

Let the RACES Begin

Comedians combat prejudice with new tricks in The Most Races Show on Earth!

By Anita Overcash

Joking about race can be a dicey affair. It's a sensitive topic, a hotbed for bigotry; jokes can be easily misunderstood or misinterpreted. Is the comic perpetuating a stereotype or turning the stereotype on its head? But what if it weren't so complicated? What if we could just simply laugh at our own cultural differences and share them in a compelling way that unites us instead of dividing us?

That's where The Most Races Show on Earth! comes in. The traveling event, launched in Canada in 2005, consists of comedians of various backgrounds — all of whom poke fun at their heritages without taking heat for it.

"Funny is funny, no matter what culture, creed or color you are," says Neil Bansil, the show's creator and producer. "Our aim has always been the same — to educate and entertain audiences about different cultures and ethnicities through comedy. It's a culture-building endeavor, and it's a safe, fun show where all kinds of people are represented."

During MRSOE's seven-year run, participants have represented more than 28 different races, ethnicities and religions. Bansil spent weeks scouring YouTube videos for new comedians. The result? He noticed a lack of people representing Chinese, Japanese and Native American cultures. "It's always been my hope that by attracting a diverse audience, maybe someone gets inspired to start performing because they see it can be done by others," says Bansil.

MRSOE's Charlotte gig on Oct. 16 — with portions of the proceeds going to the YWCA Stand Against Racism Initiative — is slated to feature five comedians of varying backgrounds: Neil Bansil (a Filipino-Canadian-American), Noah Gardenswartz (Jewish-American), Viet Huynh (Vietnamese-American), Landry (Jamaican-Canadian) and Trixx (Ghanaian-Canadian).

"The comedians will talk about their own culture, but it's never in a malicious way or anything like that, where it alienates anybody," Bansil says. "It's kind of like a window into other people's cultures for the audience." Bansil grew up immersed in diversity in his hometown of Markham, a multicultural city in Ontario, Canada. In high school, when he was asked to write down his goals, he scribbled, "I want to end racism." The result of his big aspiration is motivating: Small steps can be massive feats in the effort to fight racism.

"It's cool being able to take our different cultures and ethnicities, and just laugh together about how similar our problems or social hang-ups are," says Trixx, who joined the show last year. "It definitely helps fight racism because it lets you know that someone that you may feel is so different from you goes through some of the exact same issues that you may go through in life. So to hate them is, in a sense, funny."

Surprisingly, the show has had no negative feedback. Instead, the only shock has been in the unexpected crowds that occasionally show up. "We had a full Hasidic Jewish family show up at a performance," says Bansil. "I don't

even know how they found out about it. But we had a Jewish comedian on that show. I think people just want to see themselves on the stage."

During the show's set, Bansil confirms the stereotype of Filipinos' fascination with karaoke. "I think my mom is addicted to it. It's gotten to the point where she won't even watch TV unless it's closed captioned, just so she can see words scrolling on the screen. She'll even sing along in a Filipino accent, 'Dis is a message on de emergency broadcast system. Remember, dis is only a test.'"

Another comedian, Landry, jokes about being the product of an interracial relationship. He dubs himself as "half-negro, half-redneck" and reminiscences with humor about having grown up with a "dreadlock mullet." Currently on its first Southeastern tour, the troupe has high hopes that the show will succeed in the South. In the past, it received positive reception at the Charleston Comedy Festival, where it sold out two 200-people sets. "People came out and really understood it," says Bansil. "No one's going to go to The Most Races Show on Earth! with a closed mind."

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