



# MASS APPEAL

## issue 39

HEY YOU'RE COOL

### RUSSELL PETERS



*I'll admit, when my Indian friend Dwijen kept pestering me to watch clips of a supposedly "hilarious" Indian stand-up comedian, I was skeptical. Sure, I knew some funny brown folk, but I had never seen any of them on TV, so come on—how funny could they really be? Is it mere coincidence that the only Indian person I'd seen on the television was half of Ben Kingsley? (I know what you're thinking, but sorry—Apu Nahasapeemnetilon doesn't count because he's a cartoon. And his voice is done by a white man.) Come on, we even had to watch a tape of this guy's standup on my friend's laptop. I was not getting my hopes up.*

*On first glance, he seems like your average clean-cut guy, but it turns out that Russell is, well...funny as shit. With an improvisational, brash style and a focus on poking racial hot buttons, he often gets the crowd involved, using their ethnicity as a springboard for hilarious observations and spot-on impressions. Just when I thought I'd discovered the most hilarious comedian nobody knew, I came to find out that the 35-year-old Toronto native is already a huge star in Canada. This guy even had a camera crew from Canadian MTV "Diary" following him around during our interview. While he's internationally known and has been thugging it out on the comedy circuit for over 16 years, Russell is finally breaking through in the States due to the exposure his performances have gotten from the internet. Oh, and Russell barely knows how to use a computer.*

*Truth be told, RP just bought a new bachelor pad in LA (I smell a Canadian MTV "Cribs" in the future). He's out there reading movie scripts, trying to break away from the usual turban-clad, heavy-accented foreign characters that seem to be the only resort for Desi thespians in Hollywood. While he tries to poke holes in the system, he's got a standup DVD and album on Warner Bros., which will be broadcast on Comedy Central before its release in June. And with a new sitcom based on his comedy called "Those People" in the works for FOX, his rep will only get bigger. Just don't call him the Great Brown Hope—he's in it for the revenge. Perhaps Russell put it best when asked about his Hollywood hustle: "I'm grindin', baby!"*

**YOUR COMEDY DEALS WITH RACIAL ISSUES, AND YOU TEND TO TAUNT YOUR AUDIENCE. HAVE YOU EVER GOTTEN A BAD REACTION WHILE PERFORMING?**

Nothing major, but a couple weeks ago I was up in Irvine, California and had been up on stage for maybe ten minutes and this white guy got upset. He got up out of his seat and security ran over to him to throw him out. He was yelling, "Russell, you're a racist fucking asshole!" I wanted to go, "Is that a white guy calling me that?" I don't understand. Clearly he has his own issues going on and I've struck a nerve. If you look at my act and say that I'm racist, you're missing the point and I don't want you at my shows. I'm talking about races, not making fun of races.

**WHEN YOU DO A CHINESE ACCENT, IT SOUNDS SPECIFICALLY CANADIAN. IS THAT INTENTIONAL?**

Yeah, when I was in Hong Kong [doing shows], I heard it all the time. I just kept copying everyone when I was there. And that's become a mainstay [in my act]—the Chinese thing is going to be around for a long time. People like it. They request it. See, I'm pointing out things, and the races that I'm talking about recognize those things to be true. When I do my shows now, a lot of Asians show up because the stuff that I'm saying to them is very real. I'll make fun of a lot of different races and at the end of the show, invariably someone will come up to me and say, "Hey dude, you didn't talk about me!"

**DO YOU EVER FIND IT MORE DIFFICULT TO RELATE TO YOUR INDIAN FANS IN THE STATES THAN IN CANADA?**

Well, I think we have a totally different experience in Canada because the Indian kids that I find in the US—not all of them but a large percentage of them—come from very upper middle class families. Their parents are professionals and doctors and shit like that. In Cana-

da, Indians are very working class, so we grew up in the same neighborhoods as the black kids. So we come from a different mindset; we don't expect anything. But I find a lot of kids from the US—not all of them, but a lot—have a certain kind of "give it to me" mentality, and it's like, nah kid, you gotta work your ass off for it. I've been hustling comedy for 16 and a half years now, before I finally broke. [But] the Indian kids in the States don't want to hear about it. But I tell 'em, "Listen, we have don't have many Mexicans in Canada, so the Indians in Canada are the Mexicans."

**THE BLACK PERFORMERS IN THE US HAVE ALWAYS HAD THE "CHITLIN CIRCUIT"...**

I performed on the Chitlin Circuit for many years. I would come to New York and do Pips in Brooklyn or the Bronx BBQ on a Saturday night at like 1:30 in the morning. But I headlined at the Apollo last year. That was my first time headlining there. Honestly, it was one of my favorite performances of my entire career.

**IS THERE A SIMILAR CIRCUIT FOR DESI PERFORMERS, OR IS THERE NOT REALLY ENOUGH OF A MARKET?**

There is, but you're not ever really going to break out [doing that], because the material that you're doing is very limited. Sure, we're the second largest population in the world, but you're doing it over here. So, it really doesn't make that much sense to go that route. Get some stage time, get some experience, maybe grab a couple of pay days, but at the end of the day you have to decide: Do you want to be a performer? Do you want to be a star? What do you want to be? I knew from day one that I wanted to be a star, so I approached it from that angle. But I've been doing quote-unquote "regular" shows for years before the Indians caught onto it. I was mainstream before I was cultish.

**FOR A LOT OF PEOPLE IN THE STATES, KAL PENN IN HAROLD & KUMAR WAS THE FIRST TIME THEY SAW AN INDIAN CHARACTER WHO WASN'T JUST A COMPLETE F.O.B.**

Right, but then he turns around and does *Van Wilder* part two. Sure, you take a big giant step [forward], and then you take 21 steps back. It's harder to make it as a regular character. I mean, shit, I could be making a movie like every other week if I was willing to go and do the F.O.B. role. There was this other movie that came out recently, and I really wanted to do it, but then they wanted me to do the accent. I was like, "I don't think so." If it makes sense I'll do it, but it never makes sense, they just want you to do it to do it. But the fact that they've given me a sitcom and I play myself—I don't play some refugee guy—says that they're taking steps to move forward. I think that a lot of the educated people in the game are going, "You know what? This could be funnier." But the time is coming. We were the invisible minority for so long. Even if you watch a show like "ER," it's supposed to be an emergency room hospital in Chicago and they've got one Indian doctor. I mean, come on. That's like doing a show about a law office and there's no Jewish characters.

**DO YOU EVER WORRY ABOUT GOING DOWN IN HISTORY AS THE BIG BROWN HYPE?**

Actually, in Canada, the [press] calls me "The Great Brown Hope," but I never want to put that kind of pressure on myself. I wasn't doing this for anyone but myself, to be honest with you. Because when I was growing up, I had a lot of shit happen to me. I dealt with a lot of racism, a lot of bullies, for the very simple reason that I was a brown guy. So I got into this career and I wanted to be successful just so I could say to people, "Ha ha, fuck you!" Gerry Bednob—he was the old guy in *The 40 Year Old Virgin* who said, "It's not about the Dirty Sanchez"—I've known Gerry for a very long time, and he told me that success is the best revenge. I always keep that in my head.

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