

Episode 15 - Shelly's Leg

Hamish: Hello and welcome to Queer as Fact. I'm Hamish.

Alice: I'm Alice.

Eli: I'm Eli.

H: And we're a queer history podcast coming out on the 1st and 15th of each month, looking at people, places and things from queer history across the world and throughout time. In this episode we'll be talking about Shelly's Leg, Seattle's first openly operating gay bar and an icon of the gay scene. And this is also our first "place" episode, so get excited for that!

[intro music plays]

H: We have a couple of content warnings for this episode. We have one use of a slur in a quote; we have mentions of destructive fire; and we have intense descriptions of blood and gore - so if that's not something that you feel comfortable with we have plenty of other content that I'm sure that you'll enjoy.

Shelly's Leg was a bar and disco operating out of the Pioneer Square area in downtown Seattle from 1973 until 1978. It was not only Seattle's first gay club but it was also its first disco of any kind and it was a massive deal.

A: Really?

H: Yeah! First proper, like, disco, in the very early days of when disco started to be a thing with disc jockeys and DJs. There's a review in the Seattle Times where somebody has to awkwardly explain for their review of the club what a disc jockey does.

E and A: [laugh]

A: It had never occurred to me until this very second that that's why it's called a disco.

H: Yeah, sort of. It comes from discotheque which means 'record library' – a place where there are a bunch of a records and then you play them and people dance and get drunk and have a great time.

A: Okay.

E: Like a normal library.

H: Yeah, exactly.

The bar was named after Shelly Bauman, who was born in 1947 in Chicago, where she studied dance until she was 16, at which point she left home and roamed the country for an unknown reason. It's widely disputed why exactly she left home. There are a bunch of competing stories that are all incredibly dramatic, so it's hard to figure out which one is true and it could be that it's

just a dramatic story. Some people say that she ran away from home after her parents' divorce; sometimes there's a suicide involved; sometimes it happens on her 16th birthday; sometimes she's turfed out of home after being told that her father is not her real father.

A: [laughs]

H: So it gets kind of muddled and jumbled.

E: Uh-huh.

H: And it gets to those like heights of dramatism that make you wonder how much of it is real. But she left home at 16 without any support from her parents, and from there went to Hawaii and Miami where she worked as a dancer and a striptease artist until she sort of floated into Seattle in 1968 when she was about 21.

In the winter of 1968 she finds her way into Seattle and starts working and dancing there, which is probably where her interaction with the gay scene came from, because at the time homosexuality was still illegal in the United States and so things like the sex industry and the sort of places where you might find an exotic dancer would all rent the same sorts of buildings where they felt that they were safe from being raided; where they could pay off the mob or pay off the police to not bother them - and so everybody ended up in this kind of seedy underbelly that created large districts of cities which were known for their - I suppose what would have been considered vice at the time—

A: Mhm.

H: —but here included the sex industry, and gay clubs, and drugs, and the sorts of things that had to exist on the underside of the city in order to operate.

A: Okay. Just to clarify - you said Shelly's Leg was the first disco?

H: Yes. The first openly operating gay bar, and the first disco. But before this there were already gay bars in Seattle. They catered to a much older crowd—

A: Mhm.

H: —and they had a lot of sort of heavy '40s and '50s nostalgia that Shelly's Leg tries to imitate a little bit in its décor, but it didn't really have an out gay scene and it also didn't have a youth community that was centred being young and gay and out.

A: I can picture like, '20s nostalgia and like '30s nostalgia; I can't picture the décor of '40s and '50s nostalgia.

H: Well.... [laughs] Neither could Shelly Bauman.

[laughter]

H: Because as we'll see later when we're talking about the club itself, it has this weird mash-up of decorating styles, where she was trying for Art Deco nostalgia but it covers this whole weird, broken period from the '20s to the '40s and ends up this kind of delicious fabulous technicolour mess. It's quite the place.

A: Okay.

H: About two years after Shelly moves to Seattle, she finds herself in the house of a fellow named Pat Nesser – or Joe McGonagle – it's not clear who actually owns the house; the two live there together, and it's known as a sort of party house and hub of queer culture at the time.

E: Mhm.

