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accesses his
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Avant-garde
artists take
to the road



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CANADA'S NATIONAL NEWSPAPER • FOUNDED 1844 • GLOBEANDMAIL.COM • MONDAY, JULY 7, 2005



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A road show with a difference

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Driving all night to get to the gig. Sleeping on the floor of a stranger's basement. Dealing with skeptical border guards, unpredictable venues, fluctuating audiences. And doing it not for the money, but for the art.

If you're thinking that this is a struggling band sent on tour by an optimistic indie record label, think again.

In recent months, a whole new coterie of up-and-coming culture creators have taken to the road, touring as if they were wannabe rock stars, but turning audiences on to comics, spoken word and found notes instead of crashing guitar chords and reverberating feedback. Mixing punk rock's do-it-yourself attitude with high-art, avant-garde sensibilities, these newly minted impresarios are crisscrossing North America and, occasional mishap notwithstanding, loving it.

"The people were lovely, the crowds were attentive and interesting," enthuses Toronto performance poet Cynthia Gould, fresh off the road and 24 hours or so after her final gig in Chicago as part of a fluctuating, peripatetic tour called the Perpetual Motion Roadshow.

"It was awesome," says Toronto cartoonist Matt Blackett, whose stint on a previous Perpetual Motion Roadshow took him to seven cities where he showed slides of his semi-autobiographical comics and told the stories behind the stories. "As the tour went on, I felt more and more fortunate."

With successful tours giving writers, cartoonists and artists an impetus to turn their solipsistic art practices into an act, and in a cultural environment dominated by the same huge bands touring to the same cities and playing the same songs every summer, it seems like the indie tour is set for expansion. Artists crave it, a willing network of organizers is developing and even potential venues are becoming more attuned to the value of the indie arts tour. Peter Birkemoe, owner of premiere Toronto comic shop The Beguiling, notes that a recent visit to his store by artists on a seven-city tour hawking a comic anthology called *Kramer's Ergot* was promoted "not as a signing but as the tour coming through. We emphasized the tour aspect."

At the forefront of this burgeon-

ing trend is the Perpetual Motion Roadshow. With three tours this spring and summer featuring nine different performers, the Roadshow is fast becoming the best known and best organized tour of its kind. Its circuit currently spans seven cities: Toronto, Montreal, Boston, New York, Cleveland, Cincinnati and Chicago. Like all the tours of this ilk, it depends on volunteers, good will and word of mouth to run smoothly. For promotion and execution, it relies heavily on the Internet and the ability of local organizers to tap into their communities.

The Toronto stop on the June incarnation of the tour, featuring Gould and two Americans — Joe Meno and Todd Dills — was a well-honed, well-attended presentation. Projecting an air of impish revelry, the show merged Gould's off-colour feminist rant-poems, Dills's story of adolescent lust in a roller-skating rink, and short videos by local collective All Day Breakfast (including one starring Puppo the "robot boy puppet").

"We try to get at least one local act in each city to perform," explains overall tour creator Jim Munroe, who started the Perpetual Motion Roadshow after conducting an extensive tour for his self-published science-fiction novel *Everyone in Silico*. Munroe chooses the performers, and compares the creative process of getting a tour together to "editing a temporal magazine."

Via e-mail, he explains to me that his goal is to "have a diversity of mediums." He looks for performers who "hail from both sides of the border. Putting together three novelists from Montreal makes sense thematically, maybe, but it makes for a pretty repetitive show. ... Putting together a cartoonist from Toronto and a spoken-word poet from New York allows them to share their geographic and genre audiences, as well as exposing fans of spoken word to a cartoonist and vice versa."

