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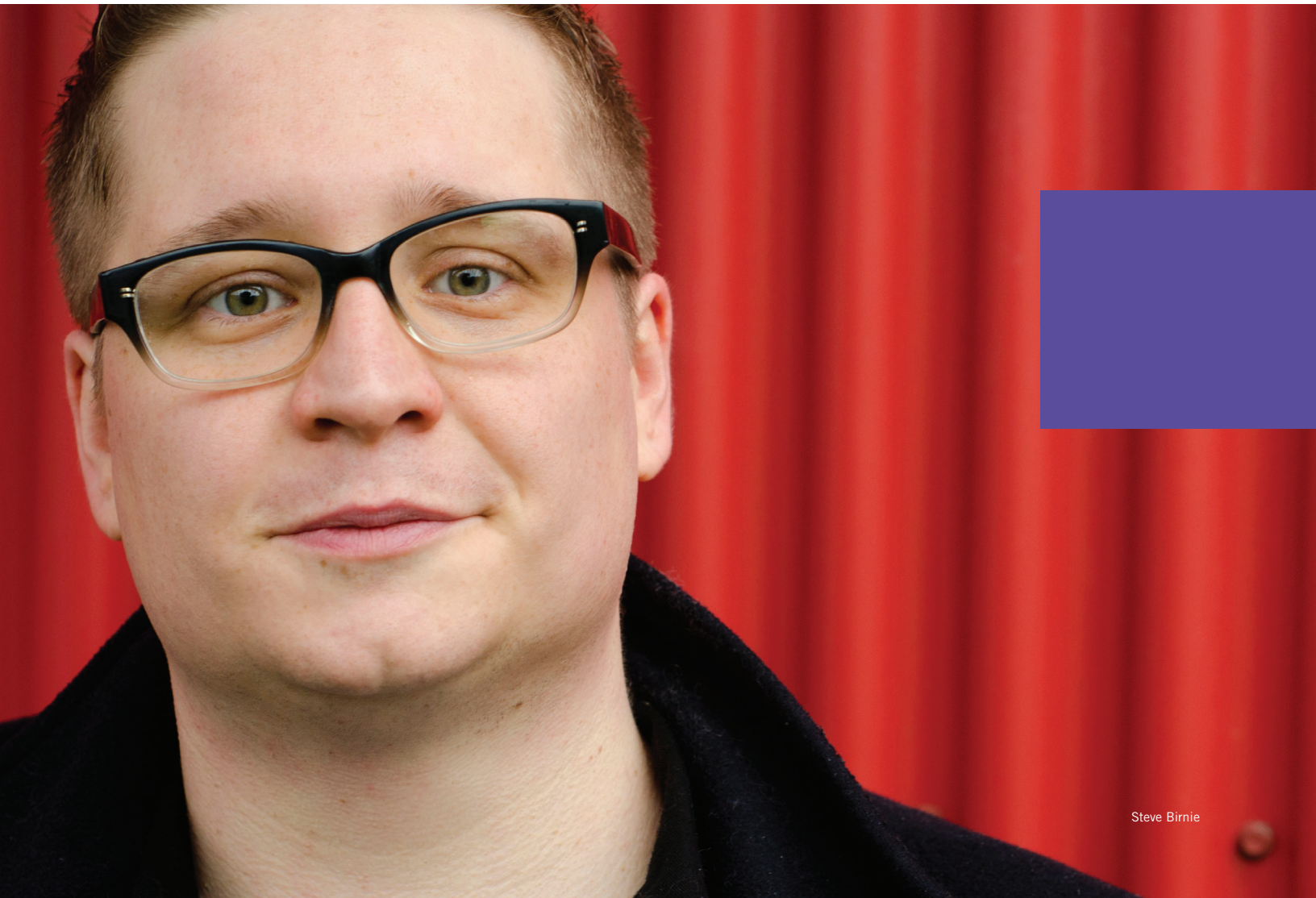
Laughing all the way to the credit union

Charlie Demers's brand of humour is making him a household name

By Alexandra Samur

Charlie Demers is the kind of comedian who makes you think. His smart sets are thoughtful and boisterous, creating an entertaining brand of alt-comedy that blends political commentary with everyday banter. Speaking about an unexpected gift he received from his Chinese in-laws, for instance, he deadpans: "As those of you in the studio audience can tell and home listeners can probably guess from the note of entitlement in my voice, I'm a white dude."

