



*The*

**ABBOTT**

*&*

**COSTELLO**

**STORY**



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THE ABBOTT & COSTELLO STORY

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## THE ABBOTT &amp; COSTELLO STORY

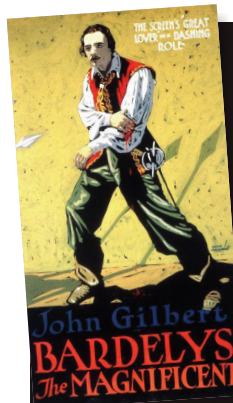
## Part 1

**T**he good looking, cherubic young man sat amongst the other film extras and waited for his cue from director Clyde Bruckman. The film set at the Hal Roach studios had been constructed to look like a boxing hall. Centre stage was a square boxing ring and on one side of the ring, rows of wooden seats had been erected for the extras who had been hired as the scene's spectators.

The two-reel silent short being shot was *The Battle of the Century* (1927), a comedy take-off of the controversial "long count" Jack Dempsey vs. Gene Tunney heavyweight boxing match. The film featured Stan Laurel and Oliver Hardy, with Stan playing the part of prize fighter Canvasback Clump and Hardy as his manager. As the young man intently studied how both Laurel and Hardy prepared themselves for the scene, the director shouted "Action."

The crowd of extras began hollering and gesticulating as Stan Laurel ran around the ring in an attempt to escape from his opponent, the scary Thunder-Clap Callahan (played by Noah Young). The young extra reacted incredulously as he leapt from the second row to a ringside seat between shots before the director called "Cut and Print"

This silent short is a fascinating piece of film history and film buff trivia, for it unites Laurel and Hardy with half of the



← **Lou Costello's first movie as a stuntman**

↓ **MGM Studios in the late 1920s, around the time Lou Costello started work there**



film comedy team that would eventually eclipse them in the 1940s.

The young would-be actor was the second son of an Italian immigrant family and was born Louis Francis Cristillo in Paterson, New Jersey, in 1906. From an early age Lou became fascinated with the world of entertainment and whenever he could, frequented the vaudeville and nickelodeon houses of Paterson. He was also a keen sportsman and had made the basketball and boxing team at high school, but because of his diminutive size – five foot, four inches – realised he was never going to make it as a professional ball player or prizefighter.

Chasing the American Dream, he decided he would become a comedy movie star and would base his act on his idol, Charlie Chaplin. Lou went to see Chaplin's *Shoulder Arms* (1918) dozens of times, until he could repeat every scene and every Chaplin gesture. Consequently, when he reached the age of 20, he announced to his family that he was leaving home. "And where do you think you're going?" his exasperated father asked. "To

Hollywood," Lou replied resolutely, quickly adding, "Pop, I ain't no academic but I'm not gonna be just a floorwalker in a department store. I'm gonna go out to Hollywood, change my name to Lou Costello and become a movie star. I know I can do it."

Following weeks of family arguments over why he wanted to go and why he wanted to change his family name, Lou's father finally relented and even managed to find \$200 for his son's journey.

Lou began his trek across country to California by hitching lifts with motorists or jumping aboard freight trains, until finally, in early 1926, he arrived in Los Angeles. The wide, palm tree-lined avenues and the sun-kissed gardens appeared to be paradise to Lou after the urban jungle of New Jersey, which only further convinced him that he had made the right move.

However, much like the hundreds of young hopefuls who had all flocked to Hollywood to be discovered, no-one noticed the boy from New Jersey. As his money dwindled, a dejected Lou was too proud to write home and admit his failure to make it in Tinseltown. Exhausted from surviving on stolen fruit from the plentiful neighbourhood orchards and sleeping in overnight parked cars, Costello was about to start hitch-hiking back to Paterson when he landed a job at the MGM studios – as a carpenter building film sets.

It was not what he had predicted but at least he was employed by a major film studio. During his lunch breaks, the mesmerised Costello roamed around the MGM lots watching movies being filmed. One day he wandered onto Lot 2, where the studio's major star, John Gilbert, was starring in the swashbuckler *Bardelys the Magnificent* (1926). King Vidor, the director, had reached a scene in the script where one of Gilbert's swordsman victims had to fall from the top of a high structure. "Damn," shouted Vidor to his AD. "We'll have to get a stuntman for this shot and that means we'll lose time while



↑ **Bud Abbott and Lou Costello**



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they prepare the ground to cushion the fall." "I'll do it Mr. Vidor," volunteered Costello, and without waiting for an answer, he scrambled up the back of the false structure and jumped. Both Vidor and Gilbert winced as Costello fell to the ground, rolled and sat up. "OK?" he asked. Vidor hired him on the spot and called for wardrobe. An extra playing a guard in the film helped Costello to his feet and said, "That was a helluva fall fellah." The extra's name was Duke Morrison, which he would soon change to John Wayne.

Over the next two years Costello became the busiest and most daring stuntman at MGM, doubling for a number of stars including Joan Crawford and Dolores Del Rio. In between stunts he appeared as an extra in various films such as the L&H two-reeler. However, the end of his stunt career came when he was seriously injured whilst impersonating actor William Haines in a football movie. Hospitalised, suffering numerous broken bones, Costello realised that he had pushed his luck too far as a stuntman.

It was now 1928 and the film industry was hysterical over the addition of audio; studios had finally realised that "talkies" were not just a novelty but



↑ Lou Costello performing his burlesque act with an unknown piano player

were here to stay. Film work dried up for the limping ex-stuntman, forcing the distraught Costello to head for home, back to New Jersey.

