

FLASHBACK

Location **10330 104 Street NW**

www.EdmontonQueerHistoryProject.ca



John Reid began his coming out process in Edmonton, but it was during travels to larger gay metros that he fell in love with the idea of gay nightclubs. As a result, it was only natural that, once he was ready to participate in Edmonton's LGBTQ2 community, he headed to the only official gay bar in town, Club 70. Ironically, John was refused entry to the private member's club because no one knew him, and therefore no one could vouch for him being gay.

Eventually, he was allowed entry into Club 70 and began his long tenure as a prominent member of Edmonton's early LGBTQ2 community. As a patron of Club 70, John was constantly lamenting the lack of a real dance floor and sound booth. The only sound system was a jukebox, and so the music depended on the whim of the customers who arrived in the afternoon—and, if they had enough quarters, they could plug the machine and dictate the music that would be played for hours, which drove John crazy!

When a long-time ally of the queer community, Mother Jean, a straight woman with deep roots in the emerging drag community, was refused entry into Club 70, Reid realized Edmonton needed a gay bar where allies and supporters of the community could be treated with fairness and respect. In 1974, John Reid, Paul Chisholm (Empress Millie), Pat Fortier, Harvey Jones, and others banded together to create Flashback, which became Edmonton's first gay disco. John stated, "gays deserved more than what Club 70 had to offer... (which included) a more positive environment."¹

This "positive environment" was reflected in John's founding vision: "Flashback is a place for human beings to accept one another. It is a place for those questioning their sexualities to feel comfortable in. An outlet that's easier to come out in... I wanted to give every individual the right to party and bring in anyone they wanted to party with. When you want parity in a society, you can't expect total privacy."²

During its sixteen years in operation, Flashback had three different incarnations. The first location was in the basement of the building on Jasper Avenue and 117 Street. After Flashback left this location, the Gymini, a gay bathhouse, relocated from downtown to the same spot, ultimately closing the day after the 1981 raid on the Pisces Spa.

From the moment Flashback opened its doors, it was different. In an attempt to set itself apart from Club 70, Flashback welcomed and encouraged straight people to participate in the party. Flashback also sported a real dance floor and John's dream of an actual sound booth. Naturally, the drag queens of Edmonton gravitated to the flashing lights of the Flashback stage. Even today, John speaks of the importance of drag to Flashback's success, having designed every incarnation of the club to nurture the performers that would bring so much life and vivacity to the club over the years, with dance floors that doubled as a performance stage, along with a dressing room and costume storage.

In 1976, the formation of the Imperial Sovereign Court of the Wild Rose (ISCWR) brought Edmonton's drag culture into the mainstream. The election of Millie as Empress I of Edmonton cemented Flashback as the House of Drag. That same year, Flashback held its first drag pageant billed as the Mz. Flashback Competition. Millie ran for Mz. Flashback and won, becoming the



only Queen in Edmonton's history to hold both ISCWR and Flashback titles simultaneously.

¹ Scott McConnell, "fineconversation: An interview with John Reid," Fine Print, June 1983,11.

² McConnell, "fineconversation."

It was in the club's basement that the Flashback Follies were formed. Under the expert direction of theatre professionals like choreographer John Kerr and director Allan McInnis, the Edmonton queens began creating elaborate full-scale drag musical productions such as *Hello Dolly*, *A Chorus Line*, and the infamous *Cabaret*. As the ISCWR started to network with the International Court System in other cities, the Edmonton performances soon garnered wide acclaim.

In the second year of the Court, Reid ran for Emperor II alongside his friend, Chatty Cathy Jackson. The duo became the second Empress and Emperor of the Imperial House of Millicent, further cementing Flashback as the centre stage for drag in Edmonton.

The tiny disco, described by the *Edmonton Sun* as “the playground of the sexually confused,”³ was packed from the moment it opened, and it soon became apparent that a larger location was needed. In 1978, after losing some of its initial investors, Reid and Millie, along with financial backing from Brent Earl and Dr. Henri Toupin, reopened Flashback on 104 Street. This would become Flashback's most iconic location—strategically located right across the street from Edmonton's newest gay bar, The Roost. This set off a legendary rivalry that would continue until there was only one club left standing.

