

Sunday, 6 January 2013

## 40 Isn't Funny

The character traits Jack Benny invented for himself became so well-known, many people feel he had them forever. But there was a time on the radio that Benny didn't have a butler named Rochester, didn't drive a Maxwell and wasn't 39. In fact, Jack's coming-of-age-39 was a comparatively late development on the show; he hung on to a few younger ages until the late '40s. But, as Jack put it, 39 is a funny number, and that's the one people remember today. Few remember than Jack actually turned 40 on the air.

It's likely the idea came from Benny's writers, as news stories can be found during the 1950s where Jack himself resisted the idea of adding another year to his age. But they gave it a try on television in 1958. The fact that people still think of Benny as a perennial 39 shows how successful it was.



Benny's writers probably could have built a whole show around the age change alone, but they decided to go for another gimmick instead. They brought back a bunch of people who had been associated with Jack over the years on radio. It would have been pure nostalgia in some cases; obscure nostalgia in a few. Likely none of his audience would get the connection between Benny and bandleaders George Olson or Ted Weems. The fact that one news stories had to *explain* the connection of George Hicks shows how little-known it was.

Let's go back to February 13, 1958 and the United Press.

### Jack Benny To Note "40th" Birthday

By VERNON SCOTT

UP Hollywood Correspondent

HOLLYWOOD (UP)—Jack Benny celebrates his 40th birthday on a TV spectacular tonight—24 years after the fact.

After eight years of being 39, Jack thought there might be a few yaks in his finally reaching 40, an age he doesn't consider, as funny as 39.

"My real birthday is tomorrow, Valentine's Day," Jack said. "And because this show falls so close, I decided to celebrate on the air. Actually, I'll be 64."

Benny is as funny as a Kremlin purge offscreen. He seldom cracks a smile, refuses to tell jokes. He has an indifferent attitude that borders on boredom. "I'm only funny when I get paid," he said.

Lunching in the dining room of the Hillcrest Country Club the comedian blinked his baby-blue eyes at leaden skies and debated as to whether he should play golf or return to his office. He mumbled about it half a dozen times during an hour interview.

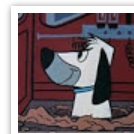
"This gag about .my age began back in 1944 on a radio show. The script called for Mary (Livingstone) to ask my age. When I said, '36,' it got a big laugh. After that it took me six years to progress to 39. You might say aged gradually."

**In person Benny looks about 50.**

As a birthday present to himself the comedian is holding a reunion party with many of the character actors and singers who helped build his show during the last 27 years.

Scheduled to be on hand for the CBS-TV "Shower of Stars" are announcers Paul Douglas and George Hicks, who preceded Don Wilson, Singers Frank Parker, Dennis Day, Larry Stevens and Jo Stafford will be there along with orchestra leaders Bob Crosby, Abe Lyman, Phil Harris, Ted Weems, Don Bestor, Johnny Green and

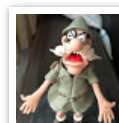
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Spencer Jordan's amazing work... we are hoping artists like Ian

Knox...and families of these comic artists can see these gems... - made with fimo clay I had ago and its not very easy to do...

3 hours ago

### Fernando Liera Blog Cartoons



Vehicle Verification Centers of Mexico City will reopen in August with COVID

safety measures. - ©2020 fernandollercartoons.com

5 hours ago

### Movies with Michael

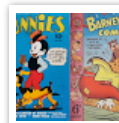


Cowboy Church #67 - Hello my friends and welcome back for another

service of cowboy church. Today's musical selection begins with Gene Autry singing "Dear Hearts and Gentle Pe...

7 hours ago

### 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

George Olson, Mel Blanc, Andy Devine, the Sportsman Quartette and a score of other Benny regulars, past and present, will help cut the birthday cake.

How long will Jack remain 40?

"I'm not sure," he said. "It depends on audience reaction. If it's not funny I may become 41 next year."

Benny generously credits his treatment of supporting players for much of his success. Through the years his show has been Valhalla to the "Little People" who earn their cakes and ale playing bit parts.

"I've always been careful how I handle guest stars and bit players," Jack said thoughtfully.

"They usually bounce the funny lines off me while I play straight-man."

But there was a bad omen reported that very same day. What may be remarkable to viewers in reading this today is that Jack's show was to be done live. Of course, this wasn't far removed from the network radio days where broadcasts were live for many years.

### Rochester Fine After Collapse

HOLLYWOOD, Feb. 13 (AP) — Eddie Anderson, better known to Jack Benny fans as Rochester, collapsed during a television rehearsal Wednesday night.

A doctor said Anderson had suffered a stomach upset.

"He's talking and he says he's feeling fine," the doctor reported after examining the 52-year-old actor.

Anderson fainted while rehearsing for a show he and Benny are scheduled to appear on tonight.

So, the 40th birthday party went on without Rochester. *The New York Times* wasn't impressed with the whole proceedings. Here's a review published the following day.

## TV: Unhappy Birthday; Jack Benny, Finally at '40,'

### Worthy of More Fitting Party Than He Received

By JACK GOULD

JACK BENNY, who is 64 years old today, observed his "fortieth birthday" last night on the "Shower of Stars" program over Channel 2. The man who made a career of always being 39 on radio and television deserved a much more fitting party than he received.

