

# SAX & OPTION ROOM

Location 10148 105 St NW  
(now Shade Gentleman's Club)

[www.EdmontonQueerHistoryProject.ca](http://www.EdmontonQueerHistoryProject.ca)



Over the decades of Edmonton's diverse LGBTQ2 nightlife, some venues have had a lasting presence and housed more than one gay club. Evolution Wonderlounge is now where Play once existed. Woodys Pub closed and became Mama's Gin Joint. The building that currently houses Latitude 53 previously hosted Club 70, the Cha Cha Palace, Boots N' Saddle, and The Junction. However, the surprising record for most gay bars in one single location goes to the building now home to Shade Gentlemen's Club, which primarily caters to straight males.

Club Soda opened on March 20, 1985, billing itself as "Edmonton's zaniest nightclub."<sup>1</sup> While surviving advertisements do not specifically brand Club Soda as a gay space, Ron Byers recalls the owners trying to cater to Edmonton's gay market after Ali Katz, their first attempt at a nightclub in this location, failed.<sup>2</sup> Club Soda featured an eclectic mix of Egyptian, Caribbean, and Hawaiian themes. The club was spread over two levels, with an upper balcony overlooking a sunken dance floor. It opened early for a nice lunch and then continued late until last call, seven days a week. Over the next few years, the 105 Street location would rebrand again and again, first as Lamborghini's (1987), then as Electric Banana (1987), and later as Reflexions (1988). The nightclubs didn't all openly advertise themselves as exclusively gay spaces but were often frequented by the LGBTQ2 community, some more than others. For example, Reflexions actively supported the Imperial Sovereign Court of the Wild Rose (ISCLR) with an ad in the Coronation Ball program.

The Electric Banana cast the spotlight onto itself when they incorporated a fake confessional into the club, featuring a man in a monkey suit and priest's collar who would forgive the sins of the nightclub goers. The most lurid confessions were eligible for prizes. The publicity stunt caused outrage among some of Edmonton's religious communities.<sup>3</sup> Later, after another rebrand, Reflexions was shut down by the Alberta Liquor Control Board in December of 1988 for failure to provide food service along with liquor sales.<sup>4</sup>

Things changed in 1989, for the worse, when new owner Carman Ahmed took over ownership of the building. He reopened it as Sax on Fifth and advertised

how the new club was proudly NOT gay. "Before, it was owned by gays and run by gays. I'm giving notice this is going to be a straight restaurant," Ahmed proclaimed, prompting some of the remaining gay staff to give notice and quit.<sup>5</sup> Ahmed went further, stating that although gays were welcome, they must abide by his rules, including no kissing or dancing together. When word quickly reached local gay activists such as Wayne Hellard and GALA's Tom Edge, they called for an immediate community boycott.



Ahmed's problematic behaviour underscored a more significant issue in Alberta at the time. Gays and lesbians had no legal recourse against discrimination, as sexual orientation was not included in the province's Individual's Rights Protection Act. Tom Edge publicly compared Ahmed's actions to anti-Semitism, which would have been prohibited under the law. Stan Scudder, then Chairman of Alberta's Human Rights Commission, affirmed Ahmed's actions were indeed discriminatory but stated the Commission was helpless to act, suggesting "the gay community [will] have to press your case with the government if you want an amendment to the legislation."<sup>6</sup>

<sup>1</sup> "The Journal Dine Out Directory," Edmonton Journal, December 29, 1985, C12.

<sup>2</sup> Ron Byers and Rob Browatzke, "History of Edmonton's Gay Bars, Part 4: The Expanding Scene," Edmonton City as Museum, October 7, 2020, <https://citymuseumedmonton.ca/2020/10/07/edmontons-gay-bars-part-4-the-expanding-scene/>.

<sup>3</sup> Kim McLeod, "Nightclub Confessions Upset Priest," Edmonton Journal, June 17, 1987, B6.

<sup>4</sup> "ALCB Suspends Lounges License," Edmonton Journal, December 22, 1988, B3.

<sup>5</sup> Sherri Aikenhead, "Human Rights Chairman Says Night Club Unfair to Gays," Edmonton Journal, May 10, 1989, B1.

<sup>6</sup> Richard Helm and Sherri Aikenhead, "Human Rights Chairman Says Nightclub is Unfair to Gays," Edmonton Journal, May 12, 1989, B1.

Shortly after Sax opened, an incident inside the club turned violent. Ahmed claimed three men assaulted him after he told a group they couldn't dance in the establishment anymore. He expressed concerns the attack would lead him to contract AIDS.<sup>7</sup> Despite the building featuring a dance earlier in the year as part of Edmonton's AIDS Awareness Week, it was unclear whether the fundraiser was held there under Ahmed's ownership.<sup>8</sup> Wayne Hellard worried the incident would lead to further attacks against Edmonton's gay and lesbian community. The LGBTQ2 community responded with a protest outside the business the day after the alleged assault. Michael Phair recalls the speed with which the protest was mobilized, and even though it was only around twenty people, the small protest attracted the attention of local media. The issue of gay rights was already in the news, with Edmonton City Council's recent rejection of another attempt by GALA to have Gay and Lesbian Awareness Day proclaimed.

