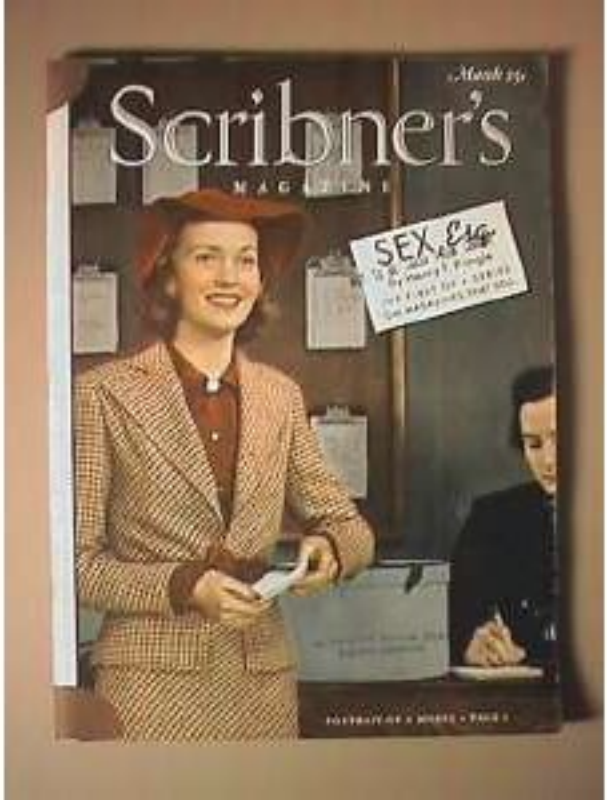
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JACK BENNY

BY
HUBBELL ROBINSON
AND TED PATRICK

SCRIBNER'S EXAMINES *radio's highest-priced comedian . . . his technique and the basis of his humor . . . how he builds his programs and hoards his comedy*

"JELL-O again."

Every Sunday at seven a slender, pleasant-looking man murmurs those three words into a little black box in a radio studio in Hollywood. And in 7,000,000 American homes the family draw up their chairs and prepare to hold their sides. For those are the words with which America's No. 1 Funnyman greets his huge radio audience, the biggest audience that ever pounded its palms for any one entertainer. The name of the miracle-worker who turns this trick once a week, thirty-nine times a year, is Jack Benny, born Benjamin Kubelsky.

Mr. Benny's employers think so highly of this feat that they pay him top funnyman salary—$10,000 a week, $390,000 a year—and add another $15,000 a week for time and additional talent. They spend this, not because they think laughter will help cure the country's ills, but simply because of the uplifting effect Mr. Benny has on the great god, *Sales Curve*. And that is what really counts in radio today—its ability to sell. No matter what you may hear of its educational, cultural, and ethical place in modern life, the radio is a commercial instrument, pointed primarily toward the business of selling goods. Jack Benny is top man of radio because he has proven his ability to sell an ungodly amount of his sponsor's merchandise. And because, more than anyone else you can name, he is a *Business Man of Humor*.

How does he brew his magic, this suave-mannered, slick-tongued clown, born in Waukegan, Illinois, in 1895, fiddling futily with *The Bee* at the age of eight and, at forty-three, the highest-salaried employee of as great and serious-minded a corporation as General Foods? What has he got that impels a close-trading manufacturer to lay out $25,000 a week to keep him on the air and lures the public into spending $30,000 a week in electric current alone to listen to him?

There's an obvious answer—"He can make people laugh."

And that's the trouble with that answer. It's too obvious. The true answer lies much deeper. If you say, "He has the ability to induce friendly, sympathetic laughter," you're getting warmer, but you're still only flirting with the surface facts. To understand the phenomenon of this man who holds America's funny bone in the hollow of his hand, you must go back to some of Jack Benny's earlier experiences in the fine art of public rib-tickling. Benny was not born and nursed to his present competency

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Jack Benny (above) is the No. 1 Funnyman of radio and the No. 1 Businessman of humor. His fellow salesmen (below) are Andy Devine, No. 2 Stooge; Kenny Baker and Phil Harris, tenor and orchestra director; and Mary Livingston, chief heckler

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by radio as were Amos 'N Andy. Nor is he an overnight sensation like Mr. Bergen's woodenheaded pixie, Charlie McCarthy.

