

Sunday, 22 May 2016

The Pals That Weren't

Harry Conn thought he made Jack Benny and, in a fit of ego, walked out on him before the end of the 1935-36 radio season.

The editors at *Radio Guide* magazine may have viewed this with a bit of embarrassment. For in their February 1, 1936 issue, they cobbled together a feature story about how lovey-dovey things were between writer Conn and boss Benny. One suspects there were barrel-fuls of fiction in the tale woven by the *Guide's* Kay Morgan.

For those of you who haven't read the various posts about Conn here, after leaving Benny he bounced around from show to show before convincing CBS to give him his own half-hour comedy programme, which couldn't get a sponsor and failed miserably after 13 weeks. Conn's writing career went down the drain and he ended up as a doorman at a theatre in New York by the late '50s.

To be fair to Conn, he did revolutionise radio comedy (with Benny) in moving away from the vaudeville revue format to something more akin to characters (announcer/bandleader/singer/assorted stooges) interacting with a host. And Conn's version of the Benny radio show has some recognisable elements. But it didn't have Rochester, Dennis Day, a sputtering Maxwell, a cash-filled underground vault, age 39, a feud with Fred Allen, a floorwalker screeching "Yeeeeess?" and most of the things anybody associates with Jack Benny.

Here's the *Radio Guide* story with the photos that accompanied it.

DAMON BENNY and PYTHIAS CONN

By KAY MORGAN

THERE were two new acts in the old Fox Crotona Theater in New York. One was a good-looking young violinist who tried to spin a few jokes. The other was a glum-faced song-and-dance man who wanted to be a writer.

Backstage one night, the song-and-dancer who wanted to be a writer, told the violinist who wanted to be a comedian. "Say, your patter is putrid! Why don't we team up? I'll write for you. With my gags and your personality you'll go over with a bang." The other looked at him with contempt. "Listen, go back to your marbles and leave this business of being funny to me. You look like the last person in the world who could write jokes. "Thanks," he said, "and no!" He turned and entered his dressing room.

This was nine years ago. And that's how the most famous partnership and the most successful friendship in radio almost died a-borning.

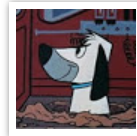
The violinist who turned thumbs down on the proposal was none other than Jack Benny, and the turned-down proposer was Harry Conn. Benny and Conn. Damon and Pythias, folks in radio call them.

Jack is the first to admit today that without Harry Conn he wouldn't have been selected by the Radio Guide readers as tophole rib tickler and outstanding star in the 1935 annual Star of Stars Election. Which shows the sort of guy Jack is. And Harry says that without Jack's inimitable, indolent manner, his gags wouldn't go over with such a punch. So there you are!

BUT to go back to that acridulous backstage meeting . . . Each took his own Broadway path and trod it alone. Apparently Jack was right. He didn't need a writer. In fact, he was doing pretty well on his own. Here he was



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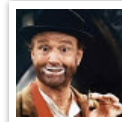


Some Cartoons For Saturday Morning #80 - Hello my friends

and welcome back for another selection of classic cartoons. Today's selection begins with one of the great Mickey, Donald and Goofy car...

5 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 (from Zieg...

6 hours ago

Fernando Llera Blog Cartoons

'Cozy Bear' Group Tied to Hacks on Covid Vaccine Research. - ©2020

fernandollera.com



19 hours 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...

1 day ago

Cartoon Research

In His Own Words: H.T. Kalmus on Disney in Technicolor - Suspended

now, star of the Earl Carroll Vanities — a high water mark in those 1930 Prohibition days. That's how he came to get that offer to star on the new gingle program then being planned. The contract was waiting for his signature. He swaggered in grandly, pen in hand, ready to sign.

"You'll be on twice a week," the agency man told him. "Better bring in a dozen prepared scripts for a starter." Two shows a week! Beads of sweat stood out on Jack Benny's forehead. He was regarded as one of the wits of Broadway, to be sure. However, doing the same act night after night, month after month, in a show or in vaudeville, is one thing. *But* — getting together two brand new comedy acts a week . . . *whew!* He felt a little faint.

He saw a great radio chance — and salary — slipping right through his fingers. Panic-stricken, he rushed to his friend Nat Burns, who was then doing a bright radio act with his wife, one Gracie Allen by name.

"Don't worry," soothed Burns. "I'll send up our writer. He'll help you."

Benny waited — and stalked up and down his hotel room alone. Time passed. Where was that so-and-so writer that Burns had promised? An hour late already. Confound it, he had even forgotten his name. Now Jack couldn't even phone him. Jack's nerves were as brittle as an old rubber-band.

THE door opened. Benny looked up.

