

OFFICE JOKER

Heard the one about GO's Photo Editor? Six months after **James Mullinger** joined London's stand-up circuit he was on stage at the world's biggest comedy show. It must be the way he tells 'em...

"This is bullshit, man. This is my third time here and every year some HBO exec promises me a sitcom, and all the bastards do is incorporate my stand-up routine into some poxy script about a quirky family."

I'm sitting in the dark, smoky dressing room of Montreal's best comedy club, Comedyworks, on the final night of the Just For Laughs festival, a two-week comedy celebration featuring the world's best stand-ups. Eddie Izzard is here, as is Dylan Moran. It is the most important date on

the comedy calendar. I am waiting to go on stage to perform a seven-minute set but am being whinged at by a well-known American comic who has appeared on Letterman and Leno more times than I've had gigs.

I am about to perform in front of 150 paying punters and close to 50 industry insiders who are currently scouting for the next Jerry Seinfeld. My stomach is churning and no matter how much water I drink, my mouth remains drier than sandpaper in the desert. ▶



Mirth sloughy
James Mullinger at Just For Laughs, Montreal, July 2005

PHOTOGRAPHS CHARLIE GRAY; YVES REINAUD; PAUL BOWDEN STYLING EMIE DALTON

STAND-UP COMEDY

► The heat is unbearable and it appears to be rising.

While my inclusion on tonight's bill alongside some of my favourite comics is a dream come true, I never expected to feel so nervous. All day I've been suffering from flu-like symptoms, pacing around my hotel room reciting my set over and over. Now I'm here. My heroes surround me swapping anecdotes, but all I can hear is the sound of the excited audience who have each parted with £30 to see us perform. Praying I don't disappoint, I think back to how far I've come since starting as a stand-up a mere eight months ago. I've done this nearly hundred times so why do I want to be sick, curl up and die?

They say there's nothing like performing at the Just For Laughs for the first time. Well, I've certainly never felt like this before. And now, my name's been called. The crowd turns to watch me as I bound up towards the stage...

It is a little-known fact that to succeed at stand-up comedy, you have to believe you are the greatest comic who ever lived. You have to truly believe you are a unique voice and that you have the capability to be bigger and better than Richard Pryor, Bill Hicks and Jerry Seinfeld put together. It was Seinfeld himself who most tersely voiced this truth.

"Any successful comedian has a similar arrogance and ego," he said. "If you don't have that, then this is not your kind of profession. There are no successful, timid bullfighters... If you don't have a huge ego, you won't make it in this game."

Grumpy rockabilly comedian Mark Lamarr agrees. "It is the unspoken trait of the stand-up. We all think we're the best. You couldn't do it otherwise."

When I decided that 2005 would be the year that I would finally attempt stand-up, I knew this would be the hardest part of it. I've never been a confident, arrogant person, but I knew I had to believe I was great in order to succeed.

What didn't help my self-belief is that despite dreaming of becoming a stand-up my entire life, I was fully aware of hard it would be. Watching the 2003 documentary *Comedian*, which follows Jerry Seinfeld, the greatest stand-up of his

generation, as he stumbles and stutters his way through his return to the scene with a set of new material, would put the most confident person off trying it out. But, oddly, not me. It made me want to do it more.

And so began my year of failure. People often ask me why I condemn myself to nightly humiliation at the mercy of drunken abusers. I'm 28 years old and have a great job working as the Photo Editor of this magazine. I am engaged to be married. I own my own two-bedroom flat in Battersea. In many ways, I'm at the top of my game. So why do I choose to spend every night standing in the corner of an upstairs room of a dingy pub, awaiting

the route into stand-up is clearly defined. The wannabe starts doing five-minute open-mic spots at comedy nights above pubs to crowds of ten. Once you've done 50 of these

over six months, you might get offered a paid ten-minute spot (anything between £5 and £40). You will be doing these for at least another year. The Holy Grail is the 20-minute spot (upwards of £50). Once you are doing regular 20-minute spots you are ready to do a ten-minute open spot at bigger venues such as Jingleurs or the Comedy Store (capacity 400) in London. Once they have employed you to do 20-minute sets, then you are ready to do an hour-long show at the Edinburgh Festival.

