



# OPEN MIKE

with  
**Mike Bullard**

**Finally, a Late-Night  
Talk-Show Host to Call Our Own**

**By Cynthia Amsden**

When asked what he would choose to give him a sense of power when walking naked through a room filled with strangers, Mike Bullard, host of the first successful late-night talk show in the history of Canada, finesses a pause, lowers his chin, and says, "Nothing. I've already got it." Ba-da-boom.

This is not the expected answer—particularly not from the man who insists on being a nice guy, not nice as in sucrose beaches of sweetness, but nice as in he doesn't play Andrew Dice Clay and sacrifice the people who offer themselves up to him as joke fodder. This is also not the answer expected from the man who makes a point of telling people that he knows he doesn't match the "pretty boy" image ("I'm a regular-looking guy with a potato face"; or "We paid \$5,000 to make me look bald.") And this was especially unexpected from the performer whose career, until a year ago, was a combination of comedian (a group network dignitaries regard as "substance-abusing seven-year-olds") and a bureaucrat for Bell Canada.

This is, however, the kind of answer that one might expect from a man who can stand patiently in front of a live audience, hands in his pockets, looking out at the crowd, and as the trademark laughter rises up from his

shoulders, everyone knows his private chuckle means he has found a target. Mike Bullard has been through the valley of the shadow of stand-up and fears no audience. Having travelled the backwaters of this country, he has met the population on its own turf and has returned stronger for the experience. This is what stand-up comedy does—it teaches its practitioners a reality and a humility that many film, television and radio performers do not have the opportunity to learn. It goes deep, and if you can't cut it, you don't come back up for air.

Sitting in the "smoking room" of the offices of *Open Mike*, located down the street from where the show broadcasts at Studio 99 at the back of Wayne Gretzky's restaurant and bar on Blue Jay Way, and well within falling distance of the CN Tower, Mike Bullard looks out the window and observes dryly that he works in the shadow of the CBC mothership. "I like the fact that I can see them right from here; it means they can see us, too." And CBC has been looking, according to Bullard, since the second week of the show on October 1997. The Canadian press have been watching as well. The success of *Open Mike* made him the flavour of the month, and the press had him for breakfast, lunch and dinner, putting his mug on the cover of anything that wrapped around editorial

content. Another wave of publicity hit when the show moved to being included not just on The Comedy Network, Monday to Friday at 10 p.m. (plus three repeats each weekday), but also on CTV's nine stations at 12:30 a.m. Yet a third press opportunity came up when Bullard successfully hosted this year's Gemini Awards.

For that specific reason, I wanted to see what was left of him during the last week of his first season, a season which, by rights, should have ended seven weeks prior, except for a season extension called in at the last minute. What I found was the daytime version of what continues to walk in front of the audience every night. Bullard is comfortable, which is a place somewhere between smooth and servile. He is also friendly in a manner I have not experienced outside of visiting the homes of my friends. He took my jacket, and then he carried my briefcase. He was very much the host.

After all the press, Bullard's history is an open book. He wanted to be a talk show host by the age of 10, which would have been 1968, six years into Johnny Carson's 30-year reign as king of late night. It took another two decades, but by 1988, Bullard was doing stand-up, except he didn't do traditional comedy. He MC-ed. "Yuk

Yuks couldn't get me to do anything but talk to people. David Letterman was never anything but the host at The Comedy Store and that was intentional on his part. For the same reason it was intentional on my part. I headlined three times a year because they made me. I got to the point where, in this country anyhow, I made MC-ing a respectable comedy position." While doing comedy at night, he spent his days working at Bell Canada, first as an installer, then in corporate affairs and finally as an investigation executive. Although he learned the territory, he was never corporately potty trained.

