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Racial stereotypes fuel comic's satire

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News Special Writer

It's hard to imagine the American comedy landscape without the contributions of "ethnic" humor, as it was once called.

Indeed, where would we be without the send-ups of Jewish culture offered by several generations of Jewish comics, from Henny Youngman, Jackie Mason and Alan King to Robert Klein, Billy Crystal and Jon Stewart? Or the comic insights into the black community hilariously presented by Richard Pryor, Eddie Murphy and Chris Rock? And in recent years, Hispanic comics like George Lopez and Carlos Mencia have made mainstream inroads as well.

But it wasn't until now that an Indian comic was poised on the brink of U.S. stardom, with amusing observations about his own culture at the ready.

Russell Peters, born to Anglo-Indian parents in the Toronto suburb of Brampton, is not well-known in the United States, but he's a big name in Canada, where he's been nominated for four Gemini Awards (Canada's version of the Emmys). He's also been nominated for best male comic by the Canadian Comedy Awards, and sells out theaters all over Canada.

And if he has his way, he'll be just as well-known by American audiences before long, because he's signed a production deal to do a TV sitcom pilot here in the States.

Peters, who comes to the Michigan Theater on Friday, has big fun lampooning cultural stereotypes, and he doesn't flinch from doing a heavily-accented imitation of his Calcutta-born father - much to the discomfort of some Canadians and Americans of Indian descent.

Peters also learned other accents at an early age, such as the Jamaican patois of some of his black schoolmates. He mixes them all together in his act, which is heavy with satires of racial stereotypes.

One routine pokes fun at frugal Indian shoppers bargaining with equally cost-conscious Chinese shopkeepers, and another is a riff on why Indians typically "have made terrible slaves - 'I'll tell you what, you pick the cotton, and I'll work out the T-shirt deal,' " he cracks.

Public awareness of Peters' humor increased in Canada after he did a "Comedy Now" special on the Comedy Network in Canada. A fan uploaded his routine onto the Internet, and it started getting chopped into small audio bits and sent around to various communities.

"I do jokes about different races, so the Italian bits would be sent around to Italians, and the Chinese bits would be sent to Chinese people; that sort of thing," Peters recently told the Toronto Sun. That word-of-mouth network built a

grass-roots following for Peters' material.

"I'm pretty sure Russell is the first Canadian comic of Indian descent we've had play the Michigan Theater," said Dave Clark, director of marketing for the Detroit office of promoter Live Nation, which is presenting the

show.

"But for me, the real first is Russell's style of comedy. I can't recall ever seeing a comedian that dives so deep into race and culture clash topics and still have such a broad cultural appeal. That's very refreshing."

As is often the case with ethnic comics, Peters' humor is inspired by situations that weren't so funny at the time, and his comic anecdotes are often based on painful memories.

"In Brampton in the '70s and '80s, you were either black or you were white trash," Peters told MEHFIL, a magazine that caters to Indian readers in Canada. "I hung with the black kids because all the white kids didn't like me, and when somebody doesn't like you, you don't like them back. I'd get called Paki all the time, and get beat up for no reason." But like many "naturally funny" kids, Peters used his quick wit to deflect such racism, and ultimately won over his tormentors.

Peters tried pitching a sitcom based on his cultural experiences to Canadian producers, but ran into indifference, so he pitched Hollywood producers instead. Eventually, he was signed by a new production company co-founded by

big-time comedy manager Jimmy Miller and TV producer Tom Werner, whose previous outfit, Carsey-Warner, produced "That '70s Show," "Roseanne" and "The Cosby Show."

So, a pilot is in the works for a "workplace sitcom," starring Peters and written by writer-

director Tom Brady, whose credits include "The Simpsons" and "Home Improvement."

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