

Cover Story:

ABBOTT AND COSTELLO

BUD: *Where have you been Costello? Your clothes are all mussed up. You look like you haven't slept all night.*

LOU: *I haven't. I can't find any place to live. I sat up all night in the park, and this morning I had to get out of there.*

BUD: *You had to get out of the park?*

LOU: *Yeah. The pigeons gave me 24 hours to get a room.*

BUD: *It's a wonder you didn't freeze to death sleeping in the park.*

LOU: *Well, I had my little portable radio with me. That keeps me warm.*

BUD: *Now how can a radio keep you warm?*

LOU: *I tune in on Gabriel Heatter.*

Bud Abbott and Lou Costello met in 1929. Costello was appearing with a vaudeville troupe in a Brooklyn, New York, theatre. Abbott, who was working in the theatre's box office, had come from a show business family. His folks were circus performers and his father was one of the organizers of the first burlesque circuit in the United States.

Abbott had started in burlesque at the age of 16, originally as an assistant treasurer, then as producer and finally as a performer. He acted as straight man for many of the burlesque comics who joked their way through Minsky's theatres.

After meeting Costello, who had become a highly regarded comic in burlesque

and vaudeville, it seemed natural that Abbott would somehow be recruited on to the stage once more, playing straight to the rotund little comic.

They hit it off as a team, toured together for a year in "Life Begins At Minsky's" and became so popular that they moved on to better paying engagements in vaudeville and night clubs.

In 1938 Abbott and Costello were playing Lowe's New York when comedian Henny Youngman spotted them. Youngman had been a regular on the Kate Smith Hour on radio and had recently been offered a screen test at Paramount Pictures in Hollywood. He knew that Kate Smith's producer Ted Collins would need a comedy replacement. He told Collins to catch the comedy team in person. Collins did and invited the boys to appear as guests on the next Kate Smith Hour.

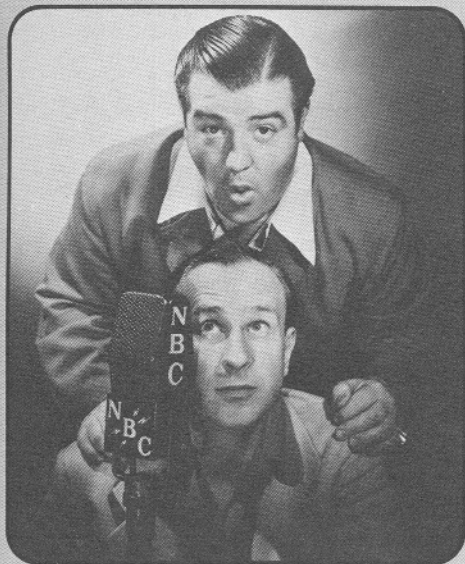
Over the years Bud and Lou had been convulsing burlesque and vaudeville audiences with an hilarious baseball routine and that's what they decided to do in their spot with Kate Smith.

"Who's On First" went over with a bang and Abbott and Costello were invited to become regulars on the program, staying for about a year and a half, doing old and new comedy sketches on each broadcast and frequently appearing as guests on other big time radio shows, including the Chase and Sanborn Show with Edgar Bergen and Charlie McCarthy.

In 1941 they began their own weekly series on NBC. That was the same year that their first starring film, "Buck Privates" was released. The radio show and the film were huge successes. The movie, made on a shoestring by Universal Pictures, a struggling studio, eventually returned \$10 million on an investment of some \$200,000!

In 1942 and 1943 Abbott and Costello were voted Box Office Champs by theatre owners, beating out such rivals as Betty

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Grable, Clark Gable and other big stars of the time. Movies like "In The Navy," "Keep 'Em Flying," "Hold That Ghost," "Who Done It?," and "Pardon My Sarong" all did very big business during the years of World War II and if you didn't see those two funny fellows on the screen of your neighborhood theatre, then surely you were laughing at them on your radio at home.

In 1944 the comedy team earned \$789,628. The only other person in the country to earn more that year was Louis B. Mayer of Metro Goldwyn Mayer studios. Abbott and Costello were earning more money than the President of the United States and all of the big business tycoons!

The Abbott and Costello Show premiered on radio July 3, 1940 as a summer

replacement for Fred Allen. They opened in their own show, on NBC for Camel Cigarettes, October 8, 1942.

Costello's life was marked by numerous tragedies, and he became known in the trade as "hard luck Lou," according to John Dunning in *Tune In Yesterday*: "In March 1943, with the radio show at its peak, he was stricken with rheumatic fever and forced off the air. Abbott refused to carry on alone, so the new team of Jimmy Durante and Garry Moore was hastily assembled to replace them."

According to Dunning, "Costello returned in the fall, but fate wasn't finished with him yet. In dress rehearsal for his first show, he was called to the phone to learn that his year-old son had fallen into the family swimming pool and drowned.

"Costello rushed home, and the news spread through the film city. Mickey Rooney was brought in to read Costello's lines; calls offering to help came from Durante, Bob Hope, and Red Skelton. But around 6 p.m., Costello called Abbott and said he was returning for the show. For 30 minutes he fought back tears and wisecracked with Abbott on the air. Just after Ken Niles had read the sign-off he broke down before the studio audience. Abbott then stepped forward and explained to the audience what had happened."

But the Abbott and Costello Show continued, and it was a big hit with radio listeners. Bud and Lou moved their big nighttime show to ABC in 1947 and even had The Abbott and Costello Kids Show every Saturday morning on ABC from 1947-1949. They were radio regulars until 1952 when they turned their attentions to television.

The team appeared occasionally on the Colgate Comedy Hour on NBC-TV in 1950 and 1951, but they starred in their own syndicated series, The Abbott and Costello Show in 1952. They made 52, 30-minute programs which are still being played on various television stations