"*You!*" he cried, somewhat in the manner of the harassed heroine confronting the villain in 'Way Down East. There before him was the sad-faced song-and-dancer of his old vaudeville days.

And that, ladies and gentlemen, is how Benny found Conn, radio found its biggest money-making team, and the public found a brand new type of radio comedy.



Not many comedians will give credit to their gag writers. It's supposed to be bad business. Spoils the glamour and the spontaneity of the funny man, don't you know! That's why these writers are jokingly referred to, in intimate radio circles, as the forgotten men.

Jack has gone against this rigid ruling of the airwaves. And that's a story in itself. The limelight glory of his radio success hasn't affected him — as it has some other comedians I could mention — to the extent where he has become pompous and wants to crowd out those who are largely responsible for his success.

I was in the room with a famous editor, an advertising agency man and Jack. There was a heated argument going on, with the first two men lined up against Jack. It seems that the editor was to appear on Benny's next program, announcing the grand fact that Jack was voted the most popular comedian on the air.

"But you can't go ahead with this fool idea of giving your writer credit on the air. You're supposed to be the funny guy. Lots of listeners may be disappointed if you give someone else credit. That's a bugaboo no comedian dares defy."

They were trying so hard, the editor and the agency man, to keep up the old illusion before the public. But arguing with Jack about that subject was like trying to carry on a conversation with the Delhi Lama [sic]. The program went on, but when the honors were passed around, Harry Conn, the unknown, unseen forgotten man, basked in the limelight too. Jack made sure of that.

They're called Damon and Pythias, but not only because they're great friends. Matter of fact, they seldom go out together socially. Jack and Mary Livingstone, his wife, travel around with Burns and Allen, Jane and Goodman Ace and the other gay younger marrieds, while Conn goes about to wrestling matches and poker parties with the Broadway crowd. But their friendship goes even deeper than that. It's based on an unbelievable trust and understanding. Just for an idea:

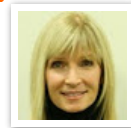
After several of Benny's early broadcasts, Conn gave up his job writing for Burns and Allen. Now don't forget, at that time George and Gracie had been on the air and were established hits. And while Benny's first few broadcasts clicked, his rating as a radio comedian was still uncertain and his contract had only a few weeks to run. Broadway-wise skeptics told Conn he was crazy to give up a sure-fire success for a chance. But the heart-warming part of it all is that Jack didn't ask Conn to do this for him. He's not the sort of fellow to demand any sacrifice made for him.

Well, you know what happened. The next few broadcasts made Jack a great star — greater, even, than the wildest dreams of either Benny or Conn. There was never a contract signed between the two. There was nothing to keep intact this business partnership — and after all, that's what it was. Jack could fire Harry tomorrow; Harry could walk out on Jack any time he wishes. There's absolutely nothing to prevent either. And yet there never has been a squabble over money, never a rumor that one was leaving the other. And in a profession where stars out-grow, with sickening rapidity, the people who've helped them climb up, this fact is news.

BENNY showed Conn the same loyalty that Conn displayed to him. At the beginning Harry received \$100 for each of those scripts. As Benny's salary ascended, so did Conn's. Harry never had to ask for it. Jack was one of the rare persons in radio who kept his head when success came to him — a mighty difficult thing to do in this ego-inflated industry. Harry's pay check rose from \$250 to \$500 and then \$750. When Jack reached his peak,

Animation #276 Many references may be found regarding two-strip Technicolor. I have been guilty of discussing Walter Lantz's King of Jazz (1930)...
1 day 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...

3 days ago

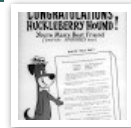
The World of Knight



TONIGHT,
11:54 PM. -
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3 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 Twoouble: A Small Addendum to An Outstanding Podcast -

Original animation drawing from Wabbit Twoouble 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

Termite Terrace headlines

Porky's Hot Dog Intake - Western Publishing definitely isn't free of

just before he went to Hollywood, Conn's salary was something like \$1,250 for each script — the highest salary, I understand, paid any writer for one individual program.

The test of their friendship came with that Hollywood offer from MGM. Jack alone was called. The company didn't need a writer. Said they had plenty of their own under contract, who had been turning out good comedy scripts for their other comedians. But Jack stood firm. I can see him exercising the same stubbornness that he showed to the editor and the agency man: "I won't sign until Conn is signed, too." In the end he won. Conn was hired to write all of his movie dialogue at a salary of \$1,800 a week. But Jack gained more than his point. He gained, for the first time, real movie success, too.

