

Rich Hall walks into a bar wearing a cowboy hat and a quizzical look. "If you really want to hear about it, the first thing you'll want to know is where I was born and what my lousy childhood was like," he says in his gravelly voice, the same growl that inspired Matt Groening's cranky barman Moe Szyslak on *The Simpsons*. "I got kicked out of Pencey Prep, this school in Pennsylvania with the ads showing hot-shot guys on horses jumping fences. You probably heard of it."

I have, as it happens, since Hall has just paraphrased the opening of *Catcher in the Rye*. "OK, so there's my 17 years of methamphetamine abuse, nine rehabs, four marriages, 16 kids and short stint with the Los Angeles Lakers," he tries, which isn't true either. The comedian, heading to Australia next month for the Melbourne International Comedy Festival, can't help it: Hall, 61, has carved an award-winning comedy career out of making things up.

We've met in east London, the other side of town from where the North Carolina-raised Hall lives (since 2004) with his English wife, Karen, and 10-year-old daughter, Dixie-Rae, to chat about *3.10 to Humour*, the stand-up show he is bringing to Australia this month. He's arrived 45 minutes late, unable to phone since he doesn't own a mobile, all apologies and twinkley-eyed humour. The curmudgeon stuff is an act.

An act that has won him such gongs as the Perrier at the Edinburgh Fringe and the Barry at the Melbourne Comedy Festival, and seen him in demand since he first stepped on to the stage of Comic Strip Live in New York in the 1970s, armed with a megaphone, a hoop of fire and a candle shaped like a giant toad. His observational humour is acerbic, frequently absurdist and evolves on the fly: random audience members become subjects of country-and-western songs. Topical issues — gun control, the US election race, Bob Dylan's late career lameness — are skewered on to walls.

Time and again Hall's expertly crafted tirades and cantankerous delivery have proved comedy gold, whether he's guesting on popular BBC panel quiz shows, headlining festivals in the guise of his country-music-singing, ex-con uncle Otis Lee Crenshaw (a character he retired five years ago) or playing a pub on one of Scotland's windswept Orkney Islands, which he did last week.

"I just wanted to go to the Orkneys so I put a date in the [3.10 To Humour] tour. It's barren and kinda beautiful in a bleak way and the Orkadian people are kind of bleak too, but they loved it. Those are the best gigs," he says when I ask. "The ones where you surprise yourself with how funny you are."

The younger of two brothers born to a welder and a shop assistant at JC Penneys, Hall grew up in the American south watching comedians such as Jack Benny and Jackie Gleason on TV, reading JD Salinger's teenage opus ("That book had a profound effect on anyone of a certain age"), shrugging off religious studies and wanting to be a journalist. After two years at Western Carolina University ("majoring in Lynyrd Skynyrd"), he went to Washington to study literature and got a job on a newspaper in Seattle, writing fluff pieces (which he hated) and opinion columns (which he loved).

Stand-up comedy was taking off, and Hall wanted in: "Steve Martin was filling stadiums. George Carlin and Richard Pryor were on *Saturday Night Live*. It seemed like the thing to do but I didn't know how to do it. So I became a street performer, a pretend movie director with a megaphone, claiming I was making a cheap Japanese monster film and needed crowd scenes."

He puts a fist to his mouth, sideways, and tips his head back. "Whaddya have to do to get a

drink around here?" he booms as everybody in the bar does a double take. "Putting people in uncomfortable situations and yelling at them from a foot away with a megaphone is always funny," he says with a shrug.

These elaborate outdoor routines let Hall exercise his off-the-cuff wit and refine his heckler handling; he was so good he was even recruited as support act for an art-punk band named Talking Heads.

"Whenever I go down Rundle Mall in Adelaide I'm reminded of how good a street performer I was," he says. "They [living statues] stand there painted all day with their dad in the crowd, weeping, saying 'Don't pretend it's not you, that's paint from my garage, you're killing your mother ...' I mean really. What is the least amount of performance you can possibly do?"

Anyway, then came New York and Comic Strip Live, where comedians such as Larry Miller and Jerry Seinfeld ruled the roost.

Open spots led to regular slots, and then to writing material for the David Letterman show (for which he won two Emmys). There were regular appearances on American networks including in the satirical comedy series *Not Necessarily the News*, where he popularised the neologism "sniglet" to describe newly created words, and indeed *Saturday Night Live*, for which he also wrote.

By the late 90s he'd become a popular fixture at comedy venues and festivals everywhere from Belfast to Boston, Manchester to Melbourne ("I became a street performer and eventually a comic so I could go places," he told *The Seattle Times* in 1994). He still breaks up his show with musical interludes.

Also, he still lampoons each town and country he visits, saving his harshest witticisms for his homeland. That he does so with a poker face only makes him all the funnier.

"In comedy there has to be a target, and the deadpan schtick helps me articulate that rage," says Hall, who first played Australia in 1998 and has returned every other year since, invariably to sold-out houses.

"It's an exaggeration. It's theatre," he says.

