

# Letterkenny's unconventional trail towards world domination

It started as a webseries. Now there's a tour and merchandise. How did *that* happen?

By Greg David

"Christ, I hope so." That's Jared Keeso's answer when asked if American and worldwide format sales for *Letterkenny*, his small-town creation for CraveTV, are in the works. But how did he get here — from a webseries called *Letterkenny Problems* — to a 73-episode order for *Letterkenny*, a line of merchandise, and a cross-Canada tour?

First, a quick flashback: In 2013, disillusioned by the film and television roles he was being offered, Keeso — who most recently portrayed cop Ben Chartier on Bravo's original series *19-2* for four seasons — and his friend Nathan Dales created *Letterkenny Problems*. The YouTube series documented small-town boys Wayne (Keeso) and Daryl (Dales), as they waxed poetic about dating, love, and farming in their rural community. Sprinkled with copious curse words and hilariously original, *Letterkenny Problems* garnered millions of views and worldwide attention giving Keeso a base audience and the juice to shop his idea around and get a television series made.

"When I created the webseries, the goal was a television show," Keeso, who co-writes, stars, and executive produces the series says. "I didn't monetize the videos on YouTube and I could have made a good buck that way. The goal was to get

that paycheque from a network. I needed that validation." Enter New Metric Media. Executive producer Mark Montefiore loved Keeso's unique voice (denizens utter catchphrases like "tarps off!" and "pitter patter") and strong vision for what the project would be and — most importantly — didn't want to mess with it. But where *Letterkenny Problems* starred mainly just two characters in 90-second webisodes, *Letterkenny* had to be populated with a community. Montefiore had to find someone who could help Keeso — who admits his strength is dialogue and snipes, not story arc — to expand the world and storylines for a series that didn't have the look and feel of traditional television. That included jettisoning a major part of almost every scripted Canadian television series: the writers' room.

"We started with the idea that, because there's such a strong, specific voice in this already and we don't want to muck it up, what's the quickest and easiest way to muck it up? Fill it with a writers' room," Montefiore says. "Little by little, that voice gets changed or altered or pivoted or whatever it is. On top of that, you add a director and you add more producers and this and that, and that vision that started so clearly ... we were scared that it



Letterkenny has transitioned from really small screen to small screen while retaining its original character and characters.

wouldn't be so clear anymore. It would start to be everybody's baby rather than one person's vision and one person's goal." The interview process began with Keeso meeting people to help bring season one's six episodes to life. Once the Listowel, Ont., native met Jacob Tierney, the interviews stopped. The two clicked.

"I bring experience in structure and storytelling, and the mechanics and mechanisms of making a world work," Tierney, *Letterkenny's* co-writer, director, and executive producer says. "How do you take something that was two minutes and make it 30 minutes? There are so many different ways that it could go." Keeso credits their partnership for him gaining confidence as a writer although they have had one disagreement.

"One time Tierney shouted at me in the Tim Horton's drive-thru for saying Wilco is overrated," Keeso recalls.

Two recurring characters from *Letterkenny Problems* who migrated to *Letterkenny* were Jonesy (Andrew Herr) and Reilly (Dylan Playfair), two hockey players who chirp at the Hicks ("chirp at the Hicks" means to engage in witty or not-so-witty repartee with the country-folk) headed up by Wayne and Daryl. Soon the fictional town — filmed

in Sudbury, Ont. — filled with other regulars via a squad of Skids led by Stewart (Tyler Johnston) and Roald (Evan Stern); Wayne's sister, Katy (Michelle Mylett); Wayne, Daryl, and Katy's friend Dan (K. Trevor Wilson); and bartender Gail (Lisa Codrington). Recurring characters include the *Letterkenny* hockey team's coach (Mark Forward); pastor Glen (Tierney), McMurray (Dan Petronijevic), Mrs. McMurray (Melanie Scrofano) and Gae (Sarah Gadon). Jay Baruchel, Kelly McCormack and Jess Salgueiro appear in the newest six episodes, set to air in 2018.

Keeso and Tierney took home the TV Comedy trophy for their season one script, "Super Soft Birthday," at the 21st annual WGC Screenwriting Awards in 2017. That followed three 2017 Canadian Screen Awards for Best Comedy Series, Best Writing in a Comedy Program or Series, and Best Direction in a Comedy Program or Series. But three years after season one went into production, *Letterkenny* still doesn't have a writers' room.

"We never will," Keeso says. "That sounds boring to me and I don't think I would be productive in that setting. We're fortunate in that our writers don't require much guidance. We hire them because we know they'll get it."

## Super-small screen



*Carmilla is just one of the recent success stories from the super-small screen.*

*Letterkenny's* success was unconventional at the time, but it's becoming less rare for webseries to become full-blown television or film projects. In the case of *Carmilla* and *The Beaverton*, both projects began online before making the jump to the big and small screen.

*Carmilla* began as a web-series produced by Shaftesbury, putting a modern spin on the cult classic gothic vampire novella of the same name by Joseph Sheridan Le Fanu. Producer Steph Ouakine, who was looking for a project comparable to YouTube's *The Lizzie Bennet Diaries*, approached co-creator and writer Jordan Hall. Re-envisioning Le Fanu's 1871 novella about a young woman named Laura, who is visited by a female vampire named Carmilla, and specifically targeting it for the LGBTQ community online was the original plan from Day 1.

