

By Olivia Stren
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REBEL REBEL

George Stroumboulopoulos is a loner who loves attention, an anti-authoritarian mama's boy and a motorcycle-riding hedonist who doesn't drink, smoke or sleep.

His job?
Save the CBC

“What the hell?” It’s the first question George Stroumboulopoulos asks Belinda Stronach, his first guest on *The Hour*’s third-season launch. It’s the only prime-time interview Stronach has agreed to do since the Tie Domi scandal. When Stroumboulopoulos poses the question, he leans forward, wiggling a pen in his fingers, casting his affectionate, sad-dog eyes on her. Stronach responds stiffly with some platitude about working hard in Parliament. Producers in headsets stand by, clenching their jaws, looking tense. Stroumboulopoulos pushes Stronach, but gently, tapping her on the knee with his pen: “I’m not gonna give you a free pass on this.” His charm works. She relaxes, if only briefly, treating him to a somewhat more worthwhile sound bite: “As you know, George, nobody—nobody—can break up a happy marriage.”

During the commercial break, Stroumboulopoulos bounds toward the studio audience—which today includes his mom, his friends, and his long-time girlfriend, CBC producer Jasmin Tuffaha. “Does anybody need anything? Want anything?” he asks, but is pulled away by the makeup person for a touch-up before he gets an answer. While his nose is dabbed, he stands obediently still, but with the distracted restlessness of a schoolkid getting suited up by a parent for the playground. When he’s done, he leaps back onstage to introduce some newsy bits, then transitions to a memorable piece about a guy who cleans up bloody crime scenes for a living (the smell so fetid he had to shave his beard to remove the lingering stench), then on to an interview with a movie-promoting Terry Gilliam.

Stroumboulopoulos has the intensity characteristic of the sleepless. He typically goes to bed sometime between two and five, after spending hours watching hockey, returning e-mails and listening to his iPod, and he’s in the office by nine. He also forgoes coffee (he favours Guru, an herbal energy beverage), never drinks alcohol (hasn’t had a sip for 12 years), won’t take drugs and often doesn’t get around to eating until four o’clock in the afternoon. And he’s exhausted. As proof, he points to the dark circles around his eyes, little pillows of triumph over the Monday to Friday bourgeoisie.

Like the Delta blues and punk he loves, Stroumboulopoulos is defined by extremes. He’s only tired because he’s driven by boundless energy; though his life unfolds largely in public, he claims he’s an introvert, which is like the Queen claiming she is a bohemian.

The Hour is meant to bring sex appeal to a network not known for its smoulder. The program is constructed around the magnetism of its host, and like Stroumboulopoulos, it’s dynamic, engaging, spontaneous, yet also sometimes tiring in its impatient velocity. Unlike *The National*’s warm-milk bedtime pacing, the show pulses with a Ritalin-generation rhythm, edited with split-second cuts, moving anxiously from serious interviews about torture in Zimbabwe to

banter about TomKat. Stroumboulopoulos has been cast as the poster boy for a new and aggressively with-it CBC: billboards of the black-clad ex-VJ panel every corner of town. But his talent for television lies precisely in his anti-Corp personality. What he won’t do (he won’t change his wardrobe; he won’t play the starchy anchor; he won’t take out his earrings) is winning him a meteoric career and a healthy fan base. *The Hour* now occupies the plum, post-Mansbridge time slot, aiming to compete with the biggies: Letterman, Leno, Jon Stewart and *CSI*.

Stroumboulopoulos is the quintessential Torontonians: he is what he does, and he strives, fanatically, for that conflation. And though thoroughly at ease in front of the camera, he seems to long less for the spotlight than what the spotlight affords: the romance of a ragged, vivid existence. “I don’t have a balanced life, and I don’t want one,” he says. “I need to be erratic. I need to be driven by high highs and low lows. I want emotional range in my life. I don’t want my life to be easy. You know people say, I just want a good life. I don’t fuckin’ want a good life. What is that? I want to feel things.” And he wants the whole spectrum served up as fast as possible—before the channel changes. “The most important lyric for me is Bob Dylan’s ‘He not busy being born, is busy dying’ So which guy do I want to be?”

