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## No joke — Russell Peters is a famous comedian

He is No. 9 on the Forbes magazine list of top-earning comics and has set attendance records in Britain. Yet the politically incorrect comic is largely unknown in the U.S. 'Why is Hollywood ignoring me?' he says. 'I don't know.'



Comedian Russell Peters at the John Lovitz Comedy Club at Universal City Walk. (Robert Gauthier, Los Angeles Times / March 9, 2010)

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By Gina Piccalo, Special to the Los Angeles Times  
*April 16, 2010*

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No heads turned when comedian Russell Peters walked into Du-par's in Studio City this week, aside from Peters' himself as he scanned the diner's orange booths for attractive ladies. He sells out stadiums in Dubai, London, Sydney and Hong Kong. But stateside, he's just another groggy dude in a black hoodie.



Even before his first cup of coffee and his cayenne pepper vitamin, though, there was a little red "on-air" light flashing behind Peters' eyes, and he was firing off antagonistic one-liners, hoping to get a rise out of his interviewer. Most of these suggestive little puns aren't suitable for a family newspaper.

They did however, drive home an important point about Peters: This guy will sell out arenas around the world, rank No. 9 on Forbes magazine's list of top-earning comics, hold the British record for largest attendance (16,500) for a single comedy performance, and collect his cool \$10 million a year with or without the media or Hollywood. He has, thanks to his viral videos on the Internet, been doing it for years.

Peters, 39, is the first — and apparently the only — Anglo-Indian comic at his vaunted level. Even his relative peers in the business, Dane Cook, Jeff Foxworthy and Larry the Cable Guy, are strictly North American stadium comics. The Canadian-born Peters takes turns with Chris Rock breaking attendance records in London.

On Saturday, Peters brings his raucous politically incorrect show to the decidedly modest Bridges Auditorium in Claremont, but that's just a warm-up for his Australian arena tour. Earlier this week, tickets to the campus gig were going for nearly \$300, three times their face value. So excuse Peters if he's not awash in humility.

"It is pretty crazy," he says of his anonymity relative to his success. "When you look at the company I'm with [on the Forbes list], it's like Jerry Seinfeld, Chris Rock, Dane Cook, George Lopez. And you know all those people's names and you can give them credit. And you look at my name and you're like who ... is this guy? Chris Rock calls me 'the most famous person nobody's ever heard of.'"

The uncensored wilds of the Internet seem a fitting home for Peters' material. In his act, which appeals to a multicultural audience, Asian and African stereotypes abound. Indians, Koreans, Vietnamese, Filipinos, even Nigerians are called out. He cracks jokes about tightfisted Indians and the Chinese retailers who despise them. His East Indian parents are regular targets too. Peters is a gifted mimic, and in one bit he cartoonishly imitates the differences between Cantonese and Mandarin. During one show in San Francisco, he quizzed a Chinese-American couple in the audience on their given names and then made fun of the way they pronounced them.

The joke killed. "I don't make the stereotypes," he told that audience. "I just see them."

Peters is a tall, heavy-set guy. He was a boxer as a young man, a sport he took up after too many run-ins with schoolyard bullies. His features telegraph his family's immigrant status, and perhaps for that reason he can get away with a brand of material that if dished out by a Caucasian might make headlines and end a career.

Peters considers his act groundbreaking because he was one of the first Anglo-Indian comics who lampooned South Asian culture. By his measure, the Aziz Ansaris of the world owe him some props.

"The good thing for the new guard is that they don't have to do that material now," he says. "That's been done, and they can get past it and move on to the next step. And because I'm the guy who started it, people kind of still expect that stuff."

Peters started doing standup at 19 in Toronto. He spent four years on amateur nights at that city's famous comedy club Yuk Yuks. He worked for another decade earning a mere \$40,000 a year, sometimes driving 400 miles for \$50, touring Singapore and Hong Kong, Europe and Canada, performing for ex-pats.

Then in 2005, just as YouTube debuted, fans started passing around video clips from his third "Comedy Now!" standup special on Canadian TV. His ticket sales soared. By late 2006, Peters was

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booking his first arena, the 18,000-seat Air Canada Centre in Toronto. By 2007, he was selling out arenas throughout Canada, greeting his audience as "You filthy downloaders!" In 2008, he sold out Madison Square Garden.

But his Internet fame didn't translate in Hollywood. "Why is Hollywood ignoring me?" he asked over breakfast. "I don't know. I don't care really. I do, but I don't. You know what I mean?"

What Peters means is that he's been auditioning and developing pilots ever since he left Toronto for L.A. five years ago. "His auditioning didn't always go well because he's going out and playing 15,000-seat arenas and then coming back to L.A. and going into a waiting room with two dozen other comics he knows," says Clayton Peters, his brother and manager. "It gets disheartening after a while."

But this year, he finally landed his first major film role in director Duncan Jones' sci-fi thriller "Source Code" starring as a disgraced comedian opposite Jake Gyllenhaal. (The film is in production.) It's a higher glamour quotient than stand-up but financially small potatoes compared with his global stand-up machine. His Sydney show next month will be the largest single comedy show in Australian history. In September, he'll head back to London's O2 arena, where he is again poised to break his own attendance records.

And yet, when Peters returns home to his Studio City "compound" he's still a touch miffed that the paparazzi outside his favorite Rodeo Drive suit store don't recognize him. "None of the paparazzi have any clue who I am," he says, remembering one particular encounter. "I look at them. I go, 'There's nobody in the [expletive] store. You're the worst paparazzi ever! You can't spot talent! And then when you do, you can't even find them!' And then I walked away."

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