made me aware of the full-time course at the Australian Film and Television School. Karl had many ideas so we decided to produce a 16mm film together as part of our application. He would be the director and I'd be the cinematographer.

An Edwardian Sonnet was the title of our production. Karl had thought of that name as the word sonnet is a 14 line poem and sometimes related to romance. The film also had a very strong connection to the poetry of Emily Dickinson. It was to be a period film set in Edwardian times, following the theme of many films being produced then. We had both been impressed with Australian films like *Picnic at Hanging Rock* and *My Brilliant Career*.

After months of hard work and a large outlay of funds on my behalf, the film was finished in late 1979. We used workers from our public service department to act and I played a small role in it as well.



Above: A scene from *An Edwardian Sonnet* filmed in Labassa's Drawing Room. *Photo:* Russell D. Clarke.

Travelling all over Victoria for locations, we shot the film mainly in Selby and Monbulk in the Dandenong Ranges. An acquaintance in the public service allowed us access to an old house in Selby, which had a rundown look about it as well as scenic views. The opening scenes were filmed at Fortuna in Bendigo and Mark Klos, whom I got to know in the public service, was a production assistant. We would share Flat 3 at Labassa a few years later from about 1982 to 1986.

Karl thought it would be good idea to use Labassa's Drawing Room, staircase and hallway for a scene. Howard Watkinson allowed us to shoot it in the Drawing Room. The night of the shoot was a particularly warm one and we all felt very uncomfortable in our period style costumes!

Unfortunately, I didn't make it into the 1980 course at the film school. Karl was successful and ended up directing film clips for bands. Ironically he directed two clips at Labassa in the 1980s. *One Man Too Late* by Hi Ho was shot in the hallway and staircase in 1986 and *Rainy Day* by Geisha was partly filmed in Flat 10 in 1985. He would eventually become director of the ABC's *Countdown* for a couple of years in the 1980s.

I recently had *An Edwardian Sonnet* restored. After 44 years left in storage it was in very poor condition. It has been a rewarding experience to bring the film back to life and add music, voiceover and to re-edit it. It also brings a sense of closure to the production, and to see my cinematography again, makes me realise how useful that Sekonic meter was.

The Heart of Labassa

By Rodney Ashton

Labassa had a resident population for 25 years after the National Trust purchased the property in 1980.

Rodney Ashton, a resident of the early 1980s, reflects on some of his most memorable experiences.

The Lingerie Shoot

It was my 19th birthday when I moved into Labassa's Flat 7 (Old Kitchen Flat) with Stephen Hall. I had just relocated from Ballarat and was spellbound by the Bohemian environment and lavish architecture. After a few weeks I tried to establish some normal domestic routines but when life finally appeared settled, I stumbled across a surreal sight.

One morning I went to my bike to ride to Victorian College of the Arts at the National Gallery. As a painting student, I was broke, late, probably a little hungover and bike transport was the only option. Lifting my bike away from the west side of the Drawing Room outside wall, I glanced through the large, curved windows and saw some movement inside. To my surprise I observed a group of female models in lingerie involved in a photographic shoot. A few of the models waved to me as I quickly scarpered off with a quick head turn around to check if it was a real scenario and not a vision.

After many months of living there I came across film crews and advertising shoots wandering around Labassa without warning – ABC drama serials, advertisements and underground and art school productions to name a few. Yet this moment galvanised the fact early on in my tenancy that you had to expect anything but the mundane living at Labassa and more importantly the need to embrace the surreal.

The Great Dust Storm

Trekking up the tight and steep stairs to the Labassa tower was always a highlight due to the vistas it presented. Every direction was stunning but it was a casual lunch in 1983 with a few friends that provided an apocalyptic vision of Biblical proportions akin to a Cecil B. DeMille movie. "What the hell is that?!" someone asked as a massive brown bloom came in from a direction and origin unknown¹.

¹ On 8 February, 1983 a dust storm descended on Melbourne carrying red soil from a drought affected interior.



Left:

Rodney Ashton
in Flat 7 (Old
Kitchen flat).

Photo:

Mark Klos.

Retreating to the basement of my flat, we were all flummoxed by the impending weather incident and I considered calling my father to tell him of the bizarre sight, despite very few Labassa tenants having a phone. Never have I reflected on the end of the Earth but even to this day I could be excused for thinking that this was it as the dust storm bellowed over Melbourne. The bloom eventually passed and calm ensued but this was a spectacular moment and one that I and Melburnians will profoundly remember.

The Photo Shoot

My short residency of approximately one and a half years came to an end with a 60-day eviction notice in November 1982. Most tenants were soon to receive eviction notices with the owners' plan to turn Labassa into a decorative arts museum.

In 1985, I had moved to nearby Caulfield South but kept in close contact with the remaining tenants. Labassa still held a spell over me. Resident and friend Russell Clarke wanted to do a photographic assignment for a television production course at Oakleigh Tech. He envisioned a stripping scenario at the base of the main hallway stairs with myself as the performer. A few friends not familiar with the grandeurs of Labassa took part and wondered what on earth they were in for. Russell got his shots, but a bizarre and comedic thing happened out of the blue.

continued page 7

The Heart of Labassa (cont.)

