

MONTREAL

It's past 5am in the bar at Montreal's Hyatt Regency on the final night of the 30th annual Just For Laughs comedy festival, but the place is rammed to bursting point. Tables have been haphazardly pushed against the walls to make space for the cluster of comedy superstars everywhere you turn. Sweat is dripping from the walls. Everyone from Patton Oswalt to Jimmy Carr to Larry David is here.

Just hours before, the stand-ups assembled were on dozens of stages across Montreal, in venues ranging in capacity from 100 to 3,000. Shortly they will be holed up – or rather, their representatives will be – in conference rooms signing contracts, doing deals for their next Hollywood movie or televised stand-up special, and organising interviews with international press. For many, the July festival is the most important event of their year, the one that will define everything.

An American stand-up legend, who shall remain nameless, stumbles past me and mutters, I'd like to think to me, but in fact to no one in particular, "F\*\*\*, I haven't been this drunk since this time last year."

**The full Montreal: Crowds flock to the annual Just For Laughs street party, which takes place outside the Imperial Theatre**

The comedy industry has changed immeasurably in the internet age. Thanks to YouTube and digital media, the >

## Can Montreal's star-making production line survive in the age of the YouTube superstar?

Story by James Mullinger



# Comedy store

Photograph Simon Pierre Gingras



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## Life on mirth: surviving comedy's biggest festival...



### 1 Don't sit in the front row of The Nasty Show

American stand-up icon **Bobby Slayton** (above) is known as "the pit bull of comedy". Just For Laughs COO Bruce Hills recalls one night in 2006, at the annual *Nasty Show* (the world's most offensive comedians doing their harshest material): "He ripped so mercilessly into a woman on the front row that her boyfriend snapped and threw a bottle that barely missed his head. Bobby came back from the intermission wearing an NHL-regulation goalie mask, and proceeded to perform an even nastier set."

### 2 Hang out at Montreal's MainLine Theatre

The hippest venue in Canada is the superb MainLine Theatre. An intimate



fringe venue, in which the manager's office (above) is reminiscent of a Tarantino film set, it hosted *Set List* (coming soon to Sky Atlantic) where comics including **Tommy Tiernan**, **Jimmy Carr** and **Marc Maron** have to improvise material from random topics.

### 3 If you are a precious Canadian, don't see Jerry Sadowitz

**Jerry Sadowitz** (below) opened his 1991 set at Just For Laughs with the lines, "Hello moosef! \*\*ers! I tell you why I hate Canada: half of you



speak French and the other half let them." A French-Canadian in the front row then stormed the stage and punched Sadowitz in the face, knocking him out.



### 4 Don't look up when Zach Galifianakis is on stage

At Club Soda in 2002, **Zach Galifianakis** (above) walked on stage posing as a stage-crew guy who needed to fix the lights. As he began his repair, his trousers slowly fell, exposing his naked bottom to the packed crowd.

### 5 Book ahead

Last year, the queue for **Aziz Ansari's** (below)



*Buried Alive* at the Metropolis Theatre stretched around the block from 9am on the day of his show. People were actually fighting for tickets.

### 6 Be prepared for every comic to do a joke about local dish poutine

The hack topic for all comics opening their show is with a gag about popular (if vile) Quebec fast-food dish *poutine* (chips topped with gravy and



cheese). The time it really worked last year was when **Swedish Chef** (above) from the Muppets made a particularly messy *poutine* live on stage.

### 7 Nothing is sacred, even the genius of Louis CK

**Andy Kindler** (below) achieved the impossible at last year's Just For Laughs



when delivering his annual "State Of The Industry". Addressing a room full of industry types and fellow artists, he uttered some killer barbs about American comedy darling **Louis CK**, and why his FX television show *Louie* is not funny. Incredibly, he got big laughs out of them.

**Taking the mic (left): Canadian stand-up Laurent Paquin makes his entrance at the Place des Arts, Montreal, July 2012**

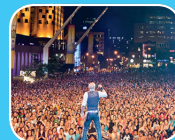


### 8 Don't just look for stand-ups

It's not just comedy legends at the festival. **Jeremy Piven** has hosted a gala show. **Cath MacFarlane** and **Mila Kunis** (above with the *Family Guy* crew) have attended. And *The Sopranos'* **Steve Schirripa** was on stage when *Law & Order's* Jerry Orbach walked on and said: "I've got a warrant for your arrest. You're being charged with attempted comedy."

