

New bar looking to end LGBTQ+ nightlife drought in Atlantic Canada's biggest city

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about an hour ago

Updated about an hour ago



Gerald McCowan, right, and his husband Jose Chiu, owners and operators of Rumours Cabaret, pose in the soon-to-open "gay, trans, women safe space" in Halifax on Wednesday, June 5, 2024. THE CANADIAN PRESS/Darren Calabrese

HALIFAX — As a closeted gay teenager walking through downtown Halifax in the early 1980s, Daniel MacKay drew hope from the bright lights, giggles and thumping bass coming from a boisterous bar called The Turret on Barrington Street.

MacKay was there to catch a glimpse of the patrons trickling in and out of the club named after the tower on the corner of the building that housed the venue.

"I'd walk up and down the street — I'd always keep walking, because you'd never want to stay in one spot and be seen standing looking in," he said.

"I could see the bright lights flashing in the turret, that's where the DJ booth was — right inside the turret — and I'd be thinking to myself, 'Wow, there are actual gay people and they are having fun in there.'"

But over the next few decades the city's once-thriving gay bar scene all but disappeared, said MacKay, 60, who publishes the 2SLGBTQ+ magazine *Wayves*, for which he's been a writer since he was 20.

Halifax queer bars *Reflections Cabaret* and *Menz* and *Mollyz* closed in 2020 and 2021, victims of the COVID-19 pandemic. A short-lived queer bar was based out of a backyard in 2021, MacKay said, and after a club that identified as "gay friendly" closed in 2023, just a few months after opening, Atlantic Canada's biggest city was left without a gay bar.

MacKay says that's why he wasn't surprised when his article about the planned opening of a new Halifax gay bar blew up — getting 15 times more views than a typical *Wayves* article as it was shared widely across social media.

"That gives you a sense of how important a safe gay space is to Haligonians, how excited people are," he said during an interview at *Glitter Bean Cafe*, a Halifax coffee shop that describes itself as queer-centric.

The couple behind *Rumours Cabaret*, set to open this month, want their new space to be a hot spot for drag queen and king performances, live music and dancing, with community space for meetings in the daytime.

Gerald McCowan and his husband José Chiu have spent weeks renovating and decorating the venue in downtown Halifax. They've filled the space with bright lights, silver furniture and a massive disco ball. McCowan insists, "this bar is going to be the most fun."

McCowan, who was in the military before working in hospitality, said homophobic harassment from his peers left a lasting impact on him and helped inspire him to open a queer space.

"I was gay in the military before you were allowed to be gay ... I was living in the barracks and had people knocking on my door at all hours calling me a f-g. It wasn't fun. So I wanted to do this because we really need a safe space again. Halifax just doesn't have anything like this anymore, and the world does feel like it's getting scarier," he said.

Rumours Cabaret shares its name with a gay bar that was open from 1982 to 1995 across two locations and was run by Halifax's Gay and Lesbian Alliance. As a member of that group MacKay helped renovate the interior of the old Rumours club on Granville Street.

Mary Ann Daye, who came out as a lesbian in Halifax in the 1980s, said gay bars have long been one of the few places LGBTQ+ people could safely have fun together.

"When I came out, as scared and terrified as I was — and as scared as we all were — when we walked into Rumours, we knew we were safe. And we knew we would find our people."

From 2009 to 2016, Daye co-owned and ran a music venue and bar called The Company House, best known for its sold-out concerts and monthly retro nights. Asked if she considered The Company House a lesbian bar, Daye laughed and said the venue was always welcoming of anyone — though a major portion of its patrons and staff were queer women.

"Our Pride weeks were crazy. We did retro night, which always attracted a huge women population, though we always welcomed men as well ... we hosted women's songwriting circles and we'd show old queer films," she said.

With the growing acceptance in Halifax and elsewhere, Daye said people may believe there is less need for queer spaces.

"There's definitely a feeling of loss in not getting that chance to find one another in a space and just be together. We always knew we had that. I think young queer people today don't have that."

Claire Yurkovich, a 27-year-old lesbian in Halifax, said the scarcity of queer spaces can make it hard to find community, especially in a city without a gay village.

"When I first came out I didn't have a ton of queer friends. So I think that was a huge missing element for me while I was wanting to meet more people in the community, and I didn't have a space to go do that."

And while Rumours Cabaret will soon end the LGBTQ+ nightlife drought in Halifax, it already has some competition in the offing: another bar and queer space, which doesn't yet have a name, has announced on social media it will open in July.

This report by The Canadian Press was first published June 5, 2024.

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