He got as far as St. Joseph, Kansas, before his cash ran out and he noticed a sign on a burlesque theatre marquee: Comic Required, Apply Within. Bluffing the manager that he had been out in Hollywood making motion pictures and was now on his way to New York for a vaudeville engagement, he asked for the job. The burlesque manager was desperate enough to hire the inexperienced youngster, and Costello's previous study of Chaplin and other film comedians now served him well.

He learnt fast, soaking up all the

expertise of the other comics and straight men he watched on stage. Now with a hastily thrown together act, he moved from theatre to theatre, playing a week at a time until eventually he reached the East coast. One night, whilst Lou was on stage in New York working his act with a guy named Joe Lyons, he was watched from the wings by a tall, well dressed man. As Lou exited the stage, the man said, "Nice act kid, but your straight man's letting you down." "Oh! Yeah, and who the hell are you?" replied a belligerent Costello. The tall man extended his hand and said, "The name's Abbott, Bud Abbott." *Handwritten signature*



## Part 2

**W**hen Bud Abbott first met Lou Costello in 1936 he was already an established and well respected straight man for comedians on the burlesque circuit. He was born William Alexander "Bud" Abbott in Asbury Park, New Jersey, on October 25th 1895, and as both his parents worked for the Barnum & Bailey Circus, show business was in his blood from an early age. His mother was a bareback rider and his father Harry an "advance man", who preceded the circus posting advertising bills and arranging free tickets for the dignitaries of the towns the circus was coming to. When Harry finally tired of travelling with the circus, he moved his family to Coney Island, New York, where he organised a number of burlesque shows. He appointed his sixteen-year-old son Bud as box office manager cum assistant treasurer of a theatre in Brooklyn

The young Bud found the financial side of theatre management, selling tickets and paying wages, tedious. He much preferred to hang around backstage studying the routines and talking to the



↑ The dapper Bud Abbott

→ A poster advertising A&C at the Steel Pier Theatre, NJ

➤ Minsky's Burlesque Theatre in New York



many comedians his father employed. Some of the burlesque comedians he avidly watched, such as W. C. Fields, Bert Lahr (*The Cowardly Lion* in *The Wizard of Oz*) and the original funny girl Fanny Brice, would later become Hollywood movie stars.

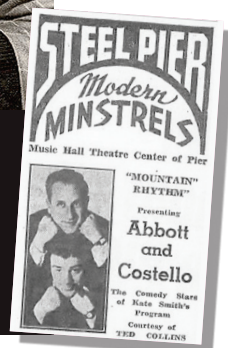
One night, when he could not afford to pay for a straight man to support the show's comedian, Bud decided to take on the role himself. Like all the good straight men he had watched over the years, Bud took meticulous care with his dapper appearance, in complete contrast to the usual outrageous outfits worn by burlesque comedians. He had also learned from his observations how to play the serious foil to the comic, and by sensing the audience's mood, how a sarcastic ad-lib retort from him could frequently receive the loudest laughter.

Every burlesque artiste who watched his performance that night noticed that he appeared to have an uncanny ability for making the comic seem funnier than he actually was. Furthermore, they all agreed that Bud Abbott would go far if he ever found a comic to

team up with – one who could react to his rapid fire dialogue.

Following their initial meeting at the Eltinge Theatre in New York, Bud and Lou performed on the same bill but with separate partners. Over the several weeks that the show played they became better acquainted, and discussed their various individual sketches and routines. Bud reiterated his earlier comment that Lou's partner was letting him down. "Your straight man, Joe Lyons, is okay, but he don't have no style. You have style but you go a little wild sometimes and when you do, you bore the audience. You need someone to pull you back." Lou appeared a little dejected, then replied, "Yeah! Joe's drinking a lot before the show, which sometimes makes him forget to feed me a line. I then have to ad-lib to keep the act moving." Lou continued, "Bud, you have a lot more experience than me in burlesque which I respect. How about us putting an act together, Costello & Abbott has a nice ring to it, don't ya think?" Bud shook his head, "You know the straight man always goes first. It's gotta be Abbott & Costello." A smiling Lou replied, "OK, partner".

Their first act together was performed at the famous burlesque theatre Minsky's





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in New York City. To appreciate Abbott & Costello's unique humour one has to understand the tradition in which it was rooted. Burlesque was a peculiar American institution, a kind of poor man's theatre with various risqué acts that contained ribald humour and immodestly dressed women. The name was taken from the Spanish word 'burlarse', which means to mock – originally the acts had deliberately spoofed the hit Broadway shows and operas that were frequented by the rich gentry. Burlesque was loud, uncouth and often downright salacious, but it became wildly popular during the Great Depression of the 1930s. For just a few cents, male patrons could purchase a ticket and be bawdily entertained for a couple of hours. Consequently, burlesque had a sleazy reputation and moralists of the day expressed outrage and demanded action be taken against the burlesque theatre managers. Minsky's Theatre was closed down many times by the police for allowing their girl strippers to remove too much of their scanty costumes (as memorably portrayed in William Friedkin's 1968 movie *The Night They Raided Minsky's*). Finally in 1937, re-elected New York mayor Fiorello La Guardia refused to renew the licences for burlesque theatres until the managers adhered to new rules that forbade all striptease acts. This action alone hastened the demise of the burlesque show.

And yet Abbott & Costello's act was never licentious. They certainly based their routines on the old classic burlesque sketches, but always without the heavy sexual innuendos. Their skits were primarily a nonsensical mix of malapropisms and miscommunications delivered with flawless timing, which they had honed to perfection. Bud played the glib tongued smartarse who would abusively harangue the hapless, child-like dimwit Lou for always misunderstanding Bud's fast talking dialogue, which dissolved into hilarious verbal mayhem.