Acclaimed playwright Brad Fraser recalls his first time at Flashback: “We were nervous and excited, taking in every detail of the place: the antique signs over the rustic wooden bar, the pinball and rudimentary video games flashing against one wall, in the next room a recessed lounge with a low-level backgammon table and matching stools, the main room with its bi-level dance floor and tacky Christmas lights on a patio-lattice ceiling.” The whole place, he said, smelled of Aramis cologne, “as integral to a gay man's identity at the time as opening that extra button on your shirt.”⁴

Former Mz. Flashback Cleo told *See Magazine* that Flashback was all she could think about. “I just wanted to be gay, and I wanted to be gay in a place that was safe. That was my overriding memory, a sense of safety to be who I wanted to be.”⁵

This magical location began to turn the party in Edmonton for the next decade, raising the bar for what a nightclub could be in a remote northern prairie town. It was large, dark, loud, and on weekends, the party often lasted until the sun came up. It became a magnet for outcasts from every walk of life, and its legend began to spread far and wide. Part of the success was due to the best sound system in the city, an epic collection of dance music, and a superstar deejay in the form of DJ Mikee (Mikee Brennan). The club even had its own record store called Hot Trax, which supplied music not just for Flashback but also for more than a few other mainstream clubs and deejays in Edmonton. Flashback became the place you heard the music you couldn't find anywhere else, often months before the radio stations would catch on. At its zenith, *Billboard* magazine named Flashback one of the ten best nightclubs in North America.⁶ Flashback quickly became legendary.

It was also in this location that the annual Drag Races became part of the yearly pageant, crowning the new Mr. & Mz. Flashback. Every May Long Weekend, the outdoor event brought outrageous drag antics into the daylight by utilizing the alley entrance and loading dock to present a bacchanalian



barbecue and “sporting” event that featured hilarious antics and competitions in various states of drag or undress, in full view of passers-by. You can relive this historical moment by watching Fruit Loop's dramatic “drag race” recreation as created by Darrin Hagen, featuring Trevor Schmidt, Jake Tkaczyk, and Jason Hardwick.⁷

In 1981, Flashback made a short-lived entry into the after-hours scene, with the addition of Phase Four, a men-only club open until 5 a.m. (without liquor service). It didn't last long.⁸

Also in 1981, the Pisces Health Spa was raided, and Flashback hosted at least one meeting of the ‘found-ins’ as they planned their legal defense strategy. John Reid became one of the few gay Edmontonians of the time to speak publicly to the media on behalf of the community.

Starting in 1982, an *Edmonton Sun* columnist began mentioning the reigning Mz. Flashback, Trash in his Page 6 gossip column. This public attention helped elevate drag gossip and machinations to local prominence. Some of the newspaper coverage included mention of a “cute as a button” columnist nominated for a Nellie Award⁹ and the popularity of the Josie Cotton classic *Johnny Are You Queer?* on the Flashback dance floor.¹⁰ This newfound visibility

3 “A Thwell Time,” *Edmonton Sun*, May 23, 1982.

4 Brad Fraser, *All the Rage* (New York: Penguin Random House, 2021).

5 Darrin Hagen, “Flash Memory,” *See Magazine*, June 16-22, 2005, 10-12.

6 Michael Phair, “Flashback and the Gay Drag Races,” *Edmonton City as Museum Project*, September 16, 2014, <https://citymuseumedmonton.ca/2014/09/16/flashback-and-the-gay-drag-races/>.

7 “Segment 8, Flashback,” Fruit Loop: Augmented Reality Pride Tour, <https://vimeo.com/544357946/eb062fa959>.

8 Bob Remington, “Calling All Gays,” *Edmonton Journal*, March 4, 1981, B2.

9 “Question of the Day,” *Edmonton Sun*, August 3, 1982.

10 “Johnny You're Tho Thweet,” *Edmonton Sun*, March 24, 1982.

had mixed results. One complaint written into Fine Print magazine about the number of straight people coming to Flashback blamed the Edmonton Sun column for this increase.¹¹ Reid's response to complaints about straights was direct: "I am hurt that people would feel that way. Flashback provides a repertoire of clientele that can't be denounced... Any hassles that I have encountered have been from the gays not the straight."¹² He went on to say, "it will take a lot of time to depend on the gay dollar in this city. We have a faithful [gay] clientele that I appreciate but it's not enough to pay the bills."¹³

Flashback hosted not just parties and pageants. For years, its dance floor was used to film a local weekly televised workout show, and in 1983 the club was chosen to host the International Designer of the Year Award, drawing fashion elite from across the country, as well as wealthy and influential patrons. Even the First Lady of Alberta, Jeannie Lougheed, was in attendance. That in itself made news the next day. The teaser airing on 630 CHED radio asked, "What was the wife of the Premier doing in a gay bar last night? Find out next..." The story related that the Flashback coat check girl was fired after snarkily telling Mrs. Lougheed that "I don't care if you're the Queen of fucking England, the coat check is full!"¹⁴

On September 15, 1983, a public community meeting was held at Flashback to discuss the growing spectre of AIDS. Fifty people attended, including Dr. Jerry Katz, a Sherwood Park physician well-informed on AIDS. Community concern was starting to build and would lead to a 1984 meeting around Michael Phair's kitchen table, which led to the creation of the AIDS Network of Edmonton.