H: It usually has five or six or 10 or 15 or 16 houseguests at the time staying there, where they'll live and throw very large parties; it's a really large house that they bought with the proceeds of selling an earlier very successful bar that Joe McGonagle owned called the Golden Horseshoe, which was – I couldn't find out if it was a gay bar or not, but it was a gay-friendly bar.

E: Mhm.

H: And Shelly just sort of wanders in one day and doesn't leave and then starts staying there, living with these guys, and becoming part of the gay scene in Seattle.

A: Mhm.

H: During which time she develops a habit for pausing movies on close-ups of Val Kilmer.

[laughter]

H: This isn't important to the history.

[laughter]

H: This is just something that I saw in her obituary that I thought would make an excellent character point.

A: They put that in her obituary? Like in the newspaper?

H: Yeah. Apparently it was a characteristic she kept for her whole life.

A: How old did she live to?

H: She lived to about 60 and she died in Seattle but ended up towards the end of her life moving all over the place, just as she did at the start of her life. It's not super relevant to the bar because by the time she dies the bar has already closed, so we probably won't cover it.

A: I was just wondering how... whether I should picture like a little old lady in her nursing home pausing the film.

H: Yes. A very old lady. Although she lived independently her whole life.

A: Yep.

H: So she would move in with friends and then move to Hawaii and get married and then that would break apart and then she'd come and move back to Seattle with friends, and she'd be all over the place.

A: I like that you said "she would move to Hawaii and get married" as though this was like her routine thing.

E: [laughs]

A: She'd live with friends, she'd marry someone in Hawaii, back to friends, marry another person in Hawaii, like....

H: [laughs]

A: Is this what happened?

H: [laughing] It's a close approximation. She was super nomadic which is probably a lifestyle that she formed early in her life and became used to before she settled in Seattle for a brief period and then returned to because she felt most comfortable with it.

A: Mmhm.

E: So what's Shelly's sexuality?

H: Shelly appears to be straight, in that I never saw a record of a gay lover, but it could be that she's bisexual. She describes herself once as a "fag hag" which seems to imply that she's straight, but that might not be that case. I don't have any conclusive records of her sexuality. I do know that she is in to men – she gets married to men a couple of times.

A: Okay.

H: And she really likes Val Kilmer.

E: Yeah. We understand the Val Kilmer thing, yeah.

H: Yeah.

[laughter]

H: Incidentally, just to sort of set the scene and lay out where we are, I have here a whole bunch of things that occurred in 1970—

E: Okay.

H: —which is the year that she wanders into Joe and Pat's house and starts to become really embedded in the Seattle gay scene.

A: I like these things. Good.

H: Yeah!

A: Tell us.

H: In America, Richard Nixon is President of the United States, still, and has not yet been turfed out.

A: Mhm.

H: The Soviet Union still exists and has just put a robotic probe on the moon, much to the US's chagrin. The Vietnam War is still happening. The Kent State shootings happen in May, which is where a bunch of Vietnam War protesters are shot by the National Guard and the unrest that springs from that rumbles on for the whole of this year. There are riots - clashes between unionists and protesting students – and that continues to be an undertone for the rest of the year and the years proceeding after that.

A: Did you say “clashes between unionists and protesting students”?

H: Yes, weirdly enough.

A: [laughs]

H: Construction unionists in hardhats.

E: Huh.

H: There were about 100 of them on each side and it turned into a massive brawl.

A: On both sides? Just unionists beating each other up over the war?

H: No. So unionists and the protestors. The thing about the war was that it was really good for business, which meant...

A: Ahhhhh.

H: ...that if you were a unionist putting together things for the war effort then you were super in support of the war at the time.

E: Huh.

H: This was obviously not applicable to all unionists.

E: Yeah.

H: But...

A: But that was the line of the unions at the time.

H: Yeah, exactly.

A: Huh! There you go. I've learnt some history already.

H: Boom! Black Sabbath release their first album in this year; Paul McCartney leaves the Beatles and releases his first solo album; and most relevantly, this is also the year after the Stonewall Riots, which was a riot in a gay bar following a raid in New York. This comes at a time of increasing feelings of solidarity among the queer community, of unity and a desire to be out and to exist publicly in a way that wasn't available to them before, this idea that we do exist and we have force and we have company and companionship and we are a group who have a collective identity starts to bubble to the surface at this time.