↑ Abbott & Costello perform one of their routines for The Kate Smith Hour radio show

Their quick-witted repartee soon made them the most popular comedy team on the burlesque circuit, but with the now dwindling number of burlesque theatres, they needed to break into the vaudeville variety shows. They signed up with theatrical agent Eddie Sherman, who got them a two week booking in a minstrel show at the Steel Pier Theatre, Atlantic City, New Jersey. They went down a storm; their routines had the family audiences convulsing with laughter and the pair's impeccable delivery of the word heavy sketches astonished their comedy colleagues and the theatre management. Consequently, this led to a ten-week review at the Pantages Theatre, which at the time was considered to be the top vaudeville venue in America.

During this run Sherman got them signed up with the William Morris talent agency, who promised to get the duo national exposure. In February 1938, they were heard nationally for the first time on The Kate Smith Hour, a very popular music and comedy CBS radio programme. They received enough applause from the show's audience to earn them a return engagement. But radio listeners complained that they could not discern Abbott's voice from Costello's, as they both spoke with New Jersey accents. This led directly to Costello adopting a high-pitched voice to differentiate him from his partner.

For their next broadcast they performed what would become their

signature sketch: the Baseball Routine "Who's on First?" The sketch had many variations, but usually began with Lou asking Bud the batting order of the St Louis baseball team. Bud: "Well the players have peculiar names in the team. Who's on first, What's on second, I Don't Know is on third."

Lou: "Yeah! that's what I want to find out."

Bud: "I'm telling you Who's on first, What's on second, I Don't Know is on third."

Lou: "You know the guys' names?"

Bud: "Yes."

Lou: "Well then, who's playin' first?"

Bud: "Yes."

Lou: "I mean the player's name."

Bud: "Who."

Lou: "The player on first base."

Bud: "Who is on first base?"

Lou: "What are you asking me for, I don't know?"

Bud: "I Don't Know is on third."



↑ Abbott & Costello performing their famous act "Who's On First?"

This slick and hilarious routine goes on for ten minutes, with an exasperated and frantic Lou continually confusing the players odd names with the order of batting.

The response from radio listeners across the country was enormous – thousands of fan letters poured into the CBS studios requesting more sketches from Mr. Abbott & Mr. Costello. Their phenomenal success in this weekly national radio show would now open the door to Hollywood. *sdj*





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### Part 3

**A**bbott and Costello's national exposure on the weekly CBS radio programme *The Kate Smith*

*Hour* brought them great success but also presented them with a huge problem. Each week they introduced the nation's listeners to a different sketch which they took from their supply of burlesque routines, but after 24 weekly broadcasts they were now running low on material. To keep their act fresh and non-repetitive, Bud asked their agent, Eddie Sherman, to find them a scriptwriter who could supply them with new material. "I know just the man," said Sherman.

Enter John Grant, who had worked on the vaudeville circuit for years writing comedy routines for dozens of stage comedians. A week or so later a serious looking Grant turned up at the CBS studios and proffered Lou and Bud a sheaf of typewritten routines. Reading through the dialogue, they both began smiling – which soon turned to laughter. By the time they reached the last page, Lou was laughing so much he could hardly recite the lines. "You got anymore like these?" asked Lou. "As much as you need," said the dour, unsmiling Grant. He was immediately put on the payroll and would continue to write sketches for Abbott and Costello for the next sixteen years.

The pair's success on the radio led to a featured spot in the Broadway revue *The Streets of Paris*. This hit show, which featured Carmen Miranda, ran for 274 performances and generated rave reviews from theatre critics and audiences alike; it made Abbott and Costello the toast of Broadway. That, however, was topped in March 1940 when President Franklin D. Roosevelt invited Lou and Bud to perform for his dinner guests at the White House in Washington D.C. The invitation included a special hand-written request from the president himself: "Would the boys please perform their 'Who's on First?' routine for me and my guests."

Hollywood now came knocking on their door in the shape of MGM movie



↑ A&C with Carmen Miranda in *The Streets of Paris*



mogul Louis B. Mayer, who offered to pay them \$17,500 per film as a supporting act in two of the studio's lavish musicals. Mayer had no idea at the time that Lou Costello had once worked as a stuntman for his studio in the late 1920s. Lou hadn't forgotten, neither had he ever let go of his dream of becoming a movie star. Consequently, it was unexpected when he told agent Eddie Sherman to "Turn it down, we're worth more than what MGM is offering." "Now hold on Lou," said a disappointed Abbott, who was keen to go to California, "This is a major studio movie offer and something you've always wanted." Lou immediately fired back: "That's right, but we ain't going for nothing less than \$20,000 a picture."

Whilst awaiting a reply from Mayer, they received a counter-offer from Universal Pictures – \$35,000 for the pair to appear in the musical *Riviera*, in supporting roles to the male and female romantic leads. Sherman convinced the boys that Universal would give them much more exposure than a film studio who boasted that they had "more stars than there are in heaven", plus the money

was double that which had been offered by Mayer. This suited Lou because he had not particularly relished a return to the movie studio that had once shunned him as an injured stuntman. As far as Lou was concerned, if he was ever to return to MGM to make a picture, it would be as a star. Subsequently, they accepted Universal's offer and travelled West; Bud for the first time and Lou in pursuit of the movie fame that had eluded him a dozen years before.

