

Sunday, 28 October 2012

Memories of Vaudeville

Fewer and fewer people are left who would have seen vaudeville. The best taste we can get of it is from remembrances of former vaudevillians written many years ago.

Here's a very brief taste. This interview from the Associated Press appeared in newspapers starting November 23, 1974, not many weeks before Jack Benny died.

Jack Benny-George Burns Friendship Flourishing

EDITOR'S NOTE — Jack Benny and George Burns have had audiences laughing for 50 years, since their vaudeville days. In an exclusive interview, the comedians discuss their lives, the way comedy has changed and the often arduous task of making jokes.

By **BOB THOMAS**

Associated Press Writer

LOS ANGELES (AP) — In a town where friendship is as fleeting as a starlet's fame, the 50-year association of Jack Benny and George Burns is legendary.

They are legends themselves.

Benny, 80, entertainer of three generations, was one of vaudeville's smoothest funnymen. He starred in radio — ever stingy, ever 39. His films ranged from "To Be or Not to Be," to "The Horn is as Blows at Midnight." One of the few radio comics to succeed in television, he continues to appear in his own specials.

Burns, 78, is best known for his cigar and rakish humor. For 36 years he played the patient straight man for scatter-brained Gracie Allen.

They, too, starred in vaudeville, radio, films and television. But Gracie retired in 1958 and died in 1964. And Burns created a new role as a successful standup comedian.

The Benny-Burns friendship has flourished in the often competitive world of show business.

Nearly every day when they're in town, they meet for lunch at the Hillcrest Country Club, joining a comedian's round table for the latest jokes and gossip. Recently they lunched with a reporter for a session of reminiscence.

Both seemed fit considering their recent hospitalizations. Burns underwent open-heart surgery two months ago. Benny canceled a performance in Dallas because of stomach pains but was declared well after hospital tests here.

Was it fun playing vaudeville — or just work?

Benny: "Oh, it was fun. I'll tell you why: you didn't have to worry about writing all the time. If you got a good act together, you could play it for seven years. Because you were in a different town every week, you know?"

Burns: "And another thing: nobody could steal your jokes, the way they do today. If you caught somebody using your material, you could send your original act to Pat Casey (Labor executive for the theater owners) and he'd make the guy stop. Nowadays if other comics don't steal your jokes, you fire your writers."

Benny: "But they never stole from George and me. We don't use one-liners.

We're story tellers; we start talking and one line leads into another."

Was vaudeville really as good as people's memories of it?

Benny: "Sure it was. Every city in America had a big-time vaudeville house, and they had top performers. Of course there were small-time houses, too, and that's where the talent had a chance to train. You know, George Jessel is always saying that there's no place for talent to be lousy any more. It's true. All of us had a chance to be lousy in small-time vaudeville and gradually we learned how to be good."

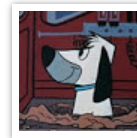
Burns: "That's right. We all built our acts gradually, learning what would get laughs and what wouldn't."

Benny: "You learned what were things you did best, and bit by bit you developed your own style. You ended up with 17 minutes of surefire material."

Burns: "That was how you determined how successful an act was. The smaller acts did 10-12 minutes. You'd ask a vaudevillian how he was doing, and he'd answer 'Seventeen minutes.' That meant he was playing next to closing (the star's position on the bill)."

Were there times when that "surefire material" didn't get laughs?

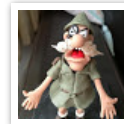
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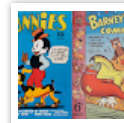
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Termite Terrace headlines



Question for All You Cartoon Collectors! - OK so I've been doing some

looking around. Bosko apparently had a comic book and I'm wondering if any of you know of

Burns: "Sometimes. There were some routines that you were sure of, like when Gracie kissed me and asked, 'Who was that?' And sometimes you'd do your act at Monday matinees and nothing happened. Then Monday night you'd get big laughs. Why? I don't know."

Benny: "The only time I found when my act wouldn't work was when I was following another comedy act, particularly knockabout comedy. One tune I had to follow the Marx Brothers for 13 weeks in a row. It was just murder. The bad thing is that the minute you lay an egg it hurts your timing." Did you change your material when you played "the sticks?"

Burns: "Never. We never knew what 'the sticks' were. Audiences were the same everywhere."

Benny: "Every town had its sophisticated audience, whether it was New York City or South Bend." They could tell, Benny added, when vaudeville started dying.

"Gradually the audiences got smaller. The people just weren't coming in," Benny said.

Burns: "Vaudeville couldn't compete with talking movies. For a dollar you could go to the Roxy Theater in New York and see 70 musicians, 60 Rockettes kicking in unison, a feature movie — and on the way out they pressed your pants and did your income tax for you. Vaudeville never changed."

Benny: "And radio killed vaudeville. People stayed home to hear it. Here's a funny thing. In theaters all over the country they would stop the movie and play the Amos 'n' Andy radio show!"

When vaudeville died, Benny and Burns changed gracefully to radio, worrying initially if they could produce enough material for a weekly show. They were successful.

Burns: "We were blessed with some great writers. They'd come to you with four-five pages of jokes. If you didn't like them, they'd go into the next room and write four-five more pages. In vaudeville, we'd go to Altoona to try out one joke.