E: Mhm.

A: Mhm.

H: It's still not acceptable to be publically out. At this time, in the state of Washington, which is where Seattle is, it's still not legal for men to have intercourse with each other. Gay bars are still required to exist sort of on the fringes, paying small kickbacks to the police force and generally existing as far under the radar as they can, which also overlaps with the sex industry, and which leads them to congregate in small and very protected areas. One of these protected areas is Pioneer Square which is in downtown Seattle. It's kind of seedy and shady; there's a string of bars that lead all the way into what you might consider uptown Seattle that sort of describe a gradient of how dodgy the district becomes as they loop down towards the south, which all sort of culminates in Pioneer Square which is this big kind of hub of the gay community at the time. It has bars, it has lodgings, it has restaurants, and it's a very socially active district. And on Bastille Day in 1970, in order to promote the life and livelihood of this district, a local restaurant owner organises a Bastille Day parade...

E: Okay.

H: Which is this... Like, it's not a great parade.

[laughter]

H: It's a really shonky parade, I'm in being honest.

A: Do the people in this district have any connection with Bastille Day, have they ever celebrated it before or was this guy just like, hey, you know, this could work for us, let's celebrate this day?

H: The latter.

A: Okay.

H: Everyone's really into it, because it's a party, it's a public party, you get to be in the streets, the police are sort of tolerating public drunkenness, which comes up in a lawsuit later.

A: Mhm.

H: But it is generally speaking a... a party for party's sake.

A: Yep.

H: The parade isn't even particularly good. It has a Dixieland band on the back of a pickup truck.

A: A pick up truck is a ute, right?

H: Yes, yeah. On the back of a, on the back of a ute, but here it's a pickup truck.

[laughter]

A: I was just clarifying if I should picture a truck or if I should picture a Dixieland band awkwardly squashed into the tray of a ute.

H: Oh no no no, yeah, the latter. It's not a flatbed truck, there is not enough room for a Dixieland band in here.

[laughter]

A: Okay.

H: And that's, because that's the closest thing they could find to a French band, uh, so they decided to go with that.

[laughter]

H: And then they had two French-made cars...

E: Uh huh.

H: So, like, a pair of Citroëns or something. Uh, and then they had an antique fire engine that belonged to a guy who just lived in the district and dealt antiques.

A: Did that have a connection to France?

H: No.

[laughter]

H: It was a fire engine. And it was big and it was red and it had a confetti cannon on it.

E: Oh my God.

A: I'd go to this party.

E: That's justified.

H: Exactly. So, like, get the confetti cannon in here, we're going to have a great time. And the owner would, like, fire up the confetti cannon on holidays and they would go through the streets and like people would climb up onto the back of the truck and get up on the platform where the confetti cannon was. The confetti cannon isn't actually a purpose built confetti cannon that's he's bolted onto the top of this fire truck.

[laughter]

H: It's actually a construction that was used to shoot "lifelines", you can't see me making air quotes but, to shoot "lifelines" into burning buildings so that people could escape by sliding down.

A: Is that like a Spider-Man kind of...

H: Yeah, basically. So it wasn't, it wasn't like... a super good confetti cannon...

[laughter]

H: But people still, like, partied on it anyway and at some point somebody spills an enormous amount of booze into it and...

A: And then it's a booze cannon?

H: Sort of.

A: I'm determined to believe that's how this works.

H: I mean, you'll find out in a second, because at one point, Shelly's up there, like, on the booze cannon and having a fantastic time, uh, and she's like partying along and then she climbs down off the back of the truck and starts dancing along behind the fire truck and the confetti/booze cannon, um...

A: I'm really worried.

H: You super should be because this the point at which...

E: This is where the leg comes in, isn't it?

A: Yes.

H: Exactly.

E: [laughter]

A: This was the revelation I just had.

H: Because this is the point at which all the accounts diverge because it turns into absolute chaos immediately and nobody has a reliable, a reliable version of what goes on. But basically what happens is the cannon kind of goes up, and then it goes down, and then it comes to rest pointing into the crowd and then there's an enormous kaboom...

E: Ooh.

H: ...and Shelly wakes up on her back on the pavement and then goes to, goes to go and grab her jacket and like move it off her hip and then just hits pavement and there is no flesh there.

