



Sunday, 27 January 2013

## No Shock Comedy

The Jack Benny show tried something novel on its season-opening broadcast of 1949-50. It had the Benny cast and incidental players talk about him for the first 22 minutes before Benny himself appeared on the show. The writers built up the gag so Jack's appearance came as an unexpected, but inevitable, surprise.

Not everyone liked it. The novel show was panned by a columnist for the *New York World-Telegram* for not being "surprising."

Frankly, she didn't know her typewriter ribbon from a hole in the ground.

Harriet Van Horn doesn't seem to have understood either audiences in general or the Benny show in particular. She appears to have been another culture vulture who detested much of radio and television, but was quite willing to accept a good salary covering them.

You can read her column below. It's from the December 4, 1949 edition of the *Pittsburgh Press*, which would have been responsible for the sub-headline about a "girl columnist," which strikes me as superfluous and an unnecessary put-down based on gender.



### Jack Benny Slapped Down For Late Start on Radio

**Comic Is Given Verbal Spanking Byirate Girl Columnist**

**By HARRIET VAN HORN**

It's traditional in the theater that the star make his (or her) entrance only after the proper atmosphere of expectancy has been created.

A tingling hush, and almost tangible tension—and on sweeps the great one! It's a fine moment in the theater, in its way every bit as exciting as that glorious split second just before the curtain rises.

In radio, fine old traditions have been mightily abused. One night Jack Benny, returning for what must be the 100th year in radio, postponed his entrance until seven minutes before the end of the show. By then it didn't matter a thought that prompts the irreverent sequitur: would it matter if he hadn't come on at all?

No, I don't think it would have. After all these years the Benny show runs by automatic pilot. Namely, the familiarity all listeners have with the established characters and their established responses. Pavlov's dogs, obediently drooling when the master rang the bell, demonstrated no more faithful adherence to the principal of the conditioned response than do members of Mr. Benny's company (Not to mention the studio audience).

There is almost no spontaneity left in the program. Its pattern, plotted on a graph, would change scarcely at all, week after week, year after year. One can almost envisage the jokes being turned out a full season in advance, Willow Run style. Faithful designs by experienced hands.

But where is the "shock" element, the swift and stunning surprise that's half of every laugh?

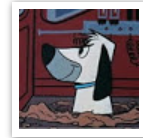
I find it not, except occasionally in the remarks of Dennis Day. Here is one of the funniest men in radio.

Listening, nobody at my house managed more than a bored smile—until Dennis and his shrewish mother came on.

She said "This year, Dennis, I think you should insist that Mr. Benny pay you in American money." Seems she found it inconvenient to run down to Mexico to cash his checks.

Dennis protested loyally. Had not Mr. Benny come to his rescue when he was ill and needed an operation?

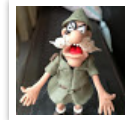
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### **Peter Gray's Comics and Art**



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

4 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

"Yes," conceded his mother, "but I still think you took a chance letting Rochester take out your appendix." There followed numerous jokes about Dennis' incision being held together with scotch tape. Surprisingly, each one seemed funny. Other repetitive jokes, such as the one about Mr. Benny buying everybody a dinner at the Brown Derby, gathered only moss. When he finally made his entrance—having driven to the studio on a sight-seeing bus with the most noxious, offensive conductor I've ever heard, on the radio or off—Benny revealed that he'd forgotten his script. Left it on the bus. He had no cause for alarm. Mary, Dennis, Phil, Rochester and all the rest of the cast could manage without him indefinitely.

Miss Van Horn decries the lack of spontaneity on the Benny show but then praises the routine between Dennis Day and his mother (played by Verna Felton), ignoring the fact the scene isn't spontaneous in the slightest. Each word has been, like everything on the Benny shows except the occasional ad lib, carefully checked over and weighed by Benny and his writers. There is no "shock" element any more than there is a "shock" element in a performance of *The Tempest* or *La Scala*. The audience knows what they're going to get. That's why they go to see the performance. Radio is no different. I doubt Miss Van Horne would compare a theatre audience watching *The Importance of Being Earnest* to Pavlov's dogs for reacting predictably to scenes it is intimately familiar with. After all, it's the uplifting THEATRE, not something common like, ugh, radio.

The challenge the Benny show met—and won—year after year after year was to have enough familiar elements that they didn't need to be part of each broadcast, and when they appeared, to make them a bit different to surprise the audience. Benny had to have learned from someone like Joe Penner, who had three catchphrases and after burning out the audience with them, had nothing else. Of course the conductor (played by Frank Nelson) is "noxious." That's the idea. He's supposed to conflict with Jack. The conflict is the comedy.

Miss Van Horn apparently never really understood the job of a radio/TV columnist. She once complained to *Esquire* magazine about the prospect of reviewing "I Love Lucy" or "Gunsmoke" 20 times. Didn't she understand that isn't the job of a columnist? One writes about a subject if they have something to say about it. They don't write about a TV show solely because it's a TV show. If "20 times" is another bit of her facetious exaggeration, like her crack about the Benny show being on "100 years," it falls flat.

If anything, Benny's writers proved the remark of her opening sentence, not disproved it. Jack made his entrance "after the proper atmosphere of expectancy has been created." His audience was delighted with the surprise. Jack didn't abuse "fine old traditions" at all. He reaffirmed them.

Posted by Yowp at 11:57



Labels: Jack Benny

## 4 comments:

**Anonymous** 27 January 2013 at 12:16

This just shows how disgusting and ill-mannered journalists and columnists can be.

The Jack Benny Program has always been a delight. To listen to and watch.

[Reply](#)

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**Anonymous** 27 January 2013 at 17:46

Let's not go overboard. I think the opinion is specious, but hardly "Disgusting", or even unfair necessarily. There are jokes on the show that easily could have been written a year in advance. I'm sure they sat down one day and thought of all the jokes they could think of about Mary's sister Babe, and then rationed them out over a lot of shows.

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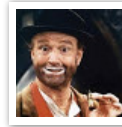
**J Lee** 27 January 2013 at 20:07

FWIW, Ms. Van Horne was still projecting an air talking down to her lessers in columns in the pre-Rupert Murdoch New York Post from the 1970s. But I didn't realize her disdain for broad-appeal shows went back to the radio era until now.

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

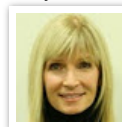
**Cartoon Research**

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

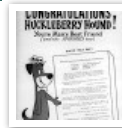
**The World of Knight**



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 -

[Reply](#)

**Anonymous** 8 February 2013 at 12:21

Because the critic in question is female, this is not very apt, buy I once saw critics compared to eunuchs: They know how it's done; they see it done every day; they just can't do it themselves.

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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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