

COVER STORY

After 17 years living the dream in Paris, Wendy Lee Taylor celebrates Bastille Day back in Melbourne with a new show, writes RUBY BOUKABOU

BONJOUR MELBOURNE

Some people write memoirs, others write cabarets. Paris-based songstress Wendy Lee Taylor has done both. The Australian performer is returning to Melbourne to perform her autobiographical show, *The Paris Walk*, on Bastille Day.

We meet ahead of her visit at the Lido Cabaret on the Champs Elysées, where she is resident singer. She dinks me on her sturdy old Dutch bike to a late-night jazz bar, as she pedals talking about life in the City of Light and what motivated her to create a show about it.

"*The Paris Walk* developed through a mix of people asking me to recount my experiences in Paris, and my love of music. It was a logical artistic choice," says Lee Taylor, who has impressively whipped out of her long, sequined gown – in which she performs with a full brass band during the Lido dinner set – into a cute black-and-white spotted dress for the change of venue and mood.

Lee Taylor's show begins with the discovery that the musical in which she had been cast (*Crazy for You*), had folded two weeks before rehearsals were due to begin. At a loss for quick alternatives, and with a sense of adventure, she followed a friend's suggestion and rang one of the most famous cabarets in the world, the Lido. The artistic director loved Australian dancers and suggested she send a video of herself performing.

Having spent her life singing and dancing professionally (including in the Australian tour of *42nd Street*), Lee Taylor landed herself a job.

"The story talks about being a Lido Bluebell dancer, the difficulties of dancing with massive feather hats and ridiculously high heels, then the thrill of discovering the Parisian jazz clubs, falling in love with musicians, artists and chefs," says Lee Taylor. "It's about my experience of the whole bohemian existence."

As well as a regular day job at the Lido, Lee Taylor has made two jazz albums, *Let's Do It* (2006), which features Australian pianist Chris Cody, and *All You Have To Do* (2011). In between she has bought and renovated an

attic apartment in the popular 18th arrondissement of Butte-Montmartre.

The Paris Walk had a successful season in 2011 at Caulfield's Downstairs At Alma's, and her 2012 Melbourne Cabaret Festival show at Chapel off Chapel sold out.

"I think the audiences love the music and being drawn into a world of all things French," she says while expertly swerving through traffic as we get further away from the tourist centre. "All things French, that is, experienced through the eyes of an Aussie girl."

After 17 years in Paris, Lee Taylor has a few experiences and stories to share on the French festivities and way of life. What French habits has she picked up?

"The French *salade verte* (green salad)," she says. I assume she is kidding but she continues with passion: "Nothing beats a green salad with a good dressing. Actually I have picked up a lot of French food habits, just not the one that most French women have down pat – that of being reasonable. I tend to overindulge!"

Luckily, pedalling like this across the city daily, she can afford extra fromage or crêpes.

Lee Taylor's Bastille Day usually involves exactly that; a plate of crêpes while watching the annual parade on TV, before getting ready to join in the national celebrations at the Lido.

"When the curtain opens to reveal the public, the room is full of uniformed military, navy etc, who are all in Paris to participate in the parade. One of my favourite memories was when a group of officers came up and carried me off the stage to join them on the dance floor. It's quite a heady experience singing *La Vie en Rose* surrounded by dapper gentlemen!"

"After work, Bastille Day for me is often about catching up with friends, sharing a glass of Champagne, and dancing."

We swing past Place de la République, now pedestrianised, and head on to trendy Oberkampf. After

"THERE ARE TIMES WHEN PARIS GETS ON MY NERVES"

