

"Who's on First?"--Abbott and Costello (October 6, 1938)

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Essay by Ron Palumbo (guest post)*



Abbott and Costello

"Who's On First?" is arguably (pun intended) the most famous comedy routine of all time. "Time" magazine proclaimed it the "Best Comedy Sketch of the 20th Century" in 1999. The Greater Los Angeles Press Club, with great foresight, declared the same almost 50 years earlier. It was inducted into the National Baseball Hall of Fame in Cooperstown in 1956, where it has played in a continuous loop since 1967.

The skit is a cultural touchstone that has inspired homages and derivatives using the names of rock groups such as The Who and Yes, as well as foreign and domestic leaders like Premier Hu, James Watt, and Yassir Arafat. Ask Google Assistant or Siri "Who's on first?" and it will reply, "Yes, he is," or "Correct, Who is on first." High school students translate it and perform it in French or Spanish, and it has even been performed in American Sign Language. The routine has also transcended comedy as a metaphor for miscommunication and double-talk in business, politics, and everyday life. It turns up without fail on the sports pages whenever a baseball club has trouble filling a position.

"Who's On First?" is one of the lasting legacies of the comedy team of Bud Abbott (1897-1974) and Lou Costello (1906-1959). (Another is their landmark horror comedy "Abbott and Costello Meet Frankenstein" [1948], which was inducted into the National Film Registry in 2001.) Bud, the straight man, and Lou, the comedian, teamed up in burlesque in 1936 and rose to rank among the top movie stars and highest-paid performers of the 1940s.

Their publicity agent claimed that the boys performed "Who's On First?" some 15,000 times during their twenty-year partnership. But this would average two performances per day, *every day*, for 21 years—clearly an exaggeration. Still, the team probably performed it close to a thousand times, although only about a dozen recordings from radio, film, newsreels, live TV and their sitcom have come down to us. This version, from the

October 6, 1938 broadcast of “The Kate Smith Hour,” is only their second national radio performance of the routine.

In the sketch, which they usually referred to simply as “Baseball,” Abbott is the manager of a baseball team and Costello is a rookie or fan who wants to know the players’ names. Before he identifies them, Abbott informs Costello that sometimes ballplayers have funny nicknames. Costello seems to grasp this context, and Abbott proceeds to name the players using declarative intonation: “Who’s on first, What’s on second, and I Don’t Know is on third.” Costello, with his own preconceived assumptions, does not comprehend that Abbott is stating, not asking, the players’ names, and the routine becomes a classic case of reciprocal misunderstanding. Costello’s frustration mounts, while Abbott fails to recognize or correct the ambiguity in his statements. (Both “The Simpsons” and *The Kids in the Hall* have done post-modern takes on the routine where the straight man realizes the source of the confusion, explains what he really means, and instantly derails the sketch. Similarly, Jimmy Fallon presented a sequel where the players Who, What and I Don’t Know came out on stage and attempted to resolve the issue, but to no avail.)

Like most of Abbott and Costello’s repertoire, “Who’s On First?” was rooted in burlesque, where sketches had been passed down for decades and were almost always considered to be public domain. Like jazz artists, creative burlesque comics looked for original ways to expand, combine, untangle, or update these core skits. A comedian’s own stylized interpretations of these sketches would be off limits to other comics, but not the sketches themselves. Abbott and Costello felt most secure performing this time-tested material, and carried it with them throughout their careers and into every medium.

Much of minstrel and burlesque humor came out of ethnic caricatures. Wordplay routines based on mispronunciation, misunderstanding, and malapropisms reflected the immigrant’s struggle to make sense of a strange language and culture. These skits allowed apprehensive American audiences to feel superior to the waves of newcomers while also empathizing with them--particularly when the naïve immigrant was paired with a streetwise straight man. Although comedians largely abandoned ethnic stereotypes in the late 1920s, the wordplay sketches endured.

According to Bud Abbott, the direct predecessor of “Who’s On First?” was an old minstrel crosstalk routine called “Who’s the Boss?” The boss was named Who and his employees were What, Ida Know and, in some versions, Hee and Issy. “Who’s the Boss?” was related to Joe Weber and Lew Fields’ classic “I Work on Watt Street” dialogue from the 1880’s. They were not the first to find humor in “Watt Street,” however. Jokes began the moment “Watt Street” signs were erected in New York, Boston, and Philadelphia (among other cities) in the mid-1800s.

During World War I, burlesque comedians blended “Who’s the Boss?” with other workplace wordplay routines. For example, in “The Baker Scene,” the straight man boasts about his job “loafing” in a bakery. In “Nuttin’ for Living,” he does “nuttin’ all day” in a nut and bolt factory. In “Dying to Live,” he works at a dry cleaner because he

“can’t live if I can’t dye.” In each case, the business was owned by Who, with employees named What and Ida Know.

