

Sunday, 26 May 2013

Screw-ups and Sportsmen

Inside jokes got on the air periodically on the Jack Benny radio show. Some are decipherable; laughter from the band greeted Jack reading a fairy tale featuring a character named "Bertram Scott," who was Jack's business secretary. But others are a little more arcane.

On the April 16, 1950 show, one of Jack's jokes bombed. He then ad-libbed "My writers own an oil well. I can't do anything with them." Jack ad-libbed the oil well reference a few more times when the show started dying.

I've tried in vain to find a contemporary reference to any of the writers owning an oil well. But I did find a newspaper column that mentioned the Sportsmen Quartet owned one.

The Sportsmen had been around since the 1930s. They had their own 15-minute show for a time, appeared on Rudy Vallee's and Judy Canova's programmes and even provided songs for animated cartoons. They had even done some anonymous work on *The Jack Benny Program* before "officially" becoming part of it in the 1946-47 season, originally playing off the notorious Benny cheapness. Eventually, the Quartet did an excellent and memorable job crooning parody versions of songs that incorporated sales pitches and stock phrases for Lucky Strike cigarettes, cleverly arranged by Mahlon Merrick.

Little was written about the Quartet during their heyday, but the United Press came out with this story in 1953. About the time it was published, the Quartet were touring with Bob Crosby and had stopped in Vancouver with Canadian-born Gisele Mackenzie to raise money to pay for the British Empire Games the following year.

Singers of Commercials Branch Into Own Show

By ALINE MOSBY

United Press Hollywood Correspondent

HOLLYWOOD, May 27. — The "Four Sportsmen" quartet which parlayed a "Hmm" into fame and fortune on Jack Benny's radio program, said today they're branching into their own show so they can really sing.

The four male crooners thank Benny hourly for giving them overnight success on his CBS program. But, they sighed, they can only give out with a cigaret commercial and "hmmm" that's a running joke on the show.

Like Phil Harris, Dennis Day and other Benny alumni, they're taking the plunge on their own.

Two Singers

"Bob Crosby sings on the show and so does Dennis Day, so they don't need us for regular songs," explained Gurney Bell, Bill Days, Jay Meyer and Marty Sperzel—only not all at once.

"We'll still stay with Benny, but we have our own transcribed radio show now so we can really sing songs."

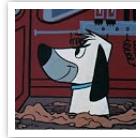
The hit they made as Benny's foils have brought them a string of other sideline businesses, too. The Sportsmen incorporated themselves and invested in a housing project, an oil well, a company in the Philippines, a helicopter and a play that flopped.

They've scored success on personal appearance tours, after a battle to convince booking agents they could do something besides a musical "hmmmm." They also plan a series of television films.

"We went into these businesses together on our motto, 'United we sing, divided we fall,'" quipped Days.



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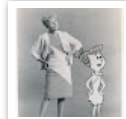


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mumbled some uncomplimentary comments at the F.C.C. in May of 1940. The Commission made two rulings, basically tell...

23 hours ago

Yowp



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64 World's Fair stuff - This documentary is quite good. Most of you have probably already seen it, but I'm sharing it here anyways. While I'm add it, why not share some ...

22 minutes ago

The "Hmm" on the Benny show started a joke.

"Don Wilson, the announcer, was to do the commercial and rather than make it a stereotyped thing, they decided to have a quartet do a hum. Then Benny could say, 'For this I pay \$500?' and faint," said Meyer.

Backing

The Sportsmen already were singing as "backing" for such name chirpers as Ginny Sims and Dinah Shore. The unknown quartet was hired for the Benny show. They were such a hit that Benny kept them on. On one program Benny threatened to sell them to rival Fred Allen, and CBS was flooded with irate letters defending the quartet.

One member of the combination has a pitchpipe to give the quartet their cue for the "Hmmm."

"Once we missed the note, so on the next show Benny locked us in the closet and made us say the commercial 500 times," grinned Sperzel.

Sperzel's reference is well-known to fans of the Benny radio show. The broadcast of January 8, 1950 was a complete shambles—except to the audience, who love the spontaneity of mistakes. It started when award-winning announcer Don Wilson spoonerised columnist Drew Pearson's name into "Drear Pooson." The sketch which took up the second half of the show had Mary bollix a line. And then the Sportsmen missed a singing cue, with only a couple of them (sounding off-mike) delivering their lyrics. The following weeks, Jack used it as a running gag which Sperzel explained the interview.

For whatever reason, Sperzel became less talkative years later. Non-talkative is, perhaps, a better term. He flatly told people he didn't want to talk about his career. He died in 2011 at 98, the last surviving member of the post-1943 version of the Quartet.

Posted by [Yowp](#) at [08:12](#)



Labels: [Aline Mosby](#), [Jack Benny](#)

4 comments:



J Lee 26 May 2013 at 10:20

The Sportsmen seem to have run into the same sort of frestration Kenny Baker did, in wanting to be used less as a comedy prop on a comedey show. But unlike Baker, the Quartet followed the Dennis Day route of maintaining their connection with Jack's show while trying to strike out on their own, and were still being used by Benny and his writers into the 1960s, well after the Lucky Strike sponsorship ended.

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Yowp 28 May 2013 at 02:26

Tom Wagner mentioned on Facebook: "According to Bill Days, there was a change made that they didn't tell the Quartet about and you heard the result." I've never seen the Days story in print.

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Tom Wagner 30 May 2017 at 13:30

That's because Bill Days told me the story :)

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wbhist 17 April 2015 at 03:09

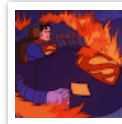
There were a few others who served time in The Sportsmen over the years. One was John Rarig, but perhaps the most famous alum was Thurl Ravenscroft whose fame lay with such moments as being the "low voice" on Rosemary Clooney's 1954 recording of "This Ole House" - and more significantly, "You're A Mean One, Mr. Grinch" from the 1966 animated Christmas special "How The Grinch Stole Christmas."

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