

# JERRY SEINFELD

STORY BY James Mullinger



The super-stand-up made the world's greatest sitcom, became TV's highest-paid actor - then disappeared. As the Seinfeld reunion finally arrives, he riffs on the show biz 'pyramid', the new king of comedy and tells us what really brought him back

**The Orpheum Theatre in downtown**

Memphis might seem an unlikely place for a man from London to celebrate his 30th birthday, but I had good reason to be there. 16 hours flying time and thousands of pounds from home. It was 6 March 2008, and I was in Tennessee with my wife - whose gift this was - to see Jerry Seinfeld performing stand-up comedy live on stage. This was a moment I had been awaiting for 15 years, exactly half my life.

Approaching the theatre on that rainy Tennessee evening, I felt nervous. I'm a stand-up myself, and this was similar to the apprehension I get before performing a gig in a strange city. Gone was the excitement I had been enjoying for the past week, replaced with fear - fear that my hero, perhaps the greatest stand-up ever, would fail to live up to my impossibly high expectations. >

Can you hold, please... Jerry Seinfeld on a Playboy cover shoot - in the middle of his self-titled show's nine-year run - California, April 1993

PHOTOGRAPH BY DAVID TURNLEY/CORBIS

Inside, the lights dimmed and the sound of Frank Sinatra's "New York, New York" blasted out through the speakers. Seinfeld stepped into the spotlight and calmly removed the mic from its stand. He took three bold steps towards the front of the stage and smiled. Along with the rest of the 2,000-capacity audience, I braced myself.

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**In a career spanning 30 years, Jerry Seinfeld** never recalls doing an interview where he had nothing to promote, until now. Since his ground-breaking sitcom, *Seinfeld*, ended in 1998 as the highest-rated show in America, and he quit his job as the highest-paid actor in television history, Seinfeld has – with a couple of notable exceptions – been mostly silent. He has retired to domestic life in upstate New York, fathered three children with his wife Jessica, and preferred to limit his public appearances to intimate comedy clubs, turning down hundreds of millions of dollars worth of offers in the process.

There are two reasons why he's breaking his silence here – both highly flattering for me. The first is that, as well as working at *GQ*, I have spent four years on the comedy circuit, performing a minimum of three nights a week, and Seinfeld likes few things more than chatting with other comics. The second is my Memphis pilgrimage. "I have to tell you," he says at the start of our conversation. "There are very few people who really appreciate my shows. People come to the show and they pay and they enjoy it, but I don't really think most people really understand what they've seen. But as a fellow comic I really get the sense that you did."

He hasn't lost the ability to ladle on the charm, either.

It's difficult to overstate just how popular Seinfeld still is in America. Between June 2008 and June 2009, despite only performing a handful of gigs, he earned \$85m, making him the highest-paid comedian in the world during that 12-month period. The money came solely from the global syndication of his sitcom, which in its last year on the air in 1998 earned him \$267m. It is fair to estimate that his net worth is more than \$2bn. Would you work?

*Seinfeld* ran on NBC from 1989 to 1998. Famously, it described itself as a show about nothing: four dysfunctional New Yorkers – Jerry, as himself, or a version of himself; his ex-girlfriend Elaine (Julia Louis-Dreyfus); schlubby best friend George Costanza (Jason Alexander), based on the show's co-creator Larry David, now writer and star of *Curb Your Enthusiasm*; and "zany" neighbour Kramer (Michael Richards) – bicker, debate and moan, but rarely get anything done. It was, of course, as much about everything as nothing – every nuance of contemporary life analysed

and anatomised, every detail that other shows glossed over or never dared touch. It was possibly the only prime-time show ever to devote an entire half-hour to masturbation or the etiquette surrounding hospital death; in homage to Harold Pinter's *Betrayal*, one episode relayed its story completely in reverse.

It is considered by many in the business to be the greatest sitcom of all time. Ricky Gervais is, unsurprisingly, a fan. "They took massive chances, particularly with the structure," he says. "They deconstructed the sitcom. It's a great example of a show not aiming to get 30 million viewers, but doing everything so beautifully that it couldn't help but get 30 million. And George Costanza is the greatest sitcom character of all time. He carries around a picture of his dead fiancée because he thinks it will make girls like him."

This detail is typical of the spirit of *Seinfeld*. All four principals are borderline narcissists who never do a good deed for anyone unless it benefits them. The mantra on set was: "No hugging, no learning, no happy endings."

