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Sunday, 4 September 2016

How To Do Comedy

All the great comedians found what worked and stuck with it. The Jack Benny, George Burns and Bob Hope of 1940 were pretty much the same, when it came to delivery at least, as they were in 1970.

Benny revealed in interviews in the late '60s and early '70s that aging and familiarity modified his material. Maxwell jokes weren't funny any more, he decided. Jokes about being 39 didn't really work, he felt. Perhaps he was wrong. When he died in 1974, obituaries referred to his phoney age and phoney car as traits that were all too familiar to current audiences.

Here's a feature story which ran in weekend newspaper supplements on January 13, 1973 wherein Jack gives a pretty good assessment of his comedy.

Jack Benny Outlines His Philosophy Of Humor

By **JACK BENNY**

Written for TV Scout

I hate to tell jokes.

Something told me when I first talked on the stage that I must never be a one-liner comedian. I knew I must get into something like a routine and when I need to go from one routine into another I must do it so gracefully that the audience never realizes that I switched.

My upcoming show, "Jack Benny's First Farewell Special," sponsored by RCA on NBC-TV on Thursday, Jan. 18, for example, depends, for the most part on situations. You can imagine the situations that can arise with Bob Hope, Johnny Carson, Flip Wilson and Dean Martin on the program.

Many times I've been asked to explain my philosophy of humor. Well, I toy with the faults or frailties of man. Now, every family has one stingy guy. Then there's the braggart or the guy who thinks he's a great sex symbol. I make myself into all of these and make people laugh without out-and-out jokes. You can do it with a little innuendo.

Let me try to explain it this way: If I were giving a dinner for you and another person in a restaurant and you whispered to the other guy: "You better leave the tip because I'm afraid with Jack," without my even being in it, it's funny. It's not as funny anymore, however, if I left a cheap tip. That would be 15 years too old. So, the only advancement is to stay with what you've done all your life but improve it by being sophisticated with it and by suggestions. I cannot emphasize too strongly the need for constant improvement in material.

I cannot do a stingy role that is not smarter than what I did 10 years ago. It's not funny now if we left the table and I gave the waiter a nickel. It will only be funny if it were wild. Say the waiter, knowing how cheap I am, tipped me instead.

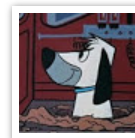
Oh, sure, I will tell a joke once in a while if I think it's a great one and I think the audience hasn't heard it. As soon as the joke is told I will immediately return to my regular routine.

You see, my method of slow talking is in sharp contrast to the styles of such great comedians as Bob Hope, Jack Carter or Milton Berle. I cannot talk as fast as these comics anymore than they can talk as slowly as I do. Jack Carter does material in 10 minutes that would last me an entire season. But, I can't talk like that.

Many people give me credit for having very good timing. But, even a fast-talk comedian — any good comedian — must have good timing. You can have timing on different things. But if you lack timing, then you might as well forget the whole thing.

Of course, let's not forget one thing — and I always have the right answer when people say to me: "Jack, you don't need great material. All you have to do is say something and stare at the audience." I say, how long do you think I could stare after a lousy joke? You know what would happen? The audience would stare back at me and I'd better get into the next joke or routine as soon as possible.

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MGM - For so many of us film buffs, *Easter Parade * (1948) is the must watch movie today. The film is as delightful as movie musicals get and I love every second...
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Way Too Damn Lazy To Write A Blog

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Famous NintendoMania producer, creator and gamer, Gus Rodriguez,

dies at 59. - ©2020 fernandollera.com
1 day ago

It is not true that because I stare I get laughs. When I stare I better stare at the right place and at the right time because nobody is that good. Nobody living can go on with bad material. The most important thing in the world right off is good material.

That's why I love writers — good writers — and I give them full credit. I want to be with them all the time they are writing. I want to steer it one way or the other. Once they hand me good material, then I know what to do with it.

As for the new, young comedians who are entering show business today, I give them a tremendous amount of credit. In our day we had schools. They haven't got it today. Our schools were vaudeville and burlesque. Don't forget I went all through vaudeville, which meant I had a chance to be lousy before I was good. I could play South Bend, Ind., in vaudeville and I could be bad and who would know it? Only those people who came to the theater. But, maybe by the time I returned to South Bend I would have improved because I was playing vaudeville.

George Burns recently put it beautifully: "Today there's no place to be bad" — and he's so right."



Benny Retiring? — Like so many theatrical greats, Jack Benny pays lip service to retirement. Early in 1973, the boy from Waukegan begins his pseudo-withdrawal from show

business with a "farewell special." "Jack Benny's FIRST Farewell Special" will be seen Thursday at 9 p.m. on NBC.