By the mid 1930s Universal Pictures had been close to bankruptcy; their movies had become hackneyed and unimaginative, with the bulk of their output being an almost continuous series of horror and jungle films. With no major stars under contract and second rate directors behind the cameras, the end result was an ever-diminishing box office returns.

Universal Pictures was saved from oblivion by a young MGM reject named Deanna Durbin.

In 1935, the teenage Canadian soprano singer had made an MGM musical short with another young unknown singer, Judy Garland. The story, possibly apocryphal, is that when Louis B. Mayer saw the film, he said





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“Fire the fat one.” He had actually meant Judy Garland, but the producer fired Durbin instead as, just like Garland, her weight tended to fluctuate. Durbin was quickly signed up by Universal for a series of musicals in which she became a singing sensation and a bigger box office attraction than Shirley Temple. Although a very private and extremely reluctant actress, nevertheless, by 1940, Deanna Durbin was the most highly paid female star in the world and single-handedly rescued Universal Pictures from its creditors.

When Abbott and Costello arrived at Universal City they soon realised that their film debut was not going to be anywhere near as exuberant as a typical Durbin musical production. In fact the low budget film – now retitled *One Night in the Tropics* (1940) – had already started filming, and the cast were forced to re-shoot new scenes to accommodate the comedy duo. Needless to say the director and the cast were not exactly enamoured with these



↑ Lou and Bud perform one of their routines in a scene from *One Night in the Tropics*

↓ A&C's famous Drill Routine in *Buck Privates*




production was *Buck Privates* (1941), selected for its topical theme. With a war raging in Europe, President Roosevelt had signed into law The Selective and Training Act, which had been passed by Congress in September 1940. This introduced the first peacetime conscription in US history, which required all eligible men between the ages of 21 and 35 to register with local draft boards. Using a lottery system, should an individual's number be drawn, he would then have to serve 12 months in the military.

*Buck Privates* opens with a voiceover and actual newsreel of Roosevelt signing the Act. It continues with the blindfolded Secretary of War, Henry Stimson, drawing the first conscription lottery number – 158. The scene then cuts to Abbott and Costello, playing a couple of petty con artists, trying to sell cheap neckties on the street. To avoid being arrested by a policeman they run into a cinema that is being used as a conscription centre, and before they know it, find themselves “buck privates” in the US Army.

Their rapid fire dialogue is mostly ad-libbed throughout the film, which includes their hilarious “drill-routine” and numerous utterings from Lou that “I’m a baaaaa boy.” Three songs, performed by the popular Andrews Sisters, were also included, with one of them, *The Boogie-Woogie Bugle Boy of Company B*, receiving an Academy Award nomination.

The movie was made on a budget of \$200,000, and when it was released in January 1941, it raked in an astonishing \$4.7 million (\$60 million in today's money). Not only did it out-gross such prestigious films as *Citizen Kane*, *Here Comes Mr. Jordan* and *Sergeant York*, it also became the most profitable movie in the 30-year history of Universal Pictures.

By the year's end the nation's exhibitors would name Abbott and Costello the number one box office draw in movies. Lou Costello had finally realised his dream, for he was now a bona fide movie star. 

tour and continue their weekly scheduled radio spot. When *One Night in the Tropics* premiered in late October 1940, it was critically lambasted as “a tedious romantic farce that only comes to life when the new comedy team of Abbott and Costello appear on the screen.” During its general release cinema audiences, too, enjoyed and laughed at the A&C

routines, but the film was an overall flop.

The studio, however, had noted the duo's originality and the audience's positive reaction to the sketches A&C had provided for the film. Universal executives now offered them a four-picture deal at \$50,000 per film, with each production specifically constructed around their characters. Sherman then asked for a 10 per cent slice of the profits of each film. Universal balked at the idea of giving away a percentage of the studio's profits, but when Lou lied to them that they had received an offer from Paramount, they quickly agreed to the deal.

Abbott and Costello's first starring



two “burlesque” interlopers. But as Bud and Lou began to perform their “Two Tens for a Five” and a truncated version of “Who's On First” routines in front of the camera, the attitude swiftly changed. Both the cast and crew laughed so much and so loudly that the director had to yell “Cut!”; he was concerned that their laughter was being picked up on the sound recording. The film wrapped in August with a memorable last line delivered by Lou's character: “A husband is what's left of a sweetheart after the nerve has been killed.”

With filming complete, the boys hurried back to New York to undertake a vaudeville



## Part 4

**B**uck Privates was still on general release when Abbott and Costello completed their second starring movie for Universal. In *Hold That Ghost* (1941), the boys inherit an old abandoned roadhouse that belonged to a dead mobster, who'd used it to stash his illicit loot. The film plays on the old familiar haunted house theme, with an unintelligible Costello continually failing to convince Abbott that he keeps encountering ghosts, dead bodies, moving candles and revolving rooms.

*Hold That Ghost* is one of the best of their early movies, thanks to a good storyline and a stellar supporting cast including the brilliant comedienne Joan Davis, who would later find worldwide fame with her TV series *I Married Joan*. Yet as the film entered post production, Universal decided to put it on ice and follow up the military theme of *Buck Privates* with a picture about the Navy. This decision was probably made due to President Roosevelt taking the USA another step closer to involvement in the war in Europe.

In March 1941 the president had signed the Lend-Lease Act, which allowed the US to provide articles of defence to any government whose protection was considered vital to US security. Not long after the Act was signed, the US began supplying weapons and warships to Great Britain, which was now the only European country left fighting the Nazis.