In the mid-1980s, after years of ongoing harassment from the Alberta Liquor Control Board, Flashback led a legal protest against provincial liquor laws in an attempt to have the cut-off hour for liquor service extended to 2 a.m. (the same as in other provinces.) The ALCB finally relented and extended service hours to 2 a.m. for all bars, except for private member's clubs. This effectively meant all gay bars, which were all private clubs, were excluded from the expanded hours. Flashback fought back again, this time with other gay bar owners joining the fight. Flashback finally won, and the liquor service hours were extended for all bars and clubs.¹⁵

In 1987, a group of Flashback drag queens led by a former Mz. Flashback, Darrin Hagen, and his partner, Kevin Hendricks, formed a performance troupe called Guys in Disguise and, in a very public debut, performed a sold-out run at the Edmonton International Fringe Festival, launching over three decades of public performance and queer theatre creation, eventually touring and being produced internationally.

In 1988, Craig Russell performed at Flashback as part of his cross-country comeback with the release of the sequel to his hit movie "Outrageous". "Too Outrageous" eventually flopped, but his performance at Flashback gave a hint of the grandeur of the Russell magic that had captivated audiences around the world.

Over the years, celebrities who might find themselves in Edmonton often asked the question, "Where does the wildest fun happen here?" They would discover the answer was always Flashback. Sarah McLachlan, Long John Baldry, Belinda Carlisle, Sylvester, Wayne Gretzky, The Nylons, The Great Imposters, Kurt Browning, Mark Messier, Steve Anthony, The Jazz Butchers, and The Kids in the Hall all spent time partying on the legendary dancefloor.¹⁶



Flashback developed a growing international reputation. Graffiti Magazine named it one of the top 5 clubs in North America, calling it "Edmonton's Alternative Underground."¹⁷ This was perhaps a better description than the Edmonton Sun's, which wrote: "the spiffy little club that serves as a second home to Edmonton's disco-n-Crisco set."¹⁸

Flashback was one of the main settings for the nightclub scenes depicted in Brad Fraser's play Unidentified Human Remains and the True Nature of Love, which became an international hit. When Denys Arcand's adaptation of Love and Human Remains was filmed, it contained scenes also set in Flashback. Likewise, Fraser and Darrin Hagen's song, Give Me Tomorrow Back, was included as part of a 1991 AIDS Awareness benefit concert held at Flashback,¹⁹ which was part of a city-wide Day Without Art reflecting on the loss of people who died from AIDS and all the potential art they would have created.²⁰

In 1990, the 104 Street Millard building owner passed away, leaving the building to his son. John Reid soon received word the club would be evicted, and the building was to be sold and transformed into condominiums. Faced with the choice of relocating or shutting down for good, John shopped around

11 M. Anderson, "Alberta Beef," Fine Print, April 1983, 2.

12 McConnell, "fineconversation," 11.

13 McConnell, "fineconversation," 11.

14 Darrin Hagen, "Flash Memory," See Magazine, June 2005, 10-12.

15 For more about these legal battles, check out History of Edmonton's Gay Bars, Part 2: A Flashback to Flashback | Edmonton City as Museum Project ECAMP (citymuseumedmonton.ca)


16 Darrin Hagen, "Flash Memory," See Magazine, June 16-22, 2005, 10-12.

17 Darrin Hagen, "Flash memory," See Magazine, June 16-22, 2005, 10-12.

18 "Johnny You're Tho Thweet," Edmonton Sun, March 24, 1982.


19 R. Bremner, "Awareness key to war on AIDS," Edmonton Journal, December 2, 1991, B2.

20 A. Tanner, "Arts community back AIDS day with blackout," Edmonton Journal, November 29, 1991, B1.



for a new location, eventually finding the perfect spot directly across the back alley from the current Flashback. With investment from Michael Ritter, the third and final Flashback location was born. It immediately drew criticism from patrons because it was large, open, and sterile. The epic curved glass brick wall did strange things to the music by reflecting the sound in unpredictable ways. It wasn't open for long before Reid and Ritter parted company, and John was left to carry on by himself. The damage to the club's reputation was fatal. The move, coupled with the changing times and Flashback's unfriendly

entrance policies, eventually eroded support from the LGBTQ2 community. In 1992, Flashback closed its doors forever. The sound system, the lights, and the massive record collection were all used to open Rebar on Whyte Avenue, which would become a mainstay in Edmonton's nightlife for the next decade. In 1996, the life and times of Flashback were immortalized in Darrin Hagen's play, *The Edmonton Queen*, which was eventually published as a book. However, the glory of Flashback would never be recaptured. All that remains is the legend.



FURTHER RESOURCES

Check out Flashback as part of a five-piece history of Edmonton gay bars: [History of Edmonton's Gay Bars, Part 2: A Flashback to Flashback | Edmonton City as Museum Project ECAMP \(citymuseumedmonton.ca\)](#).

Take a peek inside the club: [Flashback Gay Club Edmonton Halloween 1982 - YouTube](#) and [Flashback Gay Club Edmonton "Little...Pissant Country Place" - YouTube](#).

Read more about the infamous Drag Races: [Flashback and the Gay Drag Races | Edmonton City as Museum Project ECAMP \(citymuseumedmonton.ca\)](#).