

## The U.N. of Comedy

Jamaican Jeff Hodge brings together stand-up veterans from different nationalities

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By Jim Carnes  
Bee Staff Writer

When Jeff Hodge left "the islands" and moved to Texas, he was "15, had a big Afro and wore bell-bottom jeans. That's not the way they dressed in Texas," he said in a recent telephone interview from Los Angeles, where he now lives and works.

"The girls thought I was cute, but the guys would laugh at me," he said. He looked different. And he talked funny. But the American kids talked funny, too - and it wasn't just their Texas accents, said Hodge, who is known as "Mr. Jamaica" on the Ambassadors of Comedy tour that comes to California State University, Sacramento, for a free outdoor show Thursday. "They had a thing where the kids would talk tough. They'd get in your face and curse and really threaten you. I didn't know it was just talk. I thought it was for real, you know, so I tried to give it back. I started standing in front of a mirror, practicing: 'I'm gonna kick your ahhs.' No, tougher. 'I'm gonna kick yer az!' I thought that was the way you had to carry yourself."

There were plenty of cultural differences, from food to fashion. "You'd go out to eat and somebody would say to get the fried cheese steak. I'd think, 'How do you fry a big chunk of cheese?'"

"And the girls in school! Back home, they wore uniforms, but in Texas, 15-year-olds were wearing these short skirts and makeup. It was an eye-opener." Hodge has been performing stand-up "for 12 to 14 years," he said, and his teenage experience now informs his comedy and that of the group of friends he calls "a collection of America's funniest foreign comedians."

Hodge assembled three other stand-up comics - Sheila Rivera (Ms. Puerto Rico), Gerry Bednob (Mr. Bangladesh, aka "the Turban Cowboy") and Bobby Lee (Mr. Korea) - to offer, along with him, their views of what it's like to live in America.

In addition to their stand-up jobs, each of the performers has appeared on television and in films. Hodge had roles in "Crocodile Dundee in Los Angeles" and "Deuce Bigalow: Male Gigolo," and has written for the "Keenan Ivory Wayans Show." Rivera has appeared on "Sex and the City" and "The Martin Short Show." Bednob had a part in "Encino Man," is a "Star Search" international winner and often opens for Joan Rivers in Las Vegas. Lee is a member of the "Mad TV" cast.

The idea for the Ambassadors of Comedy came to him in 1990, Hodge said, but it took awhile to achieve. He had difficulty because there weren't "that many foreigners for the right mix" in Texas. He met Rivera there, but he was leaving the state by then. He moved to California, and here, after a time, he ran into Bednob.

In 1997, Hodge was producing comedy shows on Saturdays at the Ice House in L.A. "I liked to do theme shows," he said, "and about once a month I'd do an all-women show or an all-black show. And I'd bring in different foreign comics. Back then I would call it 'an international comic show.' Some guys had only five minutes of material, some had 10 minutes.

"It was good for what it was, but it wasn't what I really wanted it to be. When I got together with Gerry (Bednob), I looked up Sheila again, and then we added Bobby Lee. The concerts started in 1999, but we've really been working together - these four - for a couple of years.

"With America's population becoming so diverse, people are looking for something different," Hodge said.

Still, the Ambassadors didn't immediately take off. "Trying to turn Hollywood on to a new concept is difficult," he said. "Then the Kings of Comedy came along (the African American comedy tour featuring Steve Harvey, D.L. Hughley, Cedric the Entertainer and Bernie Mac), and it was easier to get people to grasp the concept."

The Ambassadors perform in clubs and on college campuses. The latter "kind of fell into my lap," the comic said. He had begun to get a college degree 10 years ago but dropped out. Last semester, he started back, and one of his friends was performing on campus.

"I stopped in to say hi and he asked me to do a guest set," Hodge said. "Somebody from the school's activities committee saw me and asked if I would be interested in doing my own shows. Out of that, it occurred to me to take it to college campuses.

"The week we'll be in Sacramento, we'll also be doing USC. We did UC Irvine recently, too.

"In the summertime when the colleges are closed, we're looking at the clubs, and then we'll go back on the campuses in the fall."

Hodge is coordinating the filming of a behind-the-scenes documentary on putting the Ambassadors show together. He produces the concerts as well as performs in them.

"I'm everything," he said. "I get the guys, get the venues, book the shows, baby-sit. When we come to Sacramento, I have to get (hotel) rooms for everybody. I'm always putting out fires. I'm losing a lot of sleep, but I enjoy the thing right now.

"The end result - when people like the show - that's the payoff."

#### AT A GLANCE

Ambassadors of Comedy

Perform at "Stars Under the Stars," 7:30 p.m. Thursday at Serna Plaza outside the University Union, California State University, Sacramento, 6000 J St. Free. (916) 278-6997.

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The Bee's Jim Carnes can be reached at (916) 321-1130 or [jcarnes@sacbee.com](mailto:jcarnes@sacbee.com).

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