During this period of preparing for war, the US armed services were eager for publicity and offered Hollywood film companies free access to all military bases and warships. Taking advantage of this to save on production costs, Universal requested and were granted permission from the US Navy to film the next Abbott and Costello motion picture in both the San Diego and San Pedro naval bases. With a quickly conceived script embellished by the boys' gag writer, John Grant, the filming of *In the Navy* began in April 1941, and was completed in just four weeks.

The film has an amusing in-joke in the



↑ Abbott & Costello in a scene from *In the Navy*

opening credits, with Bud and Lou in sailor uniforms hoisting two flags. The first, run up by Bud, reads 'Bud Abbott and Lou Costello'; the second, run up by Lou, reads 'in Buck Privates'. This gets Lou a hard slap around the face from Abbott. Lou then takes down the incorrect flag and hoists another which now reads 'In the Navy'.

The movie follows the same theme as *Buck Privates*, with the pair causing absolute mayhem within another armed service institution, interspersed with songs provided by crooner Dick Powell and the Andrews Sisters. The film's uproarious climax has Lou impersonating a ship's commander to impress the Andrews Sisters. He then proceeds to steer the USS Alabama through a series of naval manoeuvres that are way beyond the laws of navigation. It was this segment that got the studio into trouble with the US Navy.

A print of all military-based films produced by Hollywood had to be sent to Washington DC to receive a seal of approval before general release. The navy's admirals were outraged after viewing the A&C film, describing the climactic sequence as "disgraceful, an insult to the navy," and refused to allow it to be released. Universal executives went into panic overdrive as the sequence was not only the big climax of the movie, but it also ran the full length of a film reel. Fortunately the film's producer, Alex Gottlieb, came up with the idea of a framing device that had Lou dreaming the whole incident whilst

unconscious. With this scene added to the film, the navy's top brass finally gave its approval and *In the Navy* was released on 30 May 1941.

With barely a break in what was fast becoming a gruelling schedule, the boys began filming their fourth movie, *Ride 'Em Cowboy*, which was their take on the then popular singing cowboy genre. But when completed in August, its release was postponed to put Bud and Lou back into military uniforms yet again.



This time they were up in the air – as two reluctant recruits for the Army Air Corps – in *Keep 'Em Flying*. The picture took a more serious look at military training than their two previous service films, and was practically a recruitment movie for the Air Corps. But there were still plenty of comical routines performed throughout by the duo. The premiere on 28th November 1941 was followed some days later by a *Keep 'Em Flying* glider contest that had been organised by the Universal publicity department. The event was held at a private airfield just east of Los Angeles and when Bud and Lou arrived, all the media, including CBS radio, descended on them to record and broadcast their comments. Their interview was suddenly interrupted by a noisy commotion →



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amongst the crowd of spectators, as reporters and photographers began running to their cars. A puzzled Lou shouted, "Hey! Where you all going?!" One of the CBS crewmen, who was now frantically dismantling his equipment, shouted back, "We've been ordered to Long Beach to cover the take off of B-17s. The Japs have bombed Pearl Harbor!"

The war brought Abbott and Costello even more popularity, and by the end of 1942, they were voted the number one box-office draw in the US. As all of their films were based on a low-cost formula with wide appeal, Universal Pictures was the envy of every other film studio in Hollywood.

However, the whole moneymaking phenomenon of Abbott and Costello movies confounded some film critics, who simply could not understand the duo's mass appeal. After all, their comedy was neither sophisticated nor cerebral, and moreover, the plain-featured, 46-year-old Abbott and the rotund, diminutive Costello certainly did not possess the customary movie star sex appeal. But perhaps what the critics failed to realise was that A&C's zany humour and absurd wordplay was helping to lift the morale of a war-weary American public. War brought austerity, with petrol and food rationing, wage and price controls, and ever lengthening casualty lists.



↑ A&C being honoured by the Governor of Nebraska during their War Bonds campaign



↑ A&C promoting a wartime recruitment poster

Consequently, moviegoers flocked to the duo's pictures to enjoy an hour or so of good old fashioned slapstick and belly laughs, which helped to raise their otherwise flagging spirits.

Nevertheless, what could not be criticised was the boys' patriotism and their extraordinary efforts in undertaking two nationwide tours to raise funds for the government through the US War Bond Drive. Bud and Lou willingly took on the roles of irresistible government salesmen whilst

performing impromptu shows in 78 cities across the US. It is estimated that during the first sixteen months of the war, A&C alone raised over \$85 million in donations from the American public toward the war effort. They were also involved in the grand opening of the Hollywood Canteen which entertained the millions of servicemen who passed through Tinseltown on their way to fight in the Pacific.

But the strenuous and non-stop barnstorming tours, on top of their weekly radio show and making another five movies, took a toll on Lou's health. When he returned to Los Angeles in March 1943 after their second tour, he was struck down with a mysterious illness that was later diagnosed as rheumatic fever. Usually a child's ailment, when it strikes an adult the consequences can be fatal. Confined to a hospital bed, he required months of total rest to aid his recovery, which translated into a long absence from the screen that could be ruinous. Lou was only too aware

of that old Hollywood adage – the hotter the stars, the faster they cooled down.

Just as Lou was coming to the end of his long, enforced convalescence, he suffered yet another personal tragedy when his beloved infant son, Lou Jr., drowned in the family swimming pool. This event changed Lou's temperament forever and his family life was never the same again. He began arguing continuously with his partner Abbott, and also with Alex Gottlieb, who had produced eight of the team's movies. These altercations got so acrimonious and belligerent that eventually Gottlieb left Universal and went to work at Warner Bros. Universal Pictures was now desperate for another A&C comedy and tentatively suggested to the increasingly volatile Costello that getting back to work could possibly help him through the grieving process.

