

PROFILE

KING OF MULTI-CULTI

Why Russell Peters made \$3 million last year as a global comic superstar

BY JAKOB VON BAEYER • On first blush, Russell Peters's stand-up routine is the kind of thing you might expect to have heard 50 years ago, delivered by a foul-mouthed comic to a boozy, late-night, predominantly white audience. There's this line: "When Chinese people speak English they sound like they're chopping vegetables." Or this one: "We don't have a lot of Mexicans in Canada, it must be why our lawns are so bad." Or this one: "I could tell you were Filipino because you keep staring at the microphone like there's going to be karaoke after the show." And so on. When Peters effortlessly slips into their respective accents, he gets the biggest laughs of all.

But if the routine appears to be a throwback, that couldn't be farther from the reality of Russell Peters, the comedian of South Asian descent from Brampton, Ont., who, far from playing late-night dives, has turned into a full-blown international phenomenon. Peters made \$3 million last year, just telling jokes. He regularly sells out massive venues in Manchester and Montreal, Singapore and Sydney, New York and London—notably without a movie contract, a TV show, or a presence in mainstream media. Fans flew in from across the Arab world when he played in Dubai recently. In June, he returns to Canada from his adoptive home in Hollywood for a four-city tour, which includes two sold-out nights at the 19,800-seat Air Canada Centre in Toronto.

The tour is aptly called *Homecoming*; despite his stateside address, Peters's roots are very much in Brampton, where he grew up and his mother lives. "I still hold it down for B-

town," he said over the phone last month as he prepared for a trip to Washington, where he was scheduled for two shows, and a live interview on al-Jazeera. When he was a kid in the 1970s his friends were mainly Jamaican, but he mixed with Chinese, Italians, Filipinos and Polish kids. He loved rap music and break-dancing. His father actually taught him racial slurs—the proper verbal ammunition to fend off bullies. It should come as no surprise, then, that his act lampoons the immigrant experience from the perspective of the second generation. But what's unique about Peters is that he manages to do it without stepping on toes. Everybody's in on the joke. His act is generous, uncontroversial and irony-free,

antithetical to the "meta-bigot" comedy of, say, Borat or Sarah Silverman. Whether his fans know it or not, besides being a very funny guy, Peters just may be the most charismatic ambassador for Canadian multiculturalism since Pierre Elliott Trudeau.

Peters began doing stand-up when he was 19, and by his early 30s he had a successful career as a club-circuit headliner, even touring internationally. But his real breakthrough as a global comedy force came after a pirated video of a 2003 TV special posted on the Internet became a download phenomenon.

It wasn't strictly South Asians who were doing the downloading; the act hit a nerve with the sons and daughters of diasporas worldwide, and Peters received more than five million views on YouTube and Google Video alone. "In my show I talk about my experience, but it turns out that my experience wasn't unique," Peters says. "Turns out it's very commonplace for people to have grown up like I did."

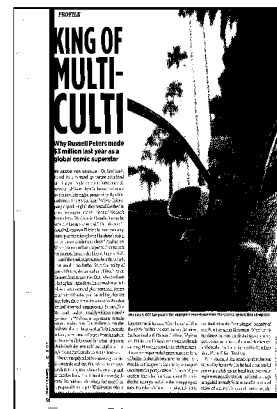
"It's nice to think that he'd be just as huge a star—and he *would* be a star—if he didn't base his comedy around an ethnic group," says Mark Breslin, founder of the Yuk Yuk's comedy club franchise and an early Peters supporter. "But when a group feels like they've been denied a voice, it's an event when someone shows up and speaks directly to them." Peters agrees, though he's quick to address the charge that he's a one-trick pony, only appealing to a narrow segment of the population: "I don't expect to see 20,000 Indian people show up at the ACC." Breslin points out that Peters has consistently had broad appeal. "Russell was always able to cross over," he says. "At Yuk Yuk's he attracted a really mixed crowd."

Peters sees himself very much rooted in the traditions of mainstream stand-up comedy. No gimmicks, just jokes. His most famous

routine, which appears on *Outsourced*, his six-times platinum DVD filmed at the Warfield Theater in San Francisco, is a series of jokes about how he, like many other children of immigrants, was physically disciplined as a child. The premise is simple enough: in the future, white kids will be outnumbered by immigrant kids on the playground, and they'll feel left out when the immigrant kids bond by sharing their experiences of getting smacked. "It doesn't matter where your parents are from, if they weren't born in this country they will whoop your ass growing up." But the spotlight shines brightest on Peters's own experiences. The highlight of the routine is a warning that Peters delivers in his father's thick Indian accent: "*Somebody going to get hurt real bad.*" The catchphrase, which earned legendary status on the Internet, provokes cheers and applause from the audience.

Peters's success is at the forefront of a wave of ethnic comedy as mainstream entertainment discovers an untapped niche. The notion of courting non-white markets first became a viable and appealing strategy with black comedy in the United States in the late 1980s. It's now being tested multiculturally. "Twenty years ago there was no black comedy circuit," says Bruce Hill, COO of the Just For Laughs comedy festival, from his Montreal office. "Then the Kings of Comedy [Cedric the Entertainer, D.L. Hughley and others] started to play hockey arenas and generated huge interest from an audience that was previously unserved. Now it's probably the most lucrative market in America. And you're seeing the Latin market explode, too."

Last month, using Peters's success as a blueprint, Just For Laughs co-produced the Ethnic Heroes of Comedy, a 10-city Canadian tour specifically marketed as a mix of multicultural and mainstream comedy. (A press release announces: "Stereotypically funny!") On the bill are Angelo Tsarouchas, a Greek Canadian, Frank Spadone, an Italian Canadian, Jo Koy, billed as an Asian comic,





PETERS'S ACT lampoons the immigrant experience from the second-generation viewpoint

'WE DIDN'T HAVE A LOT OF MEXICANS IN CANADA, IT MUST BE WHY OUR LAWN'S ARE SO BAD'



HE'S IN TALKS about a TV show, following in the footsteps of George Lopez and Bernie Mac

and Sugar Sammy, who is from India. Breslin speculates the next wave of ethnic comedians will be Muslim, taking off from an already vibrant scene in the U.S. and a growing demographic of Muslims raised in the West. In March, the TV network Comedy Central aired an hour-long program featuring comics of Middle Eastern origin. It was called the Axis of Evil Comedy Tour Special.

Meanwhile, following in the footsteps of some stars of the black and Latino scenes—comedians like Bernie Mac and George Lopez—Peters is in talks with two networks about developing a TV show around his act, and entertaining doing movies. He's recently done two small film roles, but he's wary of taking stereotypical parts. "I won't do the role of 'Indian guy' or play a terrorist," says Peters. "What's the point? I spent this much time building up the respect of my fans, of people who don't want to be portrayed that way." Besides, with millions in the bank, he

says he can afford to be choosy.

Ultimately, it's crossover acts like Peters that the industry covets, and he plays up this strength. "I make the distinction in my act between race and culture," says Peters. "Racially I'm an Indian man, as far as I'm concerned. But culturally I'm a Canadian man." Residentially he's an American, the latest in a long line of comedic exports. He has a home in the Hollywood Hills, a generous three-bedroom with a view of the Hollywood sign. It remains to be seen whether the entertainment industry will take him on his merits and fully embrace the multicultural ideal. There's also the danger the industry will embrace it too much—the "ethnification" of comedy to reach new ethnic markets could mean weak, watered-down comedy for you and me. But one thing is clear: Peters says his fans have spoken. "I can't tell you how many emails I get that say, 'Come to my city or else *somebody going to get hurt real bad.*'" **M**