



Sunday, 3 July 2016

## Unbothered Benny

To hear the fan magazines talk, Jack Benny lived a pretty unexciting life. Sure, he had huge house parties with the stars milling about. Sure, he travelled all over, giving benefit shows during the war and benefit concerts afterwards. Sure, he had more money than he knew what to do with (though his wife had a few ideas). But, no, there were no huge scandals (other than buying into a con man's smuggling scheme in the late '30s), no stories in the papers about unseemly behavior, no tell-all gossip by Hollywood insiders or biographers, and no serious marriage woes. Jack got along with his in-laws (Mrs. Esther Marks is with him in the photo to the right).

Here's a feature story from one of those fan mags, *Radio Stars*, from its June 1936 edition. At that point in Jack's career, he had pretty much decided to use Hollywood as his base of operations instead of New York. And while the story puts on a faux mantle of investigative journalism, the responses are pretty milquetoast. Not all of them are candid. The story leaves the impression that Jack was all lovey-dovey with his writer, Harry Conn, when Conn would walk out on him a few months later. And Jack did have trouble with sponsors; Canada Dry tried interfering with Benny's writing and a "he-goes-or-I-go" ultimatum ended with the soft drink company cancelling the show. And then there was Chevrolet, with a company boss who wanted symphonic music instead of a, ugh, comedian. Even Benny's switch was General Tire to General Foods was a little unusual.



However, these are all minor things. It's interesting to read Jack's sole annoyance was listener complaints that were ridiculous. He might be pleased to know that hasn't changed in 80 years.

The RCMP show referred to in the story can be found on-line. It aired February 9, 1936.

### NOTHING EVER HAPPENS

Everything's all right with Jack Benny! Maybe he just doesn't know trouble

By JACK HANLEY

WHEN the listening public, made up of a vast number of differing individuals, gets together and agrees on one performer as the top in his field, that, dear radio friends, is something. And when radio critics across the country pool their likes and dislikes and rate a performer first place, that, again, is something. But when critics and lay public together, with remarkable unanimity, place a well-sponsored laurel wreath on the same program—that program has an odd way of turning out to be Jack Benny's.

You probably are aware by now that this is the third consecutive year Jack Benny has won first place in the National Radio Editors' Poll, as a comedian. And it's the second consecutive year the Jello program has won first place, as a whole.

In the Crosley Poll—which is a canvass of listeners—the Benny program took first place among half-hour shows, first place among comedy shows and second place in the whole radio field. After five years in radio that's not only reaching the top, hut, what is more important, staying there.

Looking closely at the Benny brow, there are no evident signs or scratches visible from the laurels that have been heaped thereon. His hats, too, I believe, still fit. "Naturally," Jack Benny says, "it's gratifying to come out first on the poll. It's nice to feel that the critics agree on you and your show as the leader. But what we're most

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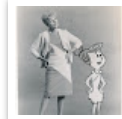


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1 day ago

### Yowp



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3 weeks ago

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Mushroom Soup Monday -

My "to do" list has enough items on it that I need to put up one of these soup cans that tells you not to expect much (if any) posting here today. A friend...

1 hour ago

interested in is not so much winning the poll as in staying among the top few. And that's pretty tough." Saying so, Jack didn't look particularly dismayed at the prospect. "With several comedy shows running close together, just one slip, one performance a little under par, puts you second. And that's bound to happen occasionally. And then, if at the same time your show slips a little, another program improves, you're third. So we don't worry about trying to keep in first place; we try to keep the general level high enough to see that we're included in the leading three or four."

Jack shook his head. "I feel terrible," he said with the same calm, affability you hear on the radio. He says practically everything that way. My guess is that if the building were on fire Jack Benny would greet the fire department with the same blend amiability, saying : "Jell-O folks—come right in and bring your hose," and make his quiet exit, first, of course, seeing that Mary—Mrs. Benny—and their beloved baby Joan, were safe. "You have a cold?" I suggested shrewdly.

He nodded. "I was wondering whether I ought to go out tonight or not. We've got tickets for the theatre and Mary was sort of figuring on going."

