

Icon Jerry Seinfeld

This month, the world's highest-paid comedian makes an explosive return to the London stage with a one-off show at the O2 arena. First, to warm up, he riffs with **James Mullinger** on why his act is the 'human digestive system' of comedy and how he aims to wither and die after his capital climax
Portraits by **Gavin Bond**

HEROES

A glass act:
Jerry Seinfeld shot exclusively for GQ at Milk Studios, New York, 9 March
Grooming by Birgitte Philippides for Rene Furterer

GQ Seinfeld iPad exclusive



Hear! Seinfeld talking to GQ about his best comedy moments
See! Jerry attempt to smash his way out of the GQ iPad edition

'You've got to have one last chance to bloom'

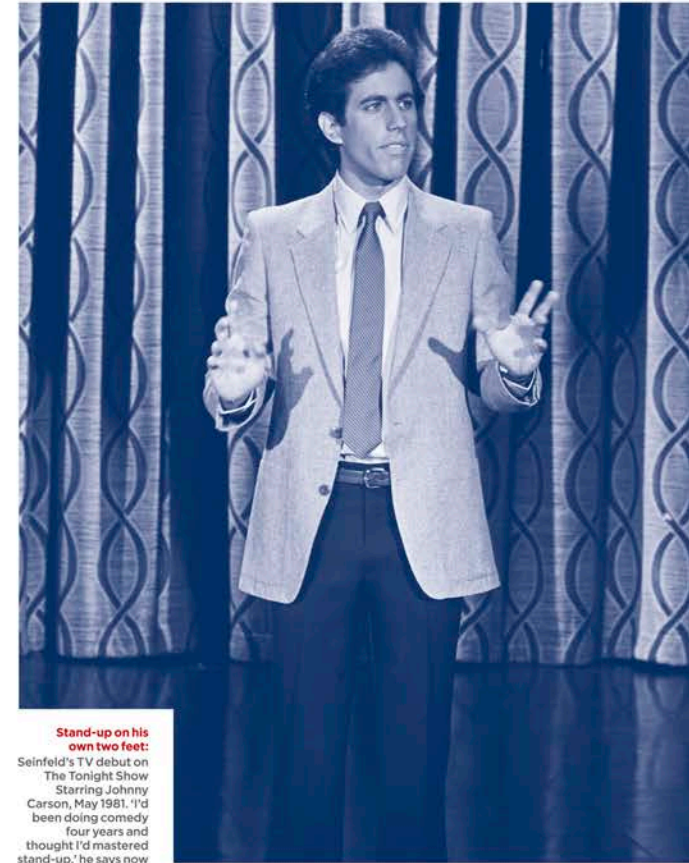
Jerry Seinfeld is keen to emphasise that he does not do things like this. He just doesn't. Simply never. **"I'm not joking,"** he says, more serious than **GQ** has ever seen him. **"I have never done anything like this.** I don't do this. **And I don't imagine I'll ever do it again..."**

Reclining on a suitably opulent leather couch at Milk Studios in the Meatpacking District of New York, he is relaxed and jovial, but keen to get across the point how out of character and utterly unheard of his latest venture is for him.

It was announced in December, seemingly out of nowhere, that possibly the greatest – and undoubtedly the most successful – stand-up comedian of all time would be performing a one-off show at the capital's biggest indoor venue: the O2 in Greenwich, London. After his hit show *Seinfeld* ended 13 years ago after nine series, Jerry Seinfeld all but disappeared from the public eye, bar the occasional appearance on American chat shows such as *The Late Show With David Letterman* and publicising his 2007 animated film *Bee Movie*.

Despite this, he remains the highest-paid comedian in the world, reaping the financial rewards from the syndication and DVD sales of *Seinfeld*. He doesn't need to work, so, more often than not, he doesn't. He started as a stand-up comedian when he was 22 years old and still loves performing, so he occasionally turns up at poky New York clubs and tries out new material (a process that was documented with excruciating reality in the 2002 movie *Comedian*, which showed him stumbling and mumbling through new sets and even being jeered and heckled on stage).

When he ended the show's run at its peak, everyone expected him to move into film-making, but instead he disappeared to his north New York mansion and started a family. He continued performing stand-up gigs around the States, eschewing the cavernous venues he could sell out in seconds, in favour of intimate theatres and clubs. Seinfeld has performed in London just twice before, in 1998, at the Palladium. Like the Sex Pistols gig at Manchester's Lesser Free Trade Hall in 1976, everyone claims >



Stand-up on his own two feet: Seinfeld's TV debut on *The Tonight Show* Starring Johnny Carson, May 1981. 'I'd been doing comedy four years and thought I'd mastered stand-up,' he says now

'It's so wrong. I love wrong! So much more than right'



to have been there. The Palladium seats only 2,286 people, but every comedy producer, writer, stand-up and runner claims to have experienced the master live in London.