THE FIRST TIME HE AND I MEET it’s at Queen West’s Shanghai Cowgirl. The place doesn’t technically open until 11, but Stroumboulopoulos’s publicist called ahead to have them open early for us to have breakfast (“George loves the grilled cheese there!”). But he doesn’t want to eat anything (he packed his own Guru). He’s warm and friendly, the same George everyone else meets on *The Hour*. He’s wearing the standard Strombo uniform (black American Apparel T, Diesel jeans, studded belt) and sporting a tan from his recent solo motorcycle trip from Los Angeles to Toronto.

It was on that trip, while visiting Joliet prison in Illinois (where the first scene in *The Blues Brothers* is set), that he felt his phone ringing in the pocket of his leather jacket. It was his manager, Michael Sugar, asking him if he could get to L.A. immediately to audition as host for *The One*, an ABC reality program about the making of a rock star. He raced to the Chicago airport, and by midnight he was landing at LAX. “I only had a rainsack, my motorcycle boots, my jeans and a toothbrush. I had nothing in L.A.,” he says. “It was the most whirlwind month of my career. You’re on a motorcycle, and within a month, you get a weird phone call, and you get flown to L.A. to host a prime-time American TV show.”

ABC had already screened a few hundred people for the host job. “They had gone through every-fuckin’-body,” Stroumboulopoulos says emphatically. “I was the second-to-last person on earth—there was one guy after me.” After a 15-minute interview, he was hired. He moved into the Standard hotel and went out to buy some black clothes. Meanwhile, CBC had decided to buy and simulcast *The One*, causing a stir by pushing *The National*’s time slot.

Some fallout was to be expected, given the show’s premise. *The One* followed the OC-style affairs and jealousies of a group of vaguely talented, fame-hungry 20-somethings forced to share



a house together. It attracted three million viewers a night—low numbers for American prime time—and was dropped after four episodes, but Stroumboulopoulos made for an engaging and relatable host.

After *The One*’s cancellation, he didn’t indulge in much wound-licking. Instead, Stroumboulopoulos pulled on his boots and neoprene riding mask and headed back to Toronto on his BMW R1150 GS Adventure bike (which had been shipped from Chicago at ABC’s expense). He’s owned eight motorcycles since he was 18 (he currently has three). Riding nourishes his need for solitude and the kind of escape he rarely allows himself in the music video pacing of his work life. “I just want to do what I want, that’s it,” he says, then quickly edits himself, refining his all-about-George philosophy: “Rather, it’s how do I want to feel? I want to experience the moment; I want to actually be in the moment, and that’s why I bike. I can smell everything, I can feel the temperature drop.

Mad about you: the CBC hopes Stroumboulopoulos will lure a younger, hipper audience. So far this season, *The Hour* has been averaging 160,000 viewers a night

I’m six years old and I’m loving it and I don’t know why.” By 10, he had started sporting all-black outfits (his mother called him Johnny Cash), and he panelled his room with posters of metal bands and devils and fire and horns. His mom would rip the posters off the wall while he was at school. “My family hoped it was just a phase, but it became my career,” he says, laughing.

“But my mom was scared that I would go down the wrong road, like lots of people in our neighbourhood did. Every day before I left

It’s beautiful.”

Stroumboulopoulos’s stamina and self-reliance comes from his mother. Mary Ivanyshan is a petite Ukrainian woman with a voice soft as a hankie and a gentle expression that she passed on to her son. His father, Mark, a Greek from Cairo, worked at a Ford factory in Oakville. George’s parents were married when they were 19, and he was born in Toronto in 1972. Before George was six, his family moved about five times in and around the Jane and Wilson area. One morning, while seven-year-old George was eating a bowl of cereal, he saw his dad, dressed in a suit, walk out the door. He never came back. “I think he said, ‘I’ll see you later,’ just as he said every morning,” Stroumboulopoulos recalls softly. “I don’t know what he does now. I’m sure my dad is a good guy. He was young.” There’s an exaggerated casualness in his delivery.

