

LivingArts

Bingo beats the weeknight slump, bringing new fans to bars and restaurants

The game has long been enjoyed in school classrooms, church basements, and charity drives, but this new version offers entirely different experiences

By Brandon Hill
GLOBE CORRESPONDENT

Halftime for the bingo game was signaled when the host, in a silver-sequined dress, hit a full split between two tables finishing dinner. When not reading numbers off of plastic balls that tumble out of a spinning cage, Mizery McCray manages the stunt in heels and a full head of blond hair wielded with the grace and gravitas of Dolly Parton.

Wolf whistles are as commonplace as vodka soda and novelty prizes at Monday night drag bingo at Club Café, a weekly mainstay of the South End cabaret and bistro. Find yourself shouting “Bingo!” at any point in the night and you’re as likely to leave with a bubble machine or pineapple-shaped candle holder as you are with a witty verbal jab for not paying attention to the instructions.

“[Bingo] has moved up,” said McCray in an interview between performing and calling numbers.

Once a go-to in bingo halls and church basements, the light-hearted game of chance is now growing in popularity as a weeknight attraction at bars and restaurants. At these events, prizes are more of a bonus than a pursuit. The attraction is the game itself. This rejuvenated bingo shares the same DNA as the traditional game, where a host calls out numbers and the lucky players get to shout “bingo” when they match five in a row on a randomly generated five-by-five grid. However, it’s novel twists on the well-known format that has venues using the game to fill seats on slow nights.

Spinoffs include drag bingo — also a monthly occurrence at Time Out Market — a popular musical version of bingo being played weekly at Sam Adams Boston Brewery and across New England, and Ashland Public Library’s weekly book bingo that kicks off later this summer, no pre-reading required.

On this March evening, patrons had braved a rumored Nor’easter (that did not come to fruition for city-dwellers) for a game at Club Café, raising over \$600 in voluntary donations for Mass General’s pediatric cancer center. At one point, between



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MIZERY MCCRAY caller at Monday night drag bingo at Club Café in the South End

games, one bingo-er tells McCray that they just beat cancer.

“It’s three to four hours for them to forget all their problems and the things going through their mind,” McCray explained. “When you come for drag bingo on a Monday night here, it’s literally just to let go.”

Thomas McNeil, the founder and owner of Good Thomas’ Entertainment, a Mansfield-based company that restaurants and other organizations can hire to put on games and karaoke, says bingo provided a break from old standby’s.

“I noticed that places were kind of sick of trivia,” McNeil said. “They didn’t want it, they already tried it.”

In 2011, McNeil hatched an idea for music bingo. What if instead of listening for numbers, he mused one day in the shower, players were offered 45-second snippets of songs and then tried to find the titles on their bingo card? Formerly a one-man karaoke operation, McNeil has since grown his company to more than 50 hosts, taking his brand of music bingo to 120 restaurants across New England every week.

From Jimmy Buffett to Wu-Tang Clan, music bingo can be a fast-paced game. At Red’s Kitchen + Tavern in Peabody, it’s acceptable to collaborate with your opponents. One patron may know every country record on the “Dirt Road Special” card, but rely on another’s knowledge for the next round’s jam-laced “80s Edition” card.

“It gets people talking. It gets people reminiscing,” said Thom Hogan, the host of Good Thomas’ Music Bingo at Red’s Tuesday night games. With Hogan, a disc jockey of 35 years, each musical “call” is punctuated by fun facts or hints. “Are there any Deadheads in here?” he asked as the folksy, smooth strings of Jerry Garcia permeated the restaurant on one March evening. A raised hand turned heads looking for the fan to name the song.

Two patrons and Peabody residents, Jessica Hamel and Bill Barrasso, agreed that mingling with their neighbors is a winning technique. They’re seated at the Red’s bar for music bingo every Tuesday, even though Peabody residents get 50 percent off entrees the night before. As Hamel claims her second prize of the night, a \$20 gift card, maybe the math still works out.

“When you first walk in, it’s an introverted bar,” Barrasso said. “Ten to 15 minutes in, these people haven’t said a word until, ‘Oh, let me see your card.’”

Music bingo changed him from a partner dragged to one too many outings to someone who rushes home from work when realizing it’s a Tuesday.

“A million games have been offered to me, I decline every time,” he continued. Unlike other weeknight bar games, music bingo allows the player to participate as vigorously or lackadaisically as they wish. Put your pencil

to the sheet and your ear to the air for one round and kick back and enjoy your meal during the next.