### 9 Think big

In 2012, there were two million visitors to Just For Laughs. GQ overheard a man from Birmingham describe it as "the Edinburgh festival directed by **Michael Bay**".



He's right. Everything here is bigger and better.

### 10 Don't expect to see a comedian 'die' on stage

As **Jimmy Carr** (below) explains: "The reason people are in such a good



mood and have such a good time here is no one's having a bad gig. Everyone invited is at the top of their game."

industry and fans alike are promoting new comedians from the comfort of their own homes. Everyone from sketch troupe the Lonely Island to Canadian stadium-filler Russell Peters has found fame off the back of their clips going viral.

For a festival that prides itself on promoting the next big thing – that began as a 16-performer, two-day event in 1983 and last year hosted 250 shows and 4,000 acts – how does Just For Laughs stay relevant in a digital age?

"It's not like it was 15 years ago," Jimmy Carr admits. "The way people get discovered now is a different beast entirely."

In the past, it was simple. The Montreal success stories are well documented, and the reason that every comedian in the world is still vying for a spot. Legendary American comedian Bill Hicks was, notoriously, never appreciated in his own country while he was alive, but was made famous in the UK thanks to a Channel 4 executive who spotted him at Just For Laughs in 1990. Tim Allen got commissioned for *Home Improvement* off the back of a seven-minute set at the 1990 festival. Chris Rock and Dave Chappelle performed as teenagers. Craig Ferguson went there as an unknown Scottish stand-up in 1987, got a development deal, and is now one of America's highest-paid chat-show hosts. Likewise Jon Stewart, now host of *The Daily Show*, in 1992. Jerry Seinfeld told me recently that performing at the festival in 1985 was his big break (the same year Jay Leno debuted there). Unlike Edinburgh, where anyone who can find a broom cupboard can put on a show, all the acts are invite-only.

But that was all before the digital revolution.

In July, the only man not hungover in the whole of Montreal each morning is Just For Laughs' chief operating officer Bruce Hills. Arguably the most powerful man in comedy, Hills has been at the helm of the festival for 25 years and seems certain of many more. "We do sometimes discover acts from their online presence, but always travel to see them live," he says. "There is no substitute for seeing an act work a room."

YouTube comedian Ray William Johnson hit the news last year when it was revealed he had made \$1m in a year thanks to 1.5 billion views of his cheaply produced videos of himself commenting on viral clips. Yet this impressive online presence has not translated into successful live shows or a TV career. Sometimes, YouTube hits simply aren't enough.

So what are the criteria? "We're looking for an original point of view," Hills says. "It used to be about picking stand-ups that are going to be sitcom stars but now it's more broad. We have everyone from Judd Apatow (the universally recognised king of comedy), to Edgar Wright, to Steven Levitan (*Modern Family*), to Jason and Ivan Reitman (directors of *Up In The Air* and *Ghostbusters* respectively), to the heads of NBC and HBO, to the commissioners ☺"

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**'It is cheaper for talent spotters to come here and see acts rather than travel the world'**

⌚ at Funny Or Die (Will Ferrell's comedy website). But while Todd Phillips might be here looking for a new comic to appear in the next *Hangover* movie, the festival bookers from Melbourne, online outlets or club bookers from London are equally as important, as artists can benefit from all of them."

Put another way, in an age of internet-propelled stars, the age of agents discovering new talent solely in metropolitan comedy clubs is over, so Montreal acts as the global curator. Australian Jim Jeffries is a case in point. A UK circuit stalwart, the extent of his success had consisted of appearing in his own clips on the Comedy Central UK website and being an occasional panellist on *Never Mind The Buzzcocks*. Then he was invited to Montreal and now has his own TV show, *Legit*, on FX in America and sells out arenas.

"I did my show and then out in the street, some guys from CAA – the biggest agency in the world – came over and said, 'We think

you're great. We would love to be your agents. We're from CAA.' And I went, 'What the f\*\*\* is CAA?' And the guy was like, 'Oh, that's good. I like that. That's very funny.' And then he walked away, and I thought, 'Well I'm not going to have any other agent, I might as well take this lot.' And I went to their office in Hollywood and it was like the Death Star."

The hottest new act this year is 22-year-old Daniel Sloss from Scotland, who has been granted the rare honour of performing his entire 60-minute Edinburgh show. Most acts are booked to simply do seven-minute sets for the filmed gala shows so they can be cut up and sold easily around the world.

