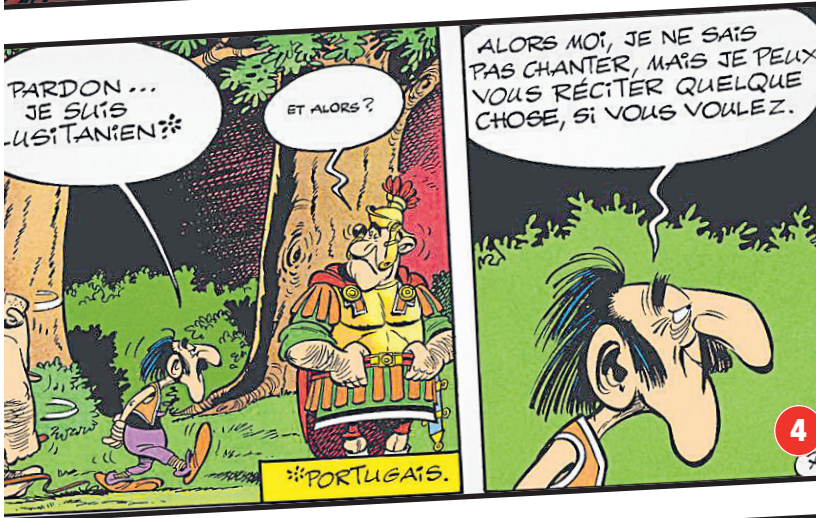
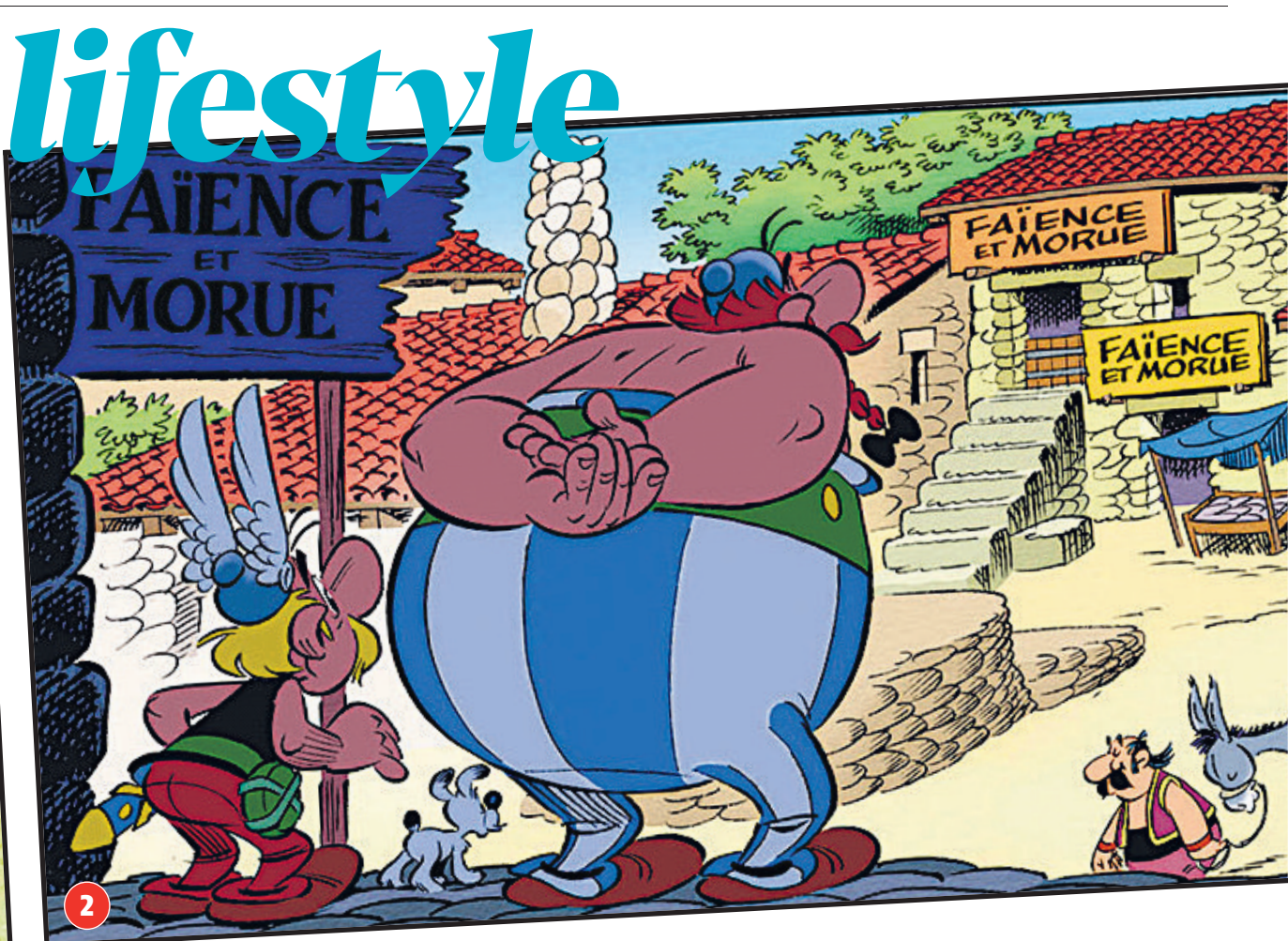
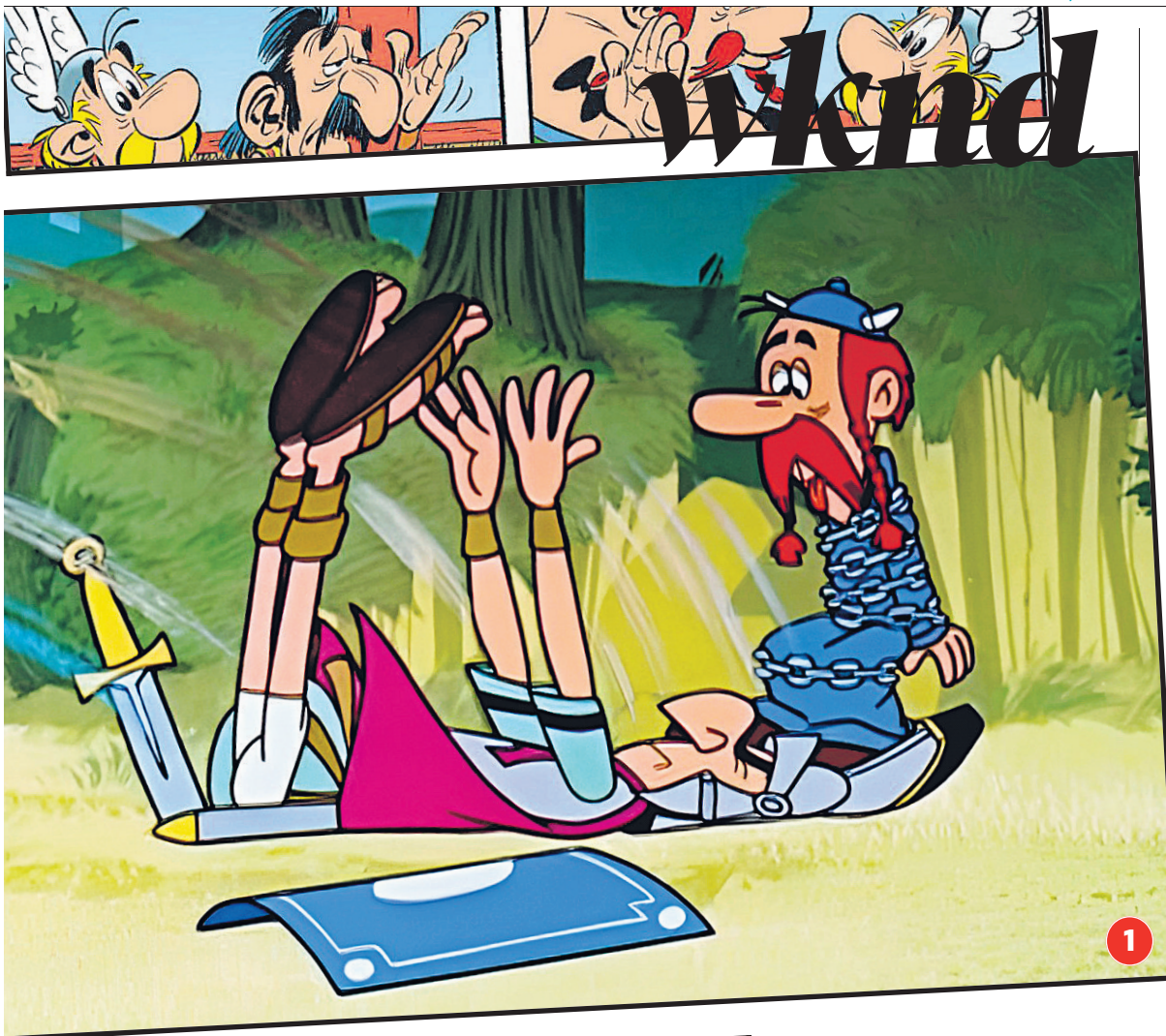
