

The Funny '40s

Whether entertaining troops or lifting the country's spirits, these comedic legends of the 1940s always delivered with lots of laughs and zinging one-liners.

Preparation & How-To's

- Write the names of these comedians on a whiteboard so everyone can see: Abbott and Costello, Jack Benny, Bob Hope, W. C. Fields, Groucho Marx, and Mae West.
- Read aloud the 18 one-liners (three by each comedian), pausing after each one to see if anyone knows which comedian said it.
- After revealing the correct answers, read the brief biographies of the comedians and ask the group about their recollections of the comedians.



The Funny '40s

Who Said...?

1. "You know you're getting old when the candles cost more than the cake."
Answer: Bob Hope
2. "A face like mine is hard to forget. How do you know? I've been trying to for years."
Answer: Abbott and Costello
3. "When I'm good, I'm very good. But when I'm bad, I'm better."
Answer: Mae West
4. "I grew up with six brothers. That's how I learned to dance—waiting for the bathroom."
Answer: Bob Hope
5. "Age is strictly a case of mind over matter. If you don't mind, it doesn't matter."
Answer: Jack Benny
6. "If at first you don't succeed, try, try again. Then quit. No use in being a damn fool about it."
Answer: W. C. Fields
7. "I refuse to join any club that would have me as a member."
Answer: Groucho Marx
8. "Middle age is when your age starts to show around your middle."
Answer: Bob Hope

9. “Be open-minded, but not so open-minded that your brains fall out.”

Answer: Groucho Marx

10. “I don’t deserve this award, but I have arthritis and I don’t deserve that either.”

Answer: Jack Benny

11. “If I’m dead, then... then why am I so hungry?”

Answer: Bud Abbott

12. “You only live once, but if you do it right, once is enough.”

Answer: Mae West

13. “I cook with wine; sometimes I even add it to the food.”

Answer: W. C. Fields

14. “Give me golf clubs, fresh air, and a beautiful partner, and you can keep the clubs and the fresh air.”

Answer: Jack Benny

15. “Marriage is a great institution, but I’m not ready for an institution.”

Answer: Mae West

16. “If you can’t dazzle them with brilliance, baffle them with bull.”

Answer: W. C. Fields

17. “Outside of a dog, a book is a man’s best friend. Inside of a dog, it’s too dark to read.”

Answer: Groucho Marx

18. “What is the use of having ignorance if you can’t show it?”

Answer: Lou Costello

The Comedians

Abbott and Costello were an acclaimed American comedy team that became the most popular comedy duo of the 1940s and early 1950s. Bud Abbott (1897–1974) was the devious straight man to Lou Costello’s (1906–1959) inane hilarity. The pair first teamed up in 1935, working in burlesque shows while perfecting their shtick. Their “Who’s on First” routine is one of the most loved and well-known 20th-century comedy bits.

In 1938, they began performing on radio broadcasts, soon getting their own program, *The Abbott and Costello Show*. They also began appearing in films, including *One Night in the Tropics*, *Buck Privates*, *In the Navy*, *Ride ‘Em Cowboy*, *Who Done It?*, and *Abbott and Costello Meet Frankenstein*. They quickly became huge box office draws, and in the summer of 1942, their promotional tour to sell war bonds drummed up roughly \$85 million in sales in just over a month.

Jack Benny, born Benjamin Kubelsky in 1894, was a hugely popular American comedian who performed on the radio, on television, and in film. He started out with a vaudeville act, playing violin before utilizing his excellent comic timing to transition into more comedic acts. Benny changed his name multiple times until settling on the stage name of Jack Benny. His wife, Mary Livingstone (born Sadie Marks), also a popular comedian and actress, became his lifelong partner in his radio shows. The couple was married in 1927 and remained happily together until his death in 1974.