"This is a big deal for me because I watched the *Just For Laughs* shows on Comedy Central as a child, so to be a part of it is a very surreal dream come true," he enthuses.

One criticism levelled at the festival, however, is that some new acts are using their sets to pitch to the executives rather than entertain.

**Funny factory (above):**  
**The Place des Arts'**  
**Salle Wilfrid-Pelletier,**  
**Montreal, hosts**  
**American comedian**  
**Joel McHale, July 2012**

Jimmy Carr – who, in 2005, was the first Brit ever to be granted a Comedy Central special in America after a *Just For Laughs* set – concedes this. "Yes, you do have acts who are on stage saying, 'My family's crazy! You'll never believe my neighbours!' Are you really trying to pitch a sitcom in seven minutes of stand-up?"

**B**ack in the Hyatt bar on the final night of the festival, the laughs booming off the wood-panelled walls are even louder than they were in the sold-out 3,000-capacity theatre earlier that night, when the Muppets took to the stage for a televised show alongside seven genuinely in-awe stand-ups (a show *Chortle.co.uk* named the best comedy gig of 2012). Deals may have been done, careers have been made, but how sustainable is all this?

"Obviously, the industry is changing and audiences dwindled briefly a few years ago due to watching their comedy at home or on the internet," says Hills. "But the simple fact remains, since the dip our numbers are growing. People talk about the bubble bursting, but why should it? In times of austerity, it is cheaper for talent spotters to come here and see acts rather than travel the world themselves. *Just For Laughs* is essentially a one-stop shop for Hollywood. And we take the festival all over the world – to Chicago, Edinburgh, Toronto, as well as North American tours with acts who have stormed Montreal.

"Rather than spend all year trawling clubs and watching YouTube clips, we do that for them. So they can just come here for three weeks and see the best of what the world has to offer." ☺  
*The Just For Laughs Montreal comedy festival runs from 10-28 July 2013. hahaha.com*

**GQ would like to thank** **Tourisme Québec.**  
0800 051 7055, [quebecoriginal.com/uk](http://quebecoriginal.com/uk)

## Planet mock

The world's funniest comedy gatherings



### Altitude, 18-22 March

The coldest comedy festival in the world offers top stand-up at the Mayrhofen ski resort, Austria. Co-curated by comedian Andrew Maxwell and Brett Vincent of GetComedy, the likes of **John Bishop**, **Frankie Boyle** (above) and **Marcus Brigstocke** take time out to spend nights in intimate Austrian clubs, while taking to the slopes through the day. [altitudefestival.com](http://altitudefestival.com)



### Camden Fringe, 29 July-25 August

While not a competitor to Edinburgh, the Camden Fringe is increasingly the place to see comedians testing their new shows. Acts such as **Hal Cruttenden**, **Shazia Mirza** and **Robin Ince** (above) have all performed recently. The Etcetera Theatre is the envied venue, easily London's smallest and most charming pub theatre. [camdenfringe.com](http://camdenfringe.com)



### Edinburgh Festival Fringe, 2-26 August

The biggest arts festival in the world still attracts the biggest names, such as **Ricky Gervais**, **Stewart Lee** and **Russell Kane** (above), as well as newcomers. Naysayers accuse the Fringe of selling out due to high prices but the new Free Fringe provides top circuit acts such as Mary Bourke and Luisa Omielan for free. [edfringe.com](http://edfringe.com)



### New York Comedy Festival, 6-10 November

Founded in 2004, the festival only lasts five days but boasts some of the biggest names in stand-up: **Louis CK**, **Sarah Silverman**, **Ricky Gervais** and **Robin Williams** (above) are regulars. Produced in association with Comedy Central and Carolines (NY's finest comedy club), it promises old masters in large venues. [nycomedyfestival.com](http://nycomedyfestival.com)



### Leicester Comedy Festival, 3-19 February 2014

The longest-running comedy festival in Europe was set up in 1994 and has been filling venues across Leicester each February since. This year, the 17-day gag gala boasted 520 shows. Everyone from **Roseanne Barr** and **Ben Elton** to **Rhod Gilbert** and **Michael McIntyre** have appeared. [comedy-festival.co.uk](http://comedy-festival.co.uk)

Photographs: Anthony Upton / Rex; Geraint Lewis / Rex; Jeff J Mitchell / Getty Images; Eric Myre / Rex