

# The Most RACES Show on Earth!

## Fighting Discrimination One Joke at a Time

By Stratton Lawrence

At the recent bris of his nephew, comedian Noah Gardenswartz stood and recited a poem to his family. "Not exactly a fair trade as I lay on this table," he read. "I lose part of my penis and you all get free bagels."

If it wasn't obvious by his name, Gardenswartz is Jewish. He's used his heritage to comedic advantage, even adopting the moniker "WanderJew" and filming videos about his world travels. In one, filmed in Israel, he shows off his extensive yarmulke collection (one for "showing off and getting money," another to "get bitches," and even one that looks like a basketball for when he hits the courts).

Gardenswartz and the five other comedians participating in The Most RACES Show on Earth! openly joke about their ethnicity, using stereotypes that garner laughs. But the show isn't about capitalizing on racial misconceptions; it's about tearing them down.

"It's like an equal opportunity show. It makes it OK for people to laugh, because we're joking about our own nationality and culture," says host and producer Neil Bansil, a Filipino-Canadian-American. "No one is attacking another race. It's never malicious. That would just defeat the purpose of the show. We're trying to bring everyone together."

Bansil founded RACES in Toronto back in 2005, drawing on that city's wealth of multi-cultural comedians to design a mixed-bag evening of fast-firing stand-up. Held annually in Ontario on March 21, the United Nations' International Day for the Elimination of Racial Discrimination, the show expanded into Buffalo and Ottawa in 2008 and Atlanta in 2010. Several RACES veterans have gone on to greater fame, including Cory Fernandez (Cop Out with Bruce Willis and Tracy Morgan), Debra DiGiovanni (Last Comic Standing), and Sheng Wang (Live at Gotham).

"Everyone is so new and different that when people watch (RACES), they're like, 'Where are you getting these guys?'" Bansil says. "For Charleston, we've got the best of the best of the Southeast."

The Comedy Fest lineup includes a few rising stars. Atlanta's Clayton English plays a recurring character, Peanut, on the TBS show Tyler Perry's House of Payne, while Jamaican-Canadian Landry (also Atlanta based) recently won the 2011 Boston Comedy Festival competition.

"It wasn't easy growing up a negro redneck," jokes Landry in one of his stand-up routines. "I had a dreadlock mullet until I was 12."

Rounding out the lineup are Gardenswartz, Polish-Peruvian Daniel Tirado ("That makes me cheap and slow," he quips), and Goose Creek native Viet Huynh.

RACES' design plays out like a "best of the best" from the individual comedians, offering each about 10 to 12 minutes to deliver the material of their choice. Bansil plays emcee, kicking off the evening and introducing each performer.

"I come out as the ringleader to make sure everything goes smoothly, but these guys are the ones who knock it out of the park," Bansil says. "It's a home run every single time, and it's designed that way. People have short attention spans, so you want to have the best 10 minutes of comedy without going too long."

The jokes aren't all about race, although most of the performers will at least fall back on their best ethnic material.

"As long as it's funny, I'm cool with it," Bansil says. "I don't censor them. There's some racy, edgy material, but people have to realize that it's coming from their own perspective. It's how they grew up that shapes their jokes."

Landry, for example, shows his understanding for his "redneck mom's" affection for black men.

"Who can blame her?" he asks. "You know the saying: 'Once you go black, you're a single mom.'"

Gardenswartz gets laughs recalling the difficulty of his lengthy last name when attending a new school.

"I do think that if you too have an equally difficult long ethnic name, then maybe you should show compassion rather than making fun," Gardenswartz says. "First day of class, reading off roll, and some smartass in the back says, 'What kind of a name is Gardenswartz?' I'm like, 'Really, Quantavius?' Interesting factoid: In Germany, my last name means 'black garden,' and in America, your first name means 'black parents.'"

"I don't think people here have even come close to seeing something like this before," Bansil says. "We're not preaching. We just want to have a funny show. It's a culture-building initiative."

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