By this point you will have been doing stand-up for almost five years and you will have made an average of £14,000 per year. Your Edinburgh show will cost at least half your annual salary and you'll make very little of it back. At Edinburgh you will hopefully get spotted and bag your own sitcom. Or more likely, you're destined to spend 300 nights a year in different parts of the country, performing to drunken hecklers and living on a pittance. But at least you're doing something you love and people will respect you. Maybe.

Frank Skinner and Jimmy Carr are exceptional in that they were successful stand-ups just two years after starting, but their discipline was unique. They spent all day writing jokes and every night performing, driving around the country and sleeping in their cars. There are numerous others who are still sleeping in their cars 20 years after their first open-mic spots.

I have been going for 18 months now, have clocked up more than 80 gigs and was pretty happy with my progress until I read an interview with comic actor Will Ferrell. He talked of the time that he was at my level

and how he was proud of his achievement. Then he was told by a producer at *Saturday Night Live* that the first hundred don't count because you haven't got over your nerves. This is what doing stand-up is like. Every time you think you've hit a milestone, a promoter or fellow comic will tell you you're halfway to nowhere.

The open-mic circuit is a bizarre place. Hundreds of comics ranging in age from their late teens to their eighties sit in the upstairs of pubs night after night awaiting the possibility of five minutes of stage time during which the audience will stare blankly and, if they're lucky, chuckle once or twice. ►

STAND-UP COMEDY

► In the past 18 months, I have met each and every one of them. Everyone knows the drill. You only have five minutes so there's no time for rambling, meandering anecdotes. Just a gag as often as possible.

Matt Lucas remembers, "Someone once said to me that the discipline of live performance is that you have to aim for a joke every 25 words. You can't have the flights of fancy that we have in our other stuff."

The audience has to warm to you, so you have to look like you like being up there, like you're having the time of your life because you are the funniest person in the world, but on this earth to make them laugh. The audience can smell weakness like shit on a toothbrush and they will destroy you if they think for one second that you are wasting your time.

My first gig was in the back room of a Caribbean bar in east London in late 2004. The terror I felt was unbearable. I wanted to be sick. But I knew I had to do it. To chicken out would be to spend the rest of my life suffering with the knowledge that I'd never tried. There was a crowd of about 40 people, big for a Monday comedy night. The stage was a door sat on beer crates. The room was filled with smoke and the spotlight was focused on the stage.

I loved every second, even though my set could charitably be described as hit and miss. I obviously hadn't found my voice and was playing it safe with material on night buses, masturbation and Michael Jackson – all the staples of an open-mic spot.

That night I came home and thought, "What am I about? What drives me? What am I really interested in?" The one thing that sprung to mind was my childhood spent at boarding school and the horrific bullying I endured there. Not the most obvious subject for a stand-up, but I became determined to make it work. At 3am I sat and wrote a brand-new set. I decided to take a real and horrifying event from my school days and turn it into a joke. Could I manage it? The event occurred when I was 13, in the house where I boarded. Boys aged up to 18 also lived there and between the hours of 10pm and 7am, they ruled. The housemaster lived next door but you'd have to scream very loud for him to hear you. I know. I tried.

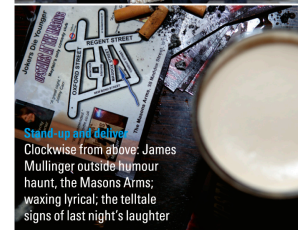
One night, a boy of 18 came into my dormitory and ushered me into his room down the corridor. He sat me in a chair and sat opposite me on his bed in his underwear. For the next half an hour he rubbed his groin and tried to convince me I was gay and that I wanted him. After much insistence that, "You know you want to touch it," I leaned forward to touch his penis. At this point seven of his friends burst in and beat me black and blue, now they had verification that I was a poof. I managed to turn this traumatic event into the most crowd-pleasing line of my routine.

I would begin by introducing myself like this: "I'm very happy to be here so I'll tell you a bit

about myself. I spent seven years of my childhood being privately educated at a boarding school in Surrey. I had to share this information with you because I didn't actually have time to write the word 'prick' across my face."

This line usually gets a big laugh. Then I continue.