Jack Benny has been on the air almost continuously for six years. His deft wit adorned the legitimate stage for four years before that, and he was one of vaudeville's darlings for fourteen years before that. It was in vaudeville that he learned the tricks that were to make him worth the princely pittance radio pays him.

In vaudeville, Jack achieved the ultimate goal, the Mecca of all vaudevillians, the final triumph of all who ever trouped the "five-a-day." He "headlined at the Palace." And New York's Palace Theater, on the corner of Broadway and Forty-seventh Street, was, in its heyday, the high temple of vaudeville. Whether you were a comic, a juggler, or head man in an animal act, you had to be the best in the business to play the Palace.

Their spontaneity is carefully rehearsed

Yet Benny was conspicuously different from the other comics to whom the hypercritical Palace patrons awarded the accolade. Practically all the others got their laughs as much from some sort of physical high jinks as from lines. Will Mahoney made the prattfall a classic contortion. Willie Dooley collapsed over the footlights into the bass drum at unpredictable and hilarious intervals. Mr. Duffy and Mr. Sweeney made themselves at home on the floor with a couple of lollipops. The late and enormously lamented Herb Williams crowned a stooge orchestra leader with a baseball bat while the customers rolled in the aisles. The leather-lunged Mel Klee wound himself around a cigar; two-hundred-pound Tom Patricola decked himself out in an abbreviated Little Lord Fauntleroy suit; and Phil Baker went them all one better by planting a stooge in a box with the audience.

But not Benny. He used no props, no funny suits, no stooge. He just walked on and "wowed" them. He was, in the technical language of the experts who gathered on the corner of Broadway and Forty-seventh Street, and who were to vaudeville what the Monday-morning quarterbacks are to football, a "smooth" comedian. To put it in plain English, Jack's humor could be propelled across the footlights by his voice alone.

That gave him a long lead on the other boys when radio burst into show business. His first Jell-O broadcast came on the evening of October 1, 1934. Before that, he was on for General Tires, Canada Dry, and Chevrolet. During his two years with these sponsors, he was a star, but not one of the top-flight stars. He was growing. His gags were "ear" gags rather than "eye and ear" gags. But that wasn't all. Benny, shrewd showman that he is, widened the lead by creating, for himself, on the air, a character aimed dead-center at the universal tendency to howl at the self-confident man who makes a fool of himself. Jack isn't the wise guy who tells all the jokes on his show nor the brightie who has all the funny lines. He's on the other end of the gun. He is the target of most of the jokes, most of the comic situations. You laugh at him, but you also sympathize with him because, almost inevitably, his best-laid plans blow up in his face.

He's the pleasant oaf, strutting down the street, superbly sure that he's making a tremendous impression. When he steps on a banana peel, and lands on his backside, you guffaw at him, but you pity him a little, too.

Another of the invaluable foundation blocks of Benny's comedy structure is his uncanny ability to outline quickly a basic situation so that the listener can easily grasp its fundamentals. He doesn't depend on the conventional question-and-answer gag routine. He builds a crystal-clear picture of himself in a given situation, and because it is so clear, it is child's play for the audience to follow him through the laugh-provoking complications that develop out of that situation. This is because they understand completely the basic humor of the situation and his relation to it.

For example, when Jack gets into his rattletrap Maxwell he sets the situation so adroitly that he is no longer a comedian in front of a microphone beguiling you with inanities about a mythical jaloppi. He is a guy named Jack Benny, a real person, engaged in a real struggle with a specific, tangible, worn-out, broken-down 1918 Maxwell automobile. It becomes a reality, not make-believe.

One of the ways he achieves this neat trick is by avoiding the temptation to fall in love with a joke. For instance, he might hear a highly entertaining joke about a fish, but he doesn't build a fish sequence into his next show just in order to use that joke. Instead, he stars with a situation that is in the show because it, in itself, is funny. Benny's situations are never contrived for the purpose of working around to a preconceived gag or a specific joke which might be funny in itself but does not properly fit into the idea of the show.