Despite this – or perhaps because of it – America fell in love with them. People related to the characters because, like them, we are all solipsists. This is to say nothing of the gag-to-scene ratio. On *Seinfeld* there was a laugh-out-loud moment every 30 seconds.

Much of the humour was subversive. In one show Kramer hired homeless people to drag rickshaws through Manhattan; in another, George pretended to be disabled to get a private toilet at work. Most shockingly, George accidentally killed his wife – a huge relief to him because he only proposed to her after making a pact with Jerry. *The Cosby Show* this most certainly was not.

On the night of 14 May 1998, when the show ended after nine hit series, the streets of New York were deserted. Bars played it to packed houses. The nation was in mourning for a show killed by its creator at its very peak.

George Shapiro, Seinfeld's agent, remembers the day vividly: "NBC really, really wanted a tenth year," he says. "We had a meeting with them overlooking Central Park and they wrote on a little piece of paper what they were offering Jerry. It was \$5m an episode for 22 episodes to do the tenth year. Howard West, Jerry and I went for a walk in Central Park, and we sat down on the bench on 81st Street and Central Park West. It was the same bench where he told his father he wanted to be a comedian. Jerry sits down and he says, 'You know, as a stand-up comedian, when you feel you're getting a standing ovation, that's the time to leave. You don't want to stay on stage too long. You don't want to stay another 15 minutes so they say.' Oh, he was good but he was on a little long." He said, "My deepest gut feeling is to leave now. Despite the offer and everything else." I was happy because I said, "This is great, to go off like that – no one can ever take that away from you." Still, it takes a special kind of integrity to turn down \$110m to do what you love.

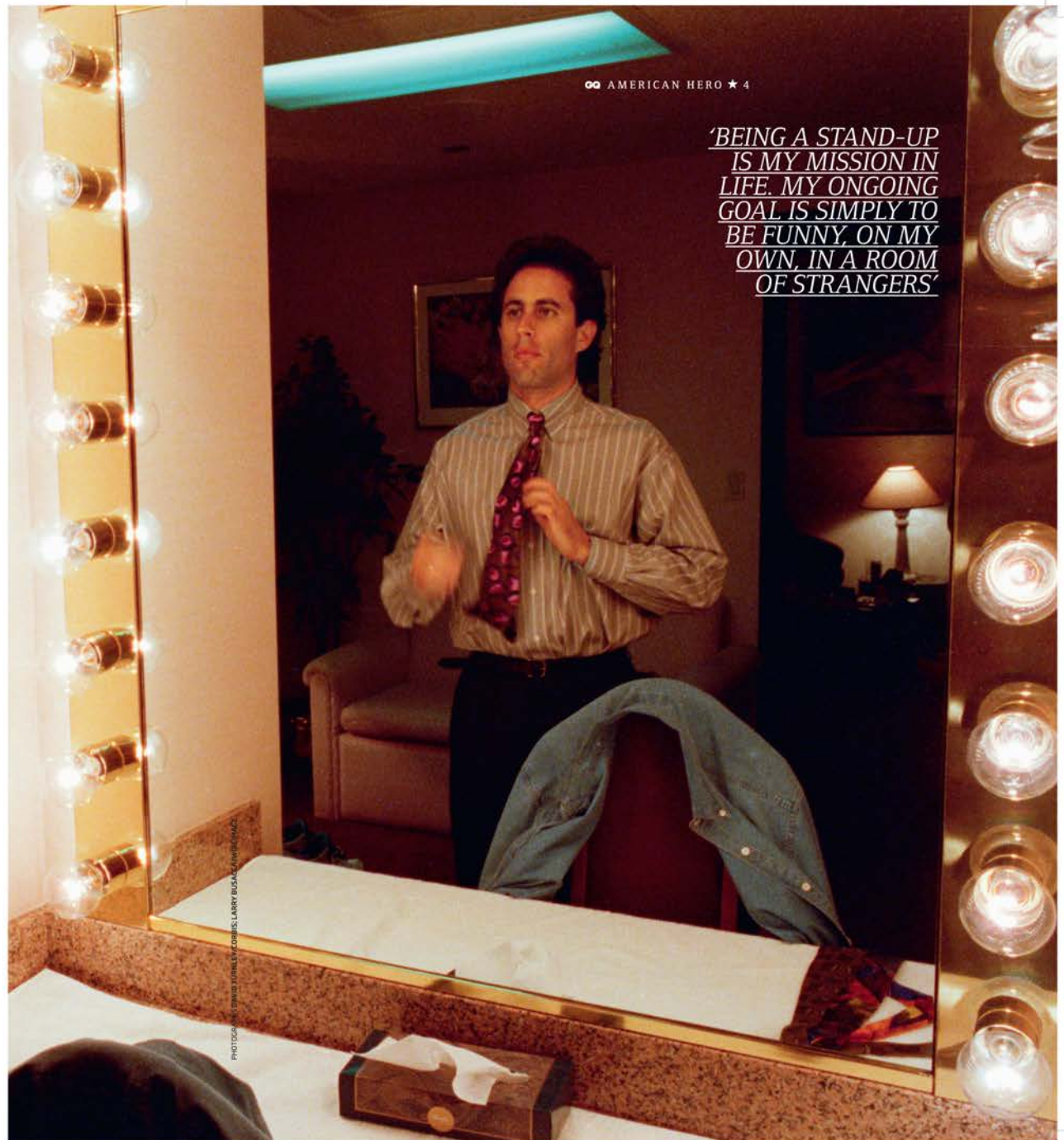
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Stand-up and be counted: Seinfeld on stage at Cipriani, NYC, on his way to earning \$85m in a year. September 2008; and (opposite) preparing for a show in Atlantic City, May 1993