"I was very badly bullied at school. Every day thrown into a bath of piss [laugh], awoken in the middle of the night to the sensation of Lynx Java being sprayed down my jap's eye [appalled laugh], and the old favourite when a boy six years my senior would call me into his room, force me to touch his penis [laugh and pause],



STAND-UP BECAME AN ADDICTION. I NEEDED THE BUZZ OF BEING ON STAGE, IN CONTROL

then ten of his mates would jump out of the cupboard and beat me shitless for being a gayser [massive laugh]."

I performed the new set a week later at the Amused Moose in London's Camden, where I had also attended a comedy workshop. The material was edgy and at times offensive, but it was from the heart. The same material took me to the finals of Jimmy Carr's Comedy Idol a few months later. Carr advised me that I needed to perform less aggressively – so it appeared I didn't realise that what I was saying was offensive. So I began to sell the list of atrocities as examples of how ordinary boarding schools are. "They're exactly the same as other schools," I said. "We've all experienced the same things."

I did this at the Comedy Idol final at the Comedy Store and the audience response was incredible. People laughed more openly because they were now laughing at my naivety as opposed to the abuse itself. To this day, I have never enjoyed a gig so much. I got applause on every joke and could see the audience rock with laughter.

The following night, the identical set died at a comedy club across London in Fitzrovia.

After a very bad gig at Camden's Laughing Horse, I reminded myself that Larry David and Bill Hicks never cared whether anyone laughed at their gigs, they just said what they wanted to say. So screw the audience. If they don't want to laugh at my liberal politicising and my rape and paedophilia jokes then they can go and screw themselves. Just as I started to feel better, I remembered Frank Skinner's far more realistic adage: "Comedy without laughter is just a bloke talking." Am I destined to be a bloke talking for the rest of my life? No, I'm a misunderstood genius just as Hicks was. Or am I? And so on.

To combat the misery of performing to tiny crowds I decided to start putting on my own nights, behind GQ HQ in Mayfair, with some of



the best open-mic acts I had met (including the winner of Comedy Idol, Colin Owens). The Masons Arms is a traditional pub that can be found brimming with GQ and Vogue staff every Friday night. Thanks to this established clientele, we routinely pull in more than 80 people, far more pleasurable than performing to eight at other, more established venues or none at all, as is often the case.

So successful have the nights become that we regularly attract the likes of Jimmy Carr, Russell Brand, Richard Herring and Perrier nominees Michael McIntyre and Reginald D Hunter. Everyone wants stage time. It's the only way to practise. Unlike, say, learning guitar, with stand-up you cannot master the craft at home in your bedroom. The art of engaging with an audience has to be done in front of a crowd of people.

Then it became an addiction. If I didn't perform at least three times a week, I started to lose all feelings of self-worth. I was horrible to be around, paranoid and depressed [So, what's new – Ed]. I needed the buzz of being on stage, in control, faces staring intently at me. I needed that sense of belonging. Does that make me needy and pathetic? Definitely. Does that make me a better comic? Absolutely. ►

STAND-UP COMEDY

► It was around this time that I heard I had secured a spot at the Just For Laughs comedy festival in Montreal. Needless to say, they normally only book acts who have been going for a minimum of four years and have reached the top of their game. But that's one of the things you learn working at *GQ* – using those two magic letters to get what you need. Just For Laughs in Montreal is the big one. This is where names are made and sitcoms are commissioned. This is where my hero Bill Hicks got his big break.

Just For Laughs began as a 16-performer, two-day event in 1983. A decade later it had transformed itself into the most important comedy festival in the world, covering three weeks, dozens of local clubs and theatres, and featuring hundreds of the world's best comedians. Post-*Seinfeld*, it has also become a hunting ground for TV producers looking to do development deals with the best comics. More than 50 development deals are sealed at Montreal each year. As soon as each event ends, they begin their worldwide trawl for the best comics on the globe for the following year's festival. The man behind all this is chief operating officer Bruce Hills, who has worked for the festival since its second year.

There are two famous stories about Just For Laughs that I wanted verified by the charismatic Hills. One is the story of Jerry Sadowitz greeting the audience at the family-friendly Britcom Gala with the undeniably undiplomatic: "Good evening moose-fuckers," only for an angry Canadian to leap on the stage and knock him out.

