

# Half French, Half English, Completely Hilarious

## Sugar Sammy's Le Show Franglais is a huge hit - before it even opens

By BILL BROWNSTEIN  
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Sugar Sammy actually has the temerity to suggest that people typically don't buy tickets to a comedy show until they've heard the buzz from the first performance. Clearly, Sugar Sammy is not your typical comic.

Without having performed a single show in the series, he has already sold more than 32,000 tickets to Le Show Franglais: You're Gonna Rire. I hasten to mention that he now has 30 shows - 27 of which are sold out - beginning Thursday and slated to run until May 26, at the Olympia. Hasten? That's because by the time this column hits the presses, he may well have added another six shows to the tally.

Sugar Sammy announced but one Show Franglais back in October, and said that if sales went well he would be inclined to do a few more.

Well, mere minutes after that first show went on sale, it sold out. So he added three more. They soon sold out. A few days later, he was up to nine shows. Then 15, 19, 21, 27 and, for now, 30 shows.

This has to be one of the most unforeseen phenomena ever to be played out on the local cultural scene. All the more so since Sugar Sammy is going where few performers, on either side of the linguistic divide, dare to tread in this province. He has thrown caution to the wind in undertaking a bilingual spectacle, wherein he will be meshing French and English shtick together, sometimes even in the same sentence.

"Honestly, this was just intended to be a one-show experiment," says Sugar Sammy - né Samir Khullar - over a late lunch of Diet Coke and meatballs at the Tavern on the Square. "It could have easily backfired. I never expected this kind of reaction in my wildest dreams. It's just been the most insane, fun ride. I really can't explain it."

Perhaps he touched a nerve. After all, many of us are clearly ready to lap up a bilingual cultural event: Montrealers of all backgrounds lined up in droves to catch Bon Cop, Bad Cop, the bilingual comedy-heist flick that went on to become the most successful film at the Canadian box office.

Perhaps he puts it best himself: "I have never seen two languages as a problem

here, but rather as part of the richness of this city.

"But, really, I wanted to do this show as a small personal project that would keep me at home for the first time in years for my birthday."

Before additional dates were announced, the first show was to set take place Feb. 29. That's when Sugar Sammy gets to celebrate only his ninth birthday. Leap years notwithstanding, he'll actually turn 36. And that's why he has chosen the Feb. 29 date as the official red carpet premiere for Le Show Franglais.

Sugar Sammy is well on his way to becoming the biggest international comedy star to come from this country. He is not only funny and fearless, but he also happens to be a poster boy for multiculturalism, and a multilingual threat. He lets loose - with equal ease - in English, French, Hindi and Punjabi. And he has done so in more than 250 shows annually over the past few years, in more than 30 countries. It doesn't hurt that he has matinee idol looks to go along with the charm.

"If you're a serious comic, you have to rattle the cage," he says. "You have to shake it up and not be scared about voicing your opinion. Even at the risk of some people thinking you're arrogant. But that doesn't mean you don't love this city or province.

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Sugar Sammy

"The distinction of who is really English and who is really French, particularly among younger Montrealers, is starting to melt. The line is getting blurry. Among most people I know, they are fluent in French and English. That's the new reality of Montreal life - whether the politicians accept it or not. I have as many friends in N.D.G. as in the Plateau. This has to be the only city in the world where I have actually heard two Punjabi guys screaming at each other in French on the street. That really blew me away."

He points out that we are now seeing anglophone comedians checking out the French market in town and francophone comics exploring the English market - as was the case with recent shows at Comedyworks, where franco wits did only anglo shtick.

"When I first tried to pitch the concept for Le Show Franglais to the industry, most told me it was a crazy idea, that it would never sell. But I was able to sell the idea to Martin Langlois - my producing partner and a sovereignist, until I converted him," he cracks. "He loved the idea from the beginning. Then we went to (promoters) Evenko, and they loved the idea. It's great to have partners to jump into the deep end with you."

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Sugar Sammy

And it's even greater for the partners to have a hot ticket like him.

"What's funny is that many people who have only heard about this latest show think I'm some sort of overnight success." He laughs. "They don't know that I've been doing comedy non-stop for the last 16 years."

Le Show Français will include two opening acts for 20 minutes total, while Sugar Sammy will do 70 minutes of stand-up: 50.5 per cent in English, 49.5 per cent in French, according to the promotional campaign - a playful poke at the 1995 referendum breakdown in Quebec.

"The show will reflect life in Montreal," he says. "But that's a constantly evolving thing - which is why it also has to be spontaneous."

"In October, I thought I had the show all figured out. But so much has happened since then. The Habs debacle and the anglo coach. A new political party in the province. The possibility of a coming provincial election. And things will probably change even more over the course of my run. There's never a dull moment here."

Though he regularly performs in French only and is undertaking a 25-show tour in French throughout Quebec this fall, Sugar Sammy concedes it's still a challenge - but not for linguistic reasons. Quite the opposite: "In French interviews, I'm often told: 'Votre français est tellement bon. Pourquoi?' I say: 'C'est de votre faute,' " he muses, in reference to provincial language laws that saw him and other children of

immigrants get their primary and high school educations here in French.

The challenge of French performances for him relate more to style. He feels francophone audiences are accustomed to something much more theatrical and scripted and less free-form in terms of stand-up.

"I will get asked before a show who my script editor and my director are. I say that I don't have either. Then I'll be asked what I'm doing for a set, and I'll reply: 'Not much, but I'll try to put up something nice.' I try to explain that I can't be scripted, that I have to go with the flow. It usually takes a few minutes to get them to adjust, but then they really get into it."

Sugar Sammy will be doing some international gigs in April and several dates in the U.S. this summer. And there remains the chance of yet more Français shows at the Olympia in between.

"Le Show Français was from the heart," he says. "But my next dream project and crazy idea that the industry will think is nuts is another bilingual show. This time in Punjabi and English."

"Punjabi is the thirdmost spoken language in B.C. and Alberta, so it should do well there. If I'm lucky, maybe I'll sell one show in Montreal."

But, then again, that's what he said about Le Show Français.