

Cracking Up With Canada's Hot Comic Sugar Sammy has grossed nearly \$3 million on the road. That's a lot of laughs By Karen Bliss

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SUGAR SAMMY SOUNDS EXCEPTIONALLY RELAXED for a guy set to hit the stage in an hour, especially since he's still at the furnished apartment he has rented in Old Montreal. After crashing at his parents' house the previous night, he spent most of the day with his accountant and then saw his doctor to discuss an MRI for his back.

"I am relaxed," he says. "I've done this show a million times. I'm not worried about it."

The stand-up comedian, who was born in Montreal but is on the road so much he doesn't have a place to call his own, is the top-grossing domestic touring artist in Canada for the last 12 months, according to Billboard Boxscore. "I just found that out. As long as [Nickelback] is taking a break and [Justin] Bieber's in jail, it works out perfect for me," he says with a laugh.

International artists — yes, that includes the legally troubled but still-free Bieber — predictably dominate the Boxscore ranking of Canada's top touring acts, compiled ahead of Canadian Music Week, which takes place in Toronto May 6-10.

But Boxscore chart data for the 12 months ending with the issue dated April 12, 2014 show that Sammy leads the pack among domestic Canadian artists. His performances, as reported to Boxscore, grossed \$2.9 million U.S. That far outranks other perennially powerful but currently less active Canadian touring mainstays, including the groups Hedley, Marianas Trench, Billy Talent and Blue Rodeo.

On this evening, Sammy — whose shows are about 20 percent improvised, a highlight for audiences and a trigger for his word-of-mouth success — is about to play two sold-out con-



"I'd sell out 10 shows a night [at the clubs], so we started doing theaters," says Sugar Sammy, photographed April 24 at FH Studio in Montreal. For an exclusive interview and behind-the-scenes video, go to Billboard.com or Billboard.com/ipad.

writing and starring in the francophone TV show *Ces Gars-Là* [*These Guys*].

An Indo-Canadian born Samir Khullar, Sammy is fluent in French, English, Hindi and Punjabi, and has adapted his show for 30 countries, from South Africa and Saudi Arabia to the Philippines and Ireland, amounting to more than 1,000 gigs.

In the last two years, according to his manager, Martin Langlois, the 38-year-old has sold 235,000 tickets in Canada, India and United States, including more than 86,000

to his English-French show *You're Gonna Rire*, produced by Sammy's company, Sugarnation, which also produces his all-English show. His francophone show, *En Français, S.V.P.*, is produced by Evenko.

In March 2012, Comedy Central India chose

Sammy, with his English-Hindi-Punjabi show, as its first artist to tour the country. But "since this [English-French show] took off, I've been home, which is a dream because a comedian usually can't be self-sustaining just at home."

He's booked in Canada through December 2015, says Langlois, and will go back to international touring in 2016.

"These days he's doing four to six shows per week, plus private gigs," says Langlois. "It's been like this since we started in Montreal with this bilingual show in February 2012, and in the fall of 2012 we started the French version and touring across Quebec.

"We didn't expect to have this huge reception in places far from Montreal," says Langlois, "because Sam is an Indo-Canadian, and he's talking about international stuff. He has a really different perspective than other comedians in Quebec."

Sammy's repertoire ranges widely, from such Quebec-centric topics as politics,

protecting the French language, NHL team the Montreal Canadiens and the province's pop culture, to more universal subjects like parents and girlfriends.

Sammy finds humor everywhere — which certainly beats the alternative, he points out. "I've always been that guy" to find a laugh, he says. "It's a better way to go through life than the other way, seeing the dark side of everything."

A young fan of Eddie Murphy, Martin Lawrence and Dave Chappelle, Sammy started performing at open mics in his teens as Sam Khullar.

While attending McGill University and promoting parties at local clubs, he earned his nickname because he'd let ladies in for free.

An early break came in 2004, when Comedy Zone club owner Paul Ronca remembered the teenager's open-mic sets, offered Sammy bookings and, later that year, a headlining slot at the 225-capacity venue. Sammy put his promoter skills into overdrive and sold out 10 shows.

In 2006, he did a special for *Comedy Now!*, a series on Canada's CTV network that, says Sammy, was "one of the reasons I've gotten booked internationally a bunch since then."

Ronca began working on Montreal's Just for

Laughs festival that year and played a major role in arranging Sammy's first gala appearance for the event in 2007.

Club owners from across Canada caught his set at Just for Laughs and started booking him. "From there on, I started doing bigger gigs at Just for Laughs and bigger gigs in Canada. By 2009, the clubs couldn't support the number of people I was pulling in," recalls Sammy. "I'd sell out 10 shows a night everywhere, or something like that, so we started doing the theater tours."

His first theater run, in 2009, led to a TV special, *Sugar Sammy Live in Concert: Direct From Montreal*, which was bought by HBO Canada. "It was their first comedy special from Canada, so that did big things for me here too," says Sammy.

The comedian's future goals are more of the same, only broader. He'd like to do an English version of his Quebec TV show — for which he is the first non-francophone to win the Olivier of the Year comedy award — and he "definitely" wants to do another Canadian run, a world tour, movies and more TV.

Says Sammy: "I just feel lucky that I'm able to do this every day of my life and be up there and do this as a career." ●

Canada's Top 5 Venues

	Venue Capacity / Location	Total Gross	Total Attendance
1	Air Canada Centre 19,800 / Toronto	\$56,781,153	593,134
2	Bell Centre 21,242 / Montreal	\$37,913,043	456,862
3	The Colosseum at Caesars Windsor 5,000 / Windsor, Ontario	\$15,959,703	235,039
4	Rogers Centre 55,000 / Toronto	\$12,930,142	134,848
5	Rexall Place 16,840 / Edmonton, Alberta	\$11,733,553	137,443

RANKED BY GROSS. COMPILED FROM BOXSCORES REPORTED APRIL 13, 2013 TO APRIL 12, 2014. ALL FIGURES IN U.S. DOLLARS.

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