Ivanyshan went back to school to become a nurse. She moved to Malton with George and his little sister, Natasha, where she rented out rooms in her house, took an early-morning paper route and an afternoon job as a waitress to support her family. Stroumboulopoulos talks often and admiringly about his mother. “Shit, if I didn’t have her, I’d be finished. I’d have no shot at this life. No shot. My mother’s bit was love, that’s what it was all about. She taught me how to love, not just people, but things, and to love life and be passionate about what you love.”

Despite his mother’s strong Christian beliefs, young George was always attracted to the dark side, preferring pitchforks and werewolves to, say, the Smurfs. When he was five, he’d force his mom to get up early so he could watch *The Hilarious House of Frightenstein*. “There were witches, there was lots of evil stuff,” he says, “but I was too afraid to watch it by myself, so I would wake her up.” When he was six, he saw an episode of *The Muppets* in which Alice Cooper guest-starred. “He played ‘Welcome to My Nightmare,’” Stroumboulopoulos remembers, and starts singing the song in a creepy whisper. “‘Welcome to my nightmare, I think you’re gonna like it...’

the house, she'd grab me and make me read this poem out loud." He recites the Edgar Guest verse breathlessly, dutifully: "I have to live with myself, so I have to be fit for myself to know; I have to sit with the setting sun, and not hate myself for the things I've done; I want as the days go by to be able to look the world straight in the eye." He says he still evokes those lines to chaperone him through every big decision.

Stroumbouloupoulos's teenage career fantasies were macabre: at his high school, Ascension of Our Lord, he dreamt of becoming a funeral director but failed chemistry, so didn't pursue it. He also entertained thoughts of becoming a graphic artist or an architect (he loved to draw—skulls, mostly), but the art teacher didn't like his attitude and wouldn't let him enroll in the class. "My friends and I weren't the most likely to succeed. We weren't on the teams, we weren't part of the academic clubs, we weren't extracurricular."

Stroumbouloupoulos's extended family—his grandmother, his aunt and his two uncles—were a source of his sense of safety and stability. He considers his uncle Paul the ultimate mentor and credits him for introducing him to culture, music and politics at a young age. On Sundays, Paul would take George and Natasha to the movies at the Carlton cinema. "He took us to see *Back to the Future*, but he'd also take us to see *Letter to Brezhnev*."

When most kids were coming home to watch *Three's Company*, Stroumbouloupoulos ran home to listen to his favourite radio shows: *The Steve Anthony Show* and the *6 O'Clock Rock Report* with Bob Mackowycz Sr. and John Derringer. "They were smart, risky, controversial. They threw out bands for being assholes—and I thought that was so cool." But he never really considered a career in radio; it seemed impossible. "I didn't ever think about going into radio. I didn't even know you could do it for a living. For me, being on the radio was like being in the movies—you don't get that. Only very few get that." When he realized one day, flipping through a course catalogue, that reality made a place for radio broadcast-

with an appliqué of a skull on the chest. It's the same top he was wearing earlier in the day when he interviewed Adrienne Clarkson for *The Hour*. Bob Mackowycz Jr., his co-host on *The Strombo Show*—also his best friend and a producer for *The Hour*—is pivoting around on a desk chair like Dr. Johnny Fever, swinging his formidable head of curly hair in time to the music. Stroumbouloupoulos grabs my hand, singing into it as if it were a mike. They turn on a Sex Pistols tune and head into the studio. Stroumbouloupoulos and another colleague start arguing about whether the Pistols' lead singer was a Nazi (Stroumbouloupoulos says no, he was just a prick), then he runs toward the producer's booth, lifts up his shirt and presses his chest against the glass.

The Strombo Show has been on the air for over a year. He does it for neither the money nor the profile (it offers very little of either) but because he wants to stay connected to what he considers his first love (radio) and because he wants to stay faithful to what he truly is (a radio guy who happens to be on television). "Radio is the beautiful art, to me," he says. "Nothing is more interactive in all of media than 'Hi, Steve, you're on the air.' You're talking to somebody. That's it."

