

Abbott & Costello

Meet Jerry Seinfeld

By Roy W. Urrico

Abbott: You know, strange as it may seem, they give ballplayers peculiar names nowadays. On the St. Louis team Who's on first, What's on second, I Don't Know is on third.

Costello: That's what I want to find out. I want you to tell me the names of the fellows on the St. Louis team.

Abbott: I'm telling you. Who's on first, What's on second, I Don't Know is on third.

Costello: You know the fellow's names?

Abbott: Yes.

Costello: I mean the fellow's name on first base.

Abbott: Who.

Costello: The fellow's name on first base for St. Louis.

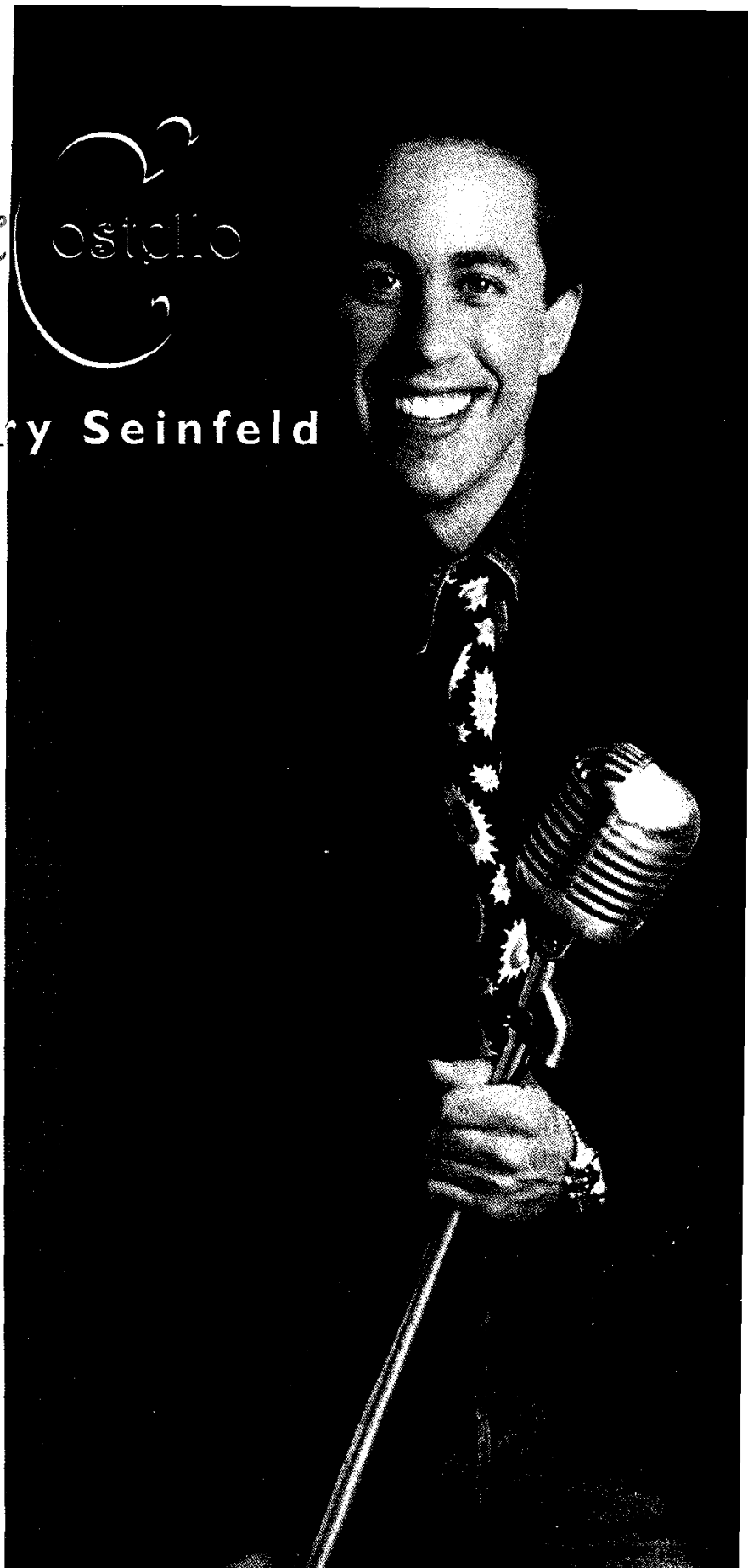
Abbott: Who

Costello: The guy on first base.

Abbott: Who...

They bridged the gap between Laurel & Hardy and Martin & Lewis as one of Hollywood's great movie comedy teams. However, for millions of baby boomers it was the 52 half-hour TV episodes, not the 36 feature films, that first introduced them to Bud Abbott and Lou Costello's classic comedy routines.

"These were the guys who made me fall in love with the idea of being funny," says comedian Jerry Seinfeld, who grew up watching Abbott and Costello on TV. Later this month, Seinfeld pays tribute to the comedy team in **Abbott and Costello Meet Jerry Seinfeld**. The special is scheduled to include clips from Abbott and Costello's movies and TV shows, home movies narrated by their children and anecdotes from friends, families and fellow artists.