"If she knew you didn't feel well," I said, as much like the Voice of Experience as possible, "she probably wouldn't want to go."

"That's just it. She won't let me go if she knows. And then suppose *want* to go after all?" He grinned disarmingly with unaffected naïveté. As a matter of fact Jack Benny is the only celebrity I can think of who could truly be called boyish without its sounding sickening.

"We get to see so few shows," he explained, "being out on the Coast so much, we like to take in as many possible when we're in New York."

"By the way," I asked, "how do you like the Coast?"

"Fine," Benny nodded. "We're very happy out the ... like it fine."

"Of course," I suggested. "you had the usual trouble in Hollywood. . . ."

"Trouble?" Jack looked blank.

"The exasperations everyone meets making pictures ... you know ... *Once in a Lifetime*...." Jack being fresh from Hollywood, thought your reporter, here was a chance to get an earful of new horrible movie adventure.

"No, we didn't have any trouble out there."

"You mean you *like* Hollywood?"

"Sure. Making pictures is all right."

And there's one of the outstanding features of the Benny makeup. Practically everything is all right with Jack. Without being a rubber-stamp or a yes-man, Jack Benny hasn't a mad on with anything in the world.

"You know, there's so much money tied up in the picture business," he said, "and so many variables involved, they can't do things very differently. They work under terrific pressure, paying enormous salaries and overhead. Personally, I think they do a pretty good job, all considered."

Another dream shattered. Another illusion gone! I tried a flank attack.

"You were about the first radio comedian really to 'kid' your sponsor," I said. "I suppose you had plenty of sponsor trouble." Show me a radio artist who hasn't ! Benny did show me.

"Well—just a little, at first," he admitted. "But as soon as they saw it wasn't a bad idea they were swell about it. On the whole, I'd say we've never had any sponsor trouble." What can you do with a guy like that? There was no use talking about comedy material difficulties. tarry Conn has been writing the Benny shows for five years, in collaboration with Jack, and Jack not only admits it, but paid him tribute over the air the night he was awarded first place the radio poll.

He pays his writer perhaps a bigger salary than any other comedian on the air and is a firm believer in the fact that the success of a comedy show depends upon a close collaboration between writer and comedian.

"I don't care if George Kaufman, Morrie Ryskind and a dozen others write a show," Jack says, "it still won't be right unless the writer and comedian build it together. We're lucky in that our comedy is more a matter of personalities than just gags. I've found that the listeners like built-up characters and that one funny line, in character, is worth a dozen planted gags."

Jack Benny can call it luck. The record shows, however, that he has been one of the few headline acts to encourage the build-up of other characters on his show. Frank Parker, Don Bestor, Don Wilson and many others have had their chances at being comedians as well as doing their own specialties. And I don't think it's "luck" that makes personality the main ingredient of Benny's program. Jack's personality is definitely his own; he sounds friendly, unassuming, bland and affable. As a matter of fact, he is the same way off-mike. It's not something he adopts for the air. Jack Benny was doing just the same type of comedy, in the same style, when he was playing vaudeville with his fiddle under his arm and when he was a featured comedian in Broadway revues.

But drama? Where was the drama—the fierce struggle for a place in the radio firmament? The battle for



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2 hours ago

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breaks  
Gaza Strip  
into two  
parts. -  
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fernandollera.com  
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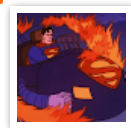
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Today's  
Post: The  
1964  
World's Fair  
Documenta  
ry and other

**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 hours ago

## Movies with Michael



The World's  
Greatest  
Super  
Friends:  
Lex Luthor  
Strikes

**Back (1979)** - A wonderful episode. In this episode, Lex Luthor escapes from prison by switching places with Lois Lane. After escaping he captures each of the Supe...

23 hours ago

recognition?

"Tell me about the time you first started in radio," I suggested. "You were out of the *Vanities*—with no job—determined to make a place for yourself on the air ..." Jack grinned apologetically as he rejected my prompting.

"Well," he said, "it wasn't just that way. I left the show with twenty weeks still to go."

"But wasn't it a zero hour for you? Didn't you stake everything on the hope of landing a radio spot?"

