

“Who’s On First?”—Abbott and Costello (Earliest existing radio broadcast version) (October 6, 1938)

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Essay by Cary O’Dell



Abbott and Costello



Kate Smith



“The Naughty Nineties”

The first time that Bud Abbott (1895-1974) and Lou Costello (1906-1959) performed their seminal comedy routine “Who’s On First?” was on Kate Smith’s radio show on March 24, 1938. As of this writing, no surviving copy of that broadcast is known to exist.

Though most network radio shows of that era were aired live, copies were routinely made for reference, review or even archiving by a network or a show’s sponsor. Still, despite that frequent practice, no copy of that particular episode of Smith’s program has yet turned up.

That lapse in historic documentation was alleviated a bit when the comedy team’s second performance of their most famous routine—also on “The Kate Smith Hour” on October 6, 1938—was captured and, thankfully, preserved.

Though some histories differ, the duo of Abbott and Costello—partners in comedy since 1935—came to their breakthrough radio appearance through the efforts of fellow comic Henny Youngman. Youngman (he of “Take my wife...please!” fame), then a weekly regular on Smith’s show, would later explain:

I got an offer from Paramount Pictures to go to Hollywood and make a test, but Ted Collins, the producer of the show, said, “You can’t go unless you get a replacement.” So I went to Loew’s State Theatre and I saw Abbott and Costello and they were doing a thing called “Who’s on First?” I closed my eyes and visualized that this could be very funny on radio.

Youngman brought them to the attention of Collins. And the rest, as they say, is radio history.

After being booked for the show, Abbott and Costello, who had long honed their act and comedy bits in burlesque theaters and in vaudeville shows, then had to decide which of their many routines they were going to do over the air.

Their “The Baseball Skit” (as it was then known) in some ways chose itself; many of their other routines were far too risqué for the airwaves.

Though there was some concern from the team that the comedy bit was far too “visual” for the ear-only medium of radio, Abbott and Costello’s first rendering of “Who’s on First?” was a stunning hit. So much so that after their first on-air performance of it, they were quickly re-booked for a return engagement on the Smith show in October of that same year.

The team’s great radio success was star-making. Soon after, they were headlining on Broadway in the revue “The Streets of Paris” and then the two headed off to Hollywood.

Abbott and Costello made their film debut in Universal's 1940 "One Night in the Tropics" (where they recreated an abbreviated "Who's on First?"). Their success there soon got them signed to a long-term Universal contract, eventually starring in 1941's "Buck Privates." That film's box office success would make them the movies's top comedy team of wartime America.

For the uninitiated, A&C's baseball skit, or "Who's on First?" as it is more commonly known, is a comedy sketch based on some complex wordplay.

The genesis of the routine is open to speculation. Most historians believe that it was derived from various early skits performed in burlesque houses including one called "The Baker Scene" (which riffed on multiple meanings of the word "loaf," from bread to laziness) and another routine named "Who Dyed" (about a man named "Who"). Various comics and comedy teams over the years expanded on the bit and varied it from show to show. Eventually, somehow, the subject of baseball got involved. Over the years, usually in obituaries, various comedy writers (including Michael Musto, John Grant and Irving Gordon) have been credited with the final form of "Who's On First?" but determining full, correct authorship has proved to be impossible.

Ultimately, whoever first wrote down the final words is a moot point: Abbott and Costello made it their own.

The routine begins innocently enough with Lou Costello (the shorter and rounder of the two comics) asking Bud Abbott (the taller, slimmer one) the names of the players on a baseball team. Straight Man Abbott is happy to oblige:

"Who's on first; What's on second; I Don't Know's on third...."

The statements, by Abbott, are perceived as questions by Costello and the ensuing confusion is only compounded by some of the player's other names: "Why" is in left field and "Tomorrow" is the pitcher.

Lou Costello, in this stage persona of an over-grown little boy, was great with the slow burn frustration that this number needed. His growing frustration—and Abbott's exceeding calm in response—drove the bit, and audiences, to comedic heights seldom realized in other comedy routines.

Though Abbott and Costello would go on to star in nearly 40 films (including the classic "Abbott and Costello Meet Frankenstein"), star in their own radio and their own TV series, the team would forever be associated with "Who's On First?" They would go on to re-perform the baseball bit (sometimes with subtle variations) throughout their career, most notably in their 1945 feature "The Naughty Nineties."

And if Abbott and Costello never left "Who's On First?" behind, neither did most of America. In his book, "The Biographical Dictionary of Film," author David Thomson writes: "If I were asked to assemble a collection of things to manifest America for the stranger, 'Who's on First?' would be there—and might be the first piece of film I'd use."

The routine, whether in the movies or aurally, has been embraced by radio lovers, filmgoers, comics and even baseball fans. A golden recording of it hangs in the National Baseball Hall of Fame in Cooperstown, New York. References to it have found their way onto T-shirts, posters, and into the announcing booths of major league games, even into a 2011 episode of TV's "Modern Family." In 1978, game company Selchow and Righter put out a "Who's on First?" board game. During play, it tested your memory if not so much your knowledge of the routine yourself. Even English teachers have utilized "Who's On First?" as a way to inventively teach parts of speech.

Derivatives of "Who's On First?" have been a comic staple for decades. Johnny Carson paid homage to it, directly or indirectly, in some of his "Tonight Show" sketches. "The Simpsons," the Kids in the Hall and the film "Rain Man" have all name checked it. And it can certainly be compared to Cheech and Chong's famous "Dave's Not Here" skit from 1972.

Today, “Who’s On First?,” and Abbott and Costello’s rendering of it, is as much a part of the American landscape and character as the great national pastime that it celebrates.

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