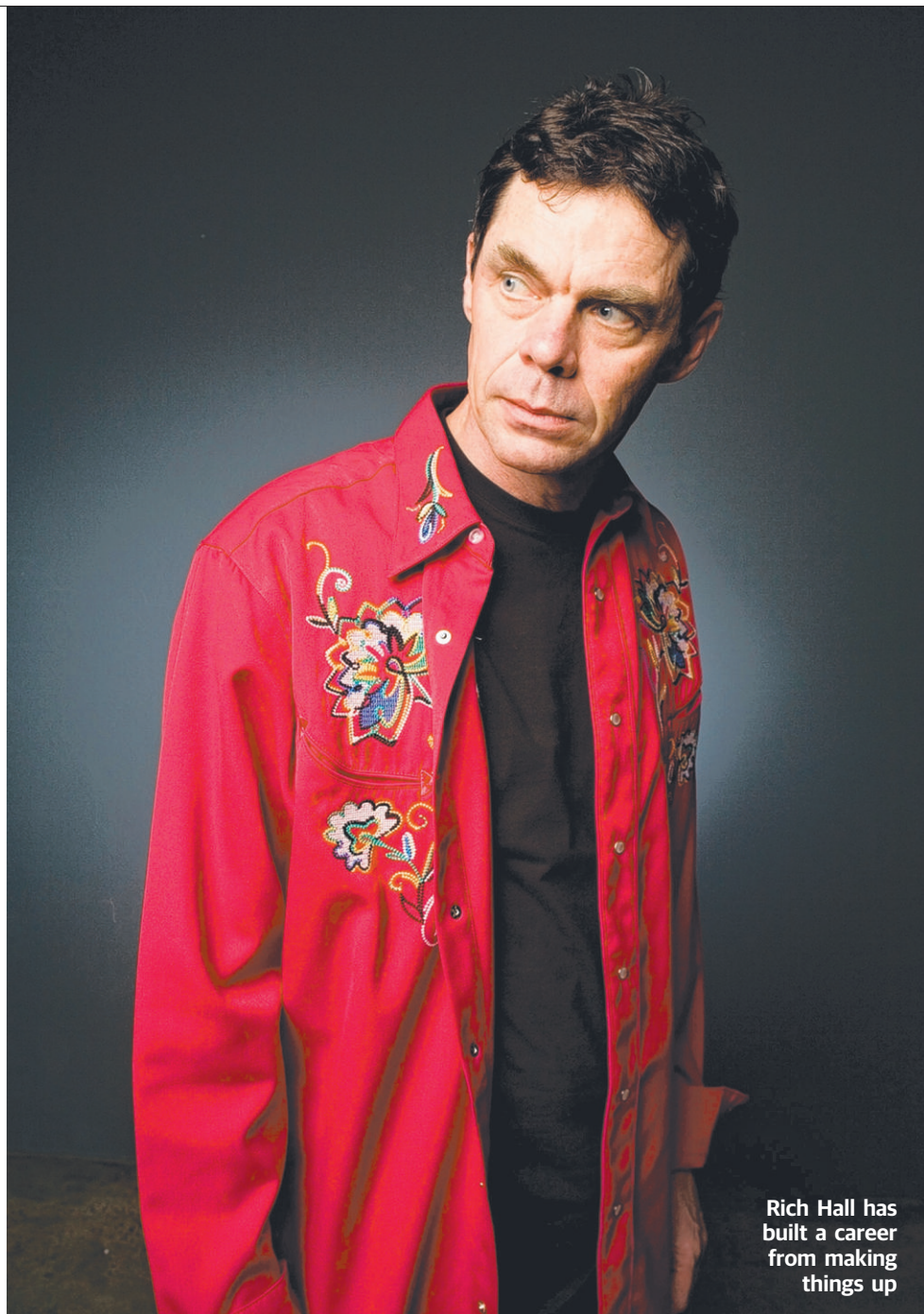
He has written several plays, semi-ironic pieces that tell of right-wing talk show hosts and oil-divining religious cults (2006's *Levelland*) and the owners and residents of a Montana hotel about to be razed to make a freeway (2007's *Best Western*).

Both were consecutively staged at the Edinburgh Fringe Festival. Neither was financially viable.

"You'd be better off taking your money, stapling it to the outside of your jacket and going for a walk through the dodgiest part of town." He puffs on his vaporiser. "I wanted to write a western drama 'cause I love Sam Shepard and all that stuff. I got it right in 2009 with *Campfire Stories*, a play I made with [North American comedian] Mike Lomack, about trout fishing."

Which somehow brings us to that famed trout farmer, Roger Daltrey of the Who, and the small ranch cum writing retreat Hall owns in

Continued on Page 4



Rich Hall has built a career from making things up

COMIC KING OF DEADPAN

Master curmudgeon Rich Hall, soon to perform at Melbourne's International Comedy Festival, prefers to articulate his anarchic rage with a straight face, writes **Jane Cornwell**

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