And so, after a 15-month hiatus, A&C returned to the studios and made two films almost back to back: *Lost in a Harem* whilst on loan to MGM, and *In Society* at Universal. The latter was advertised as "The Kings of Comedy are back", and so too were A&C's loyal fans, propelling the boys back into the top ten box-office draw list for 1944.

Over the following 12 months, three more A&C movies were produced and released. The third of these, *Abbott & Costello in Hollywood*, was the first movie that had the duo's name in an actual title and its general



release coincided with the surrender of Japan.

Not only was WWII finally over, but according to rumours that were rampant around Hollywood, so too was the Abbott and Costello partnership.

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↑ Abbott and Costello at the grand opening of the Hollywood Canteen for servicemen, October 1942





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### Part 5

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**H**ollywood in the 1930s/40s was a small town with a close-knit community, and consequently, there were few secrets there. Everything about every movie studio and its contracted stars was generally known to those who made it their business to amass that most valuable of commodities – Hollywood gossip and rumour. This information would then inevitably find its way to the typewriter keys of either Louella Parsons or Hedda Hopper, the top two Hollywood gossip columnists of their day. In October 1945, both of their columns carried reports that all was not well with the Abbott and Costello partnership, with Miss Hopper's article further stating that Bud and Lou were about to break up and go their separate ways.

Universal Pictures immediately released a communique categorically refuting this "misinformation" by announcing that Abbott and Costello's next film project, titled *Little Giant*, would begin filming in a few months time. This was followed by both Bud and Lou making a public declaration of solidarity at a press conference hastily arranged by the studio.

However, the rumour of the team's break-up was based on fact, for since Costello's long confined illness and the tragic death of his infant son, Lou "Butch" Jr, tension between Lou and Bud had increased dramatically. The growing animosity between them finally blew up – into a year-long feud – over the triviality of a domestic maid that Lou had fired and whom Bud had then re-employed at his own residence. Lou was furious, considering it a breach of friendship for Bud to hire a housemaid that he had sacked.

As a consequence, Lou informed their agent, Eddie Sherman, that the A&C partnership was over and from now on he would work alone. Sherman had to remind Lou that both he and Abbott were still under a dual contract with the studios, which had another 26 months to run. Furthermore, if Lou insisted on going



↑ "Ghosts" Horatio (Lou Costello) and Melody (Marjorie Reynolds) in the *The Time of Their Lives* (1946)

↑ William Goetz, Head of Production at Universal-International

ahead with the split, Universal would have no choice but to sue Costello, who at the time could ill afford expensive lawyer fees.

Reluctantly acquiescing to Sherman's sound advice, Lou demanded that their next film, *Little Giant* (aka *On the Carpet*), be character/situation rather than gag driven, as he refused to perform any comedy routines with Abbott. Lou's demand forced a complete rewrite of the script – made more difficult for the production team by Lou and Bud only communicating with each other through their agent. Costello continued his campaign for change and disharmony with their next movie, *The Time of Their Lives* (the title certainly did not reflect the atmosphere on the set), in which Lou played a Revolutionary tinker who returns to the present day as a ghost.

Their feud resulted in two rather odd A&C movies – bereft of their usual smartarse and dimwit routines. In fact, the duo appeared together only briefly in both productions. Needless to say the films performed badly at the box office, as moviegoers simply did not take to the new A&C format. This was brought home to them when they dropped off the list of top-ten money-making stars for three consecutive years: 1945-1947.

Whether the failure of these two particular movies at the box office was the catalyst for Costello burying the hatchet with Abbott is debatable. But it no doubt played a part in their decision to kiss and make up at the end of 1946. Their reconciliation also coincided with the old

Universal management team being ousted in a merger with the International Pictures Corporation.

The new company, now rebranded Universal-International, was headed by William Goetz, whose father-in-law was Louis B. Mayer – head honcho at M-G-M. Goetz despised the "tits-and-sand", cheap westerns and low comedy movies that had been the staple of the previous Universal regime. On his first day in charge, he announced to his staff that UI would dispense with cheap potboilers and instead concentrate on making prestige films that were both intelligent and commercial.

Following the poor financial performance of A&C's last two movies, Goetz wanted both Bud and Lou ushered out of the studio gates as soon as their contract expired. In the meantime, he assigned associate producer Robert Arthur to seek out a couple of motion pictures for the comedy team to make that would see out their contract.

Hollywood had always found it difficult to resurrect the careers of stars once they began to fade at the box office. This was more prevalent with comedy teams, whose shelf life in the movies tended to be rather short. Arthur now faced the challenge of finding a movie script that the public could identify as a typical knockabout Abbott and Costello comedy, and that unlike the previous two, would make some money.

A number of motion pictures, that became almost a trend during 1946/7, were based on stories of returning war veterans adjusting to civilian life, such as





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the award-winning classic *The Best Years of Our Lives* (1946). Noting the popularity of these movies, Arthur came up with the idea of returning to the film that had originally made A&C stars.

The boys were now able to re-establish their straight man/funny man formula by reprising their original *Buck Privates* characters – Slicker Smith and Herbie Brown – in *Buck Privates Come Home* (1947). In this, their only sequel, A&C's characters return home from their tour of duty in WWII Europe. Herbie (Costello) is carrying contraband in his kit bag – a six-year-old French orphan girl named "Evey", played by Shirley Temple lookalike Beverly Simmons. A series of comical situations ensue as the boys attempt to find civilian employment so they can get the orphan legally adopted. Following the usual frenetic and hilarious A&C finale, the film ends happily for the boys and little Evey.