Stroumbouloupoulos's first radio gig, right after he graduated from Humber in 1993, was volunteering at sports station The Fan. But he did it for only one night, then took off to pursue an internship in Kelowna, B.C. He borrowed his mother's car and drove out west to host a radio show called *High Voltage*; he made money by dressing up as a green lizard, the station's mascot. "I made \$10 an hour and I thought, Fuck it, I'm rich. *I'm rich!*" Later that year, he was brought back to Toronto by The Fan, where he worked as an operator, playing commercials and signalling to the hosts behind the glass. He lived in his mother's basement, then moved downtown and crashed at friends' apartments. He stayed at The Fan for four years, often working 16-hour days. He'd take evening shifts on Friday nights as an operator, the overnight shift as a host, then the

rock-and-roll romance in hunger. "I still feel like that guy just starting, that guy opping the board. I'm passionate the same way, and I'm as hungry as I was back then. It's exhausting," he says, rubbing his face. He is also lit by a punk-rock loyalty to his beginnings. Mackowycz, who knows Stroumbouloupoulos better than anybody else, explains him over herbal tea. "People say to me, I'd love to do what George does, and I say, Are you willing to sleep on the floor of a radio station at 6 a.m. on Saturday mornings? George is talented, but talent's not that rare. George is a workhorse. He's a boxer. He won't stop."

The program director at The Fan offered Stroumbouloupoulos advice that he continues to follow faithfully: a) never talk down to your audience, and b) fuck 'em if they don't get it. He took this ethos to his job at the radio station The Edge, where he hosted the much-

interviewers. At the end of the interview, an impressed Bono told him, privately, "George, I am a fan." His talent, partly, is in his comfort with the camera. "I don't get nervous," he says, "I just think of the camera as a microphone. And I try to talk to the person who's having the worst day of their life and I'm also trying to talk to the person whose life is good. I think about my friend who I know is exhausted and I visualize them at home on the couch or in the kitchen cooking."

The head of Newsworld, Heaton Dyer, and the current exec producer of *The Hour*, Jennifer Dettman, were also fans, and in the summer of 2004 Stroumbouloupoulos got a call to host a show. It was the third time CBC had tried to hire him. When they proposed a time slot (the concept of *The Hour* had yet to be divined), eight o'clock Monday to Thursday, he said no. He thought

Newsworld would be like a straitjacket. But the network was not letting go. "I felt like I was dating again," says Dettman. "I came into the office and I thought, Did he call? Did he call? I hope he called." She was the one who finally wooed him into taking the job. "In my head I was already building the show around him," she says. "We wanted someone who had his own voice. We wanted someone with definite opinions about things, who could say 'This is how I see the world,' but do it in a way that engages people, not in a finger-wagging, prescriptive way. He has a connection with the public through the camera that I've never seen before. When I'm sitting at home and watching the show, I feel like he's talking directly to me. He completely focuses in."

"My manager called and said Newsworld is not taking your no," says Stroumbouloupoulos. "And I laughed and thought, They don't have to take my no, it's a no. I'm not going." But this time, CBC promised he could help choose his staff, keep his black T-shirts and build the show he wanted. In January 2005, he hosted the premiere episode of *The Hour*.



Serious George: Stroumbouloupoulos and classmates on a high school trip to England and (opposite) as a Grade 8 student

George has contempt for phoniness. And that's why he likes L.A. There, at least, dishonesty isn't masquerading as truth

ing, he applied to Humber College. "If I didn't get in, I didn't give a shit," he says, mythologizing the type-B image of himself that belies his drive.

When he got in, he treated his studies with impatience. "I don't like wasting time. The idea of 'I'll try this, and I'll try this...' Fuck that. I treated Humber like a job. I hate school. I'm not one of those guys who says school is the best time of your life. No it isn't. You know who says that? People who made the wrong decisions and screwed up the rest of their lives. The best part of your life is the part that you're living right now. Unless you fucked it up."

IT'S ABOUT 8:45 ON A SUNDAY evening at CFRB, and George Stroumbouloupoulos is air-guitaring to T. Rex's "Twentieth Century Man." His weekly radio program, *The Strombo Show*, is starting in 15 minutes and the room is charged with the hormonal energy of a fragrant, do-not-enter teenage boy's bedroom. He's wearing a long-sleeve waffle T in a drowsy slate blue (among the most vibrant colours in his wardrobe)

early-morning shift as an update reader. On his days off, he'd head into the office with a stack of CDs, steal playlists and fake a show in the studio. He often slept on the floor of the studio, and kept a part-time job as a movie theatre usher at the Woodbine Centre.

