

**CREATIVITY**

# **Life's Work: An Interview with Jerry Seinfeld**

**Daniel McGinn**

FROM THE JANUARY–FEBRUARY 2017 ISSUE

Life's Work: An Interview with Jerry Seinfeld



After years as a stand-up performer, Jerry Seinfeld conquered 1990s television with his eponymous sitcom. Two decades later he's again drawing viewers and accolades, this time for his inventive online talk show, *Comedians in Cars Getting Coffee*—even as a new generation discovers *Seinfeld* on streaming video.

**HBR: How did *Comedians in Cars* originate?**

**Seinfeld:** It's very important to know what you don't like. A big part of innovation is saying, "You know what I'm really sick of?" For me, that was talk shows where music plays, somebody walks out to a desk, shakes hands with the host, and sits down. "How are you?" "You look great." I'm also sick of people who are really there to sell their show or product. "What am I really sick of?" is where innovation begins.

**You and Larry David wrote *Seinfeld* together, without a traditional writers' room, and burnout was one reason you stopped. Was there a more sustainable way to do it? Could McKinsey or someone have helped you find a better model?**

Who's McKinsey?

**It's a consulting firm.**

Are they funny?

**No.**

Then I don't need them. If you're efficient, you're doing it the wrong way. The right way is the hard way. The show was successful because I micromanaged it—every word, every line, every take, every edit, every casting. That's my way of life.

**How much of *Seinfeld*'s continuing popularity stems from quitting when it was still atop the ratings?**

I would love to know the answer to that. My theory is that

proportion is key to everything. You're making this TV show, and it gets really popular, and you have to stop at a certain point or it loses the magic. I'm not comparing myself in any way, shape, or form to the Beatles, but they ended after nine years when I was a kid, and there was something about that single-digit number. Once a TV series is in double digits, it's like, "God, is this thing ever going to end?" Ten seasons seemed so much longer than nine. I decided that ninth season should be the last so that the audience would feel it saw a performance that ended on a high note.

### **Was it hard to figure out what your career should look like after Seinfeld?**

I never thought I had to do anything. I was a successful stand-up comedian for many years before I got the show. I knew that was going to be my life. The show came along, and it was quite a detour. I went from being relatively unknown to getting the greatest ride you could possibly get in entertainment and feeling a certain amount of cultural relevance. People were picking up words we had made up, like "regifting" and "shrinkage." But I never saw myself as anything other than a professional stand-up comedian. It would have been a mistake to try to springboard into building a huge media company, making movies and TV shows.

### **Can you teach someone to be funny?**

Nope. You can teach someone aspects of making it in the comedy profession, but you can't teach someone to be funny. I didn't realize how genetic it was until I saw my daughter—I couldn't believe how funny she was. I didn't teach her to be that way, and I know my dad was funny, so now I see that

there's a huge genetic component. You just pop out with this thing.

### **How effective is humor as a leadership tool?**

Being funny is one of the ultimate weapons a person can have in human society. It might even compete with being really good-looking.

### **How do you get psyched up before going onstage?**

You don't have to get psyched up—the audience will take care of that. You walk out in front of 3,000 people who have paid \$75 or \$100, they're sitting there saying, "We want to laugh right now," and you feel that. But every comedian, like every athlete, has a little routine. Mine is to look at my notes until five minutes before the show. When my tour producer says, "Five minutes," I put on the jacket, and when the jacket goes on, it's like my body knows, "OK, now we've got to do our trick." And then I stand, and I like to just walk back and forth, and that's it. That's my little preshow routine. I never vary it. It just feels comfortable.

### **As a live performer, how do you improve?**

You have to know how to encourage yourself to be confident and courageous when you're creating new material and also how to be harshly critical and go, "That's good, but it's not good enough—take it out." I don't like to be so critical that I get depressed, but I get close. Managing that is the toughest part of the profession. Most of the time when comedians come off the stage and you ask them, "How was it?" they say, "I hate myself."

### **With Comedians in Cars, do you risk running out of people to interview?**

My feeling is that instead of digging down in the barrel of comedians, I want to start having people I like on again: Alec

Baldwin, Larry David, Sarah Silverman. Twelve minutes of Alec Baldwin isn't enough for me, and I assume that's true for the audience. I'm looking at the show now the way the old *Tonight Show* was, where you would have people like Charles Nelson Reilly who didn't have anything to promote but were just great on a talk show—so they came on all the time. I'll maintain the standard as opposed to the variety.  
citation

A version of this article appeared in the **January–February 2017** issue (p.172 of Harvard Business Review)