Pat examples of typical Benny situations are: the effort to sell his Maxwell, a car that nobody in the world could possibly want; the idea that he is a virtuoso on the violin; the absurdity of trying to palm himself off as a Western sheriff of the old school. Starting out with an idea that is basically comic, he gets his laughs largely by hanging additional embellishments onto his original idea. He not only tries to sell the Maxwell, but he demands a fantastic price for it. He not only demands a fantastic price, but flatly refuses to consider less. In a Benny show, the gags

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are not an end in themselves. They are a national evolution from the basic situations.

There are two reasons why this technique has contributed importantly to his success. In the first place, the laughs are so carefully planted, their climaxes so surely indicated, that they rarely fizzle. When Benny gets to the laugh line, he has set the reason and the events leading up to the "pay-off" so thoroughly you can't miss the point unless you're a half-wit. In the second place, one comedy situation lasts Benny a long time. He gets immense mileage out of his material, more, probably, than any of his contemporaries. That's why he's been able to sustain the pace so well, for so long.

How does Jack go about getting these sure-fire situations and the sidesplitting trimmings with which he decorates them to your vast amusement and ours? If you could answer that one, you could also explain how Picasso works his wonders with a paint brush, and the secret of D. H. Lawrence's mastery of words. Benny, like these gentlemen, is a creative genius. Every line, in every one of his shows, is as carefully constructed a piece of writing, is as much the result of hours of genuine labor, as any sentence Somerset Maugham or Willa Cather ever struggled over. You can't explain genius, and neither can we, but we can tell you how he goes about getting the finished scripts.

CHARLIE McCARTHY AND EDGAR BERGEN

JACK BENNY

GEORGE BURNS AND GRACIE ALLE

Here, arranged in the order of their popularity, are the people who make America laugh loudest. At this time, newcomers Bergen and McCarthy are in first place

Jack, unlike his good friend Fred Allen, is a slow worker. He builds meticulously and systematically. Allen works on inspiration alone; he is a true funnyman, a tremendous wit on or off the stage. The sharp contrast between the two men was never more apparent than last year, during the famous Benny-Allen "feud." During the course of it, Jack appeared as a guest on Fred Allen's "Town Hall Tonight" show. At one point Jack got to laughing over the dialogue that was going on between him and Allen. Allen stopped completely and turned to Jack and said: "Hm-m-m, laughing at your next Sunday's show already—just can't wait."

Benny replied, "I'd give a thousand dollars if I could think of an answer to that one."

And when Benny said that, he spoke from the heart. That, ladies and gentlemen, was no gag. For Jack has no divine flashes, no inspired moments. Every line, every situation in his scripts, is put together with the same care, the same thoughtfulness, and the same amount of toil that a carpenter uses in building a house.

Like practically all comedians, Jack has his gag men. Specifically, he has two writers who cost him out of his pocket about one thousand dollars a week. But he is the Mastermind behind the show. The best evidence of that is that there have been several writers in his show during the last six years. Harry Conn, one of the most famous and successful of all that strange breed known as "gag men," was the first to labor in the Benny stable. He left last year and now has his own show on the air, with himself as star. It's not as funny as Benny's, nor as the shows he wrote when he worked for Jack.

Al Boasberg then traipsed in with his famous medical kit and acted as joke doctor, working in collaboration with Jack's two current gag men. Boasberg died last year, some Broadway sentimentalist insisting the cause was a broken heart due to a law suit brought against him by his old friend Eddie Cantor. The present writers are two young men named Bill Morrow and Ed Beloin. Morrow was a fresh-faced veteran of the Hollywood script wars when Benny acquired him. Beloin was discovered in the fastnesses of Vermont, trying to live off the soil and grimly forwarding one joke after another to the humorous magazines.