"Uh ... well ... you see I was getting \$1,500.00 a week with *Vanities*," he amended regretfully. "I had appeared on Ed Sullivan's show one night as a guest performer. And I figured there was no reason why I shouldn't do all right on the air. We went down to Florida for a couple of weeks and thought it over. When we came back we signed up with *Canada Dry*. No drama again. That doesn't mean of course, that Jack Benny just walked into things, always. The real reason is that his rise to fame was no overnight sensation. It was built upon years of work in the theatre. As Jack puts it: "After you've been playing around for twenty-odd years, you've got a certain feeling of security." And a well-earned sense of security too. It's true that Benny wasn't facing starvation when he left a \$1,500 job to try for the radio. It's also true that without the gradual and steady upward climb of those twenty-four years he probably would have gone the way of most overnight successes—a skyrocket rise and fall. I gave up in despair. "Hasn't anything exciting ever happened to you?" He shook his head, mildly sorrowful. "I've had less excitement than anybody in show business," he confessed. "It's been a steady pull. When we went on the air (He almost always says "we", even if Mary Livingstone wasn't then with him in the show). "When we went on the air, at first nobody paid very much attention to us. We went right along, sneaking up gradually. But nothing much happens."

"There must be some things that get your goat."

"Well—we had a touch of annoyance with listeners who resent perfectly harmless gags. There was the time a girl sang: 'Canada be the spring ...' you know, to the tune of *Love in Bloom*. Well, several Canadians wrote in, objecting to it. Lord knows why! So, not long ago, we were going to do a travesty bit on the Northwest Mounted Police. We were afraid that would bring some more 'resenting' letters in. So we worked it out to let Mary apparently be writing the script, right while we were doing it."

You've probably heard it ... the type-writer would tap, and then they would play a five -minute scene Mary had "written" in half a minute.

"To make doubly sure, we set the scene in Alaska, instead of Canada, and put in a line to cover it. I said to Mary: *'There aren't any Mounties in Alaska!'* And Mary said: *'I know—but it's colder there!'*"

"Did it spoil the scene?" I asked hopefully. Jack grinned.

"No ... it was done to prevent any squawks, but it turned out funnier that way than it would have been otherwise."

"Then there's nothing," I sighed, "that you have to complain about?"

"Well," he said, grinning again, "back in the old days, in the theatre, when you made two thousand a week it was *your's*."

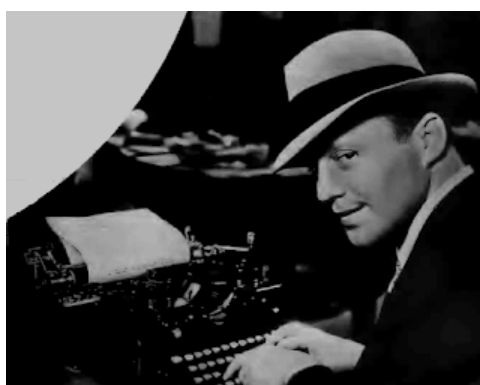
But he didn't look very upset about it. And there you have Jack Benny—the man to whom nothing ever happens, except a steady climb to success, a busy life, a happy home and an adopted daughter he's quite screwy about. Their best friends are Burns and Allen. When the Bennys are in New York they live at the Burns and Allen apartment, and use the Burns and Allen car. And George and Gracie use the Benny car, out in Los Angeles. I didn't go into what happens when both couples are at the same place.

Mary and Gracie get together and swap stories about their babies and make gifts to the youngsters; gifts that are much alike, as each of them have the same toys."

Jack likes New York, he likes Los Angeles, he likes stage and screen and radio work. He likes playing to a studio audience and figures it helps a comedy show. But he'd give it up if the other comedians did. He likes being head man in comedy, but he'd be satisfied if he were second or third. He's easy -going, pleasant and affable as he sounds. It's not very thrilling, but what can you do about it?

Well, you can listen to his show and laugh at his comedy and like him.

It isn't difficult.



Posted by [Yowp](#) at [07:34](#)



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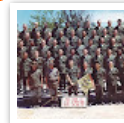


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