



Sunday, 19 February 2012

Uncle Miltie, the Crook

So, was Milton Berle's reputation as the Thief of Bad Gags deserved?

The answer's "yes," if you talked to just about anyone, even before Berle was at his peak in the early time of television. John Crosby, syndicated from the *New York Herald Tribune*, took a stab at the topic in his column of April 9, 1947. But unlike anyone else, he doesn't blame Berle for doing it.

THERE'S NO MYSTERY IN BERLE'S LIFE OF CRIME

Milton Gayly Continues His Bold Thieving

By JOHN CROSBY

For the last couple of weeks on the new Milton Berle show (NBC 8:30 p.m. Tuesdays), the announcer, man named Gallup, has been introducing, much against the wishes of Berle, a quartet with a high-flown, Russian name. "Stop that noise!" shrieks Berle. "Quiet!" All season long on the Jack Benny show, another announcer named Don Wilson has been bringing in, much against the wishes of Benny, another quartet. "Stop it," yells Benny. "Stop it."

Later on the Berle program, the orchestra played a truncated version of "Blue Skies." "That was 'Blue Skies,'" announced Berle. "Sort of an eclipse—by Ray Bloch and his orchestra. The only reason they still have their instruments is that Jamaica Park isn't open yet."

Well, let's see now. Way back last fall, if memory serves, Fred Allen interrupted the orchestra with the words: "That was just a smattering of 'Chattanooga Choo Choo' played by Al Goodman and 25 men who followed him home from Belmont Park last night."

Jack Benny has for years been kidding his announcer, Don Wilson, about his sumptuous waistline. Berle jibes at his announcer, that man Gallup again, because his waistline is so skinny. A switcheroo, as they call it in radio.

BOTH FUNNY

Then there is a man in the show called Fulton Drew Gilbert "bringing you the news from Washington" and contradicting himself in every sentence. It's pretty funny and it was pretty funny a couple of weeks ago when Peter Lind Hayes did it on the Dinah Shore show.

And so it goes. If you can find anything on the Milton Berle show, which doesn't remind you of somebody else's show, don't blame Milton. He's doing his best. Over the years, Berle has built up a towering and quite justifiable reputation as the Raffles of show business and he's not going to risk it by fooling around with any dangerous originality. Just the same, in spite of all his vigilance, I'll bet a new idea slips in there some day. A man can't keep his guard up forever.

Apart from grand larceny, the Berle show is a great improvement over the Rudy Vallee show which it replaced, though that's not much of a compliment.

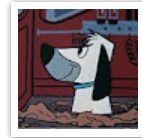
GOOD PERFORMER

Berle plays the part of a timid soul who is browbeaten by his announcer, his wife, his child, his sponsor and his advertising agency. Making the star the butt of all jokes is hardly a new idea, but Berle goes considerably further with it than any one else. He is not just insulted; he is lampooned, derided, degraded, starved and all but beaten to death by the people around him. Much of this is funnier than it ought to be because Berle, a man of the old school, is a great performer no matter what you think of his material.

However, I'd like to interject a note of mild protest about the sketches that end the show. The other day Berle did a sketch about a man who drives into a gas station in a hurry for gas. The attendants — stop me if you've



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heard this — clean the windshield, change the oil, pump up the tires, marcel his hair, put on a floor show, do everything, in fact, except give him gas. Well, it had a certain vestigial charm if only as a reminder of the good old days. But isn't there a statute of limitation on these things?

Oh, yes, and there's a singer on the program named Dick Farney, who sings in a soft, tentative style as if he were afraid of waking the baby. Sometimes I think singing is dying out entirely and perhaps it's just as well.

Copyright, 1947, for The Tribune

Berle jumped into the radio game in 1933 as part of the Fred Waring Show for Old Gold. He starred in his own show in 1939 for Quaker Oats but bounced around from show to show, season to season. Paul Ackerman of *Billboard* explained why in the April 26, 1947 edition.

Milton Berle, recognized as perhaps the fastest man in night clubs and vaude, has on this NBC series failed to impress as a top radio comedian. Impression one gets is the master of the bistro and boite simply can't break loose from his script. This is tough, for inasmuch as the script must keep within the radio limits, Berle can't cash in on what admittedly is one of his strong points—blue stuff. This doesn't necessarily mean that radio is out of Milton's reach. It just means that as of now the comedy writers and doctors simply haven't found a formula. For Berle on the air doesn't sparkle and crackle with audiences know he does on the boards. It's all quite discouraging—what with every web and ad agency in the business looking for comics. And it's not comforting to know that in the past Berle has not been able to do well on the air.

The show for Philip Morris had top writers—Nat Hiken and Aaron Ruben. It was originally intended to be similar to *Ozzie and Harriet* and included Berle's wife Joyce and Joe Besser as a stooge but, evidently, changes were made at the last minute. Meanwhile, Berle was about to open at the Copa in New York for \$12,500 a week.

Berle's life changed when his television show debuted for Texaco on September 22, 1948. He didn't need the blue material that Ackerman talked about. Instead, he dug into his old vaudeville grab bag of broad comedy and mugging and by December, had the biggest audience of any programme in history, including radio, remarkable considering he was only seen in 24 cities. Berle was eventually rewarded with a 30-year contract by NBC before the inevitable (to everyone but NBC) ratings slide. People were tired of the old frantic routines in the calm, suburban '50s. But, like when was not A-listing in radio, Berle remained a constant presence on television for years to come, trading on his reputation as show biz's biggest heister of humour.



Posted by [Yowp](#) at [08:11](#)



4 comments:



Steven Hartley 19 February 2012 at 13:42

Nice source here about him. I've not head of him; but thanks for sharing.

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Mitchell Craig 19 February 2012 at 15:52

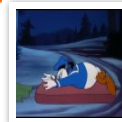
Although I was born in 1958, long past the heyday of Uncle Miltie's TV show, he was a fairly constant presence on the tube. He guest-starred on a whole heap of shows (occasionally doing a dramatic role here and there). He also hosted an episode of *Saturday Night Live*.

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J Lee 20 February 2012 at 03:13

Movies with Michael



Some
Cartoons
for
Saturday
Morning
#189 - Hello

my friends and happy Saturday morning. Once again it is time for some classic cartoons. Today's cartoon selection begins with a delightful Donald...

1 day ago

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Oh bother! The bear with very little brain through no fault of his own certainly seems to be a troublesome bruin and for many yea...

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2 days ago

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Ancillary side note -- the "Gallup" Crosby refers to is actually Frank Gallop, New York radio announcer who Famous Studio fanatics will recognize as the narrator on the early Casper cartoons (would have been interesting to hear Frank insult Casper the way he apparently did Uncle Miltie...)

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Bobby Bickert [20 February 2012 at 15:50](#)

Frank Gallop also was the host of "Lights Out". I'm guessing that's why he was chosen to narrate the Casper Noveltoons.

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