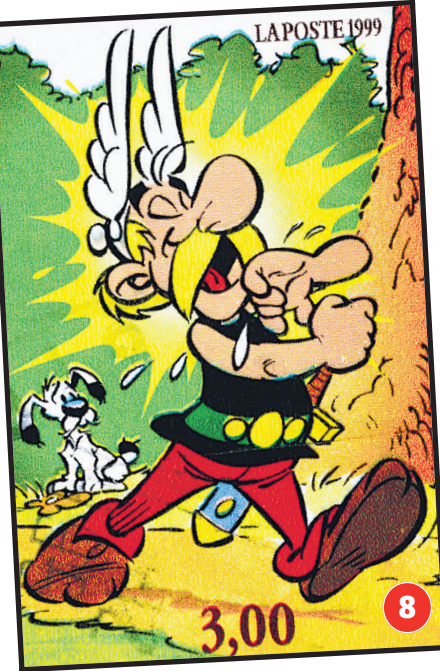
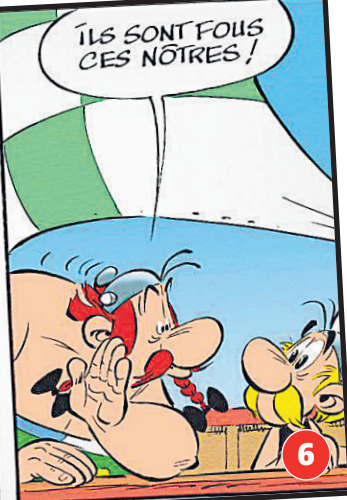