Benny's catchphrase was a long pause followed by an exasperated, "Well!" His comedy shows—particularly the long-lasting *The Jack Benny Program*, which appeared on radio and TV for over 30 years—are credited with helping to shape the sitcom genre. Benny was honored with a Golden Globe for Best TV Show (1958) and two Primetime Emmy Awards for Outstanding Lead Actor in a Comedy series (1957 and 1959).

W. C. Fields, born William Claude Dukenfield in Darby, Pennsylvania, in 1880, was a comedian, actor, writer, and juggler. Fields' humor centered on his misanthropic, hard-drinking, grandiose-but-lovable persona; he knew how to use it to garner laughs. Like most of his contemporaries, Fields made his name in vaudeville. His early act was as a silent juggler, which earned him international acclaim. He began incorporating more comedy into his performances and soon became a featured comedian in the *Ziegfeld Follies* and a star on Broadway.

Fields used multiple props, gags, and costumes, and was well-known for an outlandish billiards skit, complete with wild trick shots. One of his favored looks included a top hat, cutaway coat, and cane; another included a fake-looking clip-on mustache. Fields appeared in both silent films and talkies, finding success in both genres. Some of his hit films include *International House*, *It's a Gift*, *Poppy*, *The Big Broadcast of 1938*, and *My Little Chickadee*, costarring Mae West.

Bob Hope was a British American comedian who became a Hollywood legend. Born in London in 1903, Hope's family moved to Cleveland, Ohio, when he was a young boy. As a teen, he busked—singing, dancing, and performing comedy acts for tips. The multi-talented performer briefly pursued a boxing career and other odd jobs before going after a future in entertainment. He started out in vaudeville shows and theater before conquering radio, movies, and television.

Hope's many accomplishments include hosting the Academy Awards 19 times, starring in over 50 films, writing 14 books, making 57 tours for the United Service Organizations (USO) to entertain active-duty troops overseas, and pioneering modern American stand-up comedy. Hope, who died at age 100 in 2003, was made an honorary veteran of the U.S. Armed Forces and was known for his self-deprecating humor, wicked one-liners, and big heart. From stand-up, acting, and vaudeville to song, dance, and hosting duties, Hope could do it all.

Groucho Marx, who was born in New York City in 1890 and died in 1977, was known for his spot-on wisecracks, as well as for his bushy eyebrows, glasses, painted-on mustache, and cigars. He was the leader of the Marx Brothers comedy acting troupe, which included his siblings: Chico, Harpo, and Zeppo Marx. The Marx Brothers started out in vaudeville before turning to the silver screen. Some iconic Marx Brothers films include *Duck Soup*, *Horse Feathers*, and *A Day at the Races*.

Marx, who also had a successful solo career, particularly in radio and television, was the host of the game show *You Bet Your Life*. The quick-witted funnyman is considered one of America's best-ever comedians. His memory and image live on in the quintessential novelty disguise of Groucho glasses, complete with attached bushy eyebrows, nose, and bushy mustache.

Mae West was a multi-talented American actress, comedian, singer, and writer who died a Hollywood legend in 1980. The blonde bombshell began her entertainment career in vaudeville and theater before heading to Hollywood to make her mark on the silver screen. Known for her breezy, provocative humor and double entendres, as well as for her good looks and sexy voice, the American Film Institute ranked West the 15th-greatest female screen legend of classic American cinema.

Born in 1893 to a prizefighter father (Battlin' Jack West) and a fashion model mother in Brooklyn, West wrote, produced, and directed her own (often scandalous) plays and film roles. Two of her most iconic projects were her very popular 1928 play *Diamond Lil* and the 1933 Academy Award-nominated film version *She Done Him Wrong*, costarring Cary Grant. She was often censored and was even arrested on "morals charges" due to the salacious content of her work, which garnered her publicity and fame as an alluring (and hilarious) "bad girl." By 1935, she was a national phenomenon and the highest-paid woman (and second-highest-paid person after Randolph Hearst) in America.