“Dying to Live” was also known as “Who and Dye” or “Cleaning and Dying.” There was even a version called “Dying to Live on What Street.” Burlesque veterans Steve Mills and Irving Benson, as well as Ralph Allen, author of the Broadway musical “Sugar Babies,” asserted that “Who and Dye” was the basis for “Who’s On First?,” but, as noted above, Bud Abbott himself traced back it to earlier material.

Burlesque comedian Harry Lang untangled “Who’s the Boss?” from “Nuttin’ for a Living” in 1920, retitled it “Who is Your Boss?” and spent the decade performing the routine in vaudeville. The dialogue was just one part of Lang’s act, which included comic dancing and his whistling specialty. Not surprisingly, “Who’s the Boss?” found its way back into burlesque shows in the mid-1920s, including one produced by Bud Abbott just as he was transitioning to performer.

Eventually “Who’s the Boss?” was transposed to baseball. (One fanciful speculation is that Washington Senators second baseman Allie Watt inspired this shift, but Watt played only one game in the majors, in 1920.) Ralph Allen asserted that a forerunner of “Who’s On First?” called “Baseball’s Who’s Who” was popular on the Mutual burlesque circuit in the 1920s. Bud’s wife Betty, a talented comedienne and performer herself, recalled, “Bud had done the baseball bit a long time before he worked with Lou. That was public domain. He did it with some comic, I can’t remember who.” (In the 1990s, the heirs of Michael Musto, an independent film producer, and songwriter Irving Gordon made separate spurious claims of authorship, even though these men would have been young boys when the baseball version first appeared.)

Before he teamed with Abbott, Costello worked with Joe Lyons, a Canadian-born straight man, throughout 1934 and 1935. During this time Lou became enthralled by the baseball routine. According to Bud Abbott’s nephew, the late television director Norman Abbott, Costello had the idea of transposing “Who’s the Boss?” to baseball. Lou may have come up with the notion independently, since, as a relatively new arrival to burlesque, he may not have been exposed to the earlier version. A partial script titled “The Baseball Rookie,” with Lyons’ and Costello’s names, survives. It appears to be a simpler version of the routine that we know, without the set-up regarding funny nicknames, and with seemingly less repetition and doubling back.

When Costello and Lyons tried the routine at one of the famed Minsky burlesque houses, however, the producer tossed it out after their first performance. (Costello’s own cousin didn’t think much of the skit at this early stage, either.) But Lou was undaunted. He brought it up when he and Abbott joined forces in 1936, and they honed the sketch for more than a year in burlesque, minstrel shows, what was left of vaudeville, and Costello’s garage. Betty Abbott recalled, “Bud and Lou put an awful lot of stuff in it, a lot of new material.”

The boys took what was a short story and turned it into a novel, expanding it beyond the core characters of Who, What and I Don't Know to fill eight of the game's nine positions and creating the last word in wordplay sketches. (They copyrighted the routine in 1944.) By the fall of 1937, "Who's On First?" was so refined that "Variety" called it the hit of a traveling stage show called "Hollywood Bandwagon." Fittingly, Abbott and Costello also performed the routine that same year for top brass and sportswriters at professional baseball's annual winter meeting in Milwaukee.

Early in 1938, both stand-up comic Henny Youngman and an executive with the William Morris talent agency brought Abbott and Costello to the attention of Ted Collins, singer Kate Smith's manager and the producer of her CBS radio show. At an audition in Collins' office, the team launched into "Who's On First?," but Collins stopped them mid-stream. "They'll hiss you off the air if you do that," he admonished them. Had he seen "Who's On First?" with a live audience, Collins would have had no such qualms.

Bud and Lou performed a different routine on their February 3, 1938 debut broadcast. At least two radio critics praised the new comedy team, while other listeners complained that they had difficulty distinguishing the boys' voices. Lou solved this problem by adopting a shrill falsetto for all subsequent appearances, including in this recording. To modern audiences, and to those familiar with his later film and television work, it sounds excessive, but it fit with Costello's child-like character and his tag line, "I'm a baaad boy."

Collins brought Abbott and Costello back week after week, and they formally became regulars on the program. (The boys always considered Kate's show their biggest break in show business.) To ensure a steady supply of verbal routines, the team summoned John Grant, a respected burlesque straight man, producer, and show doctor, to write or adapt material for them. Grant remained Bud and Lou's chief collaborator through radio, movies and television until his death in 1955.

In the weeks following their debut, Bud and Lou continued to lobby for "Who's On First?," but Collins was unyielding. According to legend, the team used a gambit to force the producer's hand to permit the performance. They told Collins that they didn't have any material prepared for the March 24th broadcast. This may be true, but considering that Grant had recently arrived with a treasure trove of routines, it could be apocryphal. Perhaps Grant put some finishing touches on the sketch that appeased Collins. In any case, on March 24, 1938, "Who's On First?" made its national radio debut. It was an instant hit. CBS received a record number of phone calls and letters from listeners, and the team's profile and popularity ratcheted up exponentially. (Unfortunately no surviving copy of this broadcast is known to exist; Smith and Collins destroyed most of their radio transcriptions sometime in the early 1950s.)