So, 13 years since *Seinfeld* – he's now 57 – what made him want to return for a one-off show at a 20,000-seater? Why London? Why now?

"It wasn't my idea, I'll tell you that," he laughs. "My promoter was convinced that there were people that wanted to see me over there, which came as news to me. Because when I was over there [13] years ago, when the TV show was kind of an obscure little thing playing on BBC 9 or whatever, I thought that it would be a big detour for the British audience to bother to watch the live show."

Last time *GQ* spoke to Seinfeld (in December 2009), he argued vehemently that he only played smaller venues because they guaranteed "the best experience for the audience. Any bigger and you lose something." So why the O2?

"They tell me that this is where you have to be," he says. "I am told all the comedians play the O2, so I thought I'd better do it there. It's pretty amazing, but I'm really thrilled and excited mainly because it feels like I haven't ever done anything like that. First of all, you'd figure that the largest audiences would be in your home market, so to be going someplace outside the US and playing to that many people just feels pretty cool. Going to a strange country to do a gig like this, it's so not me."

Of course, it helped that Jerry's oldest comedy friend, Chris Rock, conquered the UK comedy scene last year, initially just booking four nights at the Hammersmith Apollo, assuming his profile here would not warrant more. Tickets sold out in minutes, prompting Rock to launch a tour of vast venues including, yes, the

O2. *GQ* was there to witness it and met Rock backstage prior to the gig. He was – without wishing to put too fine a point on it – utterly petrified.

"Chris loved it in London," says Seinfeld. "But yes, he wasn't expecting it to go so well. He couldn't believe how well you guys took to his act. He told me to do London and I said, 'I don't know, it doesn't sound right for me.'" Unlike Rock's hard-core racial politicising, Seinfeld's act focuses more on the minor niggles that bother us every day, such as people glancing down at their phones while speaking to you and the minefield of tipping etiquette – meaning he doesn't need to worry about changing it for UK audiences. "My act is like the human digestive system," he says. "Things constantly going in and things constantly coming out. And some bits that just sit in your stomach for days."

Despite his earlier assertion that larger venues do not always provide the best comedy experience for the audience, he insists he does not need to adapt his performance to make up for the extra space. "Steven Wright and I once did a gig in the Eighties at a university football stadium in Florida. That was 80,000 seats. And there were no screens then, of course. We did an interview before the gig and we were asked what it was like to perform to that many people. Steven had the greatest line I ever heard on the subject. He said: 'Doing comedy is like swimming. No matter how deep the water is, all you can do is swim.'"

With such a deliberately sparse CV, where does a gig like this sit on his almost nonexistent career path? A long pause ensues, before a scratch of the chin. "I hesitate to say that this is a culmination of my career, but in some ways to me it is," he says, earnestly. "This is a scenario that I never imagined, and frankly I'm very content, at this point, just playing theatres in the States. I just >

Stars in alignment (from left): the cast of *Seinfeld* – Jason Alexander as George Costanza, Julia Louis-Dreyfus as Elaine Benes, Jerry Seinfeld as Jerry Seinfeld and Michael Richards as Cosmo Kramer. The show ran for eight years, won three Golden Globe awards and made Jerry Seinfeld one of the highest-paid comedians in the world



James Mullinger on the *GQ* Jerry Seinfeld iPad exclusive



I have written about my love of Jerry Seinfeld's work a number of times. The first was in June 2006, when I wrote about my performance at the Just For Laughs festival in Montreal, having been inspired by Seinfeld to try stand-up. The most recent was when he granted me an interview after reading said article and hearing that my wife and I had flown 5,000 miles to Memphis to see him perform live.

So when we announced that *GQ* would be doing its first iPad app, there was only one person I wanted to collaborate with. The greatest comedian of all time, Jerry Seinfeld.

But how to make it happen? It is common knowledge that Seinfeld never does interviews unless he has something to promote (my last with him was the first time he had ever done otherwise). And even though he is doing a one-off London show this month, there was no need for him to promote it because it would be sold out before we hit newsstands. We wanted him to make a film and record spoken-word audio for our iPad, do an interview with me, and a shoot with photographer Gavin Bond. That's a lot to ask of a man who doesn't need to work another day in his life.

And so began four months of relentless chasing, calling and e-mailing every single person he is affiliated with – his publicist, manager, PA... if I had a number for his gardener, he'd have heard from me, too. Then, late one night, I saw an e-mail waiting from Tom Keaney, Seinfeld's no-nonsense publicist. My heart jumped. It simply said that he was ready to talk to me. I took a breath and called him, pitching some ideas for the film. He said he would get back to me.