Posted by [Yowp](#) at [07:03](#) 0 comments



Labels: [Jack Benny](#)

Sunday, 28 August 2016

The Comedian and the Agent

Stars don't have lives like you and me. They're little corporations. They have all kinds of people working for them in a professional capacity—agents, business managers, personal secretaries, public relations types.

Jack Benny had a number of agents. I haven't really looked to see who handled what, but for many years he not only employed his brother-in-law by marriage, Myrt Blum, he was represented by Arthur Lyons. The pair-up began in the vaudeville days and continued toward the end of the 1940s when Jack approached MCA to set up a corporate tax deal just as it had done with Amos 'n' Andy. MCA agreed, provided Lyons was out of the picture. Lyons was bought out. When he died of a heart attack in 1963, Lyons was lauded in *Variety* as a product of another time, leaving the impression he was an earthy guy a few steps removed from the Garment District, as opposed to the fast-talking, insincere hype-ster of Madison Avenue.

Radio Guide devoted a great deal of space in its edition of December 19, 1936 to Arthur Lyons, Benny and their relationship. Here it is, including the pictures that accompanied the story.

The GREATEST FRIENDSHIP IN RADIO

THEY'VE BEEN PARTNERS FOR YEARS—BUT THEY'VE NEVER HAD A CONTRACT! AND THEY'RE MORE THAN PARTNERS—THEY'RE PALS!

BY DOROTHY SPENSLEY

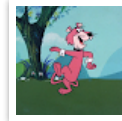
GETTING Jack Benny to talk about himself is easy. Easy, like roller-skating up Mount Everest in a roaring blizzard. The man to talk to about Jack Benny is Arthur Lyons, his personal representative. He knows more about the humor king that Jack (born Benjamin Kubelsky) does himself.

A chat with Jack is pleasant, but sterile. He is so modest that it's devastating. Ask him about his success and he grins, rolls the ever-present cigar in his mouth, and murmurs something about it being "a long, hard grind." He has definite ideas about the kind of radio humor he purveys—it must be "high class and low down," he says—but he'd rather tell you what a truly superlative artist Georgie Jessel is. "Much better than I am at impromptu speeches," Benny says. And he means it!

Sure, it's fun to talk to a celebrity who is self-effacing, unspoiled by success, but if you want to get a peek at the real Jack Benny, the man who has been wowing the airwaves for plus three years now on his exuberant dessert program, who has a corner on the gentle business of toppling personal appearance records, whose stage and screen work brings whoops of joy, then you want to see Arthur Lyons.

Short, sturdy, compact Arthur Lyons is not Jack Benny's agent. Get that straight at the outset. He's something more than a mere "agent" or "manager." Lyons is a "personal representative." He explains carefully that he is not out for grabbing money for his clients (he has something like two hundred top-notch artists in all the

Yowp

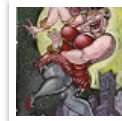


Yogi Bear Becomes a Star - Snagglepuss and Yaky Doodle can thank Hank

Saperstein for the boost in their careers. In June 1960, a deal was being firmed up between Kellogg's and Sap...

1 week ago

The World of Knight



PATREON BONUS for MARCH 2020! - Hi, Patrons (\$2 and up)! Now in your

mailboxes: Your PDF Bonus for March 2020: a portfolio of six paintings! Printable *and* frameable! Many Thanks for Yo...

2 weeks ago

Supervised By Fred

Avery: Tex Avery's Warner Brothers Cartoons



All this and Rabbit Stew: Bugs Bunny's Most Shocking Moment -

Release date: 9/13/1941
AVAILABILITY: On many dollar-store VHS tapes and DVDs, and online, usually in atrocious visual quality. You can view a better-than-...

2 weeks ago

Peter Gray's Comics and Art



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

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=&_from=1

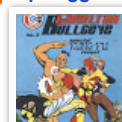
1 month ago

Mark Kausler's CatBlog
Your Comics Page 1-22-

2020 - Here are some rare stills from Frank Capra's "Lost Horizon" (1937), directed by Frank Capra. That's Mr. Capra behind the movie camera (right top) and his ...

2 months ago

Rip Jagger's Dojo



Dojo Update! - Sadly it seems my efforts to establish a

artistic fields). He is building lasting careers for them. He'd just as soon turn down \$22,500 a week for Benny as not. In fact, he has. A sponsor offered that much for Funmaker Benny's services. Jack didn't care that it was turned down. His honest opinion is that no man, artist or otherwise, is worth that much money a week. That gives you an idea of them.