Collins, now a believer, supposedly ordered the routine to be repeated once a month, but Abbott and Costello used "Who's On First?" sparingly on radio (and in film and television) for fear of overexposure. It wasn't until seven months later, on this broadcast,

that they performed it again on Kate's show. In between, Bud and Lou did the routine a couple of hundred times in stage shows and at the Steel Pier in Atlantic City.

This version differs slightly from later ones in content and performance. Two well-known exchanges are missing, perhaps not yet developed or omitted for time, and Costello doesn't reach the same heights of hilarious frustration as in later renditions. The missing lines are:

BUD: Sometimes his wife comes down and collects it.
 LOU: Who's wife?
 BUD: Yes. After all, he's entitled to it.
 LOU: Who is?
 BUD: Yes.

And, later:

LOU: I throw the ball to who?
 BUD: Naturally.
 LOU: I throw it to who?
 BUD: Naturally.
 LOU: So I throw the ball to Naturally.
 BUD: No, you don't!
 LOU: I throw it to who?
 BUD: Naturally!
 LOU: That's what I'm saying!

While appearing weekly on the Smith program, Abbott and Costello headlined stage shows, nightclubs, and the Broadway musical "Streets of Paris," frequently using "Who's On First?" In 1940, they performed the routine at the annual White House Correspondents' Dinner, one of several command performances for President Roosevelt. A few months later, Universal Pictures signed the team to appear as comic relief in a musical, "One Night in the Tropics." Their scenes included an abbreviated version of "Who's On First?" that never left the infield. It was the beginning of their movie careers and the end of their tenure with Kate Smith.

Bud and Lou starred in a string of hit films in the early 1940s without using "Who's On First?" but the routine was always in the public consciousness. The team acknowledged this and poked fun at themselves in their 1942 comedy "Who Done It?," where their screen characters turn on a radio to hear "Abbott and Costello" performing "Who's On First?" They quickly turn off the radio in disgust and complain, "No, no, no! Every time you hear those two guys, it's 'Who's on first, What's on second!'"

The boys shoehorned the full version of the routine into their 1945 film "The Naughty Nineties." When word spread on the Universal lot that Bud and Lou were filming the routine, anyone not in a meeting or shooting their own film crowded onto the soundstage to watch. The team did two takes because the first was marred by audience and crew

laughter. The second take (which also includes some crew laughter) is generally considered their finest recorded performance, and is shown at Cooperstown.

Just as we cannot imagine anyone but Kate Smith singing “God Bless America” (which she debuted on her program several weeks later in November 1938), we cannot conceive of any other comedians performing “Who’s On First?” Aside from their familiarity with the routine and their masterful comedic timing, Bud and Lou had a secret to the rapid-fire crosstalk. Asked if the sketch ever got tiresome, Lou replied, “Never. Abbott has been trying to trick me on the routine for years. He never throws the same cues twice. And I try to trick him.” The boys had to pay close attention to each other, and that kept it fresh, even after a thousand renditions.

This has led to the overstatement that the team never performed the routine the same way twice. There are subtle differences between versions, usually because the boys themselves became mixed up or lingered on an exchange. They also modified the end gag, using “I Don’t Care,” “I Don’t Give a Darn,” or even “I Don’t Give a Damn,” depending on the audience. But the routine always follows a consistent structure. Their most radical departure was when they switched the players’ names to members of an orchestra for audiences in England and Australia who were unfamiliar with baseball.

Still, new twists were possible even after 20 years. During their last televised performance of the routine, in October 1956 on “The Steve Allen Show,” Costello voiced his usual exasperation about the pitcher, Today, and the catcher, Tomorrow, complaining, “That’s all, you got a couple of days on the team.” Abbott replied, “Well, I can’t help that,” then added, apparently for the first time, “They’re brothers.” Lou responded, “Who’s brothers?” Bud countered, “No, they’re no relation to Who.” Genuinely surprised, Costello broke character and said, “Where did this come from?”

In recent years “Who’s On First?” has been referenced in dozens of television shows, adapted for a board game in the 1970s, and played a pivotal role in the 1988 film “Rain Man.” But life finally imitated art in September 2007, when Los Angeles Dodgers shortstop Chin-Lung Hu, a late-season call up from the minors, got his first major league hit. Dodger announcer Vin Scully declared, “Shades of Abbott and Costello. I can finally say, ‘Hu’s on first.’”

Ron Palumbo is the co-author of “Abbott and Costello in Hollywood” and the author of “Buck Privates: The Original Screenplay” and “Hold That Ghost: The Original Screenplay.” He founded the Official Abbott and Costello Fan Club in 1986, and has written the liner notes for the definitive boxed sets of the team’s films and television series. He has appeared on “A&E Biography,” the “Today” show, and in several documentaries. He is an advertising creative director.

*The views expressed in this essay are those of the author and do not necessarily represent the views of the Library of Congress.