For the second film, producer Robert Arthur found a script originally intended for James Stewart, who was unable to commit due to his work schedule. The story was inspired by an obscure 19th century Montana law that made the survivor of a gunfight responsible for the family and debts of the person he shot. In *The Wistful Widow of Wagon Gap* (1947), Bud and Lou are once again travelling salesmen who arrive in the lawless town of the title. When Lou fires his gun in the air to get the townsfolk's attention, notorious outlaw Fred Hawkins drops dead. Lou is framed for his murder and by law inherits the deceased wife (played by the formidable Marjorie Main) and her seven children. Lou is then made sheriff and ordered to clean up the town. Throughout the film



↑ Lou Costello, Marjorie Main and Bud Abbott in *The Wistful Widow of Wagon Gap* (1947)



↑ Poster for *Buck Privates Come Home* (1947)

he carries a photo of the widow and her brood to scare off the bad guys, who, if they shoot Lou, will automatically become responsible for the widow Hawkins and her family. This western spoof is one of the boys' better films, and the dinner sequence in which the widow's kids put a frog into the unsuspecting Lou's soup is simply priceless.

Whilst A&C were making these two movies, William Goetz had ploughed ahead with producing the first batch of UI's "prestigious films". During its first year UI released *A Double Life* (which won star Ronald Colman an Academy Award for Best Actor), *Great Expectations*, *Odd Man Out* and *Black Narcissus*. But when UI's money men worked out the box office returns for the year, they (and especially Goetz) were astonished with the bottom line results. They clearly showed that A&C's *Buck Privates Come Home* and *The Wistful Widow of Wagon Gap* had completely out-grossed the total profits of the rest of UI's product released in 1947.

The boys' original contract with Universal had now expired and Lou told their agent, Eddie Sherman, to immediately begin negotiating a contract with any other Hollywood studio

except M-G-M. Bud and Lou were aware that Goetz had wanted them out of UI, which Lou believed was down to the influence of Goetz's father-in-law, Louis B. Mayer. Mayer had never forgiven them for not signing with M-G-M at the beginning of their film careers. But before Sherman could engage with any of the other studios, Goetz – who never understood A&C's mass appeal but realised their films could still make money – offered the pair a new contract. Sherman argued (with sound logic) that as A&C pictures now appeared to be financing UI's so called prestige productions, they wanted a better offer. The boys' return to form and Sherman's argument led Goetz to offer them a more lucrative contract for two UI films each year, with an option to also make an independent production.

A&C's first UI film under their new contract (which had the working title of *The Brain of Frankenstein*) would become the studio's top profit-making production of 1948, grossing over \$3.2 million worldwide (\$45 million in today's money). Furthermore, the movie is considered by many film historians to be the greatest Hollywood horror-comedy spoof ever made.





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### Part 6

**"T**his stinks! My five-year-old daughter could write a better story. You don't think I'm making this crap, do you?" Lou Costello looked around producer Robert Arthur's office and, locating a waste-basket, threw the screenplay into it. As Costello moved to exit the office, Arthur said, "I'll make a deal with you Lou, you do this picture and I'll pay you fifty thousand dollars cash for your share of the profits". Lou, with his hand on the door handle, stopped and turned. "Fifty G's right now?" "Right now," replied the producer. Costello retrieved the script from the bin, smiled and said, "Ok, I'll look at it again".

The unexpected resurgence at the box office of two Abbott and Costello 1947 comedies, *Buck Privates Come Home* and *The Wistful Widow of Wagon Gap*, led Universal-International to renew the duo's contract. For the first film under their new contract, producer Robert Arthur came up with an innovative, genre-bending idea. In 'The Brain of Frankenstein' (the original working title), the classic Universal monster characters of Dracula, the Wolf Man, Frankenstein's Monster and the Invisible Man would meet up with Abbott and Costello. It was a risky idea to inject these fictional horror movie characters into a comedy, as no other film studio had ever combined the horror and comedy genres before. Furthermore, the last of the Universal monster films, *The House of Dracula*, had completely bombed at the box office in 1945, leading everyone to assume the horror movie cycle had run out of steam. Hence Lou Costello's initial reluctance to make such a movie.

Nevertheless, with the \$50,000 sweetener appearing to alleviate their concerns, Bud and Lou began filming at Universal City in May 1948. Charles T. Barton took the director's chair alongside Bela Lugosi and Lon Chaney Jr., resurrecting their roles as Dracula and the Wolf Man, respectively. Glenn Strange took on the role of Frankenstein's Monster and Vincent Price voiced the Invisible Man.



↑ **Publicity shot of *Abbott and Costello Meet Frankenstein***



↑ **Lon Chaney Jr. (out of his Wolf Man makeup) relaxing on set with Lou Costello**

The film opens with a cartoon figure of Frankenstein's Monster knocking on two coffins which eject skeletal versions of Bud and Lou. As they run into each other screaming, their bones drop down to spell the film's title. The boys play bumbling railroad baggage clerks who receive a strange shipment, which unbeknownst to them contain the remains of Dracula and the Monster. But after delivering them to The House of Horrors Museum, the coffins are found to be empty. Blamed by the insurance agent for losing the contents, the boys follow the monsters' trail to a nearby mysterious island, where a mad scientist (played by Charles Bradstreet) wants to switch Lou's brain with that of the Monster. With everyone chasing each other, the Wolf Man turns up to thwart the scientist's dastardly plan.