Can you tell which Asterix is from which era? Goscinnny died in 1977, Uderzo in 2020. Their legacy lives on. Images 2, 4, 5, 6 and 10 are panels from Asterix in Lusitania (2025). 1 and 9 are stills from the animated film Asterix the Gaul (1967). 3, shows Getafix brewing his potion, in an archival album. 7, is a still from the live-action film Asterix and Obelix: God Save Britannia (2012). 8, is a postage stamp issued in France in 1999, the 40th anniversary of the comics. (At right) Creators Rene Goscinnny and Albert Uderzo on the sets of Two Romans in Gaul (1967). IMAGES: ASTERIX-OBELIX-IDEFIX / HACHETTE LIVRE / FABCARO - CONRAD, SHUTTERSTOCK, GETTY IMAGES



The little Gaul that could

Rene Goscinnny died at 51. In that brief time, he created one of the comic world's most beloved characters. Asterix (born 1959) transformed the industry, built up a fan base that is still growing. Readers of all ages remain glued to the layered, pun-laden, irreverent tales about two Gauls fighting off Romans. Time moves differently around an Asterix, says K Narayanan, in a tribute to Goscinnny in his centenary year

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When Rene Goscinnny died in 1977, the French newspaper Le Monde carried an obituary on the front page. He was to comic books what the Eiffel Tower is to Paris, what Balzac is to the French novel—in a word, what Obelix is to Asterix, it said.

Goscinnny had been working with long-time collaborator Albert Uderzo on Asterix in Belgium (1979). Open the album and one can tell exactly at what point he passed. The skies are dark in every panel after.

All Gaul was in mourning. The man who repeatedly referred to himself as a mere entertainer had, in less than two decades, transformed the face of French comics, inspiring dozens of other great artists and writers.

Goscinnny was born in Paris in 1926, to Polish Jewish immigrants Stanislaw Goscinnny, a chemical engineer, and homemaker Anna Beresniak-Goscinnny. The family moved to Buenos Aires when he was two. He started working

aged 17, after his father's death, first as an accountant, then as a junior illustrator at an advertising agency.

