



Laurel & Hardy and Abbott & Costello: America's Most Popular Comedy Duos

Charles River Editors

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*Includes a transcript of Abbott & Costello's "Who's on First?"

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By the 1920s, English comic Stan Laurel had been in dozens of films and American Oliver Hardy had appeared in hundreds, but it was not until they formed a duo together in 1926 that they began to truly be noticed. Once they did, however, Laurel & Hardy became one of the most famous comedy teams in American history, with a career that spanned 4 decades and included over 100 combined shorts and feature films. Even today, nearly 60 years after their last performances together, Laurel & Hardy are still popular, alongside legends like The Three Stooges and Abbott & Costello, and their routines are still watched across the globe.

Perhaps most importantly, Laurel & Hardy were forerunners of slapstick comedy and thus influenced those that followed. Their complementary styles of slapstick humor, with the thin, childish Laurel acting as a foil for the overweight and overly pompous Hardy, offered a template for others to follow, and the duo established several famous gags that other acts like the Stooges subsequently mimicked. For example, when Laurel occasionally came up with a smart idea, something completely out of character, the surprised Hardy would ask him to repeat what he just said, and Laurel would be unable to replicate it. That theme would recur with Curly and the Stooges, and Laurel & Hardy's use of "D'oh!" has been made even more famous by Homer Simpson in *The Simpsons*. Of course, the physical aspects of their slapstick, which often included destruction and mayhem, proved popular for them and several groups as well.

Ironically, one of America's most famous comedy duos, and the performers of the country's most famous skit, came together in part because Lou Costello had already failed to cut it in the film industry. In fact, Costello had appeared in a Laurel & Hardy film in 1927 before meeting his partner, Bud Abbott, on the burlesque circuit in New York City. In fact, the two first performed together in 1935 only because Abbott filled in for Costello's usual partner, who happened to be ill one fateful day.

Over time, Abbott & Costello perfected their routine, which typically consisted of Abbott playing the straight man while his dimwit partner acted foolishly and interrupted his plans. It was a shtick that also did well on radio, albeit one that required Costello to modify his voice with a higher pitch that not only differentiated him from Abbott but also made him sound appropriately dumber. By 1940, they were not only successful on the radio but also among America's most popular movie stars, a status they held almost consistently throughout the decade and into the early 1950s.

The legendary comedy duo performed together for decades, and like similar acts, their popularity began to wane over time, but Abbott & Costello are still household names today. While all of their material is still in syndication and watched by many, they are best known today for "Who's on First", the famous routine in which Abbott's answers about the names of baseball players at various positions on the field sound like questions and completely confuse Costello. Although the skit was pieced together from various others, it was immortalized by Abbott & Costello and helped popularize not only the duo but some of their subsequent

material.

Laurel & Hardy and Abbott & Costello: America's Most Popular Comedy Duos examines the lives, careers, and comedy of the famous performers. Along with pictures and bibliographies, you'll learn about them like never before.

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