A and E: [general horrified noises]

H: Where there should have been flesh. And what's happened is that, because somebody's poured an enormous amount of booze into this cannon...

A: Ohhh.

H: They've basically... Like, you know how paper gets when it gets wet, it just turns back into wood, and compressed it down and wadded up...

A: Mmm.

H: ...this enormous amount of confetti that was loaded into the cannon and then the charge operated like the charge in just a normal cannon at this point, uh, and fired the enormous wadded ball of confetti straight into the crowd.

A: The confetti also being soaked with booze which, I don't know if it would catch fire depending on how this cannon worked...

H: No. It did not catch fire, thankfully.

A: Okay.

H: Um.

A: Could have been worse.

H: Could have been a lot worse.

A: Still pretty awful.

H: Exactly. And so Shelly has just been hit with effectively a cannonball of wood, uh, which doesn't go super well for her as you can imagine. There's a doctor on hand, and when I say "on hand", I think literally within arm's reach who has to kneel over her and physically reach into the cavity of her body and hold an artery shut until...

A and E: [general horrified noises]

H: ...the ambulance arrives.

A: Ooh.

H: At which point, she's taken to the hospital and she has a large section of her pelvis and her whole left leg and a small section of her small intestine amputated.

A: Oh my God.

E: Alright.

H: Which is solidly, like, D- outcome for Shelly at this point.

E: 10 minutes ago we were at Val Kilmer!

H: Yeah!

[laughter]

A: Like three seconds ago we were partying on top of a confetti cannon.

H: It takes a sharp downward turn.

A: Oh my God.

H: And then a sharp upward turn.

E: Mhm.

H: Because Shelly's in the hospital for nine months.

E: Jesus.

H: She recovers pretty well but is thereafter in a wheelchair for the rest of her life because her pelvis is all messed up.

A: Yeah.

H: Like all kinds of messed up. And then she comes out of hospital and she immediately sues the pants off everybody involved.

A: [laughter]

H: So she goes for the city itself for licensing the parade and allowing public drunkenness, she goes for the fellow who organised the parade for allowing a literal cannon into the parade, and the fellow who owned the literal cannon which became loaded with shot, and, uh...

A: Mm.

H: A firecracker, was how they were firing it. So they'd, like, jam a firecracker in there...

E: Well.

H: And then cover it in confetti and then just hoped that worked.

E: So this was already a terrible idea.

H: Yeah no, this was, this was a fiasco waiting to happen.

A: At least she came out of this was a, like, really good 'how did you lose your leg' story.

H: Oh yeah.

A: This is the sort of story you make up when you have a pretty mundane accident...

H: [laughter]

A: It was a confetti cannon!

E: Mm.

H: She also comes out of it with an out-of-court settlement of \$330,000.

A: That's a lot of money.

H: It is a lot of money, which, in today's money, puts you just over the two million mark.

A: Wow.

H: Which is a solid lump.

E: Nice.

H: Yeah. Without legal fees, too, because she settle out-of-court.

E: She deserved that because the city fired a cannon at her.

H: [laughter] I mean, I think it was the teenage son of the owner...

A: [laughter]

H: Kind of messed up firing the cannon and fired the cannon at her.

E: So you have a teenage boy.

H: Yeah...

E: Firing the cannon you have at a public parade.

H: [laughter]

A: The cannon operated by shoving a firecracker into the cannon...

H: [laughter]

A: ...and kind of hoping but it's already soaked in booze.

E: So as I said.

[laughter]

H: Yeah.

A: At the start of this, I was like, yeah, I'd go to this party. I would not go to this party.

H: Yeah. I mean, I think it's a great party before the confetti cannon. So Shelly comes out of hospital with this big lump of effectively two million of today's dollars which is 330,000 of the dollars of yesteryear, and she goes back home to where she's staying with Pat and Joe, and they get to talking and they start talking about, y'know, what would you do with two million dollars and they just closed a really successful bar so Shelly goes, why don't we open a bar?

E: So.

H: So they just do.

E: Their bar was very successful and has also just closed.

H: Yes, they, they sold it and bought a big house and are now just kind of living life.

E: Yes.

H: And having a great time.