Two years later, he moved to New York with his mother, to live with her brother. He then moved back to France to enlist in the army, where he reached the rank of senior corporal.

He returned to the US in 1947. He was unemployed and poor. But this time, he made some good friends, including Harvey Kurtzman, Will Elder and John Severin, who would set up the frantic and satirical MAD magazine.

Goscinnny and Kurtzman became especially close. At Kurtzman's home, he met Maurice De Bevere, a Belgian cartoonist who had just created a cowboy character named Lucky Luke under the pseudonym Morris.

In 1950, aged 24, Goscinnny returned to Paris, determined to focus on writing rather than illustration. There, at the Paris office of the Belgian publisher World Press, he met Uderzo. 23. It was the beginning of a relationship that would last beyond the deaths of the two men.

Their first collaboration was Jehan Pistolet (The Little Known Pirate; 1952), and it had all the trademarks that would make Asterix such a success.

The series, which first appeared in a children's magazine, featured a young waiter named Jehan who gives up his job at a Nantes tavern and buys a ship, determined to become a pirate. Set in the 18th century, the series follows Jehan and his motley crew, and each adventure ends with a celebratory banquet.

In 1955, Morris returned to Belgium. He had been creating Lucky Luke comics since 1946, but was having difficulty writing longer stories. He reached out to his old friend Goscinnny, who jumped at the chance. The two would collaborate on 40 Lucky Luke albums.

At the same time, Goscinnny and Uderzo were working on a series of stories featuring a young aristocrat named Hubert Brussels Sprout and his Native American friend Oumpah-Pah, set in 17th-century America.

Amid it all, Goscinnny and other comic artists became increasingly frustrated by the power the publishers at World Press held over them.

"A publisher could fire an artist simply because he was sick... He could have someone else draw the artist's series without paying him royalties," he said in interviews.

These frustrations resulted in the creation of Pilote, a

magazine created by artists for artists, in 1959. Goscinnny and Uderzo wanted a new hero for it. They considered a series around Reynard the trickster fox of French folklore, but realised Benjamin Rabier had already beaten them to it. They went back to their schoolbooks looking for inspiration.

They found it in standard French history textbooks from the early 20th century, written by Ernest Lavisse. These books had more than a hint of nation-building about them, telling tales of grand victories, and tracing various elements of present-day French culture to ancient Gaul.

It is Lavisse's language that is mocked in the first panel of Asterix the Gaul (1960): "In 50 BC, our ancestors the Gauls had been defeated by the Romans..."

The stories that followed showcased the best of Goscinnny: anachronisms (traffic jams, tea parties, roundabouts, journalists and contemporary politicians), visual puns (Egyptians arguing in panels of hieroglyphics), and historical references in such density that one would need a codex to get them all.

Take for example, a panel from Asterix at the Olympic Games (1968). It describes athletes entering the stadium: "Ceux de Milo sont venus aussi; ceux de Cythère viennent de débarquer... ceux de Macédoine sont très mélangés". Those from Melos have arrived, those from Cythera have just disembarked, those from Macedonia are a very mixed group... But in doing so, it also references the Venus de Milo, Antoine Watteau's 1717 painting L'Embarquement pour Cythère, and la macédoine, which is a type of French salad.

This is part of what has kept people in the love with the stories. By the time of Asterix at the Olympic Games, the comics were selling in the millions per album.

But before all that, there were hard times.

The first issue of Pilote, in 1959, carried a large group of smiling people on the cover, ostensibly the artists featured within. In reality, it was just the three founders—Goscinnny, Uderzo and Jean-Michel Charlier—and their friends and relatives, gathered together to give the impression of a large group.

Over the next few years, attracted by the success of Asterix, many artists did flock to Pilote. Though the adventures of Asterix remained its biggest draw, the magazine provided a platform for artists such as Jean (Mœbius) Giraud, Enki Bilal, Jean-Claude Mézières, Marcel Gotlib and Annie Goetzinger. Morris even moved Lucky Luke to Pilote.

By the mid-1960s, the little Gaul had acquired a worldwide following. Goscinnny had become an elder statesman of the European comics world. Any album written by him was a guarantee of wit and quality.