

# THE COSTCO CONNECTION

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A lifestyle magazine for Costco members

Rick Mercer

## WHAT MAKES RICK TICK?

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of Rick Mercer **18**

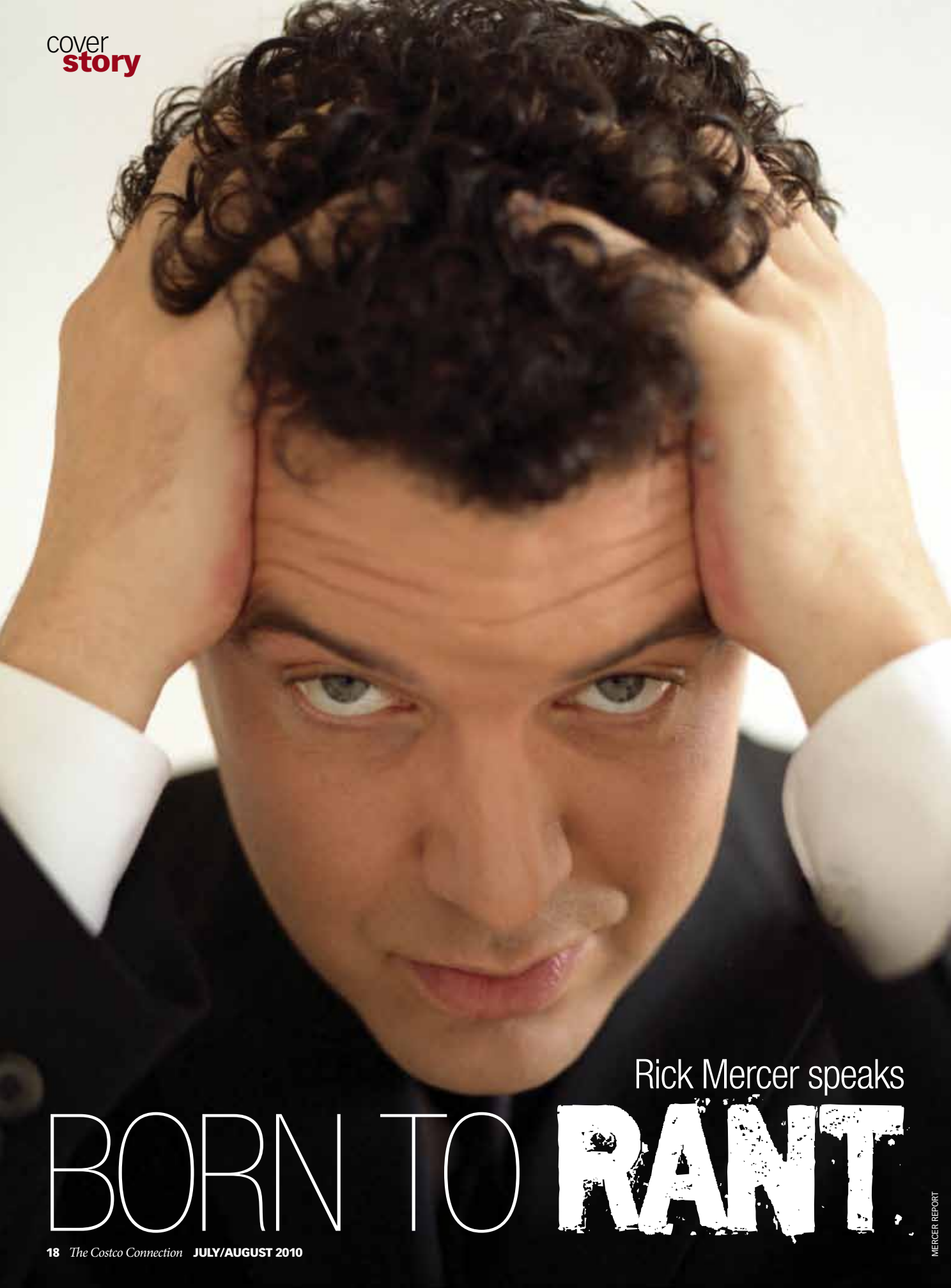
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Rick Mercer speaks

# BORN TO RANT

“Being self-deprecating is certainly an admirable trait—and Canadians have that.”

by Mark Cardwell

A LONG TIME AGO, in a province far, far away, a young Newfoundland comic tried to defend his island's honour during the political battle over the Meech Lake Accord by writing and performing a one-man satirical show that poked fun at Canada and Canadians.