Apart from the idea of having Mr. Benny age a year, the producers of the program were at a loss for anything to do. There were some nostalgic moments as colleagues of the comedian appeared briefly before the cameras, but there was no serious effort to organize any entertainment. The quips were labored, and on the home screen the element of sincerity seemed contrived and rehearsed.

At the instant when Mr. Benny started to respond to a mass singing of "Happy Birthday" he was cut off for a commercial. Rochester, Jack's aide, was sick and unable to appear. Andy Devine did his best as a replacement. What so easily could have been a first-rate show was just uninspired television.

Whether Jack continued to try to pass himself off as 40 after this, or pretended that it never happened and went back to 39, I don't know. I'm not familiar with the intricacies of his TV work. But, suffice it to say, the memory of it never stuck. Everyone thinks of Jack Benny as 39; his obituaries in 1974 all mentioned it and UPI's wire story even deadpan-joked about it. Jack was right. The idea of a vain, aging man sticking to an age that he's obviously passed long ago is good comedy. 39 is funny.

Posted by Yowp at 08:26



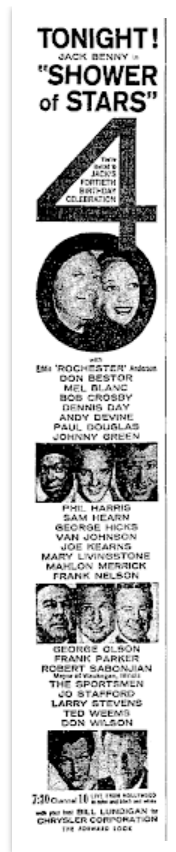
Labels: Jack Benny

## 1 comment:

 **J Lee** 6 January 2013 at 09:00

In the post-World War II era, the age of 40 has been associated with "Mid-Life Crisis", as people have to come to grips with not being young anymore. That's a big part of what makes 39 funny, because it adds to the idea of Jack being too vain to admit he's aging.

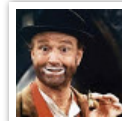
(As for the special, they probably would have been better served either filming it or borrowing some of Big Crosby's new-fangled Ampex video tape if they wanted to maintain a live feel to the presentation. Most of Jack's TV shows that featured large casts were filmed, which gave the large group a chance to do work at



additional covers you could share! ...

16 hours ago

### Way Too Damn Lazy To Write A Blog



Born on July 18, 1913 - Red Skelton - \*Today's post

commences

with the Guzzler's Gin routine ...

1 day ago

### News From ME

Sorry... - As far as I know, I do not have any diseases. I just have too much to deal with right now so I won't be blogging much if at all. I'm postponing all the web...

2 days ago

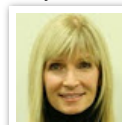
### Cartoon Research

In His Own Words: H.T. Kalmus on Disney in Technicolor - Suspended Animation #276 Many references may be found regarding two-strip Technicolor. I have been guilty of discussing Walter Lantz's King of Jazz (1930)...

2 days ago

### AFRTS Archive

Mary Turner 1985 - Mary Turner today Mary Turner really rocked the house.



Normally when any of the jocks got a reaction, it'd be split.

The ones

that were really liked wou...

4 days ago

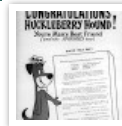
### The World of Knight



TONIGHT, 11:54 PM. - COPYRIGHT 2020 BY MILTON KNIGHT

4 days ago

### Yowp



Hanna-Barbera Birthday Did-You-Knows - 63 years ago today, some

forms were signed by George Sidney, Bill Hanna and Joe Barbera creating what eventually became the biggest TV cartoon operation i...

1 week ago

### Supervised By Fred Avery: Tex Avery's Warner Brothers Cartoons

Wabbit Twouble: A Small Addendum to An Outstanding Podcast -

it until they got it right. Bringing that many people back, even for an extended live special, was bound to be risky.)

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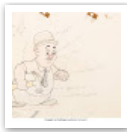
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Original animation drawing from Wabbit Twouble with color notations

for the ink and paint department. Release date: 12/20/41 Availability: Looney Tunes Gol...  
3 weeks ago

**Mark Kausler's CatBlog**  
**The Lady and the Tiger** - From the Cathy Hill Archive of Unpublished Comics comes "The Lady and the Tiger". This story was drawn before Cathy started the "Mad Raccoons" series. U...  
4 weeks ago

**What About Thad?**  
**Cartoon Logic Podcast** - And yet another distraction from this brick and mortar blog... I've entered the world of podcasting with renowned animation director and historian Bob Jaques...  
10 months ago

**Likely Looney, Mostly Merrie**  
**That's all, folks!** - My posts have gotten thinner over the years. I'm aware of that. I've been hopeful for a long time, that I can remain active with blogging and sharing furth...  
1 year ago

**Dr. Grob's Animation Review**  
**The Flying Man** - 'The Flying Man' is a very short absurdist film in which a man drops his coat to take a swim in mid air. Another man with a dog drops by, tries the same th...  
2 days ago

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