**Jerry Seinfeld was born in Brooklyn,** New York on 24 April 1954 to Kailman, a sign maker of Hungarian-Jewish extraction and Betty, a housewife of Syrian-Jewish descent. It was while studying theatre at Queens College, City University of New York that he developed an interest in stand-up. His family were adamant it was a bad idea. They said he'd never be as

**'BEING A STAND-UP IS MY MISSION IN LIFE. MY ONGOING GOAL IS SIMPLY TO BE FUNNY, ON MY OWN, IN A ROOM OF STRANGERS'**



PHOTOGRAPH BY TONYA WITKLEY; COPIES; LARRY BUSACCA (THIS PAGE)

➤ funny as his father. But he was determined. "Becoming a comedian is like becoming a murderer," says Seinfeld. "No matter what people tell you, you are going to do it."

He started doing open spots in 1976 and fast made a name for himself as the only comic on the circuit not doing crude or hard-hitting political material. Instead, he focused on the minutiae of life and the daily trials and tribulations of a nine-to-five existence in the big city. Although he was waiting tables at the time he characterised working life thus:

"Frankly, I don't believe people think of their office as a workplace anyway. I think they think of it as a stationery store with Danish. You want to get your pastries, your envelopes, your supplies, your toilet paper, six cups of coffee, and you go home."

Following in the footsteps of great Jewish comics such as Jackie Mason and Woody Allen, he played on his own neuroses and discussed everyday things people could relate to. One of his earliest routines went like this: "The worst way of flying, I think, is standby. It never works. That's why they call it standby. You end up standing there going, 'Bye!'"

Four years on, Shapiro – who previously worked with Elvis Presley and the shock-comic Andy Kaufman, and who remains Seinfeld's agent – spotted him at the Comedy Store in LA. "I first saw him in July 1980 at the Comedy Store and one of the things that was most notable about him was the fact his material was clean," he says. "He also had the respect of other comedians. Lots of them were sitting in the audience, who had just come to see him perform. Howard West [Shapiro's business partner] and I got him booked for the *Tonight Show Starring Johnny Carson* on 6 May 1981, which was so monumental I'll never forget the date. In those days it was massive. Doing the *Tonight Show* made careers and it certainly made Jerry's."

During the broadcast, Seinfeld demonstrated his skill at taking a sideways glance at everyday things when talking of renting a tuxedo for the show: "There's a thrill wearing a suit that's already been worn by 80 high school seniors on the most exciting night their glands have ever known."

Seinfeld is not puritanical about keeping his act clean, it's just the way he chooses to work. "I've been working like that my whole career," he tells me. "For me, it's a purity thing about the joke itself. It's a test of a joke whether or not you do it completely clean and it works. If it does, then that's a legitimate item you have there. For me, it's nothing to do with finding those words offensive. It's just not what I'm in search of. Do it clean and you are really earning that laugh."