“I was angry about some of the stuff that was being said about Newfoundland and Newfoundlanders,” Rick Mercer recalls about *Show Me the Button, I'll Push It (Or, Charles Lynch Must Die)*, which he first performed at the National Arts Centre in Ottawa in 1990 at the age of 21. “Looking back, it was a pretty rough show. I basically went on stage and ranted for an hour—but trying to be funny, of course.”

At least one person in the audience saw a comic diamond in the rough: George Anthony, a former entertainment editor for *The Toronto Sun* and head of arts, variety and entertainment for the Canadian Broadcasting Corporation (CBC). After taking Mercer's show on a successful cross-country tour—and touring again in 1992 with a second show called *I've Killed Before, I'll Kill Again*—Anthony hired Mercer to co-create and co-star in a zany new CBC comedy called *This Hour Has 22 Minutes*. It was on this wildly successful show that he honed his political rants into a trademark shtick that has fuelled his rocket ride to Canadian television stardom. “Depending on how you look at things,” Mercer writes in *Rick Mercer Report: The Paperback Book*, a best-selling collection of rants from his current hit CBC show, *The Rick Mercer Report (RMR)*, “George Anthony gets the credit or the blame.”

It's likely the former for the roughly 2 million Canadians of all ages who tune in to *RMR* each week—and the latter for the politicians and pundits Mercer sometimes pummels from his podium. Officially billed as an arts and entertainment program, the half-hour show mostly revolves around the sharp-witted, self-deprecating Newfoundlander's antics as he travels across the country to do everything from conducting tongue-in-cheek interviews to skinny-dipping with famous Canadians to trying high-risk activities, such as ice climbing or experiencing zero gravity (“The best thing I've done,” Mercer says), that often leave him banged up and bleeding, much to the delight of his viewing audience—and Mercer himself. “It's a great gig,” adds the 40-year-old Costco member in a recent phone interview from his home in Toronto. “I get to travel around and have fun while making a fool of myself. It doesn't get any better than that.”

### Civic duties

Then there are the rants. Usually written by Mercer on Thursday nights in his office at CBC headquarters in downtown Toronto, where *RMR* is

taped in front of a live studio audience most Friday evenings between September and March, they are his satirical takes on the most telling political events that he has read about in the papers that week. “It's something I've done consistently throughout my career,” Mercer says about the tightly choreographed, two-minute tirades that are shot outdoors year-round by a cameraman who walks backwards as fast as Mercer does forward, a process that is often interrupted by slips, falls, sirens—even street people in alleys—requiring up to 40 takes. “It comes from my love and passion for politics.”

As political awareness and caustic wit go, he certainly comes by both honestly.

Born and raised in Middle Cove, a town he says is “now almost a suburb of St. John's,” Mercer grew up in a tightly knit family “in a house with a little barn and a goat and a horse in back” and among friends who loved nothing more than talking politics and dissing politicians. “Some families avoided talking politics—not the Mercers,” he says.

Notably, his first job, at age 13, was at a restaurant, Shea's Hamburger Hell, and at the corner store next door, Shea's Rip Off, which were both owned by his godfather, Hughie Shea, a close family friend and local iconoclast who sat in the provincial legislature as a Liberal, a Conservative and an independent, depending on the term. “I met a lot of colourful characters working there [and] got some great material,” remembers Mercer. “I also discovered that I wasn't very good at peeling potatoes—and realized that I didn't want to peel potatoes.”