Following the community protests, Sax on Fifth's days were numbered. Sax was repeatedly plagued by other troubles, including issues with the police in the weeks and months that followed. <sup>9 10 11</sup>

With Sax now closed, the building would eventually become queer again, but not without a different kind of legal issue. In 1993, Tony C's opened on the ground floor of Capital Place (9707 110 Street), but the success of their grand opening was short-lived. Owner Tony Calara found himself locked out of his new business after just two days in operation. This wasn't the first time that a landlord had locked out an Edmonton gay bar, of course; the very first gay bar, Club 70, had gone through the exact situation a quarter of a century earlier. Capital Place owners, Triple Five Corporation, cited numerous so-called violations of the lease agreement, claiming their decision to lock out Tony had nothing to do with gay rights.<sup>12</sup> Other tenants in the building made anti-gay arguments, though. In the court's legal decision, Justice David McDonald stated, "Lesbians and gay men should not be considered lawbreakers just because of their sexual orientation."<sup>13</sup>

Although Tony eventually won his legal dispute against Triple Five, the business relationship was destroyed. Tony searched for a new location for his gay club and found it on 105 Street. In this new location, Tony C's was renamed "The Option Room" and (re)opened to great success. At the time, The Roost was the only nightclub specifically catering to Edmonton's LGBTQ2 community. Bar manager Carl Austin recalls how The Option Room's opening severely impacted The Roost's business, stating that gays were seemingly always attracted to new things. The Roost only managed to survive due to the loyalty of its lesbian customers. However, even The Option Room tried to win over the lesbian crowd by inviting Womospace to host events, ranging from pool tournaments to live music nights. For a fleeting time, The Option Room was a smashing success.

The Option Room was also an early performance space for Edmonton's Village People Revue. The troupe began in 1994 as part of the build-up to the

Coronation Ball of the Imperial Sovereign Court of the Wild Rose (ISCWR). Their July debut was only the beginning; they would go on to perform in venues across Canada as part of the ISCWR and in support of other fundraising causes. The troupe would also perform at Edmonton's Pride festivities in 2007 and 2009 and would later partner with Womospace for an all-lesbian version of their Village People ensemble in 2013.



No matter the iteration, nothing seemed to last for long in the 105 Street location. After The Option Room closed, Vicious Pink opened and began advertising itself as a gothic club with the best in rave, underground, and alternative music<sup>14</sup>. Vicious Pink faced the same 105 Street curse and soon gave way to the even shorter-lived bar called, "Choices". Vicious Pink was one of the few places in Edmonton that booked live electronic acts and played host to shows by LGBTQ2 community groups like the ISCWR. Whether it was something about the building itself, the competition (Edmonton had four other gay bars at the time these all tried to open), or some other factor that led to so many venues opening and closing at this location is unknown.

Perhaps it was the storied queer history of the building that led JR White, the current owner of Shade, to incorporate a drag element into the launch of ladies' night featuring the "Men of Maximum Exposure". Male strip clubs with private lap dance rooms were unheard of in Western Canada at the time.<sup>15</sup> Local queens Miss Bianca and Krystall Ball often performed before the all-male revue took to the stage. Sadly, the drag performances had only a short, but entertaining run.

While none of the venues associated with the 105 Street building ever rose to the legendary status of long-running queer bars like Flashback or The Roost, their short-lived contributions to Edmonton LGBTQ2 nightlife remain an important part of our community's history. Moreover, the media attention garnered by the events at Tony C's and Sax on Fifth helped demonstrate just how important it was for sexual orientation to be included as a protected ground against discrimination in Alberta's human rights legislation.

7 Don Retson, "Bloody Scuffle with Gays Worries Club Owner," Edmonton Journal, May 11, 1989, B1.

8 "Neighbors Diary," Edmonton Journal, March 12-18, 1989, 8.

9 "\$3,500 in Stolen Goods Recovered at Night Club," Edmonton Journal, May 24, 1989, F8.

10 "Man Shot in Leg at Downtown Nightclub," Edmonton Journal, August 16, 1989, B4.

11 "Two Charged with Cocaine Trafficking," Edmonton Journal, January 19, 1990, B2.

12 Tom Arnold, "Court Orders Triple 5 to Hand Over Premises to Gay-Oriented Club," Edmonton Journal, October 8, 1993, B3.

13 Arnold, "Court Orders."

14 "Explore Edmonton," Edmonton Journal, Summer, 1999, 20.

15 "Lap Dance for Ladies," Fort McMurray Today, March 3, 2011, A2.

## **FURTHER RESOURCES**

Learn more about the history of Edmonton's gay bars with this timeline published by the Edmonton City as Museum Project: <https://citymuseumedmonton.ca/2020/10/09/list-of-edmontons-gay-bars/>