E: So why did they sell it? Did they just get bored of having a successful bar or?

H: I think they wanted to cash out.

E: Okay.

H: Y'know, like, convert it to something concrete.

A: Mhm.

H: And get to the point where they can live in an enormous house and have fifteen house guests and just not have to work, which sounds like an ideal outcome from, like, converting off from a bar where you're, like, actively managing it.

A: So when are we opening a successful bar and subsequently selling that bar for our large house and not having to work?

H: I mean... never in this economy.

[laughter]

E: Well.

A: Well, that was depressing.

H: But in the economy of 1970, if you happen to have two million of today's dollars, you can just up and open a bar, which is what they did. They were originally going to call it, uh, they were going to have a bird mascot and they were going to call it The Great White Swallow, but that didn't get past the planning board.

[laughter]

H: For obvious reasons.

A: That was good though.

H: Yeah.

A: I like that.

H: Likewise the Meat Grinder didn't make it past the obscenity filter.

[laughter]

A: I preferred The Great White Swallow.

H: I agree. It's a good pun.

Y: Yeah.

H: And then eventually they were like, why don't we name it after the leg? And so they did.

A: Cool.

H: They went and found a three-storey brick building in Pioneer Square which is the same square and started converting it. It had previously been like a couple of mildly unsuccessful rock clubs. It had been turned into housing and apartments and a hotel, it had been a bunch of different things over its years. It was just sort of nestled in under the overpass of the Alaskan Way Viaduct which was a big highway section that travelled right over the top of the bar and you could hear the cars sometimes rumbling over the top.

A: Clearly I don't know what the word viaduct means and I just immediately pictured an aqueduct which is not what a viaduct is and then I was like "Why did they have, like a roman style aqueduct." And just made myself very confused.

H: I mean it's functionally identical except you replace the "aqua" for water with "via" for road. It's just like, it's an aqueduct for cars basically. And I think it was directly over the top. It's at least kind of like within a general arc of it because you could in theory get an object down from the top of the viaduct onto the building.

A: I feel like this is going to come into play later in the story.

H: Shhh

[laughter]

H: And it's located at the very center of gay life in Seattle in downtown Seattle. If you go and Google Seattle now then it's under the spot where the word Seattle is on the city. Like it's pretty central.

E: Do you remember which letter it's under?

H: It's close to the "S" so it's in the, like SEA section. It's not right on the water but it's near the water because there are no places in Seattle that are not near the water.

E: I bet we have some people who listen to this who are from Seattle

A: Mhm. We will, yeah.

E: Which is cool.

A: But they'll also be like, "Why did you locate us using it's under the S of Seattle and not the name of a place we would know."

H: I mean it's in Pioneer Square what more do you want?

A: I mean maybe they, I mean, I don't know anything about Seattle, maybe they all know what Pioneer Square is.

H: Yeah, me neither. If you know where Pioneer square is, drop us a line we'd love to hear from you.

A: And go past the building and send us a photo.

H: I think it's residential again now but it still exists.

A: Okay.

E: Maybe one of our listeners live in Shelly's leg.

H: That would be amazing. The moment they acquire the building they set about making it into the most intense and flamboyant disco that they can possibly conceive of existing. It turns from this kind of rundown brick building into this weird fever dream of Shelly's imagined 1920s and '40s nostalgia. So she gets in massive palm trees that are fake but are still massive palm trees. She gets, air quotes, "tiles" which is linoleum. It's tile-coloured and it's vaguely tiled-textured and then she gets a friend to just cut little martini glasses and palm trees into the tiles of the floor to be almost like what somebody who had had a 1940s or '20s bar described to them once would think if they had to then go and build a 1920s bar.

A: Which I feel like is exactly what was happening here.

H: Exactly, yeah. They filled the whole place with neon lights.

E: Of course they did.

H: And they had this massive elevated dance floor where people can go and dance and they have Seattle's first DJ set up which involves a lot of things that when I researched had brand names and technical specifications which I do not remember and cannot recount to you but looked very impressive.

A: And would mean nothing to us also.

H: Exactly. And so they had that set up on the stage and then on the side of that stage the whole thing was flanked by two enormous eight foot women underneath the sconces which were not there when they arrive they just decided they needed to be.

