

Indie Toronto Podcasts: How and Why They Work

When life slows down, and you feel like you are watching dust bunnies form in real-time, here is how independent GTA-based podcast hosts provide ideas and stories to revitalize our inside-days during quarantine.

The camera and built-in microphone are positioned at the end of a long table draped with a white table cloth and Shalisa-Maria Shaw, host of Shalisa-Marie Radio, is at the other end. There are pink rose petals laid on the table, a 1.5-litre of Rosé being passed around and an empty 1.5-litre bottle sitting just out of reach. “The thing is, for me,” a guest on her 2018 episode says, “shortness wouldn’t drive me away. It’s the teeth,” and all 10 people at the table erupt in laughter and agreement.

Shalisa-Marie, 24, brings real-life friendships and “soul-ties” as she might refer to them to her podcast. She nurtures a community on Instagram, and more recently on YouTube. Everyone is welcomed to the party. During her second last episode of season two, episode 13, she takes listeners down memory lane and reveals the journey that is Hmble Productions.

Her first episode titled *Situationships* is about navigating a new relationship after her 20-year-old partner of four years died in a canoe accident at Long Lake, Sudbury in 2017. Listening to the Shalisa-Marie Radio archive is like going to a childhood friend’s party where everyone can pick up right where they left off. She also produces 10-minute-long SMR Vibes episodes that make you move, where Shalisa-Marie showcases unsigned artists from around the world.

Shalisa-Marie is a self-described love addict whose show revolves around everything self-love, religion, sex and manifestation.

Shalisa-Marie preps for her podcasts by meditating in the morning and a matcha tea to calm her nerves because, although she has been hosting this podcast for about three years now, she still gets the pre-recording jitters.

Shalisa-Marie met 32-year-old Nathaniel Lingard on Valentine’s Day, 2019. Nathaniel built her basement studio, Hmble Productions. Though Nathaniel graduated with a degree in Film and Television Production from Humber College specializing in sound design, he had never actually built anything other than his wooden outdoor garden bed as a quarantine project.

The goal with Hmble Productions Studio is to make money from renting out her space or providing a platform for other podcasts. Shalisa-Maria is trying to create a space for

up-and-coming creatives who might not have a big platform yet. She wants to be her own Vevo, Colour Studios, MPR Tiny Desk.

But, of course, the reality of right now cannot be avoided. Shalisa-Marie sang “zerooo” in a high-pitched voice when talking about how much income her podcast has generated.

On a hot morning in June 2020, at a checkout counter in a Pickering Home Depot, Shalisa-Marie looked at Nathaniel and told him point-blank that the price they were looking at was not the price he quoted her for. The cashier looked slightly confused at Shalisa-Marie who was standing in her spandex shorts and had her arms crossed on the other side of the Plexiglas. “The worst is when you don’t have money at the cash *and* you’re in front of a guy,” Shalisa-Marie says.

Nathaniel ended up paying the difference of about \$60; Shalisa-Marie paid him back as soon as payday came around from her freelance job at Rogers Media. Nathaniel put the walls up that same day and Shalisa-Marie ended up being happy they had great quality walls. “Everything is industry-standard [with Shalisa’s setup],” says Nathaniel. The next time they went to Home Depot to pick up the flooring, Nathaniel had the right quote.

Having the right equipment is also important to Mike Boon, 46, the host Toronto Mike’d podcast. His podcast covers local stories as well as features chatty conversations with interesting guests. The show branches off the Toronto Mike Blog started in 2002. By the time he launched his podcast in 2012, he already has a built-in audience. Regardless, he wanted high-quality equipment for his listeners

Before the Rodecaster Pro soundboard came out in 2018, Mike was using the Mackie FX. While both soundboards allow each mic to have their own channel and has a USB port, the most useful feature the Rodecaster Pro offers is the ability to add another device via TRRS cable which has a headphone jack receiver. When Mike wants to record a phone call for his show, his Android cell phone plugs directly into the TRRS. Now his phone can be its own channel on the board.