“I’m not gonna sit there and play that number bingo, but music bingo? I’m there,” Hamel said in agreement.

The game brings in newcomers as well. First-time patron Sherry Hansen said she hasn’t played bingo in years and she

had never been to Red’s, but the allure of music bingo was an itch she had to scratch.

“I literally passed by here every day for 15 years. Music bingo brought me in,” says Hansen, who lives in Greenland, N.H., and works in Cambridge.

At Club Café, the game of chance is also effective at eroding stiff social barriers when a good caller gets you out of your comfort zone.

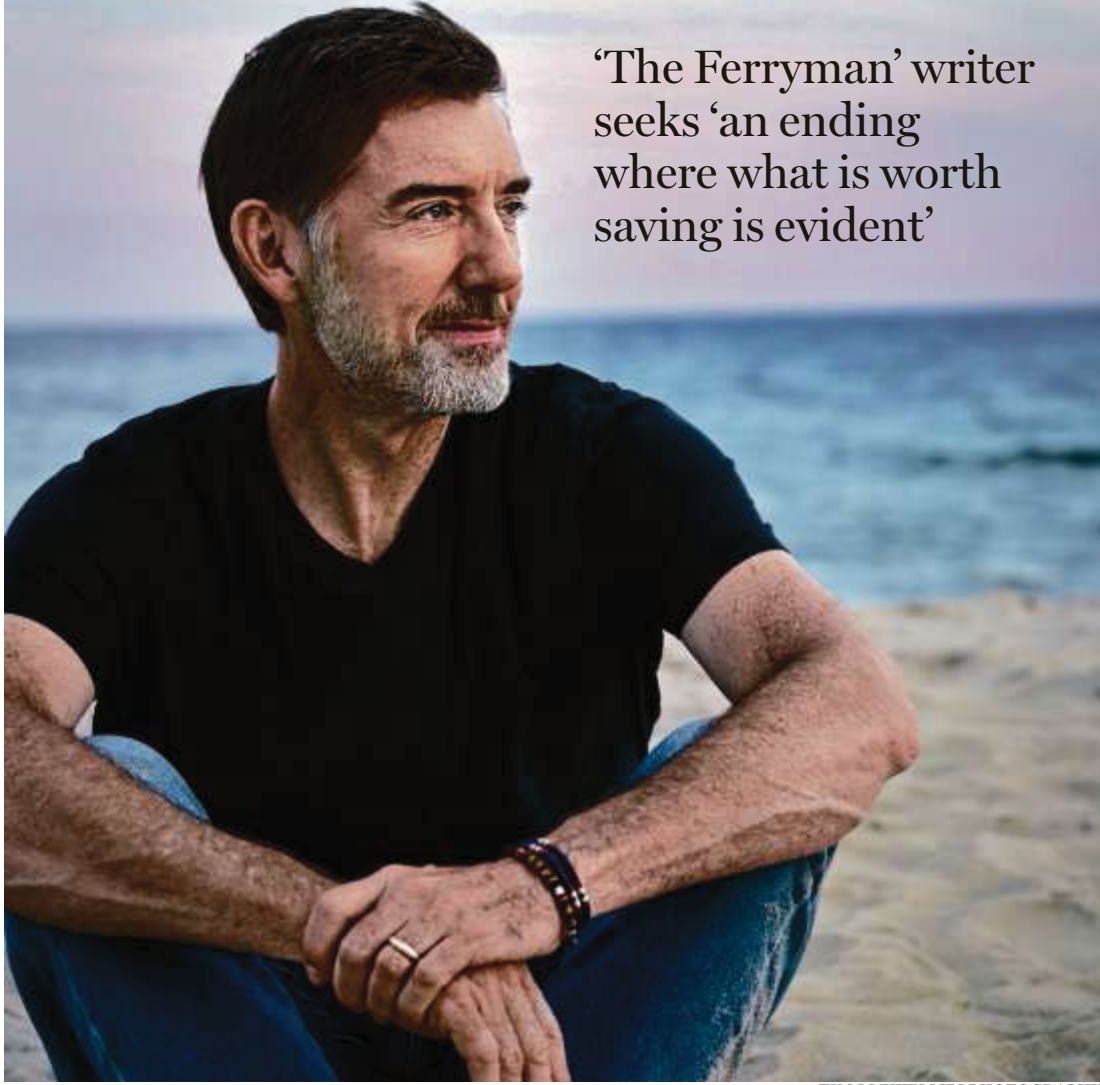
Patrons commended the way that their hosts have used the familiar game to create another space for celebrating self-acceptance.