### Roots of fame

Elected student council president in high school, Mercer also discovered a passion for the stage. The first creative piece Mercer wrote, a one-act play called *The 20-Minute Psychiatric Workout*, won Newfoundland's high school drama festival. Then he and three fellow students—Christine “Tiny” Taylor, Andrew Younghusband and Ashley Billard, all of whom went on to enjoy careers on stage or on TV—formed a theatre company called Cory and Wade's Playhouse (“There was no Wade, no Cory,” says Mercer, “but it sounded cool in grade 10.”) and put on original performances in theatres around St. John's.

### The Costco Connection

*Rick Mercer Report: The Paperback Book* (Anchor Books, 2008) is a collection of some of Mercer's rants from the first five years of his television show. In those rants he has his say about politicians, elections, Americans and more. He even discusses his native province, Newfoundland, as in the excerpt above right.

## Memorial Day in Newfoundland, July 1, 2005

THANKS TO ONE of those great Newfoundland-in-Confederation ironies, Canada Day is an official day of mourning in Newfoundland. You see, Canada just happens to celebrate its birthday on the anniversary of the bloodiest day in Newfoundland history.

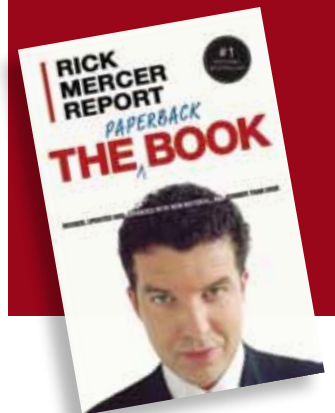
On July 1, 1916, the Newfoundland Regiment was wiped out on the battlefield of Beaumont-Hamel, France, during the Battle of the Somme. The story of the Newfoundland Regiment in World War I is a dramatic one, long and filled with heroic victories. It came to an end on this day in 1916.

It was on this day that 801 fighting Newfoundlanders left the trenches and tried to smash through the German lines. Only 69 returned to answer roll call. An entire generation was wiped out in minutes. Today is the day we remember them.

I was at the War Memorial in St. John's this morning at 11:00 a.m. and watched the wreath-laying ceremony. It was a beautiful day; there was a big crowd, including lots of young people, in the audience.

It makes for a bit of a muddled holiday. On the day we are supposed to be celebrating the flag, the flags are flying at half mast.

Everything is different in Newfoundland.—Rick Mercer



# RICK RAVES ABOUT HIS ADVENTURES

Once he got his driver's licence, Mercer was bitten by what he calls "the circus bug" and became the wheel man for a travelling entertainer who put on one-man shows in communities around the province. He eventually ended up *in* the show, dressed as a robot that weaved through the crowd on roller skates. "It was not a speaking part," deadpans Mercer. Less funny is the fact he failed to finish the final math credit he needed to get his high school diploma—a lifelong regret that pushed him to recently contact the Newfoundland education ministry to learn if and how he can do it.

Back in St. John's, Mercer met CBC radio producer Alison Gzowski, daughter of the late and legendary Canadian radio host Peter Gzowski, at a restaurant where he was working as a dishwasher. He managed to sell her on his idea of doing short satiric commentaries about politics on the radio. The rant was born, and soon after Mercer was on his way to that show in Ottawa. "That was my big break, and I was young and stunned enough to say 'I'll do it!'" Mercer tells *The Connection*.

## Taking TV by storm

In addition to "dumb luck and obviously some natural talent," he credits his success to Canadians' ability to laugh at themselves. "Being self-deprecating is certainly an admirable trait—and Canadians have that," he adds. "It's certainly worked out well for me. I somehow made it through the jigs and the reels."

