The Baton Show Lounge turns 40

The Baton Show Lounge in Chicago, home of “The Worlds Most Beautiful Female Impersonators”, has turned the “Big 4-0”, and is still going as strong as ever.

In March of 1969, Jim Flint (aka Felicia), after returning home from a 4-year stint in the Navy, decided to open a bar called the Baton Bar, just across the river from downtown Chicago. Trying to draw business into the bar, he decided to put on some roller skates and a dress and twist his baton, which he had done as a drum major while in school. And with some friends joining him on the street to draw attention, they began to pull customers into the bar.

Flint had already worked at several places on the North side, such as Sam’s and the Normandy Bar on Rush St. and had an idea as to what would attract attention, especially in the new bar which was in the “gay mecca” with a clustering of gay bars and gay life in high density.

The concept of his “drag” would eventually come to define his bar. He had to devise something to set the bar apart from the others, so he asked his friends to dress up and do shows along with himself as the emcee, “Felicia”, he would open the show with his baton twirling act and present the “girls”. It took off and there has been no looking back.

At first, performers would stand on a stage made of plywood and beer cases, the bar had a Hawaiian motif with a thatched roof on the bar. And the stage sat in the back corner of the bar, with tables made from long slabs of wood with chairs.

In the early 70’s, when you went to the bar, you were greeted at the door to buy a ticket, by Grandma Richie. Joann was one of two waiters. The early “cast” included, Lady Baronessa, Audrey Bryant, Lotta Love, and Jan Howard. (Audrey was the first ever impersonator to appear in Vogue magazine 6X before they found out she was a “he”.) Jan was one of the first to take hormones and was called, “the body beautiful”, but she was so near sighted that she had to count the steps to the front of the stage, and several times miscounted and fell into the audience. They just picked her up and put her back and she continued on. hahahahahahahahahaha!!!

The Baton gained fame and national recognition when Ir Kupcinet of the Chicago Sun times, brought Phil Donohue to a show in 1972, and he proceeded to feature the Baton on his talk show, many times. The Baton has also been featured on Oprah, Maury Povich, and Sally Jesse Raphael, among many others. (Incidentally, Chili Pepper was responsible for introducing Oprah to her stylist, as Oprah was just starting her TV show and didn’t know anyone in Chicago). Many, many celebrity visitors come to the Baton regularly when they are in town.

The Baton has grown to be 3X larger than the original bar, but is still at the same address: 436 N. Clark St. The interior now has a very posh look and the stage is larger and is able to accommodate the performers for production numbers. And they can comfortably accommodate up to 250 customers per performance, 5 nights a week at 8:30, 10:30 and 12:30 Wed. - Sun.

Being “gay owned and operated”, Flint says that 70% of his clientele is straight. They host a lot of bachelorette parties and everyone comes to see and admire the Las Vegas style revue that they put on. Since 1980, the Baton has been the home base for the “Miss Continental” pageant system, and has expanded to include, “Mr. Continental, Miss Continental Plus”, and “Miss Continental Elite” (for performers over 40). Many of these winners have gone on to become world famous, such as: Mimi Marks-“World Most Beautiful Transsexual”, Candace Cane - from the TV show Dirty, Sexy Money, Erica Andrews, Maya Douglass, Monica Muro, Ginger Grant, Chili Pepper, Sheri Payne, etc.

Jim Flint has been profiled on last years Out and About documentary on cable television, and is a founding member of the Windy City Athletic Association, and the LGBT sports league. Who would have thought 40 years ago, that a pair of roller skates, a dress, and a baton would make this man an icon of the gay business world that he is today.!!! (Incidentally, he owns the building now.)

It just shows what a little imagination, and a lot of ingenuity can produce.

As a fitting gesture and in celebration of their 4 decades of entertainment, the Baton devoted 4 days to each decade they have been in business. Each day was celebrated by having past performers from the 70’s, 80’s, 90’s, and 2000’s come back and recreate each decade. And this has all been captured on video. Go to thebatonshowlounge.com and see all of the winners of the Continental pageant system, and see more of the Baton, and you can also order video’s of the Continental pageant system, how to enter, and more info about The Baton Show Lounge.

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