Seinfeld was so influenced by their comedy that he patterned his own sitcom after the comedy team's TV show. "When Seinfeld first came on," comments the NBC star, "people said, 'You play yourself...it's kind of like *The Garry Shandling Show*' and I said 'No it's Abbott and Costello.'"

The Abbott and Costello series ran from 1952 to 1954 and was one of the first TV comedy shows produced specifically to run in syndication...and run it did. "Television was a natural for Bud Abbott and Lou Costello," wrote author Bob Thomas in his 1977 biography "Bud and Lou... The Abbott and Costello Story." "Their burlesque routines, mini comedies in themselves, were ideally suited to limited attention span of television viewers. Their comedy was elemental, it appealed to all ages and all shades of sophistication..."

The series, with Bud and Lou playing themselves, followed their misadventures at a boardinghouse and pounding the pavement. Their regular cast included their hot-tempered landlord Sidney Fields (played by himself), girlfriend Hillary Brooke (played by herself), a pesky friend, Stinky (Joe Besser), officer Mike Kelly (Gordon Jones) and the entrepreneurial Mr. Baccigalupe (played by Lou's brother-in-law Joe Kirk). Each show began and ended with Abbott and Costello addressing the audience.

Likewise, Seinfeld plays himself, lives in an apartment house, has a recurring cast of characters - friends Elaine, George and Kramer, and an irritating landlord called Newman. He also begins and ends each show by addressing the audience. But that's where the similarities end.

Seinfeld, a stand-up comic since 1978, has utilized his TV series to catapult his career whereas Bud Abbott and Lou Costello had already conquered burlesque, vaudeville, Broadway, radio and film when they went into TV. For them it was just another medium to spread their classic comedy bits.

Their comedy routines first began taking shape in burlesque theatres - the comedy clubs of their day. They crossed paths numerous times on the burlesque circuit but it wasn't until 1936 that Bud Abbott and Lou Costello formally teamed up. They were perfect together. Bud, the debonair straight man



A career spanning 36 films and 52 TV episodes

with the grifter-like delivery, and Lou, the wide-eyed innocent. Later Arthur Lubin, who directed many of Bud and Lou's films, would say: "Lou Costello would have been lost without Bud, and Bud without Lou."

They rose quickly after that, graduating to vaudeville, and then in 1938 to radio on *The Kate Smith Hour*, where a one-night opportunity grew into a 99-week appearance. In 1939, they began a one-year run in a Broadway revue *Streets of Paris*, in which Costello would occasionally leave his character to recap the show for late-arriving patrons. Finally in 1940 came their shot at the movies and what was to become an unprecedented film career.

Their first feature film was *A Night in the Tropics* (1940) in which they co-starred with Allan Jones and Robert Cummings. Their audience appeal was quickly apparent to Universal Studios. They were the first Hollywood stars to demand - and get - a percentage of their movies profits. In their first 24 months in Hollywood they made 10 films and only a bout with rheumatic fever that kept Costello out of action in 1943 slowed them down.

During the 40s, their ability to thrive at the box-office helped keep Universal studios afloat despite low-budget vehicles such as *Buck Privates* (1941), *In the Navy* (1941), *Hold That Ghost* (1941), *The Naughty Nineties* (1945) and *Abbott and Costello*

photos: On page 89 are from NBC Inc.

Meet Frankenstein (1948) to showcase their talent.

By the time their filmmaking careers ended they had made 36 films together, more than any other comedy team, and earned more than \$86-million. To put that figure in today's perspective: *Buck Privates*, in 1941, earned \$4-million at a time when an average ticket cost 25 cents.

"They flashed like twin meteors across a summer sky...with their bright, brash, totally unsophisticated comedy," wrote author Bob Thomas. But their comedy routines, many of them old burlesque bits given a fresh coat of comedic paint and a lot more style, became trademarks of the comedy team.

The best known, of course, was *Who's On First*, which was inducted into the *Baseball Hall of Fame* in 1956 and still is one of the most popular exhibits at the Cooperstown, N.Y. museum. It was also featured in the

film *Rain Man*. Some of their other famous routines include the Lemon Bit, the Piano Routine, the Drill Routine, Hole in the Wall, Crazy House, Mudder/Fodder, Floggle Street and Slowly I Turned.

Their television success on the *Colgate Comedy Hour* and their own series helped relaunch their film career in the fifties but by 1957, and after more than 20 years as a team, they had separated for good. Two years later on March 4, 1959 Lou Costello died of a heart attack. Ironically, Abbott, (who would die of cancer in 1974) was watching a rerun of their TV show featuring their *Who's On First* Routine when he learned of his longtime partner's death. "Tell me why I was watching that at that particular time," he sobbed, "I never watch it, I've seen it a thousand times... I've lost my best friend."

Fortunately their 36 films (Lou also made one film, *The 30-Foot Bride at Candy Rock*, without Bud) and 52 TV episodes are still going strong on TV and video; and now comes Seinfeld to pay tribute to their comedy genius.

Reflecting once again on the influence of *The Abbott and Costello Show* on his series, Seinfeld says: "That was really the genesis of the style, to be in real life as they were and then come out on stage as entertainers...I sometimes feel that me and George (Jason Alexander) can get into a rhythm like that, that goes back a little to those guys."