In particular, he is thankful for the eight years he spent with *This Hour Has 22 Minutes*, whose name was a nod to both the groundbreaking CBC news show of the 1950s—*This Hour Has Seven Days*—and the 22 minutes of content in a modern half-hour show. "It obviously created my career," says Mercer. "And working with [fellow East Coast comics Cathy Jones, Mary Walsh and Greg Thomey] was great fun." Though he loved doing his rants, which he terms "my own creative place in every episode," and which became the basis for his first book, *Streeters*, which made it onto *The Globe and Mail's* national best-seller list in 1998, Mercer didn't like having to use a fictional name, J.B. Dickson, on the show's popular news desk segment. "That always bugged me," he says. "I thought, 'This is show business, and the only thing you've got is your name.'"

Eager to create and produce his own shows together with his life and business partner, Gerald Lunz, who produced Mercer's first one-man show in Ottawa—and everything after that—Mercer came up with a novel idea while on a shoot for *22 Minutes* in Washington, D.C. "[The crew] was standing around waiting and a man came up and asked what we doing," recalled Mercer. "I bullshitted him and said we were there with the Canadian president—which is hardly an original joke for Canadians, since we've all laughed about Americans show-



PHOTO CREDIT

Mercer experiences zero gravity.



MERCER REPORT

Bungee jumping with activist Rick Hansen.



MERCER REPORT

Prime Minister Stephen Harper reads Mercer a bedtime story.

ing up at the border in July with skis on their cars. But the guy started going on about how he knew everything about our president and what a great guy he was. And it got me thinking, 'Hey, this could be a show.'"

And it soon was. Begun as a regular segment on *22 Minutes*, the aptly titled "Talking to Americans" was expanded by Mercer into an hour-long special in 2000. It drew 2.7 mil-

lion viewers, making it the highest-rated comedy special in CBC history. It also earned Mercer major media attention in the U.S., where eyebrows were raised about such stunts as his getting a state governor to back supposed Canadian legislation to go to a 24-hour day instead of only 20. "Americans weren't supposed to see the show," Mercer quips in mock horror. "But they were very good about it. I never got a single vitriolic call or e-mail. I only tend to get flack from young political assistants here in Canada, who get mad when I poke fun at their masters."

After writing and starring in *Made in Canada*, a satirical sitcom about Canada's film and television industry that ran for 65 episodes and was nominated for every major award for best writing in a comedy series, Mercer launched *Rick Mercer's Monday Report* in 2004. Moved to Tuesday nights and redubbed *The Rick Mercer Report* three years later, it was, and remains, the highest-rated comedy show on CBC. The show attracts viewers from all demographics. "We are very much a family show," Mercer says about RMR, which is managed by Lunz and owned by the couple's production company, Island Edge. He adds that, despite winning a prestigious Rose d'Or, the TV industry's most prestigious award, for best comedy, the show's format defies comedy convention. Says Mercer, "People in the industry just don't get it."

More certain, he adds, is the reason for the success of his rants, which have earned Mercer comparisons to American late-night talk-show hosts such as Jon Stewart. "We play the role of editorial cartoonists in newspapers," he explains. "There are so many sources now that people can get news from today that I think they like the idea of going into the office the next morning and saying, 'What did Mercer have to say last night?'" He adds that his rants have mellowed over the years, which may help to explain his show's G-rating attraction. But they still connect with people. "The rants have changed, as I have," he says. "I was angrier as a young man and very ideological, [but] I see things more grey now."

As for the many awards he has received over the years—including six honorary doctorates as of this summer, an honorary high school diploma, 20 Gemini Awards and a Governor General's Performing Arts Award—Mercer most cherishes the first Gemini he won with the cast of *22 Minutes*. "It was the most exciting night of my life," he says. "I thought, 'Yeah! Now I've got a job for the next few years.' And, 'Hey, if there's a war, I won't have to fight. I've got talent to entertain the troops—and now I've got this trophy to prove it.'" [E]

Quebec City-based freelance journalist Mark Cardwell isn't as witty as Rick Mercer, but he is taller.