



Michael Hess's best shot

'I took this picture in 2008. You go into a bingo hall, and it feels like you're stepping back into the 1960s'

I'm from Germany, and we don't have bingo there. But in Southampton, where I used to live, there was an amazing old cinema - a huge art deco place with neon lights. One day in 2005, I went in to see what was going on. Inside, I found dozens of people playing bingo. I was fascinated straight away, and I thought, "I have to come back and capture this."

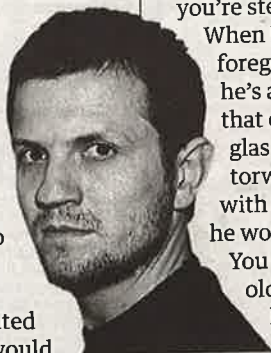
I'm a structural engineer by training, but I always dreamed of making a book of my photography, so I spent the next five years photographing 60 bingo halls. The majority of them were in Liverpool and Newcastle. I liked the smaller, independent bingo clubs best - that's where you get the strongest characters. Whenever I visited a bingo hall, the manager would

introduce me to the whole club, so it was impossible to stay out of sight. You don't know how people will react - after all they're gambling, and people can be sensitive about that. But everyone was so open and warm.

I took this particular picture in 2008, in Flutters bingo club in Biggleswade. The thing that really strikes me about this picture now is how timeless it is. You go into a bingo hall, and it feels like you're stepping back into the 1960s.

When I first saw the man in the foreground I thought, "Oh God, he's a character straight out of that era, right down to the glasses." He was looking towards the board on the wall, with all the numbers; I thought he would make a strong image.

You can also see the shape of the old cinema auditorium behind him, the building sloping back. I'm standing where



CV

Born: Eisenach, Germany, 1977.
Studied: Self-taught.

Inspirations:
W Eugene Smith, Jim Goldberg.

High point:
"Getting an email from the publisher saying he would publish my book."

Low point:
"Travelling to Newcastle once to photograph a bingo club, only to be told they wouldn't let me in."

Top tip: "Don't be afraid of interacting with your subject to capture an intimate moment."

the front row of the cinema seats would have been - they had got rid of them, and installed the partitions, and all the special bingo tables. I came upstairs to get to the balcony, where this is, and straight away I saw the angle and composition. It was perfect. And I used a film camera, rather than a digital one, to make sure it had an old-style feeling.

The series as a whole worked best if I talked to people, engaged with them, asked them what they wanted to do in the photograph. But they have to concentrate to play bingo, so it is possible to pass among the players unnoticed - as, after checking that he was happy to have his picture taken, I did with this man. You only really get a good picture when your subjects allow you to photograph them.



Interview by Andrew Pulver. Bingo & Social Club, an exhibition of photographs by Michael Hess, is at the Book Club, London EC2 (020-7684 8618), 3 to 30 March.