In his early 20s, he hosted an overnight show called *Game*—an unbridled free-for-all about sports—with Mackowycz. And the two, recognizing in each other the same anxious ambition, made a sort of spit-in-the-hand pact that they'd always try to work together. "That show spoiled me," Stroumbouloupoulos says. "It was raw and it gave me a taste of what it felt like to be myself." He remembers the dramatic struggle of those early days fondly—there's a



loved all-request breakfast show and, later, the afternoon music show *Live in Toronto*. MuchMusic was taken by his style: he had enough charm to immediately engage his subject, but never dominated an interview; he was funny, had instinctive comic timing, but avoided the wincingly chauvinistic shock-jock zingers; and he had a genuine obsession for new music. But Stroumbouloupoulos had no desire to be a VJ. "I didn't want to play 'N Sync videos. Like, I'd rather die. I don't want to be the guy who introduced you to the worst band ever." But Much tempted him with the prospect of hosting *The NewMusic*, a show that enjoyed not only a 27-year lifespan, but also boasted a history of such big-name hosts as J. D. Roberts, Jeanne Beker and Daniel Richler.

During his time as a VJ, hosting *The NewMusic*, as well as *The Punk Show*, *Loud* and *MuchNews*, Stroumbouloupoulos earned plaudits for his encyclopedic knowledge of music and his easy, quick-witted style. When he interviewed U2, for instance, during their Elevation tour in May 2001, he was fast on his feet, never consulting a script or notes, avoiding the fawning of so many celebrity

IT'S A BRILLIANT FALL MORNING, warm sunshine dripping through orange leaves, and Stroumbouloupoulos is politely waiting for me on the front stoop of his house, off Queen West. His small front garden is well tended (his mother often pops over to prune), and there's a small stone statue of a sleeping cat in the bushes, the sort you'd expect to see in an English garden (his mother left it there for him one day).

Inside, there are zero feminine touches. The photographs that line the taupe walls (there's one of Joliet prison he took on his recent trip) are black and white. He's planning on painting his bedroom black (even the ceilings). The kitchen, almost completely bare, looks scarcely visited—except by his cats, who match the decor. Snake is a white female who followed him home one day ("She could spot a sucker," he says, smiling), and Minnow is a portly black creature with the girth of a small pig and the docked tail of a cocker spaniel (it had to be amputated because he was biting at it compulsively).

Stroumbouloupoulos doesn't have his usual sizzle today. He's had a bad morning: he thinks he may have lost five gigs of music from his iPod, which for him qualifies as a catastrophe. "I may seem relaxed right now, but I'm not," he says. Truth is, he doesn't seem relaxed at all, but never really does. In fact, at the moment, he seems quietly frantic. He brightens briefly when he introduces me to his favourite "girlfriend"—his BMW bike.

His quick tour of the living room has the slightly crazed tempo of his TV show, as if he needs to go to commercial in 15 seconds: an old sepia-toned globe (he loves maps), handsome cloth-bound



world. It's just your moment, but you're sharing it with fuckin' everybody."

Stroumbouloupoulos often refers to something baseball pitcher Satchel Paige said: "Don't look back: something might be gaining on you." "He loves that expression," says Mackowycz. "Passing time is George's enemy. He wants to be awake for all of it. And he kind of is."

His greed for awareness might explain his decision, 12 years ago, to stop drinking. "There were a lot of drug and alcohol problems in my group of friends. And there was some tragedy in the circle," he says quietly. "It was a decision to stop drinking, not because I did too much of it. I'm an all-or-nothing kind of guy, so I drew a line in the sand. When you come out of a certain neighbourhood, you don't always have opportunities, so when you get one, don't disrespect it by being a dick."

Charm offensive:
Stroumbouloupoulos
interviews Deepak
Chopra on *The Hour*

copies of the Bible, a piano (he's been playing since he was 13 and is impressively talented), a Bob Dylan songbook, framed pictures of him dogsledding in the Arctic, a gilded bust of Elvis (a gag gift from a friend), framed photographs of the Clash live in Boston, and the pièce de résistance—a neat pile of stones that hail from the three possible gravesites of legendary blues man Robert Johnson. He collected them on two trips to Mississippi.