It would be disingenuous to talk equipment without bringing it back to the monetary and production. In November 2020, Mike’s indoor podcast set-up includes posters of his current sponsors taped on his white walls, he has a total of six sponsors at this time. Every one of his guests leaves with craft beer from The Great Lakes Brewer, a frozen lasagna from Palma Pasta and a Toronto Mike’d sticker made by StickerU. When it comes to negotiations with sponsors, Mike warns, “If you’re not small and nimble, you’re just small.”

Since sponsorship prices fluctuate, to pay the bills Mike also runs TMDS (Toronto Mike Digital Services) offering support with producing/editing other people’s podcasts as well as giving professional advice to people seeking to improve their online presence.

Traditional radio makes money through selling airtime to advertisers, whereas most podcasts make their money through subscription services and sponsors. “When advertisers come to a podcast it’s usually a more niche product and in turn requires a niche approach,” says Paul Cross, a program coordinator at Humber College for Radio and Media Production. Advertisers need to make sure their product/service is compatible with the show and the host’s personality. On the other hand, “It’s largely irrelevant [to a radio host] what spots are on,” says Paul, because they follow schedules and the host has no say in what advertisements play or when.

“Good radio hosts, broadcasters and preforms are speaking to one person at a time,” says Paul. He has an M.A. in New Media and Society, and he is especially interested in the connection between radio and society in times of local crisis. When CFRB added live overnight hosts during the darkest days of the pandemic, the host was available for listeners to call in and feel like maybe the world on the other side of the window hadn’t completely shut down.

Usually, the success of radio is based on ratings and numbers, but in 2020 Paul does not think numbers are a great way to show success in radio or podcasting – it is more about the bond created through human stories and voices in our everyday lives and the way these hosts can colour our lives when it seems like everything is in black and white.

Mike used to host T.M.L.X. (Toronto Mike'd Listener Experience) events at the Great Lakes Brewery on Queen Elizabeth Blvd. Not being able to enjoy warm nights at the Great Lakes Brewery with his listeners is one of the worse fallouts of the pandemic for Mike. He has a segment called F.O.T.M.K.O.T.J. (Friends Of Toronto Mike'd Kick Out The Jams) where he plays his listener's 60-second voice notes of themselves naming a song and explaining its significance to them.

The way Shalisa creates connections with her audience is by inviting them into her world with her best friend, Patrice Morgan-Hamilton, through conversation. This means the impetus for her podcast, which is to connect, is easily maintainable and transferable. The chemistry between Shalisa-Marie and Patrice transcends audio.

There are infinite ways to connect with audiences online. Gina Marie, host of Mixed in the 6 grew her podcast from a community she built with Haan Palcu-Chang. They co-founded the Mixed in the Six Facebook group after meeting on a Tinder date.

Since then, they’ve held frequent meet-ups for mixed people in Toronto, ranging from small dinners to blood drives in order to raise awareness for the rarity of bone marrow and blood type of mixed people. “That is an issue that affects mixed people disproportionately,” Gina says, “if

you're a mixed person who needs a bone marrow donor to survive you're so unlikely to find one," since a person is more likely to find a donor within their ethnic group.

Before starting the podcast, Marie's only experience with talking into a mic was saying the welcoming words at her events. She admits her feelings of being disconnected from the community she built at times because of her roots in hosting in-person events but understands she needs to work through these emotions because showcasing stories and listening to one-on-one conversations is the foundation of their community - and this pandemic will not be allowing in-person meet-ups for a while.

Shalisa-Marie often posts questions on Instagram, initiating conversation with her audience and provoking meaningful (and sometimes spicy) responses. Every response she gets makes her infinitely excited. Though Shalisa-Marie can rattle off the names of prominent supporters by heart, Kerlita Johnson is one supporter who stands out. "She's a strong, independent, confident, Black woman who transferred those beliefs and affirmations to myself," Shalisa-Marie says. Kerlita has even convinced her to quit her part-time job at Zara to dive into Hmble Productions.

It is the relationships with people who host our podcasts that remind us of the world out there. That host-viewer relationship pushes us beyond what we can see on our own, towards connection even in the most isolating of times.

Jessica Da Silva
April 2021