As very few people had landline phones at Labassa, many of the tenants used other people's numbers to receive messages that were then passed on verbally or by a note slipped under your door. Coincidentally, this night I received a message in real time from the top of the stairs via Ian Hance right in the middle of the photo shoot. "Rodney, your Auntie Marge is on the phone now and wants to know if Thursday or Friday night is best for the Tom Jones concert next week? "Tell her Friday is best!" I said not skipping a beat.

This scenario made me realise that even after leaving the mansion, the surreal and the comedic side of life at Labassa were often intertwined within its walls.

The Heart of Labassa

Vintage horror films always seemed unrealistic to me and yet one night in Labassa a bizarre scenario changed my mind. A lashing lightning storm had hit late in the early hours of the morning in 1981, so intense that it woke me up. This was an opportunity to experience the lightning coming through the majestic stained-glass windows of the four seasons in the dark of the main hall of Labassa.

I thought that the best area to view this spectacular nature show would be at the middle section at the top of the stairs. This is my favourite spot in the manor and one I call 'the heart of Labassa'.

Nature that night didn't disappoint as thunder and lightning peppered against the beautiful stain glass windows. I was standing still for at least ten minutes when I felt a presence near me. My awe was suddenly interrupted by a loud gasp. Shocked, I spun around to see a figure doubled over. It was Alvyn Davy who lived in Flat 6, a balcony flat directly behind this viewing platform.

He had heard an odd noise above the lightning and thunder and trepidatiously left his flat to investigate. As it was a hot Summer night, thinking I was alone, I was only wearing underwear and poor Alvyn thought that he had stumbled across a naked apparition. He never let me forget that encounter and every time I stand in that spot, neither do I.

Vale Gerry Grabau

21.12.1957 – 21.05.2023

Gerry Grabau lived in Flat 9 (downstairs Servants Quarters) from around 1979 until 1983. Music was Gerry's passion and his talent for composition and performance flourished at Huntingdale Technical School, an alternative school that encouraged student creativity. One of his significant artistic achievements was the song he wrote for his mother – *The Time has come to part* – which Judith Durham recorded and released in 2018.

According to fellow resident Rodney Ashton, Gerry was a man of many talents. "His strong artistic and musical personality was only one layer of him as he was a practising lawyer. He loved it when people were gobsmacked to find this out as his general personality came across as Bohemian, often eccentric and carefree. He nevertheless had a strong moral compass which drove his lawyer side and an intelligence and pluck that meant that he could argue with the best of them.



Left: Gerry Grabau (far left) c. 1982. He is pictured (left to right) with Liza Wilson, Rodney Ashton, Stephen Hall and Penny Ashton (now known as Shira Hadassa).

Photo: Rodney Ashton.

Gerry and I enjoyed going out to bands and having a big night out on the town with a soothing coffee and cake the following morning at the nearby Viennese Konditorei cafe where we recounted the events of the night before. Gerry was made from stoic stock and was often the last to go to bed and the first up. He hailed from Balranald, NSW where his father and step mother had a large property. It is the whip cracking, revelling, musician, thespian, wrestler, lawyer, comedian and poetry reciting larrikin Gerry that I will remember."

Volume 11, Issue 2, 2023

Labassa is open on the third Sunday of each month, except in December when it is open on the first Sunday. Please check the National Trust website to confirm dates, times and booking details: nationaltrust.org.au/places/labassa

Forthcoming Open Days

Sunday 15 October 2023: With three special tours of Labassa's renewed garden conducted by landscape architect Elizabeth Peck.

Bookings through [Eventbrite.com.au](https://www.eventbrite.com.au) are highly recommended for all open days.

A new life for the Belinskis

By Louise Svensson



Above: Louise, Mark and Jane Belinskis.

Photo: Louise Svensson (nee Belinskis).

Louise Svensson (nee Belinskis) was only two when her parents Boris and Deborah and her siblings Jane (four) and Mark (one) moved into the Willas Flats in 1967.

The Belinskis like many migrants of the 1960s arrived under the Assisted Passage Migration Scheme on S.S. Australis. Conditions on the Australis were sometimes described by passengers as 'unhealthy' and there were occasional outbreaks of chicken pox among young passengers.

Louise recalls: "We migrated from England and after a six week boat journey arrived in Australia in April 1967 and moved into flat 2/2a Manor Grove Caulfield.

Whilst my father worked as a steel fixer my mother would not only look after her own children but also other children either from Labassa or the flats, Ivan Lazarus being one of them.

My father Boleslavs (Boris) Belinskis was born in Latvia in 1925. In 1943 he was "conscripted" into the German Army. (The Germans executed people who refused to fight for them.)



Above: Back: Boris and Deborah Belinskis.

Louise on Deborah's lap. Front: Jane and Mark.

Taken circa late 1967. **Photo:** Louise Svensson.

He was eventually taken prisoner by the Allies and ended up in a prisoner of war camp in England. When the war ended he had to repay the English government for his years in the camps and worked on a farm for two years. After repaying his debt he was allowed to return to Latvia or stay in England; he decided to stay. My father met my mother Deborah (b.1935) in the early 1950s. They married in 1957 and had three children.

My parents bought a piece of land in Heidelberg in December 1967 and over the next couple of years built a three bedroom house. We moved in early 1970, and my parents lived in this house for the rest of their lives. Boris passed away 8 June 2022 and Deborah 13 September 2022."