A: I don't know what I'm asking, I just need a clearer mental image of the situation.

H: I have it in my head somewhere that they are nude but I haven't recorded that in my notes so I can't tell you that for sure, dear listeners, but they're holding up the sconces that illuminate that side of the wall and they're just there to flank the DJ booth.

A: Okay.

H: Yep. It also has a bunch of gigantic mirrors behind the bar and by the sides of the bathrooms and then most importantly it has right as you walk in the door an enormous sign that says... and

I'm going to try and replicate the impact of the all caps and the underlining and the bits that's in red and very big. It says, "Shelly's leg is a GAY BAR provided for Seattle's gay community and their guests," underlined.

A: That's not as catchy as I imagined that sign would be.

H: No, it's not a catchy sign but it is a very important sign because all of the gay bars up to this point have been these covert underground establishments which are kind of like wink wink nod nod they're not established as gay bars they're just where the community knows to go find people who they can hang around with, you know. Here it's a stated part of the bar, it's up in big positively illegal letters. Right as you walk in the door. I really hope we can get a photo of this sign up on the blog because it's got underlining it's got big red text. It has an enormous palm tree it's quite the sign and it's in a museum now.

A: Oh good, what museum?

H: It's in the Museum of History and Industry.

A: In Seattle?

H: Yes. In Seattle.

E: This whole place sounds so tacky, I love it.

A: I want to go there.

H: It was quite the place. It was like 70% neon light and an enormous dance hub. The DJ was a very important part of the appeal of the place because it was very directly a youth culture thing. At that point DJing didn't really exist super well at that time so it was a relatively new and unknown art form that was mainly marketed towards young people which is something that Shelly's Leg became known for, that it was a place for new and up and coming music, it was a trendsetter, it was a very cool place, it was the place to be seen, it was this sort of icon of not only gay culture but also the culture at large which... had an interesting perception at this time of being spearheaded by gay people. In the same review in the Seattle Times that awkwardly tries to describe what a DJ is there's a quote that says, "The popularity of Shelly's is another example of fashion setting by homosexuals who have set trends for example in clothing and hairstyles.

A: Check out our clothing and styles, guys.

[laughter]

E: God.

A: So when you say that it was trendsetting the place to be and all that was that also for people who weren't gay?

H: It developed a really large cult following outside of the gay community. And so you'd find that especially as the life of the club goes on, as we get towards like 1975, it starts to have a more mixed and diverse crowd which is super important because it's a place where everybody of every inclination can come together and sort of just mingle and and not be weird about it.

A: Yep.

H: And it tried to achieve this through being at the very forefront of dance trends and music and being right there when disco was starting and being the first discotheque in town and really, like, pushing that new frontier of culture. But at the same time it also tried to establish itself as... a safe space is probably not the right word because it is a very, like, loud and ebullient and terribly hectic kind of melee of people in it in its composition but it would keep a selection of people in a Rolodex at the back of the door because they didn't want to have to go in the front and be seen and entering the bar and wanted to be able to still kind of manage their in and their out life together and so it was it was very actively a gay club throughout its whole existence., but it became more mixed as time went on.

A: Okay.

H: Apparently Bowie played there once which was a big deal at the time. He...

E: When? What year?

H: I could not tell you.

E: I need a source for this.

H: So I have to say I was careful to say, "Apparently Bowie played there once." Because I did go looking for this and it comes up in two obituaries of Shelly and it comes up in an article about the bar but I can't find a specific reference to a year in any of those three. So it may be that 'you know I heard Bowie played there once'. So possibly unsourced.

E: I mean definitely unsourced, just possibly also a lie.

H: Yes quite true. But it was very active in trying to be at the forefront of music and so tried to draw in a hip crowd and did incredibly well.

E: It sounds like the kind of place that David Bowie could have aesthetically blended into quite well. Unsure if complimentary.

[laughter]

A: I mean, I think that the fact that people would believe that Bowie played there also tells us a lot about the bar.

H: Yeah. Yeah, definitely.

A: Whether or not he did.

H: It was definitely very popular and people had this idea in their head of what Shelly's Leg was as a sort of forerunner of culture. And you would have, at one point there were lines that would literally loop around the block to get in the front door and you'd have a three or four hour wait to get from the back of the line to the front.

