

Bingo exits Squaresville to new address in Trendytown

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When you think of bingo, chances are the first things that come to mind don't include cross-dressers, stripping and the Sex Pistols.

But these unlikely elements are helping sell the senior-citizen pastime to a crowd more likely to identify with *Girls Gone Wild* than *The Golden Girls*.

Across Canada, new converts are finding their calling in subversive bingo games customized for everyone from drag queens to exhibitionists and punk rockers. In May, ABC will take the hobby's reformation one step further with the fast-paced game show *National Bingo Night*, which network execs promise will not look like "grandma's bingo."

Imagine asking the Dukes of Hazzard to drive Miss Daisy and you get the idea.

"Bingo is seen as the ultimate square activity," says Robert Thompson, director of the Bleier Center for Television and Popular Culture at Syracuse University.

"But it's not hard to change the neighbourhood of a cultural thing from square to hip, and oftentimes there's a very short distance between the two."

In major Canadian cities, that distance is traversed using raunch and titillation for "dirty bingo," a flesh fest hosted in numerous Toronto nightclubs by an acid-tongued transvestite named Shirley; the sounds of the Sex Pistols for "get lucky bingo," where leather-clad punks at Edmonton's Filthy McNasty's compete to win X-rated toys; and cross-dressing that would put *Rocky Horror* to shame for "bingo for life," formerly known as "gay bingo," in which a drag queen duo takes control of the numbers game to raise money for people with terminal illnesses. Weekly games are held at Sugar Daddy's in Vancouver.

ABC, for its part, hopes to bridge the generation gap using contemporary set decoration, a two-story Plexiglas sphere that shoots bingo balls at breakneck speeds, and an interactive component in which viewers at home play along with cards printed off the Internet.

Thompson, however, isn't sure it'll be enough.

"Bingo's got this kind of cool, kitschy history to it," he says. "But as a game, there's not a lot going for it except for the fun it is playing live with other people. That's the hard part (for a TV network). It's so incredibly simple - a chimpanzee could play - that you really have to rely on window-dressing to get people to watch."

Elsewhere in North America, players of a younger vintage enjoy "hipster bingo," a New York creation in which attendees of an indie concert earn squares by spotting various hipster cliches in the crowd; "buzzword bingo," where office workers discreetly earn squares every time a superior

uses corporatespeak in a meeting; and "bitter bingo," a Maryland offshoot in which women earn squares for the various types of men who annoy them at the bar.

On one Bitter Bingo card, for instance, squares include the familiar "cheesy pick-up line" guy, the "I'm not from here" guy, and "the guy you accidentally made eye contact with." Beat your girlfriends to marking off five pickup artists in a row and you win.

"Bingo lends itself (to reinterpretation) because it's a game everyone is familiar with," says Anna Ditkoff, the 30-year-old founder of Bitter Bingo. "There's no learning curve, you don't have to explain the rules."

Don't think for a second, however, that the Baltimore writer is enamoured of the old-school church basement bingo circuit.

"Predominantly, when people think of bingo they think of little old ladies with, you know, two-inch ashes hanging off their cigarettes and scary, windowless rooms," she says, laughing. Years ago, Ditkoff paid a visit to a real bingo hall and attests it was "one of the most depressing places I'd ever been to."

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