Three long days later, I noticed I had received a three-word >



Funny talks: Jerry Seinfeld at home on the mic at NYU's Tisch School of the Arts Gala in California, November 2004 – 27 years after he started out in stand-up

> want to slowly wither and die. And all this energy and interest in this place that I never worked before. I never made a show for British audiences. It's like the cat watching the famous cook make a meal for a very elegant dinner party, and then waiting, just waiting for them to throw it all in the garbage, and then the cat gets to enjoy this fabulous gourmet meal. It wasn't made for the cat, but the cat is going to have this fantastic evening. But it's just so wrong! What I love about it, it's so wrong. I love wrong! So much more than right."

Seinfeld is attracted to wrong. Only last year he decided it was time for the *Seinfeld* cast to reunite. They had been offered hundreds of millions to do so over the years. But, instead, they decided to do it the only way that would make them no money and ensure it was watched only by a limited audience of HBO cable-channel subscribers; they made it a recurring story line on *Seinfeld* co-creator Larry David's brilliant (but barely watched) sitcom *Curb Your Enthusiasm*. "When Larry told me about his



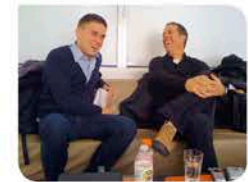
Friends reunited (from left): Michael Richards, Jason Alexander, Julia Louis-Dreyfus, Jerry Seinfeld and *Seinfeld* co-creator Larry David line up for their return in *Curb Your Enthusiasm*, 2009

idea, I said, 'Yes, this is the worst way you could do this. This is exactly what we have to do, what we must do.'

Coupled with the apparent wrongness of performing in London however, is Seinfeld's love of England. "I have a great admiration and respect for English culture and English theatre. Monty Python and Peter Cook were all as influential on American comics as anything that American comedians were doing. We would look at these guys and think, 'They're really doing it.' And of course, they're all in the English theatrical tradition so I couldn't be more proud that I've somehow reached

these people who in some way started me off years ago. The whole thing couldn't be more exciting. I'm really happy and proud."

GQ has never heard Seinfeld talk for this long without being sarcastic. Is this a new serious side to him? Does he really mean all of this? "Of course. But I'm very sure that I'll never do this again. I really would prefer to wither and die. But you've got to have one last chance to bloom before they cut the roots. I can see your headline now: 'Last chance to see Seinfeld before the withering begins!' I'm obviously not one of those guys that likes to hang on. I could have done the TV show for so many more years, but I don't like to stay until the end of the party. I have always done the opposite of what people expect me to do. But that's a good guide for a career. Ask yourself: what do people want you to do next? Make a list of what they expect you to do and want you to do and there you have it, there's precisely what not to do." *GQ* Jerry Seinfeld appears at London's O2 on 3 June. theo2.co.uk



Who's doing the jokes round here? *GQ*'s James Mullinger sits down with his stand-up hero Jerry Seinfeld in NYC for our first iPad edition

> e-mail containing the third best news I had heard in my entire life. "Yes," was the first best (from my wife); "I'm pregnant," the second (also from my wife); and the third came that glorious afternoon from Seinfeld's publicist. It simply said: "Let's do it."

I flew to New York within 48 hours. From my room at the Standard Hotel, I called Keaney to see if we could shoot Seinfeld behind glass so he could act like he was trapped in the iPad. He laughed, which I took as a good sign. Seinfeld was due to arrive at Milk Studios at 3pm the next day. We arrived at 9am and spent six hours going through the laborious process of preparing the extensive set. After all, no one wants to be responsible for a sheet of glass landing on the most powerful entertainer in the world. Knowing we only had him for an hour, I acted out and filmed what we wanted him to do. So when he pulled up in his limousine at 3pm on the dot, I walked him up the stairs to the studio, past screaming women and men doing double takes. This is what life is like when you are Jerry Seinfeld.

He watched the clips, laughed politely and, echoing the words of his publicist, said: "Let's do it." He stepped behind the glass and I pinched myself. He then hit us with some of the best improvisation I've ever seen. At one point, Seinfeld did another hilarious take before turning to me and asking, "Was that OK?" Uh yeah, Jerry. You're doing just fine.

Having entertained the crew for more than two hours, Seinfeld bade us farewell. He genuinely seemed happy with the afternoon's work and was in good spirits, even writing to me afterwards saying how much he enjoyed working together.

That, my friends, is the power of *GQ*. And the power of the iPad. To see *GQ*'s Jerry Seinfeld film, see the *GQ* iPad edition. £3.99, iTunes.