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Steve Patterson yuks it up

This 905er on ditching an advertising day job, his upcoming one-man comedy tour & ruling the airwaves with his hit radio show

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The prodding that finally pushed Steve Patterson into a full-time comedy career came from an unlikely source: his boss at an advertising firm.

Back in the mid-'90s, the host of CBC Radio's *The Debaters* was toiling away in the ad world, and though his work may have been above par, his heart was seriously not in it. To wit: in a particularly tough meeting with his boss and a client, Patterson became so frustrated that he more or less pink-slipped the client.

"I believe the exact line I used was, 'If you guys are going to suck all the creativity out of this, why don't you just write the ads yourselves!'" Patterson recalls.

After the meeting, his boss countered with a surprisingly empathic response.

"He said, 'Look, I know what you want to do, and this isn't it, so....'"

So Patterson was fired, but he was also liberated to step in to the successful comedy career that he was made for.

Born in Richmond Hill and raised in Thornhill, the young Patterson used his sense of humour as a defence mechanism against his scrappy older brothers.

“I figured if I could make them laugh then I wouldn’t be put into wrestling submission holds and punched as much,” he says.

But as he grew up, Patterson’s comedy aspirations didn’t extend much beyond the aim of self-preservation. His father’s model of professionalism made a big impact on him, and he reasoned that an adult career equaled a desk job.

“I used to think very traditionally,” Patterson says. “My dad always would come home from work wearing a tie, and I would think, ‘Ah that’s what you’re supposed to do.’ ”

In keeping with his tie-based definition of a job, he first considered law (and entered York University’s pre-law program on scholarship) before deciding he’d prefer to do business school at Western. Armed with his business degree, he then jumped over to advertising, and we all know how that turned out.

“I went from law to business to advertising to stand-up comedy, which is certainly not a traditional path,” says Patterson of his roundabout career trajectory. “But I think everyone who does stand-up finds it in a different way.”

Of course, even during his button-down university days, comedy seemed to find its way into Patterson’s life. In first year, his peers found him funny enough to sign him up (unbeknownst to Patterson) for amateur night at Yuk Yuk’s. Thinking he and his friends were just there to scope out the scene and never having done stand-up before, Patterson had absolutely no material ready.

“The first time I did stand-up I literally stood up and walked on the stage not knowing a word of what I was going to say. They just called my name and I went onstage,” he says.

“I think everyone who does stand-up finds it in a different way.”

Though he dismisses his inaugural performance as “probably not stellar,” he’s just being modest. Yuk Yuk’s invited him back to perform based on his set, which he did occasionally throughout his university and advertising days.

Years later, when he transitioned from advertising to comedy, Patterson didn’t intend on being caught unprepared again. In the months before his job ended, he began to focus steadfastly on writing material and planning his act.

Then he strategically planned a tour of western Canada to build his onstage chops.

“Toronto has almost as many comedians as they do condos,” he explains, “so the thing in Toronto is that you can do stand-up, but it’s obviously very competitive and you might not get paid — not just as in you might not get paid a lot — you might not get paid at all. So I decided to go out west where there was less stand-up.”

His Yuk Yuk’s comedy tour helped him hone his skills, especially since it forced him to develop new, location-specific material to cater to his non-Toronto audiences.

Or as he puts it, “When you’re in Toronto you tend to do stand-up about Toronto, but if you happen to be going to Moosejaw to do a show they don’t give a crap about Toronto, so you better find material that can make them laugh.”

Beyond expanding his repertoire and helping him connect with his audiences, Patterson’s first tour offered him a sense of validation.

“I felt for the first time ever like I was doing what I was supposed to be doing,” he says. “And when it feels right, you honestly don’t care about the money. As long as you can live, you’re happy.”

Patterson has eked out a comedy career for himself that has him doing more than just making ends meet. In 2007 he was chosen to succeed Shaun Majumder as host of *The Debaters*, a role that he has made his own and which utilizes his stand-up skills in a novel way. In every show, a pair of stand-up comics are invited to debate a topic in front of a live audience that also serves as the

debate's judge.

"I think the host needs to have a stand-up comic's mentality because we're working with stand-up comedians," says Patterson. "The show has a rare format that allows stand-ups to work off of each other on the same stage. It's a playful environment, and it's nice to have other people to fill in the blanks sometimes in comedy."

His reign on the show has actually been so popular that the CBC decided to try out *The Debaters* in television format this past year, but unfortunately, after filming 26 episodes, it's back to the radio waves for the show. Patterson acknowledges that *The Debaters* may, indeed, be better suited for radio anyhow.

"The live feeling wasn't really translated as well as it could have been to television," he says. "You know, on TV they want everything to look sort of perfect, so if you flub a line, they want you to go back and deliver it again, but this show is supposed to include mistakes."

Hosting duties aside, Patterson also had a huge year in 2011 when he was nominated for a Gemini Award, for a Just For Laughs appearance, and named Best Stand-Up Male at the Canadian Comedy Awards. Now he's hoping to match his past successes by embarking on a one-man tour with his first-ever solo theatre show, *This Is Not Debatable*.

"I hosted the Just For Laughs tour last year, and it was great," he says, "but it was all hosting, so now I'm really getting back out there with my material. I'm looking forward to seeing how it goes on the road this time around."