Immediately after the rebroadcast of each week's show, Benny and his writers start on the next one. Each Benny program, like most of the other big-league network shows, is broadcast twice. The first show is broadcast from the N. B. C. Studio in Hollywood at 4 o'clock—7 o'clock Eastern Standard Time. This broadcast is for the East and Middle Western stations and is not heard on the Coast at all. Then at 8:30 Coast Time, there is a second or rebroadcast. This goes out over the Coast stations only. As soon as the rebroadcast is over and the usual rush of autograph seekers and people who "just wanted to shake hands" has been appeased, Benny, Beloin, and Morrow go into a huddle on the studio stage. A million dollars' worth of comedy brains wheel into action. Each of them suggests his ideas for next week's show. They decide which ideas seem worth developing into script, and then go home —or if they don't, that's their business.

On Monday, Beloin and Morrow feed the grist into the mill, and on Tuesday they have a rough draft of the

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show you will hear next Sunday. They take this draft to Benny, and the three of them spend Tuesday, Wednesday, and Thursday polishing, changing, cutting, building it into a working rehearsal script. The actual hours they spend may run from eight to eighteen a day, depending on whether or not they're clicking.

Friday they rest, although the script is always with them, in their minds. Saturday, the entire cast is brought together—sometimes in the studio, sometimes in Jack's home—and Jack reads them the script. Any comments that

EDDIE CANTOR

FRED ALLEN

PHIL BAKER

Radio favorites come and go with alarming frequency. Few entertainers stay at the top for more than a season, yet Jack Benny has ranked with the leaders for four years

Mary Livingstone, Kenny Baker, Don Wilson, Schlepperman, or Andy Devine or Phil Harris have to make on their own lines are duly noted. Sometimes, revisions are made with these comments in mind. Kenny Baker may feel he can't say a certain line they've written for him. He may have an idea that improves the line. That's true for all of them. Then they go over the script again. This time every member of the cast reads the lines written for him. Usually there are further revisions after this reading. Then they read it again—and again and again.

After this rehearsal, the cast is dismissed, and there's another conference. Sitting in, are Benny, Beloin, Morrow, Tom Harrington, and the producer for Young & Rubicam, the advertising agency which handles the show. They discuss the rehearsal, the suggestions, and all their own bright ideas. The Benny trio are intent on improving the jokes, Harrington on keeping them from being too good. They talk and write, and talk some more, and rewrite for hours. This ordeal usually lasts till after midnight Saturday, by which time they all heartily dislike each other, and depart convinced the show will be a flop.

Sunday morning at 10, the entire cast assembles again and rehearsal of the rewritten script starts. It lasts without interruptions till the first show goes on, at 4 o'clock.

So much for the routine. But within that routine, the variations, the labor, the search for the right lines and the right way to deliver them is endless.

Here is an example. A few weeks ago the show included a spot between Benny and Schlepperman. On the air the spot was scheduled to consume about seventy seconds of the thirty-minute show. The spot was built around the difficulty Schlepperman was having in getting a birthday present for his wife. Schlepperman suggested that he might say he had given her a washing machine last year and this year he thought he'd give her the laundry. Jack decided to try the gag. As put down in dialogue, it ran like this:

SCHLEPPERMAN: I've been tramping from store to store — upstairs and downstairs — to buy a birthday present for my wife.

JACK: But what did you give her last year?

SCHLEPPERMAN: A washing machine. I could give her my laundry now.

They worked over it for an hour and a half—those three lines—changing them, reading them, accenting them, till they were in that form and read in the most effective way possible. Then Jack said, "We're leading with our chins because we're going for it. People will expect Schlepperman to say something funny, and if that line isn't funny, God help it."

Jack was suspicious of these lines because they were a gag for a gag's sake. A situation—Schlepperman's shopping was being wrung in simply to get in a three-line gag. To try to insure the laugh, the last line was switched from Schlepperman to Mary Livingstone. They tried it that way and spent another half-hour polishing it. Then Jack threw it out altogether. Not only the gag, but the whole Schlepperman spot, because it closed on a gag which the spot did not build to from the very start.

Jack once said, "Gags die, humor doesn't." He practices what he preaches. He never sets up a situation which screams out loud that a funny line is coming. The funny line comes unexpectedly and naturally. In this way he never lets himself in for promising you a funny line and then letting you down with a pay-off that doesn't convulse you. He takes commonplace, everyday happenings and milks humor from them.