The second myth has it that Tim Allen so impressed television executives with his seven-minute performance that his *Home Improvement* series was commissioned on the spot.

Hills still seems disappointed with Sadowitz. "He did get punched. In retrospect, it was a very funny line," he concedes. "But unfortunately it was all downhill from that point on. I should have realised that Jerry couldn't work clean regardless of what his management told me. As for Allen, Hills says, "It was quite obvious to everyone at Just For Laughs in 1990 that Tim Allen was going to be a huge sitcom star from the moment he stepped on stage at Montreal."

So there you have it, just seven minutes is all that stands between a comic and international celebrity. I've got seven minutes to repeat Tim Allen's success.

The day of the biggest show of the festival, the Britcom Gala, I have breakfast with the show's host, Lenny Henry. "Performing at Edinburgh means that eventually you'll get onto Comedy Central," says Lenny. "Montreal means that eventually you'll get a movie deal and you'll get your own series on American TV. There are bigger stakes to play for here. It's a real deal-making thing. That's why all the comics look so edgy – the four days they are in Montreal are the biggest opportunities of their careers."

SEVEN MINUTES AT MONTREAL CAN MAKE YOU AN INTERNATIONAL STAR



The sold-out Britcom Gala was undoubtedly the best two hours of stand-up I have ever seen. Welsh Perrier Newcomer nominee Rhod Gilbert, and Noel Fielding, of BBC's *The Mighty Boosh*, were the standouts for me, but Scottish comic Danny Bhoy set the 2,200-strong crowd alight with a delightfully absurd dissection of his cultural heritage. I have never seen a crowd in such fits of uncontrollable laughter as during his 15-minute set.

When I met with Gilbert earlier in the day he was feeling the pressure that Lenny Henry described. "I'm probably the least-experienced act in the whole festival, apart from yourself," he confided. "There's quite a lot of attention on it. There's a lot of pressure." The buzz from Montreal ensured Gilbert had a sellout show at Edinburgh a month later.

American comic Mike Birbiglia (who delivered a fantastic set to a predominantly black crowd about how they can only refer to him as a "cracka", not a "cracker", because the latter would be racist) later reinforced the scepticism about the television deals made at Montreal: "My manager introduced me to this guy and the first thing he says to me is, 'I think we may be

able to do a *Seinfeld* thing with you,' which was fine, except that he hadn't even seen my act. It's like meeting a guy who's holding a pencil and saying, 'I think we may be able to do a Shakespeare thing with you.'"

Complaints like this are typical. Some facts are irrefutable, namely that there are no such things as talent scouts any more, only success scouts. Agents are not out looking for great undiscovered talent. They're looking for discovered talent without suitable representation or a TV show. One respected agent, Hills Jago, complained to me about the unprofessionalism of some of the acts. "I could not believe it when I heard certain acts had chosen to bring their girlfriends with them instead of their agents. No one will want to do deals with them without their agents." I did not have to worry about such things. I was ready to perform my undeniably killer set. Would I be the next Tim Allen?

When I leap on stage, I am wearing my lucky outfit: jeans, white

T-shirt and suit jacket from H&M. While I had been sweating backstage, I feel nothing on stage but adrenalin. I hit them with my first gag:

"Hello Canada! It's great to be here – thank you for letting me in to your country. Although I've heard you let anyone in, so perhaps I shouldn't be so flattered. [Laughter] Any Americans in? No, of course not. Because they haven't got any fucking passports, have they? [Big laughter]"

How does it go? Well, modesty not being the order of the day, I have to admit I have a fantastic gig. It's not my best ever, however, and I ignore warnings not to make 9/11 or paedophilia jokes. The gags bomb.

Thankfully, the Canadians are happy to laugh at jokes about fisting the Queen, boarding school rape, having sex with the Olsen twins, Pee-wee Herman and, more predictably, Americans.

Despite the lukewarm response to the 9/11 gags – having said how lonely I am, I elaborate: "I'm rather like the New York firefighter who took a day off on 9/11" – my defence that, "Oh, come on, you've got to laugh, otherwise the terrorists will win," is more popular, albeit through gritted teeth.

Regardless of my nerves and comparative inexperience, I get a better reaction than some of the big-name acts who are also on the bill. This is undoubtedly the most personally satisfying thing I could walk away with. Although a sitcom would also be nice.