"If you want to know George," Mackowycz insists, "you have to listen to Robert Johnson. It's all about Johnson's song 'Hellhound on My Trail.' George connects to the blues world because of its passion—it's up, it's down, it's hard, it's easy, and the cards are stacked against you and you do your best. Those guys back then, they had nothing, and George didn't come from a lot. And when Robert Johnson plays the guitar, many people can play that lick, but Johnson played it right. That's why I believe George loves blues and punk—you can't fake it. It's all about authenticity."

Stroumbouloupoulos, indeed, has a Holden Caulfieldian contempt for phoniness. He claims, curiously, that his intolerance for fakery is why he is fond of L.A. There, at least, dishonesty isn't masquerading as truth. "Every place has fake people," he says. "Everybody's bullshitting everybody everywhere. In L.A., people just build bigger walls. And everybody knows that the house with the biggest wall is the one you want to break into—because they're hiding the best shit." The question that hangs in the air: how big are the walls surrounding someone whose persona is built around having none?

People reveal themselves through their fears. What horrifies Stroumbouloupoulos is the notion of a life half-lived. "When you're growing up, you have this idea that you get a job, you have a family, your weekends are yours. Are you kidding me? I'm not living my life for Saturday morning. I'm not living my life for 'What am I doing after work?' I'm living my life for 2:30 in the afternoon in the office, and I want to love that. I don't want to be that weekend guy." And he doesn't miss the frills—family, children, sleep—of the other kind of life. He doesn't want kids, at least not yet. "I'm not one of those spread-the-seed guys," he says.

It's draining to be alert to life all the time, and it can be alienating, too. His fierce individualism not only creates a certain loneliness, but also a need for it. He thinks of himself as an outgoing introvert. "I love to be alone," he says, repeating it, as if savouring just the thought of it, "I love to be alone." His goal, it seems, is to secure a sense of purpose without compromising his autonomy. "I like to be a part of something. That's why I love to go to monstrous rock 'n' roll shows. Going to see U2 play in an arena is the best thing in the

IT'S TWO AND A HALF WEEKS INTO THE NEW SEASON, and Stroumbouloupoulos is talking to the studio audience. "Here's Kevin; he's gonna give you some bullshit about a fire drill," he says. Then he tells them about an interview he just did with The Killers ("It was the worst interview ever," he says in a confessional whisper. "It was pain, man") and keeps chatting until about one second to air time, the foot-tapping audience members more nervous than the host. Margaret Trudeau is the first guest and, during a commercial break, Stroumbouloupoulos runs toward the studio door to welcome her and escort her onto the stage. He chats about her work in Africa and about her battles with bipolar disorder like he's talking to his best friend's mom. She speaks warmly and openly to him about her bouts of depression after Pierre's death. It's like she's catching up with an old acquaintance.

When the show wraps, he poses flirtatiously for pictures with a few smitten 20-something women, signs autographs and heads to his office to research tomorrow's show.

The back wall of his office is painted black (his choice), and his desk is piled with books, a big Styrofoam box (crusty graveyard to some lunch past) and DVDs (including his favourite, the box set of *The Muppets*). He sinks into his couch, lets out a gravelly sigh, then checks his BlackBerry: he has to do a phone interview with a Vancouver radio station in five minutes. When the call comes in, he leans back in his chair, fields questions as he stares at the ceiling and balances a loonie on his forehead, crossing then re-crossing his legs, covering the receiver to stifle what sounds like a tubercular cough. "That was pretty good," he says of the interview. "The trick is to be totally honest. But to hold back. A lot."

When we talk about future opportunities or fantasies, what he will do if *The Hour* doesn't last, he's not sure: he says he might like to work in London, because there you have to be smart to be on the air. Or, he says with a disarming lack of humour, he could go back to work as an usher in a movie theatre. But the future compromises Stroumbouloupoulos's commitment to the present, so he doesn't waste much time on it. Then he thinks of the perfect plan: "I'd like to fly to Europe with my motorcycle and just ride. Border to border, to border, to border." Chances are, he'd try not to look back; something might be gaining on him.

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