“Seeing people so out and about, why should we be afraid to be so quiet?” says Trinity De Santiago, a Lynn resident who attended a Club Café bingo night with friends. “It makes us proud to be who we are.”

Bingo is everyone’s game, and something about it sucks everyone into the performance. It’s hard not to find some gravitas in the outcome, whether that’s a pineapple-shaped candle holder, a new favorite song, or a much-needed laugh with a stranger. As Hogan puts it, “It’s not your grandma’s game, but she can come, too.”

Brandon Hill is a graduate student studying multimedia storytelling at Emerson College.

Author Justin Cronin isn’t in search of a happy ending



‘The Ferryman’ writer seeks ‘an ending where what is worth saving is evident’

By Francie Lin
GLOBE CORRESPONDENT

Justin Cronin wants to save the world. That may not be readily apparent, given that Cronin, over the course of his best-selling 2010s “Passage” trilogy, has laid spectacular waste to North America and the world at large, killing off vast swaths of humankind via a deadly vampire-inflicted virus. Or that, in his latest novel “The Ferryman,” released May 2, he foists a different but no less existential peril upon his characters.

But the author, who teaches at Rice University and lives the rest of the year in Centerville, is something of an optimist, albeit one with a lot of doomsday baggage. “I was born during the Cuban missile crisis,” he said in a recent video interview. “The existential question created in 1945 was, do you want to survive? Across the ’50s, we talked about the survivability of global nuclear conflict, then abandoned that idea completely in favor of mutual assured destruction. These are the clouds I grew up with over my head.”

Some people go to therapy; others write a 900,000-word dystopian epic to work through their preoccupations with loss, disaster, and mass extinction. “The Passage” was not purely a personal exorcism, however. Cronin, an animated figure whose energy transmits even through the flattened dimensions of Zoom, is thoughtful about his work and the place that apocalyptic stories serve in the public psyche, especially in the current age of national fracture.

“Reading nonfiction, you get information, you learn facts,” he said. “[But when] you read fiction, you experience something more directly. It’s my one small gesture towards my fellow earthlings, to write these stories that will be diverting and entertaining but [also] express something serious. The act of reading is an experience of shared humanity, which is what is missing right now.”

“The Ferryman” — without getting too far into spoiler territory — is an intricate mystery that deals with loss and devastation on levels both personal and global. It’s a love story as well, or rather a catalog of love stories, between the characters — residents of the island of Prospera, where nobody dies, and its connected Annex — and also in a more comprehensive sense.

“Am I looking for a happy ending? Not per se, but I’m looking for an ending where what is worth saving is evident,” he said. “That’s the job of apocalyptic literature.”

He cites love, particularly parents’ for their children, as one of humankind’s redeeming qualities, but for Cronin, art and literature are also cornerstones of a world worth saving — or building. His enthusiasm for books and movies runs deep, although not necessarily toward the objects you might expect. “The Passage” drew comparisons to Stephen King’s “The Stand” (virus) and “Salem’s Lot” (vampires), but he credits Larry McMurtry’s great Western “Lonesome Dove” both for giving him the road novel structure for “The Passage” and for showing him that there is “a difference between form and formula.” (A lengthy section of “The City of Mirrors,” the third book in the trilogy, was based on that icon of dystopian literature, Evelyn Waugh’s “Brideshead Revisited.”)

“The Ferryman” also takes its bones from a classic, the final epigraph of the novel hailing from “The Tempest,” a selection that required no mental rummaging to recall. As a Harvard undergraduate in the 1980s, Cronin said, his “old-fashioned, quite stodgy education in English literature” meant that “I just read everything.”

The other artistic influence on “The Ferryman”?

“The last two minutes of ‘Planet of the Apes.’”

While acknowledging that he’s learned much about storytelling from TV, and is at work on a screen adaptation of “The Ferryman,” Cronin remains a novelist at heart, noting that writing is a solitary endeavor in which your inner life is put to the page. He prefers to face that process on his own rather than with an army of other writers and producers.

And he maintains that as the “local god” of their story, a writer should be kind and allow every character, even the “villains,” their own humanity.

“You have to decide what kind of story you want to tell,” he says, “and I made a decision early on in my writing life that I would send everybody to heaven in the end.”

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Justin Cronin will be at Brookline Booksmith on Tuesday at 7 p.m., 279 Harvard St., Brookline. brooklinebooksmith.com

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