Of course, the burgeoning indie tour tradition does not follow a single formula. Lanky redhead Davy Rothbart came through Toronto on a self-organized fall, 2002, tour that spanned a staggering 40-plus stops. The 27-year-old indie impresario was promoting his *Found* magazine, which consists entirely of reprinted found notes. On-stage, the

confident Rothbart read some of the funnier notes in between mini-lectures on the philosophy of found stuff. Then, in keeping with the tradition of involving local talent, he ceded the spotlight to those in the audience who had brought their own found notes. The vibe of the evening could only be described as a postmodern hipster singalong, an ironic self-conscious yowl that left those in attendance both smugly satisfied and filled with the desire to come up with their own tourable scheme.

But organizing and executing an indie tour is not as easy as seems.

"It was a huge amount of work putting it together," notes Misha Glouberman, who was the host of a touring amateur lecture series based on a regular Toronto event called Trampoline Hall. The tour rolled through nine cities last fall. "The logistics of doing something like this are just crazy. We had a lot of false starts." Like *Found* magazine and the Perpetual Motion Roadshow, the Trampoline Hall tour relied on local presenters and organizers, and depended on local talent. "Part of what made it work is that the show is inclusive and it's kind of like a party," Glouberman explains.

'So many things happened that sparked a billion ideas, little inspirations, perfect moments. Big fuel for future projects.'

"It's different if you are just coming in doing a reading, but we were getting people excited to do the show, and they would bring friends out and help with posterage, so it became a group endeavour."

Along with the necessity of extensive preparation, many note long hours on the road, sleeping on stained couches, and wading into the crowd after the show to get them to buy your book, zine or comic are the hazards of being part of a touring indie variety show.

"On the downside," Montreal writer-performer Corey Frost explains via e-mail, "it can be tiring to travel that way — rushing to make it in time, schlepping books, leaving before you really have a chance to talk to people or see the city or see friends, et cetera. And it's impossible to predict whether people will come."

Frost travelled with cartoonist Marc Ngui on the first of the Perpetual Motion Roadshow tours (in April), but because of an ill-timed bout of bronchitis, only made it to four of the seven shows. Ngui,

meanwhile, had his own problems. The Toronto cartoonist was refused entry to the United States twice. "Freelance cartoonist with a one-way ticket to New York," he notes wryly. "Alarm bells go off." After finally making it into the United States, Ngui found out that Frost couldn't drive with him to the next gig. "I had been on an overnight bus to Brooklyn, then had a few hours of sleep, performed, and had to do the nine-hour drive to Cleveland on my own. I was over an hour late getting into Cleveland. It was a case of getting there after a nine-hour drive, setting up in 10 minutes and performing. I was shaking with exhaustion."

Despite the difficulties, Ngui notes that he developed an entirely new way to present his work to an audience — using slides and voices — that will serve him in good stead in the future. Other performers also say the tours not only allow them to network and make new contacts, but also to revitalize their creative spirit. Says Cynthia Gould: "So many things happened that sparked a billion ideas, little inspirations, perfect moments. Big fuel for future projects."

Enthusiasm, excitement, disbelief at the kindness of strangers and relief that they survived are all in evidence on the requisite on-line tour diaries, which the various creators updated as they went. Nomediakings.net is home to the Perpetual Roadshow's aural tour diaries, and readers can find the Trampoline Hall tour diary at trampoline-hall.net.

But you don't just have to read about these indie tours after the fact. Many of these creators are planning, or at least keenly anticipating, future tours. Matt Blackett sees touring as the key to cementing relationships developed on-line. "Fans who knew my work from my Web site drove in from an hour away to see me in Cleveland. Afterward, they even stayed at the bar and proceeded to get me drunk. ... I want to get on the road again."

He may yet have the opportunity. The Perpetual Motion Roadshow plans to spend July and August retooling, and will send a new circuit of creators forth in the fall, as well as launch their first western road show. Veteran tourer Frost, meanwhile, is currently in the midst of his first solo tour through Europe. "I've been really thrilled by how easy it is to set something like this up," he says of upcoming gigs in places such as Berlin and Paris. "When you have an idea and are willing to follow it through, other people seem to — the universe itself seems to — want to help anyway possible."

Special to The Globe and Mail