"You do have a lot of communities who have not had their stories told and not had an opportunity to tell their stories," Hall says. "The

lower bar for entry that digital projects offers is a place for the creation of those stories to start. I don't think that there is a magic bullet; we definitely have to put pressure on the upper end of the industry to give diverse creators space and support." Starring Elise Bauman as Laura Hollis and Natasha Negovanlis as Carmilla Karnstein, *Carmilla* quickly became a beloved series, focusing on the life of a university student who has her world upended when a vampire moves into her dorm room.

For Hall — a playwright — penning a webseries wasn't as different as one would think. Both require story beats and scene outs; Hall modeled *Carmilla's* roughly two- to seven-minute storylines after a feature, using the two-hour film format to lay the groundwork for a season. Expanding the *Carmilla* world, the series evolved into a feature film in 2017 with Laura, Carmilla and their friends reuniting five years after the events of season three, providing Hall and co-writer

Alejandro Alcoba a unique challenge because of the internal battle between fan expectations and writing a compelling story.

"The problem is the relationship," Hall says. "The fans don't want them to break up, they want Laura and Carmilla to be happy together forever. And I do not in any way begrudge them that desire. But sometimes that's not good for the narrative. We'll have conversations about the level of conflict that can be allowed between the two leads. I'm almost always on the side of more conflict because the resolution means more later."

As for Jeff Detsky, he knew *The Beaverton* would make immediate sense as a television series. He'd seen his Facebook feed filling up with stories from the satirical Beaverton website. That, coupled with the site's unique voice, six million views in 2016 and over 500,000 unique views a month, made it a natural choice.

"People are very familiar with the format of a satirical news show," Detsky says. "It was kind of frustrating that we didn't have one in Canada. It just seemed like, here is a property that people are paying attention to, and it seems like a natural fit for that format. It seemed like a can't miss idea to me." But translating a website for television wasn't easy. Detsky and co-writer, co-showrunner and *TheBeaverton.com* founder Luke Gordon Field originally thought each half-hour installment would cover just six stories. Bell Media's Sarah Fowlie, director, comedy original programming, and production executive Bill Lundy urged the pair to utilize the website's rat-a-tat-tat headline delivery on the show by making it

the fast-paced, joke-driven series viewers have seen for two seasons. And having Emma Hunter and Miguel Rivas serve as anchors to *The Beaverton's* three-ring circus of correspondents in Marilla Wex, Aisha Alfa, Dave Barclay, and Laura Cilevitz was a total fluke.

"We just stumbled into that," Detsky admits. "We realized we hadn't really seen that other than [Saturday Night Live's] late-era Weekend Update. It was a way to pace up the show, and really just a way to find a character within a framework that doesn't necessarily allow for character."

The writers in the room, meanwhile, had to tweak their joke telling. Unlike the website, *The Beaverton's* jokes have to be shorter and end on a hard joke. As Detsky tells it, the website skewers the news wire while the TV show parodies broadcast news. And because of the fast pace of writing and filming season two, Detsky and Field's room had a rotating group of approximately 20 writers from different backgrounds.

"One thing that we desperately needed on this show was to have a room with diverse points of view and diverse backgrounds," Detsky says. "So having 20 writers enabled us to have a lot of very strong female writers, a lot of very strong people of colour who could bring a point of view that we didn't necessarily have in our core of four straight white dudes."

Seasons one through three of *Carmilla* can be seen on the KindaTV YouTube channel. *The Carmilla Movie* is available on Hollywood Suite.

Seasons one and two of *The Beaverton* are available on The Comedy Network's website. ■

Current scribes include Jonathan Torrens, Jesse McKeown, Lynne Kamm, Trevor Risk, and Sonja Bennett, who write one-off episodes and communicate via phone and email rather than be in a room with cue cards and white boards. No planning is done in advance with regard to story arcs going into future seasons, Keeso stresses, just the season on deck with two chunks of six episodes plus two shoulder episodes — Easter, Halloween, and St. Patrick's Day have been used to drop special installments — for 14 half-hours.

Not planning seasons in advance is ironic considering the deal signed by CraveTV, New Metric Media, and DHX Media last October. In addition to at least 40 new episodes of *Letterkenny*, the multi-year partnership includes cross-promotional support for the recently concluded *Letterkenny Live! Tour*, and a 90-minute comedy show starring Keeso, Dales, Wilson, and Forward. Montefiore describes how, by season three, fans were asking the cast to appear at nightclubs, bars, and puck drops at hockey games. He recalls one of the first meetings he had with Keeso, in Toronto's Thompson Diner, where they discussed the future of the brand, including a live tour of some sort. Fast-forward to 2017 — a partnership with Joel Baskin of The Feldman Agency — and *Letterkenny Live!* launched. Thanks to online metrics and where the show's audience is, Montefiore has plans to take *Letterkenny Live!* into the United States, Australia, Ireland, and the U.K.

Another facet of the deal includes *Letterkenny* merchandise — hockey jerseys, T-shirts, baseball caps, baseball shirts and hoodies — and a deal with Sudbury Ont.'s Stack Brewery to produce Puppies Premium Lager. Keeso says Gus 'n Bru whiskey — the tippie of choice served by Gail at *Letterkenny's* bar, MoDeans — will soon be in the offering.

In addition to the aforementioned international format sales being done by New Metric Media and DHX Media, the partnership means production of more than 40 new episodes. With three seasons currently streaming, the agreement commits to a total of at least 73 episodes of *Letterkenny* and many years of work for everyone involved. Keeso is just fine with that.

"*Letterkenny* is my dream job," he says. "I will do whatever it takes to maintain and protect it. I will make this show forever if they let me. I'm just happy to have a steady paycheck for a while. I spent my first 10 years in this business being broke off and on. I never want to be broke again."

Seasons one to three of *Letterkenny* are available on CraveTV. ■