The best act of the night is hip American stand-up John Henton, with whom I share a beer after the show. He is extremely ►

► positive about my act, which makes my day because he was the night's show-stopper. He is impressed by my line about being "the guy who fucked the Olsen twins... before they were famous".

"That Olsen twins joke, man, that rocked."

I have never set out to be offensive but in order to sell a joke convincingly to an audience I have to find it funny. And there is nothing more satisfying than eliciting a roar of laughter from people who would rather not be laughing at a shocking joke. Twice during my set I receive this reaction, where the audience burst into fits of laughter before turning on me with sounds of mock horror.

After my gig I head to the Just For Laughs industry party, where Eddie Izzard is swapping notes with Greg Proops. Irish comic Ed Byrne is dancing with his agent. I talk to Ottawa-based comic Paul Telnor who says: "It is always dangerous to drink after a good gig because you are constantly attempting to match the buzz from earlier in the evening, which is predictably impossible. It's like a crack addict trying to cure cravings with buck's fizz."

The buzz in the bar afterwards is incredible. Despite the presence of Izzard, everyone's focus is on the evening's acts. You know what they say, you're only as good as your last gig. And mine was great. I am going to make this the night of my life. That's the last thought I remember having before everything blacks out.

SPECIAL THANKS TO LEISA LEE AND ERIK HODGSON

The following morning, hung over and elated, I meet the other highlight of the festival, Lee Mack of BBC's *They Think It's All Over*. Mack started gigging in 1995 and remembers those first lonely gigs.

"It was different when I started. New acts were genuinely new acts. Now, if you enter a new act competition most of the acts already have agents and have been going for more than three years. It's much harder to get a break in stand-up now." Mack is now more famous in the States that he is in England for his work with Kelsey Grammer on *The Sketch Show*. Despite this fame, he still considers Montreal the highlight of his year. "This is the best comedy festival in the world. This is the one we all look forward to," he concludes.

YOU KNOW WHAT THEY SAY, YOU'RE ONLY AS GOOD AS YOUR LAST GIG. AND MINE WAS GREAT

Later, when I pop back to the scene of last night's gig, I am offered another by the manager of the club. Devastatingly, my flight is scheduled for tonight. He assures me that they will happily offer me a spot whenever I return. I decide to return soon.

On my way back to the airport, with one bar of battery left in my phone, it breathes its last breath and buzzes reluctantly. I answer to hear a Montreal friend of my fiancée on the end of the line.

"Hi James, it's Sylvana."

"Hi, how are you? My phone is just about to die."

"OK, I have to tell you something though. A friend of mine called me this morning and said she had been at a Just For Laughs gig on Friday night and saw a hilarious British comedian. I asked what his name was. She said James Mullinger. I said..."

The phone dies.

But at that point it doesn't matter. Nothing does. My plane could crash and it wouldn't matter. I have come to the comedy centre of the universe, conquered and am going home. No matter that I'm returning to the nightly grind of London's open-mic circuit.

I have proved I am capable of being a great stand-up comedian and, to paraphrase the old adage, great things come to those who are great. For the first time in my comedy career I truly – and rather arrogantly – believe that I am capable of great things. *Seinfeld* would be proud of me. ☺

For more information about the Just For Laughs festival, visit: www.hahaha.com

The Just For Laughs DVD, *World's Greatest Stand Ups*, is out on 8 May and features Lee Evans and Dylan Moran, among others.

extra special

The sleek and sophisticated Motorola RAZR V3x is free when you join Panther from Orange. This ultra slim 3G phone is great for checking emails on the go, which Panther customers can enjoy free for three months.

Also boasting Bluetooth® technology, a 2.0 megapixel camera, Orange Music Player and 64MB of internal memory, it's the ideal phone for people who like all the extras.

Panther – a new package for people who are always on the go.

Ask about the Panther package and the Motorola RAZR V3x in any Orange shop.



PHOTOGRAPH BY RENAUD

the future's bright



Free email for 3 months is available on 18 month Service Plans only. Minimum term 12 months. Existing customers must be in at least the last 3 months of their contract. Conditions apply see www.orange.co.uk