

Interview: Tom Rhodes

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He's an American comedian who started stand-up routines at just 17 years old and was the first comic spokesman who signed with Comedy Central in the USA in the early 1990s. He's a TV host, travel writer, actor and one hilarious guy. In short, **Tom Rhodes** is an American travelling comedian and star whose international fame outweighs his popularity at home. And he's on his way to Hong Kong for a series of comedy shows across the city which should knock your socks off.

Rhodes, who hails from Florida, says he prefers life on the road. In fact, the man hasn't had a permanent home for seven years – only a postal address for mail deliveries and a storage room for personal effects. Apart from his Comedy Central breeding ground, he also hosted NBC sitcom *Mr Rhodes* for a year before landing a spot as a host on Dutch talk show *Kevin Masters starring Tom Rhodes*. The show was successful and hilarious segments included Rhodes giving Tenacious D a tour of Amsterdam, which ultimately takes place inside a café with the trio smoking weed and making smartass wisecracks. He was also with Steve-O, who stapled his scrotum to his leg.

That's Tom Rhodes for you. He doesn't tiptoe around potentially awkward cultural barriers. Instead he puts it all out there and it's hard to hate him for it. Something about his fearlessness in overstepping cultural boundaries is truly genuine and most importantly, funny as hell. That's exactly what we found when we spoke to him ahead of his HK shows...

You're a travelling comedian known better internationally than in the US...

Well, not many of the American comedians get out into the worldwide circuits. I got in with London and that led to gigs all over Europe and then Asia.

Does being an American comedian make it more difficult in countries with rocky foreign relations?

It was harder during the Bush years when I played Europe. It didn't stop me though. I read somewhere that the only prejudice that's tolerated is anti-Americanism. But, you know, if you're a self-deprecating American or can make jokes about America, you can go to any country and it's universally funny... especially England. Anyways, if somebody is prejudiced towards being American, as a comedian I think you've got a lot to work with.

Have you noticed any comic differences between countries?

Well, the trouble with playing in Ireland is that everyone in Ireland is so hilarious. People are just so funny – you never know

when you might get heckled by hilarity. In Malaysia, you've got Muslims, Chinese and Indians all ruthlessly making fun of each other's religions and ethnicities. I found they were freer with their humour, whereas in the US people are so PC and can be touchy about certain things.

Do people in different countries usually find the same things funny?

You've got a core of material that's universal – things that everybody can make fun of. But then you do lose a certain percentage of stuff when you go to different countries and that's what I find exciting. You have to be smart to adjust to different audiences, but at the same time what you lose you gain in observations.

Do you use the same material in every show?

You have to be culturally aware to play in other countries. It would be impossible to not do that. When I started in Florida, I'd see New York comedians with unrelatable jokes like 'oh, you know on the subway, right?' and I'd be like – 'no we don't have those here'. At least acknowledge you're in a different place or different country. What was the question again?

Do you change your strategy with regards to different audiences?

No, I stick with what I think is funny.

Touché.

I know the parameters of things that would be uncouth to say depending where you are. But audiences differ anywhere you go. It's just a different collection of people nightly.

Well, how do you deal with potentially awkward cultural mishaps? For example, would you crack a Mao joke in China?

Here's the thing. I'm from a right wing, really hardcore Christian republican family and... *[hesitates and smiles]* I thought I was a communist growing up. Well, I used to say I was because it upset my family and I didn't have the courage to be homosexual so being a communist was the next best thing on the list. The first time I went to China it felt like a homecoming.

Seriously?

No. And I should probably get around to apologising to my parents about that. As an adult now, having been to Russia, Vietnam and China, I see Communism might not be a real workable system. But I was young and idealistic at the time, and on paper it's fucking brilliant. Although I do love collecting commie shit. Do you know how many Chairman Mao statues I have? I think I've got three of them. The last time I was there, I got a great one where Mao is like reclining in a chair. I also have a tall one of him standing. For a white guy from Florida, I probably have too many of those little red communist books. I love 'em.

Your podcast, Tom Rhodes Radio, has featured everyone from Jeff Foxworthy and notorious MegaUpload founder Kim Dotcom to Uncle Bob and a musician also named Tom Rhodes. Tell me what you've been working on recently.

I'm trying to pitch a TV show like Anthony Bourdain but with comedy, where I check out countries throughout the world highlighting their comedy scenes. But the world we live in – I don't need a TV network to say you can do this. I'm the king of free content. The podcast is an extension of this idea because I interview comedians around the world. It's not just about comedy but also other things.

Why do you do what you do?

I love writing stories. I'm really interested in the world and people of the world and what people think about things. What are people making jokes about in other countries? I think that would be endlessly fascinating. Like what do people laugh at?

And what do they laugh at?

There's always a gay guy getting hit in the balls on TV sitcoms in poorer countries. It's a recurring theme. Go to Indonesia and watch TV for an hour and I guarantee you'll see like four gay guys getting hit in the balls. Physical humour is popular in third world countries.

How does the HK comedy scene compare to other ones you've seen?

Hong Kong – you've got expatriates from every country. It's my favourite kind of audience when people are multi-ethnic, multinational and somewhat smart.

So are you looking forward to coming to Hong Kong?

I like the international-ness of HK. It's more of a do-able NYC *[laughs]*.

Tom Rhodes Live in Hong Kong, Various venues, Nov 1-5. Tickets: \$250; comedy.hk.

Ying Lo

<http://www.timeout.com.hk/around-town/features/61884/interview-tom-rhodes.html>