A fellow comedian once likened Charlie to a "squeegee punk anarchist," but today his comedy has evolved. Thinking back to the first jokes he delivered at open-mic nights at Vancouver's Laugh Gallery, Charlie chuckles and cringes, but he still credits the venue with the launch of his career. It gave him exposure, of course. But it also allowed him to brush shoulders with – and learn from – comedy greats like Brent Butt, the Flight of the Conchords and Tig Notaro.



Now in his 30s, Charlie is one of Vancouver's top comics; next, he's working on becoming a household name. He appears regularly on CBC Radio One's *The Debaters*, performs for national and international audiences at Canadian comedy festivals and has fans rolling in the aisles on The Comedy Network's *Comedy Now!* These days, the self-described activist and comedian, who also teaches writing at the University of British Columbia, evokes nutty, nerdy prof more than punk.

An early career highlight occurred when Zach Galifianakis – best known as the kooky brother in the Hollywood hit trilogy, *The Hangover* – approached him after a set. In town shooting a TV series, Galifianakis complimented him on an absurd story he'd told about buying a statue of Saddam Hussein as a gift for his dad. Charlie was so surprised by the compliment, he asked Galifianakis if he was joking. (He wasn't.)

For all the praise, being a B.C.-based comic is challenging. Few can make a living strictly performing locally, which is why Charlie has diversified with a vengeance. He's an essay writer, an author of both non-fiction and fiction books, a playwright, a web series producer and an actor, too. "Nobody who wants to stay out here can lead a by-the-book career, so it means learning other skills and doing other stuff – piecing together a career as opposed to having one clear trajectory or one clear path," he says.

Charlie is ambivalent about the Internet as a viable platform for emerging comedians. "The Internet can be seen in one of two ways – it's either the research and development laboratory of comedy or it's just this comedy furnace that's insatiable," he says. "When does that click over to being paid [and to being able to maintain] an actual artistic career? I don't know."

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Charlie has used the Internet, though, to fund and distribute projects. His upcoming one-man show, *Leftovers*, supported by Vancouver's Newworld Theatre, was funded via the online platform Indiegogo. Newworld exceeded its \$5,000 goal in five days and *Leftovers* will debut in Vancouver this spring. The Winnipeg Comedy Festival will feature it, too.

Despite this success, Charlie recognizes the limits of crowdfunding to finance art projects. "I think crowdfunding peaked a little while ago when everybody's social media feeds turned into panhandling to help make shows. That works if you're a mime and all your friends are investment bankers," he jokes. "Most of

the writers I know, their friends are writers. Most of the comedians I know, their friends are comedians. We can't all recycle the same loonie around and around in a circle."

Charlie employed a different model to produce *Will Power*, a five-part web series launched in the summer of 2014 and now available on YouTube. The darkly humorous story turns on an awkward meeting between a lawyer and two brothers following the death of their father. Demers raised *Will Power's* shoestring budget of \$2,000 through tickets and donations at a comedy fundraiser mounted by the series' actors and friends. It's clear Charlie is proud of what the *Will Power* team accomplished.

“My goal 10 years from now is to be doing comedy that is 10 years better than the comedy that I'm doing today”

"Granted, we didn't figure out a way to make money from it, but it really was a cooperative production; it wasn't for bosses or a corporation – it was for pure play and expression and we got to do that together, which was wonderful."

A staunch supporter of cooperatives, Charlie has been a member of credit unions his whole life. Growing up as the son of a teacher, he and his family were members of the Teachers Credit Union (TCU), which eventually became **Vancity Credit Union** (501,000 members, \$17.5 billion in assets.) He's still a member today. He says credit unions have backed the arts community and cites Vancity's 2007 report, *Power of the Arts*, as an important resource detailing how credit unions can help.

One of the people behind the report, Bob Williams, agrees that the document is still relevant. Williams, now a Vancity director, points to Vancouver's first Technology and Social Innovation Centre – a new hub for social innovators, artists and community members – to be opened in the Downtown Eastside. The centre, being built with funds from the Vancity Community Foundation, the City of Vancouver and the Vancouver Economic Commission, is envisioned as a crucial bridge that will support collaboration among different sectors of the city's artistic community.

Williams admits nonetheless that Vancity could be doing more to support the arts – and Charlie concurs: The daily reality of uneven and fluctuating funding means that emerging artists often can't make a living, so they abandon their callings in favour of reliable paycheques in other fields.

Still, Charlie remains passionate about what his future holds. "My goal 10 years from now is to be doing comedy that is 10 years better than the comedy that I'm doing today. With perfect comic timing he adds, "And I want to be good at it at a point in my life where my daughter can actually understand what it is that I do for a living." ■