The production appeared to be a happy experience for all involved, as revealed in the bloopers/outtakes reel contained within the SE DVD release. Costello's scene of sitting on a chair that already contains

the Monster has Glenn Strange reduced to tears of laughter at Lou's ad-libs. Lon Chaney's line that he feeds to Lou: "You don't understand...every night when the moon is full, I turn into a wolf", and Lou's quick retort of, "You and fifty million other guys!", left Chaney guffawing with laughter.

Released in August 1948, the now retitled *Abbott and Costello Meet Frankenstein* was not only a smash hit at the box office, it also delivered for UI a comic masterpiece. However, this had no effect whatsoever on the studio's formula that they had used for all of the A&C movies – keep the productions cheap and produce them fast. The studio's advertising and marketing budgets for A&C films had always been miserly, but with *Abbott and Costello Meet Frankenstein*, they reduced their advertising costs to virtually zero when someone realised all they had to do was include the Abbott and Costello names within the title and the film would practically sell itself. Inspired by this money saving revelation and the box office success of *Meet Frankenstein*, over the next six years A&C would go on to meet *The Killer*, *The Invisible Man*, *Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde*, *The Keystone Kops*, *The Mummy*, *get Lost in Alaska*, and *Go to Mars*.

UI would replicate the A&C production model with two other team-up series that also proved highly profitable, and



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veritable lifesavers for the studio. Marjorie Main (who had played the Widow of Wagon Gap) and Percy Kilbride were two character actors who played poverty stricken hillbillies in the feature film *The Egg and I* (1947). Their characters captured all the notices when the film was released and consequently, Ma and Pa Kettle plus their fifteen kids



partly because the portly 46-year-old Costello was unconvincing as a youthful giant killer. *Captain Kidd* fared better with more of an adult theme and a fine performance from Charles Laughton, who resurrected his role of the pirate captain he had played in a 1945 movie.

Abbott and Costello's relationship with UI had now become untenable,

and the studio seemed eager to dispose of them – which they finally did in 1955. Times had changed and the duo's comedy, which had perfectly fitted the war years, now seemed dated. Plus, there were two new kids on the Hollywood block, who, by the early 1950s, had shot to the top of the box office list.

Dean Martin and Jerry Lewis were now moviegoers' favourite big screen comedy duo. Lou and Bud's descent was almost as rapid as their rise to stardom. They moved into television with *The Abbott and Costello Show*, which at first proved popular but was cancelled after two seasons when the pair demanded more money. After

would go on to appear in a ten-film series. Francis the Talking Mule and his less than bright master (played by Donald O'Connor) would also appear in a similar series. Once again, UI found that placing the names Ma and Pa Kettle and Francis in their respective film titles negated any money being spent on advertising, which helped to maximise their profits. This was noted – and sarcastically highlighted – by Hedda Hopper when she wrote in her gossip column, "I hear that everyone at Universal-International is happy because the Abbott and Costello pictures plus Ma and Pa Kettle pay all the studio staff salaries."

Reading Hopper's article prompted Bud and Lou to demand that the UI executive allocate bigger budgets for future A&C movies. An enraged Lou confronted UI's studio boss, William Goetz, demanding better stories, location shoots and films in colour. "None of the 26 movies we've made for your damn studio have ever been in colour," he ranted. But Goetz was unhearing to their demands as he saw no purpose in increasing their budgets, especially as his policy of making other "prestigious" films had already lost the studio \$12 million.

Snubbing UI by using their contractual agreement (which permitted them to make one independent film per year), Bud and Lou decided to invest their own money in two colour productions and release them through Warner Bros. Lou's choice was the fairy story *Jack and the Beanstalk* (1952) and Bud's was *Abbott and Costello Meet Captain Kidd* (1953). The result was a disappointing return for Lou's production,

one more film – *Dance with Me Henry* (1956), independently made at United Artists and a box office flop – the pair finally split, which went almost unnoticed by the media. Bud and Lou never saw or spoke to each other again.

Throughout their movie careers, both Bud Abbott and Lou Costello had been big spenders and inveterate gamblers. At the height of their popularity they were the highest earners in Hollywood, but that also placed them into a brutal tax bracket. Their agent, Eddie Sherman, had continually reminded them to honour their tax obligations and to hire the very best financial advisors. But unfortunately for them, they hadn't, and as a consequence they suffered dearly for not ensuring their taxes had been paid regularly. In 1957, the Internal Revenue Service audited Bud and Lou's finances and found that they owed Uncle Sam years of unpaid taxes. This resulted in a serious loss of assets including their homes and all of their film rights, which forced them both into bankruptcy. Following two years of continuous financial stress, Lou suffered a fatal heart attack a few days after completing his first solo comedy, *The 30 Foot Bride of Candy Rock* (1959). He was just 52 years old. Bud, although now practically destitute, would survive his old partner by almost 15 years, finally succumbing to cancer in 1974.

The Abbott and Costello story ended as just another one of many Hollywood personal tragedies. Yet Bud and Lou left a legacy of comedy film work that contains all of the classic burlesque and vaudeville routines that otherwise would have been lost to future generations. Their baseball skit "Who's On First" is probably their most enduring sketch, and a gold record of their famous routine has been placed in the Baseball Hall of Fame. Moreover, in the 1988 Oscar-winning movie *Rain Man*, Dustin Hoffman's autistic character, Raymond Babbit, recites an affectless "Who's on First" as a defence mechanism when anything upsets him. No doubt Bud and Lou would have been proud of that. *shf*



↑ Scene from *Jack and the Beanstalk* (1952)

↓ Charles Laughton and Lou Costello in *Abbott and Costello Meet Captain Kidd* (1953)

