

New Jersey comedians

Abbott and Costello still leave us laughing

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One of Hollywood's most popular comedy teams had deep roots in the Garden State.

Not only were Bud Abbott and Lou Costello both born here, but their wise-cracking humor was full of New Jersey attitude.

The skinny half of the team, William Alexander "Bud" Abbott, was born in Asbury Park, Monmouth County, in 1897. His parents both worked for the circus and he took to show business early, working the concessions at Coney Island. Later he took a job in a burlesque theater, eventually becoming a straight man — the part of a comedy team that sets up the jokes but usually doesn't deliver the punch line.

Burlesque houses featured to entertainers who performed provocative dances, but they also had comedians, who did over-the-top comedy routines.

Baby-faced Louis Francis Cristillo, who later changed his name to Costello, was born in 1906 in Paterson, the Passaic County town he managed to mention in many of his performances. As an athletic young man he was an amateur boxer and reportedly once held the title of New Jersey State Foul Shot champion. He went to Hollywood to try acting, but had little initial success, although he did appear in a 1927 film that starred another famous comedy duo - Laurel and Hardy. He eventually became a burlesque comedian.

Abbott and Costello first worked together in 1935 when, as legend has it, Bud was pulled in as an emergency replacement after Lou's regular straight man failed to show. The characters they created — the sharp-talking Abbott and dim-witted Costello — had an instant chemistry, and they officially became a team the following year.

For the rest of their partnership, they stuck close to those characters. In their films, they usually portray friends, but Costello often drives Abbott crazy with his naïve misunderstandings and Abbott isn't above cheating Costello out of his money or getting him to take the fall when they land in a jam.

Atlantic City played an important part in launching Abbott and Costello's career, according to local newspaper accounts from the 1940s.

A year after their teaming, Abbott and Costello were spotted in their burlesque act — for which they reportedly were paid \$35 per week — by Eddie Sherman, who needed a comedy team for a Broadway show. The show didn't come together that year, but Sherman became their manager, offering them \$100 per week and booking them into Atlantic City's famous Steel Pier, where they appeared for several summer seasons.

The comedians returned to Atlantic City in 1941, making a personal appearance in connection with the world premiere of their movie "Hold That Ghost."

The team's success in burlesque led to a radio performance in 1938 that would bring them national fame and immortalize the "Who's on First" skit. Soon they moved to the Broadway stage and then to Hollywood, where they made 36 films together from 1940 to 1956. During that time they also starred on their own radio show, where their New Jersey accents made it hard for some listeners to tell them apart. In the 1950s, their television show ran for two seasons on CBS.

They ended their 21-year partnership in 1957. Costello died two years later, and Abbott died in 1974.

Dan Simkins, Website administrator for abbottandcostello.net, likes to compare Abbott and Costello's comedy style to a figure-skating couple, flowing gracefully from one turn to the next.

"With Costello, it was his reaction to life in general and circumstances — fear, love, aggravation. He took the extreme reaction to everything. It took someone like Abbott to set up the routine, the punchline, and rein him in."

The team also combined strong verbal humor and physical comedy. "To have one character that can deliver lines and another that can do slapstick, that crosses generations," Simkins said.

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Photo provided
Lou Costello, left, and Bud Abbott play reluctant recruits in "Buck Privates," the 1941 picture that made them movie stars.

The films of Abbott and Costello

Buck Privates: Abbott and Costello's first starring roles were in 1941's "Buck Privates." With a peacetime draft in effect, the theme of Bud and Lou accidentally joining the army hit home with audiences. The film was a huge hit. It cost \$180,000 and made \$4 million.

The film is built around well-honed routines — such as Bud teaching Lou to play dice — that showcase their comic timing polished during years working in theaters and on radio.

The icing on this slice of pre-World War II Americana is the music. The Andrews Sisters sing several swing numbers, including their hit "Boogie Woogie Bugle Boy."



Abbott and Costello Meet Frankenstein: The comedy partners were in their prime in this 1948 film which had them crossing paths with, and running from, the classic Universal Studio monsters. It's funny and suspenseful, and gathers some of the great horror actors all in one place.

The plot involves Dracula, played by Bela Legosi, trying to revive a run-down Frankenstein monster, played by Boris Karloff, by giving him a new brain: Costello's.

Trying to foil Dracula's plot is Lawrence Talbot, played by Lon Chaney Jr., who helps our heroes except when the moon is full and he becomes the Wolfman.