After a decade on the road, he was earning up to \$17,000 per show. In 1989, his star as a stand-up had risen to the extent that NBC wanted him to come up with a sitcom idea.

## 'COMEDIANS HAVE A WAY OF TALKING TO EACH OTHER THAT'S A LITTLE OFF. I THOUGHT WE SHOULD DO A SHOW ABOUT THAT'



Back in the frame (from left): Seinfeld and co-stars Jason Alexander, Michael Richards and Julia Louis-Dreyfus, in 1991; and the long-awaited reunion on Larry David's *Curb Your Enthusiasm*, 2009

After some bad experiences with television he wasn't really that interested. "Being a stand-up is my mission in life, it's my passion," he says. "My ongoing goal is to simply be funny, on my own, in front of a roomful of strangers. By comparison, television shows are no big deal." Determined to avoid the usual pitfalls and have himself play a plumber or a taxi driver, he turned to a fellow comic who was 41 and was famous on the circuit for dying on stage every single night. His name was Larry David.

David suggested they pitch *The Seinfeld Chronicles*, a show about how a stand-up builds his set every day. "The idea for the show came at a late-night Korean deli," Seinfeld remembers. "Comedians have a way of talking to each other that's a little off, and I thought we needed to do a show about that. Whenever Larry and I talk it has this silly quality to it, and it's very analytical. A combination of those two things is how I approach comedy. It's making a serious analysis of a silly thing. I just wanted the show to sound like that."

The results broke new ground for self-reflexive postmodernism on television. In series four, Jerry and George pitched a show called *Seinfeld* to NBC. The show, they say, is "about nothing". Needless to say, this kind of metafiction was not customary fare for a mainstream network show. It's *Garry Shandling's Show* and the same comic's *The Larry Sanders Show* both blurred fiction and reality, but on Showtime and HBO respectively – both niche cable channels.

Global mega-success was not part of the plan. "I never thought it would be seen," says Seinfeld. "If you look at it, it really does have all the hallmarks of a small, cult enterprise, that type of idiosyncratic humour. I think the reason it got popular was because the actors were so strong; they were able to make some quirky ideas accessible to a broad audience. I thought we'd probably just get away with doing it for a few years."

He is also philosophical about the definition of a hit. "The thing to remember is, if we're talking about a 'hit' show – in the case of *Seinfeld* we got 25 million people watching a week; that's a big audience, but it isn't big relative to the population base – there is still a vast majority of people out there thinking, 'I don't care for this at all.'"

Despite being one of the most successful sitcoms in American history, *Seinfeld* barely registered in the UK thanks to the BBC's habit of showing it at erratic times in the early hours. Seinfeld hears from fans all the time about the BBC's incompetent schedulers but remains philosophical. "I know there are some fans over there and I kind of like that it got to be a small, cult success in the UK. I got a British Comedy Award a few years ago that I am hugely proud of," he says. "I feel like the kind of comedy I do is really Britain's gift to the world. I think you were the first ones to play with language and turn it into entertainment, and then America did their version of it. So whatever popularity the show has over there I am very proud of."

Post *Seinfeld*, its star was offered the lead role in numerous Hollywood comedies. Out of respect for the actors who did take these roles, even now he won't be specific as to which ones. "It was easy to turn it all down," he says. "The experience with *Seinfeld* was a pinnacle show-biz experience. Everybody in this business wants to do a show where it's working and you're proud of it and the public is accepting it. *Seinfeld* ticked all the boxes for the show-business endeavour. I think that people are always trying to sit on the top of that pyramid for just a minute and I got to do it, so I felt satisfied. I certainly didn't want to do anything that would be a lesser experience."

Seinfeld took a few years off, doing – as he famously riffed on *Letterman* in 2002 – "nothing". He and his wife Jessica had three children and settled comfortably in their \$35m mansion north of New York. In 1998 he did a tour of all the material that made him famous and swore it would be the last time he would perform it. The tour was called, "I'm Telling You For The Last Time". He then decided to start again, from scratch, and build a new show with all-new material. The torturous process of building a new stand-up show was detailed in the 2002 documentary *Comedian*.

"I went to see one of Chris Rock's shows in LA and had this experience watching him," ➤



The last laugh (from left): Julia Louis-Dreyfus, Jerry Seinfeld and Larry David rehearse the final episode of *Seinfeld*, 15 April 1998, Houston, Texas

he says. "I thought, 'This is a fantastic amount of fun to be able to give people.' Then I thought, 'Hey, you know what? I can do this!' Then I started noting ideas down and that's what *Comedian* was. I wanted to start fresh."