On March 29, 1995, under the aegis of Ed Robinson (deputy head of variety at CBC), Joe Bodolai, producer of *Comics*, ran Bullard's own episode produced in a talk-show format. It was the culmination of conversations Bodolai had been having with Bullard about late-night programming in Canada since 1992. Although there was no promise that CBC would have the funding for original programming, Bullard says, "I thought even if they won't use it, I've got a tape. Knowlton Nash was on, along with Bob MacDonald from *Quirks and Quarks*. I asked Nash because he is newsmen emeritus of Canada. I wanted him to show a whole new side of himself. He was fantastic."

On September 4, 1996, CTV landed the licence for The Comedy Network. "The next thing I knew, Robinson was hired on as VP at The Comedy Network. He had promised me that if he was ever in the right position, he would give me a talk show. I had done a golf tournament with Doug Bassett and Ivan Fecan. Fecan was already a fan, but Doug Bassett became like my number one fan." It took less than 24 hours for the call to come through from CTV.

*Open Mike* is an anomaly in Canadian history. Talk shows in Canada have always been a matter of fresh facie, same old ganglia. Research-laden Peter Gzowski had a two-year stint in the late 1970s with *90 Minutes Live*. That fizzled due to bad press and less-than-Letterman-quality content. In 1992, Ralph Benmergui launched *Friday Night with Ralph Benmergui* which started in the 10 pm time slot, until it was moved to 11 pm in February, 1993. The show carried on until January, 1994, and then exited stage right. Other than those valiant efforts, talk shows have cowered in the mid-day bracket or, if issue-oriented, in early evening. Everything else stays in the safe harbour of radio.

It would seem the key to success is *duende*. Carson had it, Leno doesn't and Letterman, well, Letterman is too busy crucifying himself to let himself develop it. Bullard is well in the *duende* target zone and this is very exotic on Canadian airwaves. Benmergui may have had it, except what Benmergui also had, in Bullard's mind, was the cards stacked against him. "I think he was given an opportunity which anybody would have taken, and they made *Friday Night* sound like

'this is the one.' To have that kind of pressure on you must have been unbelievable."

Reportedly, the urge to deconstruct Bullard's magic has no appeal for the man, although in and of itself, it seems fairly self-evident. He's a decent guy, and funny as hell. Deconstructing the mystery of why *Open Mike* has had this breakthrough success is more of an adventure. It is also a process in analysing the Canadian identity, typically an academically fruitless task, until you see Bullard work a crowd. He knows, from his work in the comedy trenches, his viewers ranges from eight to 80. He also knows "Canadian comics have to perform for the toughest audiences in the world, and that's the Canadian audience. Canadians are better educated and they are not going to go for the hackneyed premise."

Finally, it took him only one week on air to realize that the distance between the first row and the foot of the stage was a damaging abyss. So, like any stand-up worth his weight in potassium-cyanide salts, he jumped in. "When I was on that stage, I didn't like it. We agreed I would do it from the floor, and as soon as I did (he snaps his fingers), I stopped reading the monologue and I started feeling it."

Connecting to the audience is integral. In fact, connecting to the audience is not only Bullard's strength, it has evolved into the reason why *Open Mike* tickets are impossible to find. While Letterman and Leno draw an audience for their celebrity guests, Bullard, himself, is the celebrity people tune in to watch. And the audience, comprised of mortals without a publicist, has become as much a part of the show as the guests.

Still, the celebrity ingredient is an outright necessity, except that for a nonissue-oriented show in this country, the call for celebs is the sound of the fat



Above: Bullard, himself, is the celebrity people tune in to watch.

Below: "Honest Ed" Mirvish on *Open Mike* with Mike Bullard.





lady  
singing.

While the Canadian television and film industry wrestles with the notion of a star system—they want it; they don't want it; they want the money, but not the hype; they want the fame, the hype, the cash, but not the tabloids—Bullard just wants a star system so he can draw an audience. "It brings a focus." However, if he waited for the creation of such a system, he could never fulfil his show's mandate—to promote Canadian talent. So, instead, he created his own. "Out of 400 guests this season, we've had only three household names. It will be 99 shows as of the end of the season. Ninety-nine nights of putting people on who, not only have viewers never heard of them before, but didn't give a damn about before they saw them, including me! To me, that says we've more than lived up to our mandate, we've kicked the crap out it."