Comedy, the pair agrees, has changed over the years.

Benny: "Well, we're all more sophisticated than we used to be. In the last five or six years I have been telling risqué stories that I would never have done before. People expect it nowadays. But George and I would never use four-letter words."

Will they ever retire?

"Never," said Burns.

"Well," said Benny, "It's tough not to retire. Sometimes I think ..."

Burns: "What would you do — stay home with Mary?"

How long have you been with her?"

Benny: "Almost 50 years."

Burns: "Well isn't it nice to get out of town?"



Posted by [Yowp](#) at [07:36](#)



Labels: [Bob Thomas](#), [Jack Benny](#)

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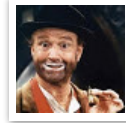
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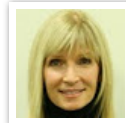
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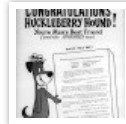
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- ▶ [2020](#) (216)
- ▶ [2019](#) (376)
- ▶ [2018](#) (379)
- ▶ [2017](#) (380)
- ▶ [2016](#) (396)
- ▶ [2015](#) (389)
- ▶ [2014](#) (390)
- ▶ [2013](#) (388)
- ▼ [2012](#) (397)
 - ▶ [December](#) (39)
 - ▶ [November](#) (34)
 - ▼ [October](#) (32)
 - [The Wickedest Wicked Witch](#)

[Buccaneer Bunny Teeth
Grind](#)

[She Sends Me Back a
Wire](#)

[Memories of Vaudeville](#)

[Willy Pogany Makes a
Cartoon](#)

[Hound Fights Fox](#)

[Joke's Over](#)

[Fred Allen 1, NBC 0](#)

[Max Fleischer and the
Red Seal](#)

[Torch Song Celebrities](#)

[Well Oiled Backgrounds](#)

[A Parade of Jack Benny,
Part 2](#)

[More UPA Critic
Snobbery](#)

[Into the Inkwell](#)

[Deputy Droopy and the
Cat](#)

[Catastrophobe](#)

[The Twirling Tom Cycle](#)

[If My Friend Rocky Was
in There](#)

[A Parade of Jack Benny,
Part One](#)

[Cartoon Commercials
1955](#)

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[Scaring Betty Boop](#)

[How \\$weet It Is](#)

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[High Diving Julian](#)

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Than a Breadbox](#)

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1930](#)

[The Brementown Blur](#)

[Rabbit Meets Skunk](#)

[Al Pearce](#)

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Ernie Gee](#)

[Fighting is Kosher](#)

► [September](#) (34)

► [August](#) (33)

► [July](#) (34)

► [June](#) (34)

► [May](#) (31)

► [April](#) (32)

► [March](#) (31)

► [February](#) (29)

► [January](#) (34)

► [2011](#) (106)

Labels

[Aline Mosby](#) (17)
[Art Davis](#) (33)
[Bad Luck Blackie](#) (9)
[Bob and Ray](#) (10)
[Bob Clampett](#) (82)
[Bob McKimson](#) (59)
[Bob Thomas](#) (53)
[Chuck Jones](#) (142)
[Columbia](#) (33)
[Counterfeit Cat](#) (8)
[Cynthia Lowry](#) (26)
[Dick Thomas](#) (14)
[Don Patterson](#) (17)
[Earl Wilson](#) (6)
[Erskine Johnson](#) (37)
[Felix the Cat](#) (27)
[Film Daily](#) (50)
[Fleischer](#) (154)
[Frank Tashlin](#) (24)
[Fred Allen](#) (43)
[Fred Brunish](#) (11)
[Friz Freleng](#) (137)
[Gene Deitch](#) (18)
[George Pal](#) (10)
[Grant Simmons](#) (4)
[Hanna and Barbera unit](#) (99)
[Hanna-Barbera](#) (2)
[Harman-Ising](#) (61)
[Henry Morgan](#) (13)
[Irv Spence](#) (8)
[Jack Benny](#) (454)
[Jay Ward](#) (30)
[Jimmy Durante](#) (17)
[John Crosby](#) (84)
[John Sutherland](#) (28)
[Johnny Johnsen](#) (27)
[Kenny Baker](#) (6)
[King-Size Canary](#) (8)
[Laugh-In](#) (11)
[Legend of Rockabye Point](#) (6)
[Little Rural Riding Hood](#) (7)
[Magical Maestro](#) (9)
[Maurice Noble](#) (12)
[Mel-O-Toons](#) (4)
[MGM](#) (553)
[Norm McCabe](#) (5)
[Pat Matthews](#) (10)
[Paul Julian](#) (13)
[Paul Terry](#) (2)

Sara Berner	(5)
Screwy Squirrel	(34)
Spider-Man	(1)
Terrytoons	(84)
Tex Avery	(468)
Tom and Jerry Human	(29)
Tralfaz Sunday Theatre	(17)
Ub Iwerks	(80)
UPA	(57)
Van Beuren	(94)
Vernon Scott	(42)
Virginia MacPherson	(14)
Walt Disney	(145)
Walter Lantz	(241)
Warner Bros.	(586)
Who Killed Who	(10)