*Comedian* may be the most accurate portrayal ever of what it's like to be a stand-up. It shows Jerry returning to the small clubs where he made his name and building a new set. It shows every failed gag, every gut-wrenching humiliation. It is the reason I decided to try stand-up for the first time, in January 2005 – watching the greatest comedian fail gave me permission to do the same. In *Comedian*'s most mortifying moment, Seinfeld loses his way on stage completely and after 20 seconds of painful silence an audience member shouts, "Is this your first gig?"

Shapiro admires his star client's bravery. "I thought it was exciting to do something like that because it had never been done before," he says. "I don't remember an established comedian ever discarding all their material and starting from scratch. Let alone on camera! They followed him for 13 months. It was an English lady that heckled him that night in the Gotham Comedy Club and he had the choice of editing it out, but he left it in because he had such an honest approach to revealing everything that goes on in stand-up. I was very proud of him."

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**Seinfeld returned to the public eye** in 2008, writing and voicing the animated adventure *Bee Movie*. The film stemmed from a dinner with Steven Spielberg in which Seinfeld joked that someone should make a B-movie about bees. It was well received but the comeback everyone has

been waiting for started last month on *More4*. Seinfeld and the rest of the cast have reunited for the seventh series of Larry David's *Curb Your Enthusiasm*. The plot line has Larry – as himself – trying to reunite the cast of *Seinfeld* – as themselves.

Shapiro is as excited as the fans. "It's great," he hoots. "Everyone has been asking for a finale but it's very tongue-in-cheek. It's the opposite of a serious reunion show, perfect for *Seinfeld*. It was a scintillating couple of weeks shooting the five episodes. Everyone had stayed close to Larry David, and we all loved *Curb* and knew exactly what he was doing. Larry had the guts to display every human shortcoming and character defect he has."

Seinfeld won't be drawn to comment on other current sitcoms such as the American version of *The Office*. "I don't watch that show much," he says. "I watch *30 Rock* occasionally. I really don't watch much TV. I have three little kids and once I come in the door I am pretty much busy."

He does rate the work of current king of movie comedy Judd Apatow, particularly *Funny People*, about the life of stand-up comedians in LA. "I think it did a very good job of recreating the atmosphere and the tone," he says. "The way the comedians speak to each other is so disrespectful and aggressive. Sometimes as a comedian it's difficult speaking to regular people because you have to keep reminding yourself you can't insult this person like you would another comedian."

He loathes the whingeing of current celebrities and has never had a problem with being famous. "I do get a certain amount of attention, but I never understand why people say, 'It must be horrible, being you.' I always say that for many years of my life I wasn't famous and it wasn't that great! This is much

better! Whatever the differences are, it's pretty fantastic. I can't stand the whining about it, I really can't. It all depends what you're famous for and the kind of fame you have. I'm lucky. I'm settled into a nice place where I can work steadily. I'm not pursued and I'm not really an object of interest for these people."

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**The Memphis show exceeded all my expectations.** Every line, every sideways glance, every nuance was meticulously honed to eke out the loudest and most satisfying laugh from the audience. And it was all new material: routines that he had tirelessly rehearsed in poky clubs in New York.

The subjects may not have been groundbreaking – marriage, children, mobile phones, parents – but what he does with the subjects is. He manages to find things to say about these supposed "hack" topics that journeymen comics the world over have failed to consider. He devotes an entire routine to his mother's obsession with the way the air conditioning blows, and it is one of the funniest things I have ever heard.

Seinfeld simply loves the craft and he continues to excel at it. When pressed for a career highlight, he goes back to September 1976, when he first began to do stand-up full time. "The most exciting part of my whole career was when I handed back my waiter's apron," he says. "I was making \$35 a night and I went out to visit my parents and I remember standing on the platform of the Long Island Rail Road in Massapequa. I was a comedian. I had made it. That was the biggest moment of my life." GG

SERIES SEVEN OF *CURB YOUR ENTHUSIASM* IS SHOWN ON *MORE4* AT 10.45PM ON THURSDAYS.

PHOTOGRAPH: DAVID DUKE KENNEDY/GETTY IMAGES