A: Oh, wow.

H: It was quite a time and it was very popular and Shelly did very well out of it and so did her business partners for the first while at least. There are accounts of her dressing up in jewels and furs and getting her two pet Dobermans who were named Satan and Lucifer...

A: [laughter]

H: ...and then getting the biggest and most ridiculous pair of platform shoes that she could find, throwing away the left one and wearing it down the boulevard in her wheelchair with her dogs and her friends just sort of promenading.

E: That's amazing.

H: It was very successful. It maintained this level of success up until about 1975 where... it's starting to become more of, like, an established feature rather than a bold new thing which hasn't hurt it terribly much at this point until about midnight on the 4th of December 1975 when a petrol tanker on the Alaskan Way Viaduct above the bar strikes a guardrail...

A: I'm so scared.

H: That's probably a good reaction. Strikes a guardrail and jackknives it back on itself, which causes the tanker trailer behind the truck to become detached from the truck itself, at which point it slides along the roadway, hits a concrete pillar, splits open, catches fire, and then tumbles over the edge of the viaduct and explodes into a field of flame right outside of Shelly's Leg, and also on top of Shelly's Leg, so a portion of the building is aflame, the windows explode from the heat, and everyone rushes out the back door, to escape this literal disco inferno.

[laughter]

A: You chose this entire topic because you realised you would say "literal disco inferno".

H: I didn't realise until I was...the... Like, I was writing this last night, and I was like, "It's a literal disco inferno!"

A: [laughter] Shelly has the worst luck.

H: Terrible, terrible luck. This isn't even her last enormous fire. She has one when she's sixty, and one in Hawaii. It doesn't seem like they're started intentionally. It just seems to be a thing that happens a lot to Shelly.

A: If she managed to start this one intentionally, I would be impressed.

H: That would be...that would be deeply impressive.

E: Shelly is a chaos god.

A: [laughs]

H: So the bar is not...in a great state for receiving visitors at this point. The whole front set of windows is gone, the fire has severely damaged some of the interior, they were storing some booze behind the bar, which I imagine didn't turn out super well, so it has to shut for four months.

A: Did many people die?

H: Not a one. I should have mentioned this.

A: Oh!

H: The windows exploded, and some people were injured, I think, but they got everybody out the back doors and it worked out pretty well, because they had a really well established system of sneaking people in and out through the back doors.

A: [laughs]

E: Oh, that's wonderful.

H: So, no casualties at least. Except for the bar itself, which is not in much of a shape. And so it closes for four months to remodel, which is a rough thing to do to a hot and happening night spot unfortunately. So it just sort of slips off the scene while they use the insurance money to patch it back up, and by the time it reopens again, it's still...a viable nightclub, but it's lost some of that splendour and that newness and that impressive 'it' quality that drove it in its early days, and then from there it just sort of starts to peter out. Eventually the owners of the bar start to argue a little bit, the profit sort of disappears, and then in 1978, the IRS just literally padlocks the front door.

E: Wow.

H: At which point the company that holds the title for the building is dissolved, Shelly takes her packet from the payout, and moves away to Hawaii, and that is the end of Shelly's Leg. But it exists for this five year period as...this kind of shining beacon of not only the gay culture in Seattle, but of a culture that wants to be out and integrated and exist in society, in a loud and

visible way. Perhaps the loudest and most visible way, full of neon light and music and possible Bowie and everything.

A: [laughter]

H: And everything that is communicated by an eight foot statue as a woman and as much neon light as you can pack into a building, and so it becomes this icon of Seattle culture thereafter.

A: Mhm. I'm interested in the fact that Shelly herself wasn't gay, because, did she choose to open a gay bar because her co-owners were gay, or because she just saw this as a very viable business opportunity?

H: Probably a little bit of both? She was very deeply integrated into the gay community at the time and her job for that meant that she had a lot of contact with that community, and she existed as a part of that life, I suppose.

A: Mhm.

H: That network of people that just sort of casually determines who you meet and the things that you make and the things that determine how you produce culture and who you produce it for, and so the people that she wanted to make a place for, to be in her night club were...there's a quote somewhere that I didn't think would become relevant and didn't ring down, but she talks about wanting to make a nightclub for everybody, regardless of race or sexual orientation, or any of these other factors that would be discriminated against. And so she builds a bar for the people that she's around, and wants to just pack as many people into it as possible.