Tracking the ease of finding guests for the show is a revealing exercise. From day one, comics have called to appear, and this is the first bonus of Bullard's stand-up life. He does, however, note that the number of TV-savvy comics in Canada is limited. The difference between last October and now is that the word has spread and comics from Pennsylvania and New York are calling to be on the show. Musicians have also been plentiful, a fact that kicked in after the first month on air. That Bullard hosted the Canadian Music Awards four years in a row has helped and the reciprocal support is evidenced in the record companies footing the bill for their bands to appear. The supply is so plentiful that Bullard maintains *Open Mike* could run for 20 years and still have a deep talent pool from which to draw.

The slowest group to come to the understanding of *Open Mike* as a direct line to the Canadian market are actors and writers, although Canadian talent have been somewhat quicker on the uptake than visiting U.S. talent.

Celebrities, while entertaining, have a short half-life on talk shows, and do not provide the sense of show-biz kinship that keeps audiences returning. Threaded through every evening's dialogue are an array of down-market references. Throw-away lines about no salary, no budget and no perks not only add to the romance of the show, they narrow the psychological distance between Bullard and his viewers. Those are just jokes, Bullard explains, and the reason they are jokes is because he is staggeringly happy about the team of people he has gathered together to pull off the show five nights a week. Still, the stone truth of the matter is that perceived reality is reality, and if the audience feels more connectivity because of the absence of slickness, then the jokes are serving a purpose above and beyond simple entertainment. They are signalling the public that there is no hard candy-coating covering Bullard's backside. This street-level sensitivity may also be a function of stand-up experience. When comedians become too slick, they lose the texture that makes them real. And fake is not funny.

Jane Hawtin, a three-year veteran of television talk shows (*Jane Hawtin Live* on WTN) and a 20-year veteran in Canadian broadcasting, has been a guest on *Open Mike* and she sees no "slick" in the Bullard future. "I don't think he'd ever do that. I think he knows what he does well which is why he insists on having the audience so close. What happens with slickness is that if it's interpreted that you're just going through the motions and the question becomes more important than the answer, then you've lost the depth. That means you've got someone who really doesn't care about what the guest is saying, and I think

that's what Canada hates. The audience will take the show down if they see that phoniness."

Performing for television is like taking a hit of Novacaine to the cerebral cortex. While a studio audience of 125 helps, there's a much bigger viewing audience out there that a comic cannot hear. Bullard can. This postmodern performer has at his fingertips the pulse of the Internet and he uses it ruthlessly, in a way no one else does. The launch of the *Open Mike* web page took 68,000 hits in the first four days. Why rely on focus groups and ratings when you can watch the email. The Holmes Brothers, 72-year-old blues singers from Chicago, were on one night and 60 email letters had arrived by morning voicing approval. Bullard knows he has American viewers because an average 200–250 emails every week from northern New York state. He knows when his jokes hit or miss as well, "If we slag Toronto, we get 50 emails saying 'way to go.' If we slag Newfoundland, we get 250 letters saying 'who the hell do you think you are?' And if we slag the Americans, we get 500 letters backing us up."

While some comedians go the Henny Youngman route and remain on stage until death hooks them into the wings, others wait to be handpicked by American talent scouts to appear in sitcoms or they become sit-down comedians and grow old and lucrative writing comedy. It all comes down to whether they need the fear of the unexpected. The buzz. The close calls. Bullard has found a way to keep it all; the live audience, the unknown quantities of each guest, the heckling, it's all there. He has even found a way to up the ante with a broader audience and nightly performances. And except for the monologue, nothing is scripted which means new material five nights a week. It is the eternal spring for a funny man. He is the Ponce de Leon of comedy—not only has he found the fountain of entertainment youth to keep him fresh, he has the right audience. "Canadians won't accept crap. They can spot fluff a mile away." It keeps him honest and the honesty will keep the cameras rolling. ■

