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# Two Comics Walk Into A Studio

*On Showtime's 'Inside Comedy,' can comedians talk comically about comedy?*

By [DON STEINBERG](#)



Is there a secret to great comedy? WSJ's Don Steinberg joins Lunch Break with the answer from his interviews with Steve Carell and David Steinberg as they prepare to launch season two of their Showtime series "Inside Comedy." Photo: AP.

During the coming season of Showtime's "Inside Comedy" series, Louis C.K. tells host David Steinberg that to grow as a comedian, Mr. C.K. needs to go on stage with untested material and "invite the awful." Bob Newhart says "fear is a friend" and, although he has done it for more than 50 years, insists that for him performing stand-up still is like playing Russian roulette in "The Deer Hunter." Keenen Ivory Wayans recalls that when his brothers were kids and said they wanted to be performers like he was, he put them through comedy college, making them watch movies including "Airplane!" and "Blazing Saddles" and quizzing them about why the films were funny.

It's a great  
time to be  
someone who



Getty Images

Steve Carell



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Keenen Ivory Wayans

enjoys comedians talking about comedy. The last few years have brought a ton of it: Marc Maron's "WTF" and other podcasts, Jerry Seinfeld's Web show "Comedians in Cars Getting Coffee," IFC's "Comedy Bang! Bang!" (just renewed for a second season),

HBO's "Talking Funny" special with Mr. Seinfeld, Mr. C.K., Chris Rock and Ricky Gervais. On Feb. 11, Showtime's "Inside Comedy" launches its second season, which will feature sit-down interviews with monsters of comedy including Steve Martin, Lily Tomlin, Tina Fey, Bill Maher and Judd Apatow.

"Inside Comedy" is hosted by Mr. Steinberg and co-executive-produced by Steve Carell, and last week the co-creators took a few moments to talk about the art of talking about comedy. Mr. Carell was in New Orleans for a Super Bowl TV special, presenting a "Fantasy Football Player of the Year" award to Vikings running back Adrian Peterson (the actor called fantasy football nerdier than Dungeons & Dragons). Mr. Steinberg was in Tampa, Fla., finishing a 13-city tour chatting on theater stages with Robin Williams.

"The audience is mostly there to see Robin," Mr. Steinberg admits. "In fact, after I get my first big laugh, what I see are the heads of all the young people looking me up on IMDb."

The Williams-Steinberg tour grew out of an interview the two did last season on "Inside Comedy," a series that itself was born out of the exploded remains of a



Invision/Associated Press

Sarah Silverman



Associated Press

Louis C.K.



Getty Images

David Steinberg

feature-length documentary that Mr. Steinberg, 70, and Mr. Carell, 50, had originally planned. Between them, the two alumni of Chicago's Second City improvisation troupe know just about everyone in comedy. Younger audiences may not know Mr. Steinberg, because he has

spent the last few decades mostly behind the camera as a director and producer, but as an observational comic who broke out in the late 1960s, he had more guest appearances on Johnny Carson's "Tonight Show" than anyone besides Bob Hope. Since then he has directed sitcoms including "Curb Your Enthusiasm," "Friends" and "Seinfeld."

Working with Mr. Carell's company Carousel Productions, they raised "a couple million dollars," Mr. Steinberg says, with the idea of making a documentary where they would interview everyone from Mel Brooks and Carl Reiner to Sarah Silverman and Chris Rock and piece together a sort of interconnected map of the comedyverse. They filmed far too many interviews to fit in a movie. Then they took a highlight reel to Showtime, and Showtime Entertainment President David Nevins called them before they left the parking lot to ask what it would require to take the project off the market.

Cut into half-hour episodes, the interviews have a little more breathing room. Each episode features two comedians, with the pairings made to illuminate connections and influences. In the first show last season, Don Rickles admits that he started talking to audiences because he couldn't tell a joke, and Mr. Seinfeld praises Mr. Rickles as a "pure white light of comic energy.... Comedians as they age I think really struggle, because so much of comedy requires physical force. You look at Rickles's DNA as an 80-whatever-year-old man. Not in good shape. There were no elliptical machines at the Sahara in the '60s. And he has the same energy."

Although interviews are paired up, the comedians generally have been interviewed separately, and their snippets are interspersed. So they're not doing schtick for each other.

"Even Mel Brooks and Carl Reiner. It's interesting to see them speak about each other separately," Mr. Carell says. (When asked, "Have you had two guys at once?" Mr. Carell jokes: "Are you talking about my personal life?")

Mr. Steinberg has an easy rapport with subjects. He stays out of their way as they jump to the good stuff, the things you imagine comedy people talk to other comedy people about. There's no live audience, only occasional chuckles from the off-camera crew, so guests don't treat it like a performance.

"David has a way of putting people in a comfort zone," Mr. Carell says. "It is sort of like sitting down with these people over dinner and discussing their careers. You sit down with Jim Carrey and he tells you about his early days in Las Vegas and how he could have very easily just stayed there forever and become Las Vegas's impressionist."



Getty Images

Chris Rock

Drew Carey, in an episode this season, recalls that early in his career he auditioned successfully for a spot on the "Tonight Show," then missed a phone call from the producers who wanted him to appear that night, needed to reaudition, and had to wait another three years to get on the show. If any themes emerge from it all, it's the fickle nature of comedy and the total, almost frightened reluctance of pretty much everyone who's funny to anger the comedy gods by trying to figure out how they operate.

"I never let it get too pedantic. I don't want it to be a seminar on comedy," Mr. Steinberg says.

"There are no universal truths," Mr. Carell adds. "I am very reticent about talking about what makes something funny. I love to hear these comedic minds talk about themselves and their careers and why they think things might be funny. But if something works, I don't want to overthink it. It might not work next time."

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