

Sunday, 2 August 2015

Not Quite Farewell

Ah, if there had only been a third and a twentieth Jack Benny farewell TV special, as a columnist for *Newsday* once hoped. It was not to be, though a third was in the planning stage before Jack's health quickly went down hill in late 1974. At least, we'd like to think Jack would be hale and hearty on any future specials, not a sad shell of a funnyman long past his prime. Fortunately, Jack Benny left the world laughing until the end. He never really quit, despite the facetious headline you see below.

This column was published in the *Yonkers Herald Statesman*, January 21, 1974.

Jack Benny quits — again

By **BILL KAUFMAN**

Newsday

Jack Benny, that ageless comedian whose chagrined exclamation of "Weelll," has long been delivered with clockwork precision, is retiring publicly on national television again for the second time. 'It's not that he's insincere about it all, but as Benny explains, "I'm going to keep doing it until I get it right."

Last year he bowed out on TV with a special, and since it went over so big with just about everyone from sponsors and network officials to the Nielsen Hating folks, it's about to happen again.

"JACK BENNY'S Second Farewell Special" is the apt title of the telecast, and it's set for Thursday night on NBC pre-empting "The Flip Wilson Show." According to one Madison Avenue video mogul, "There may be a 3d, 4th, 10th and 20th farewell before Benny gets ready to hang up his violin."

The second farewell stanza will feature one of those rare occasions when Benny and his close friend George Burns will appear together on the tube. They've been chums for 25 years, and for reasons known only to themselves, they've actually worked together very little.

Benny's guest stars this time around, in addition to cigar-chomping and musically vamping Burns, will be Johnny Carson, Redd Foxx and Dinah Shore. The special will also herald the TV debut of a hot new singing group, the DeFranco Family, spotlighting 13-year-old Tony DeFranco. (The Family's latest hit, "Heartbeat, It's a Lovebeat" is soaring on the record rating charts these days). Benny's bash will also include cameo appearances by Dean Martin and the "Dragnet" team, Jack Webb and Harry Morgan.

"SOMETIMES YOU think you've got something going," Benny said in a recent interview. "I wasn't sure about, the show's title, but every time I mentioned it to the audience in (Las) Vegas, they laughed like hell. Now that's a good thing!" Benny quickly added. "I think I can go as far as the third farewell. After that who knows what will happen."

Possibly the most well-worked gimmicks of Benny's career have been his reputation of being a penny pincher and his age. Far from being penurious in real life, Benny has a reputation for philanthropic activities; as for his age, the veteran comic's most recent biography states: "Jack Benny was born 39 years ago in Chicago."

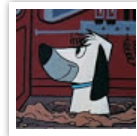
The loquacious performer laughs when questioned about it, admitting that "I've been 39 for almost that many years, if anyone cares. But if you look closely, you'll see that I have the face of a young man. Hey, I can remember not too long ago paying only half-fare on public transportation. Are you going to ask me now if it was horse-drawn?"

BENNY'S LONG relationship with Burns is remarkable both in terms of both show business and just plain camaraderie.

The fact that both senior members of the entertainment fraternity haven't spent that much time together before the public isn't because of a lack of offers. They are constantly besieged with requests to co-star in Las



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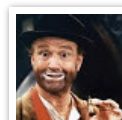


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9 hours ago

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(f...
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fernandollera.com
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Vegas, and to appear on TV specials and talk shows. It generally hasn't occurred, except for brief cameo spots on each other's programs.

Benny and Burns were asked to replace Walter Matthau and Art Carney in "The Odd Couple" on Broadway, and Neil Simon wanted them originally for his "The Sunshine Boys," which many said would have been a natural for them with its plot about two vaudevillians. But their answer was always no.

BENNY HASN'T a specific reason for the perennial turndowns, except to say, "Come on and watch the farewell show. Burns and I had more fun than we ever did as long as I can remember."

Benny said he met Burns back in the 1920s, when Burns was dating Gracie Allen and Benny was dating her roommate, a girl named Mary Kelly. Later on the Burnses were present at Benny's wedding in 1927 to his wife of many years, Mary Livingstone.

The show's cameo appearance by Johnny Carson is more than just another guest shot by the host of the "Tonight Show."

Carson is an avid admirer of Benny and always admitted that Benny was his idol. Carson tried to learn from watching Benny perform during his early days and frankly allows that the master provided many pointers that Carson uses in his monologue style, if any comedians today can match Benny's pacing and timing during delivery.

BENNY, WHEN approached with this fact about Carson's career, gives his quizzical look and says, "Weelll, that may be so, but now he's my idol." Dinah Shore was Benny's first guest on his initial television show in 1950, and her guest appearance enables them to reminisce about the adventure.

The viewing audience will also get a first, of sorts, on the farewell special. The cameras will give them a look at Redd Foxx's real home, not the junk shop that they're used to seeing on "Sanford and Son," and the contrast is great. "Foxx is now quite rich, you know," said Benny, "And we thought it would be interesting for the audience to see how he really lives." Strangely enough, "Sanford and Son" is based on a British series called "Steptoe and Son," and Benny was approached by the producers who originally had an option on it, to play the title role. He turned it down, because he didn't want to do a weekly show anymore.

THE SPECIAL will also feature a musical group headed by Benny and inspired by the success of the DeFranco's recordings. But Benny won't divulge the group's name until air time, saying it's "A very lively one, if nothing else." The spot marks the first time Benny has played the violin on television in several seasons.

The violin is one of Benny's great loves—perhaps second in line to his natural penchant for entertaining people with comedy. He's an accomplished musician and has for many years toured, making guest appearances with leading symphony orchestras.

Benny talks enthusiastically about a forthcoming trip to Australia and New Zealand, where he'll appear in concert with each nation's major symphony. "I'm also going to give a concert in Singapore," says Benny with just a hint of pride in his voice. "I hear my old TV shows are being run there, and I'm curious to see how I sound in Singapore, or whatever you call the language down there."

Benny acknowledges that today there's an entirely new generation—more probably two generations—that don't even know him as the Jack Benny of the radio waves during the 1930s and 1940s. Gone are the wheezing Maxwell Rochester's gruff voice and the longstanding, contrived feud with the late comedy genius, Fred Allen. One of Benny's early radio appearances was on Ed Sullivan's show in 1932. His first words were, "Hello, folks! This is Jack Benny. There will be a slight pause for everyone to say 'Who cares?' " It turned out that many millions did.



Posted by [Yowp](#) at [07:05](#)



Labels: [Jack Benny](#)

1 comment:

 **Paul B** 3 August 2015 at 09:49

I truly love Jack Benny and that "Second Farewell Special" was great. The photo of George Burns sparked the memory of one of the funniest skits on the show, where Jack and George are statues. I don't remember anything else about it, except that I laughed until my sides ached.

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