The Time of Their Lives: This funny and charming 1946 film is notable for the ways it departs from the usual Abbott and Costello formula. It has a stronger plot than most of their films and lacks the set-piece comedy routines. Costello plays an 18th Century ghost who haunts a present-day Abbott.

In The Navy; Keep 'Em Flying: The team had so much success spoofing army life that they took on two other branches of the service in these 1941 films. Both movies stick to the formula of two bumblers who have no business in the service driving everyone else crazy.

About Explorer

This summer our Explorer pages, which appear each Monday, look at the lives and achievements of famous New Jersey residents. The Education page will return in the fall.

Who's on First

Here's a taste of Abbott and Costello's most famous routine. Keep in mind that 'Who,' 'What' and 'I Don't Know,' are names of players on the team.

Abbott: they give ball players nowadays very peculiar names.

Costello: Funny names?

Abbott: Nicknames, pet names. Now, on the St. Louis team we have 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 fellows' names?

Abbott: Yes.

Costello: Well, then, who's playin' first?

Abbott: Yes.

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

Abbott: Who.

Costello: The fellow playin' first base for St. Louis.

Abbott: Who.

Costello: The guy on first base.

Abbott: Who is on first.

Costello: Well what are you askin' me for?

Abbott: I'm not asking you, I'm telling you: Who is on first.

Costello: I'm asking you, who's on first?

Abbott: That's the man's name!

Costello: That's who's name?

Abbott: Yes.

Costello: Well go ahead and tell me.

Abbott: Who.

Costello: The guy on first.

Abbott: Who.

Costello: The first baseman!

Abbott: Who is on first!

Costello: Have you got a first baseman on first?

Abbott: Certainly!

Costello: Then who's playing first?

Abbott: Absolutely!

Costello: When you pay off the first baseman every month, who gets the money?

Abbott: Every dollar of it! And why not, the man's entitled to it.

Costello: Who is it?

Abbott: Yes.

Costello: So who gets it?

Abbott: Why shouldn't he? Sometimes his wife comes down and collects it.

Just for laughs

From "Abbott and Costello Meet Frankenstein"

Abbott: I don't get it. Out of all the guys around here that classy dish has to pick out a guy like you.

Costello: What's wrong with that?

Abbott: Go look at yourself in the mirror sometime.

Costello: Why should I hurt my own feelings?

From "The Abbott and Costello Show"

Abbott: Just mark down, "Dear druggist."

Costello: "Dear druggist" ... Go ahead.

Abbott: Here's what you want. You want seven milligrams of sulfursilic monosetic acid diluted in seven micrograms of tincturized chlorophyll. Have you got that?

Costello: All but one part.

Abbott: What part?

Costello: The part that comes after, "Dear druggist."

From "In The Navy"

Abbott: Did you ever go the school, stupid?

Costello: Yeah, and I come out the same way.

See Abbott and Costello videos

To watch a video clip of Abbott and Costello search *funnymen* at PressofAtlanticCity.com. To download this page or earlier Explorer pages, search explorernow.com.

Other comedians with roots in N.J.



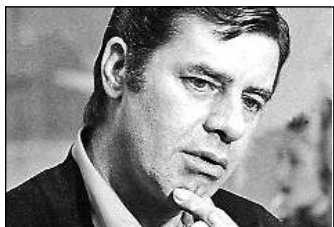
Jason Alexander

Before making it big in TV's "Seinfeld," this Newark-born actor was a star of the high school stage in Livingston, Essex County.



Danny DeVito

Born in Neptune, Monmouth County, this diminutive son of a small-business owner grew up in Bud Abbott's hometown, Asbury Park.



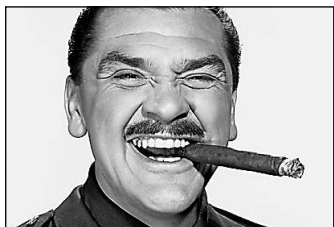
Jerry Lewis

The philanthropist, filmmaker and zany funnyman — whose rise to fame began with Dean Martin at Atlantic City's 500 Club — was born in Newark.



Chelsea Handler

The stand-up comedienne, author and talk-show host was born in Livingston, the youngest of six children.



Ernie Kovacs

This Trenton-born comedian worked as a disc jockey and newspaper columnist before he created one of the most innovative shows in television history.



Queen Latifah

The hip-hop starlet-turned-comedy star born as Dana Owens in East Orange, Essex County, and worked briefly at a Burger King.