YOU may remember Benny was in the movies once before. The Broadway Melody of 1929 it was. Jack recalls it with a headache, because it was an ill-fated venture for him. That was before the Conn days. Brutally and frankly, he was a flop in it. It seemed that the keen Benny wit, the suave Benny drawl were lost in a maze of wrong material. The great Broadway comedian who had made thousands laugh in the stage houses, couldn't gel more than a faint ripple from the tremendous movie audiences. The movie portals were closed to him — and for good, he thought. Second chances are as elusive as cigarette smoke.

But it came to him — that second chance, I mean — and solely because of the great name he had made for himself in his radio series. This time, lease though, when he boarded the train for the movie colony, he wasn't afraid. He had the controlling hand of Conn to shift his gear to the real Benny stride.

And as a result — well, I hear he's just placed the down payment on a palatial Hollywood home. Which means that he expects to be making a lot of other movies, don't you think?

And, oh yes — Harry has renewed his lease at a smart Hollywood hotel, because even though he still has no contract with Jack Benny, he knows he'll be with his boss for a long, long time.



Posted by [Yowp](#) at [07:29](#)



Labels: [Jack Benny](#)

3 comments:



J Lee 22 May 2016 at 08:07

While the story does try to push the Benny-Conn friendship, there is a certain thread of Jack being in over his head until Harry showed up at the recommendation of George Burns. Which could be considered just show business embellishment to make the story sound better, but not if the person being embellished in the story actually believes it, and thinks the other guy will go back to being in over his head if he leaves.

[Reply](#)



Yowp 22 May 2016 at 11:10

On one hand, he bought material from Al Boasberg and Sid Silvers during his vaudeville days. On the other, he had to mould it all. And I can't help but think he had to have written for himself, too. So I don't know how much over his head he was (though a twice-a-week radio show would have required massive amounts of material).

[Reply](#)



J Lee 22 May 2016 at 13:38

I doubt he was in over his head in absolute terms -- as you noted, Jack had dealings with other comedy writers. But the telling of this story reminds me of the one about Leon Schlesinger coming to Friz Freleng ask begging him to come back to save his studio after J.L. rejected those first Tom Palmer cartoons.

Pretty much every comedian needs writers the more and more exposure they get because the material gets used up faster, and Jack was no different. It's just that the tone of the story here, while painting a picture of Jack and Harry as pals, also hints that Conn was the comedy brains of the outfit. Subsequent events at least indicate that he had a higher opinion of his indispensability to Jack than was warranted.

[Reply](#)



cannibalism when it comes to comics featuring Porky Pig. These are

just some of the covers in which Porky is ei...

4 weeks ago

[Peter Gray's Comics and Art](#)



An early Tom Thug page for sale and other comic art by Lew Stringer

to link and ebay.. -

<http://lewstringercomics.blogspot.com/2020/02/original-art-for-sale.html>
https://www.ebay.co.uk/sch/graphite47/m.html?_nkw=&_armrs=1&_ipg=&_fom=

5 months ago

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[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...

1 day ago

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- [2020](#) (215)
- [2019](#) (376)
- [2018](#) (379)
- [2017](#) (380)
- ▼ [2016](#) (396)
 - [December](#) (34)
 - [November](#) (33)
 - [October](#) (31)
 - [September](#) (32)
 - [August](#) (33)

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[That Old Guy on TV](#)

[Your Safety First](#)

[The Six Heads of Screw Squirrel](#)

[The Pals That Weren't](#)

[Cartoons of 1955, Part 2](#)

[Before He Talked to Mr. Ed](#)

[Opening of The Tell-Tale Heart](#)

[Farm of Tomorrow Opening](#)

[Brits, Backus and Magoo](#)

[Wally Walrus Mail Call](#)

[Cartoons! Fah!](#)

[Behind the Man Who Fired Julius LaRosa](#)

[Jack Benny, 1940](#)

[Lillian Friedman](#)

[Pun of the Camel](#)

[Living Ladder](#)

[Unmasking the Host of Masquerade Party](#)

[Rudy the Roach](#)

[Bill Schallert, The Man Who Played Old](#)

[Stop That Beer](#)

[Blah About Benny](#)

[Cartoons of 1955, Part 1](#)

[Snafu Thwacks a Nazi](#)

[What Is That Thing, Anyway?](#)

[Pies, Co-Stars, Baseball and Bill Frawley](#)

[Cartoon Drunks](#)

[Dance of the Fairy Godmother](#)

[Mary Livingstone Meets Jack Benny](#)

► [April \(34\)](#)► [March \(36\)](#)► [February \(31\)](#)► [January \(32\)](#)

- [2015](#) (389)
- [2014](#) (390)
- [2013](#) (388)
- [2012](#) (397)
- [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 (453)
Jay Ward (30)
Jimmy Durante (17)
John Crosby (84)
John Sutherland (28)
Johnny Johnson (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)