A: Mm.

E: So, I find it surprising that...did they get any backlash from the police or anything like that, because that's certainly like, the vibe of the time.

H: Yeah, definitely. It's heavily that they paid the police at least a little bit.

A and E: Ah, yeah.

H: And it's also a time where people are still comfortable talking about the fact that it's a gay bar, like, in the papers – and it closes in 1978, which is two years after the sodomy law in Washington is repealed, but the review that comes out describing it as a homosexual bar happens in 1975. So it exists at this kind of turning point for “out” gay culture.

A: Mhm.

H: Where, it's not as frowned upon as it was, but it's certainly still not legal, so it kind of straddles that divide from the very end of prohibition of gay sex to the very beginning of this new legal era.

E: Yeah.

A: Mhm.

H: But it gets to exist as this icon of what the future of the queer out community could be. And it's important to note that this wasn't as much of a universal queer bar as it was a deliberately gay bar.

A: Mm. When you say gay, are you talking about men and women?

H: No, so specifically this was known as a bar for gay men, and their guests.

A: Okay.

H: But, 'cause, this was a community, you also had gay women and straight women and straight men who would enter as guests and then come back later as part of that same community.

A: Mhm. Mmkay.

H: So it wasn't actively exclusive of gay women, but it also wasn't—

A: It was actively for gay men.

H: Exactly. It was actively for gay men. Which I suppose, to a degree is actively exclusive of other things. But I think they made it quite clear that this was a bar for all people.

A: Well even having "and their guests" in big writing with double underline on their sign is, you know... Yeah, a good start there. So, after Shelly closed this bar, was she involved in any or even while this bar was open, was she involved in any gay activism or anything like that, or was it just for her a business venture that included her friends?

H: It doesn't seem to be. It seems like this was a purely commercial venture. And I don't know if she herself was involved in activism, but there was never an activist event that is hosted at the bar, or involves the bar heavily. Those two parts of that movement are very distinctly separate, because obviously this is where she makes her bread and she wants to keep it separate from sort of, anything that could tarnish it.

A: Yep.

H: Shelly's Leg the bar never really had any involvement in activism. It's possible that Shelly did, but I didn't go digging too much into her life. I only found what was given in her obituaries where they described her bar.

A: Yep. Okay.

H: Certainly her obituaries don't describe her as a gay activist, which is the sort of thing that an obituary would be wont to do, but then again, it could an omit-tuary.

A: [laughs]

E: [disappointed] Okay.

A: That was bad.

H: That was great! But we do know that it was very prominent, and visible, which from an inanimate building is perhaps as much as you can expect for gay activism...

A and E: [laughter]

H: ...and was an icon of the fact that you could be out and you could be queer, and you could be integrated into the community in big bold red letters.

A: [laughs]

E: Mhm.

H: Hanging on the sign in front of your bar. And with that, we're Queer as Fact. Thank you for listening, we've enjoyed your company. You can find us on Facebook, Twitter, and Tumblr as queerasfact, because luckily none of those usernames were taken. You can also email us at queerasfact@gmail.com, all one word, because that wasn't taken either, and we would love to hear from you. Download this podcast from wherever you get your podcasts. Or you can access it directly on the Podbean site, or on the iTunes site. And we would be super stoked if you could write us a review, because iTunes cares a lot about what you think about our podcast and how many positive words you put in the review. So if you enjoy what you've heard so far, leave us a review or comment or even just the word good repeated 75 times so that the search spider picks it up, we would be very appreciative. And if you are on the fence about contacting us, this episode comes to us from an anonymous Tumblr user who we are very grateful for the fantastic tip-off, because it's rare that we get a two-explosion episode. We'll be back on the 15th of November, with Eli and the Warren Cup, which is a Roman cup that just has a stonking great picture of gay sex on it.

E: Two!

A: Several pictures.

E: Two pictures!

H: Two stonking great pictures of gay sex on it!

E: Yeah!

H: Until then, I've been Hamish.

A: I'm Alice.

E: I'm Eli.

H: Thank you for listening, and we'll see you next time.