Rehearsals of the Benny show are not epics of mirth. It's serious work, and they all take it seriously. Jack is watching and listening to everything with a fixed intentness. Something may happen that can be converted into a laugh. For instance, the trick of having Mary Livingstone refer to the comic-strip character, "Popeye," as "Poopeye," had its beginning in the fact that Mary is a trifle uneasy about pronouncing jaw twisters on the show. She never flubs them, but the uneasiness is there.

If Jack catches a slip, and (*continued on page* 73)

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EVERYTHING IS NOTHING

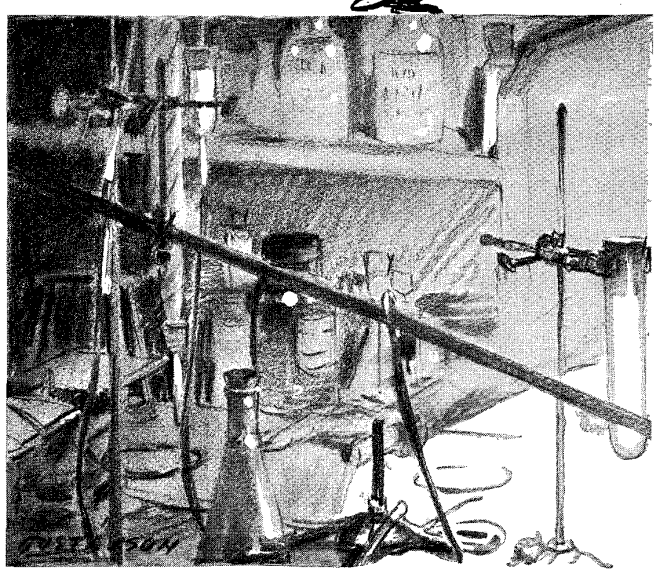
WALTER BROOKS

THERE was a young man named Herbert Stocking who worked in a bank in Buffalo, and until 1939 that is about all there is to say about him. He was quite normal and uninteresting. He believed in the American way of life and that coffee keeps you awake, and he always wore his fraternity pin. He preferred ice-cream soda to whiskey and girls to intellectual activity and almost anything to work. Though he never admitted these preferences even to himself. He thought of himself as a square peg in a round hole, but he could not seem to find a better hole so he stayed where he was. What he was really interested in was chemistry and he had a little laboratory fitted up in his attic where in his spare time he boiled and distilled and precipitated and sometimes had small explosions.

But he wasn't very good at it and the only original things that ever came out of the laboratory were some remarkably bad smells.

One evening in the fall of 1939 he came home late and saw a faint light in the attic window. Gosh, I wonder if I left that light on last night! he said, and he galloped upstairs and sure enough there was light in the laboratory but it was not coming from the electric light bulb. It was a white moony glow more than bright enough to read by and it came from a beaker half full of liquid that he had left on the work table. And Mr. Stocking gave a gasp. For he knew that he had discovered cold light.

Now cold light was something that scientists had been hunting for for a good long time, and all Mr. Stocking had to do was to let them know about his discovery and he would have had banquets given for him and been elected to societies and had a lot of publicity and honor. But though Mr. Stocking was normal he was not a fool. So he bought a big padlock for $2.49 and put it on the attic door and he experimented for two months without saying anything to anybody. And then when he had written everything out and given it in a sealed envelope to the president of his bank for safekeeping he went to



The money came pouring in. In two years he was one of

see his uncle Gideon Palmer who was one of the best lawyers in Buffalo.

Within two years Stocking Coldfire Illumination was standard equipment in every building put up in the United States. There was no production problem. The ingredients were cheap and accessible and any kind of glass bulb or bottle could be filled and sealed and it at once became a lamp guaranteed to give light for ten years. As a matter of fact they later found that they could as well have guaranteed it for fifty. The little luminous tubes—Coldfire Pocketlight: A Lifetime of Light for $1—were bought by the million. Street lighting soon followed, for the Stocking lamps saved their cost in a year. The automobile industry—always conservative in introducing major improvements—held out for some time, alleging the impossibility of turning the lights off. But by that time Mr. Stocking was making so much money that he didn't even bother to point out to them

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