EIGHTEEN years ago Benny was doing a "dumb" act. In show business, it's a vaudeville turn that has no talking. Jack, a skilled violinist, had been teamed with a fellow named Woods. Benny and Woods. He was then doing a solo skit. As for statistics, we don't need to tell you that Jack is a Waukegan, Illinois, boy who has made good. History tells, too, that Jack's poppa was a haberdasher; first name Mayer. His mother's name is Emma. He has a sister, married, living in Lake Forest, Illinois.

Jack had a friend named Phil Baker. Yes, the same. They were pals, playing the same circuit, but never the same bill. Know why? Phil played an accordion, then as now. Jack, with his violin, was a rival act. Vaudeville bookers never put two "dumb" acts on the same bill. In those distant days, when war clouds were coloring the eastern horizon, they were "curtain ringer-uppers." If either one ever played "No. 2" on a bill, he thought he was a big-shot. Professional rivalry there was between the two young fellows, but never personal rivalry—they were the best of friends.

ARTHUR LYONS, at that time, was trying to re-enter the show business. He had been out of it for several years, dabbling with the drug business (junior drug clerk) for Druggist Louis Schenk. Louis was Joe and Nick Schenk's brother. Lyons had been a part of show business for a few years (he had acted and produced) and it was in his blood. He had run away from his birthplace in Minsk, Russia, and gone to the Orient. In Pekin he got his first sample of theatrical life, and liked it. It wasn't much of a job, but it was show business. In the international colony's theater in Pekin, where so many foreign tongues are spoken, it was necessary for a boy to parade across the stage carrying an announcement in various languages of the next number. He was that boy.

Saving enough money, Lyons travelled steerage to New York from the Orient. It took him two or more months to make the trip. But he didn't mind. He had plenty of time before he joined up with show business in Manhattan. He was then ten years old! He was eight when he ran away from Minsk. He was seventeen when he first met Jack Benny. Lyons is now thirty-five, and a success. One year he and his firm, Lyons, McCormick and S. Lyons, Arthur's brother, did six million dollars worth of "actor business," as he calls it, netting six hundred thousand dollars for his organization.

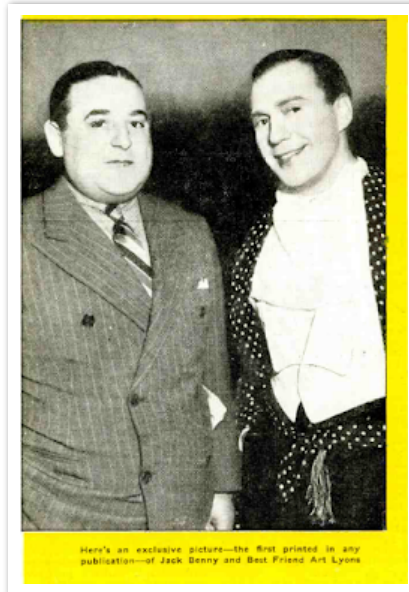
He has been president and chairman of the Council of the International Theatrical Artists' Association; president of the Agents' Association of Actors' Equity; always an important figure in the advancement of his profession. If Benny, his old pal, is today an important figure, so is Arthur Lyons, although not as much spotlighted. Their success has been shared through the years. As one climbed, the other climbed with him. Their careers are so closely bound together that it is hard to tell where the guiding talents of Lyons stop and the artistic talents of Benny begin. Their abilities are perfectly fused. One complements the other.

OF COURSE, if Jack didn't have the superlative talent that he has, if he didn't know timing, voice inflection, all the things that make the master humorist, Lyons would have nothing to exploit. But if Jack did not have the omniscient Lyons to "groom" him, to guide his professional destinies, counsel him, chances are that he might still be making the \$1800 a year that he was making when Lyons met him. Today, Jack is in the upper brackets, and very much so.

The scene shifts to nearly two decades ago. One day Phil Baker, then and now a Lyons client, brought to Arthur his friend, Benny. Jack was playing the Keith-Orpheum Circuit, a two-a-day, and Lyons was booking for Loew and Fox, three-a-day circuits. Lyons knew he couldn't better Jack's circumstances by making him play one extra performance a day in booking him on his circuits, but that didn't prevent the three from becoming friends. For several years they lived together, sharing a six-dollar room (two dollars apiece) at the Forest Hotel on 45th Street; at the National Vaudeville Club, or the San Rafael Hotel.

One day Jack told Arthur that he wanted him to handle his professional career. He felt that he had gone as far as he could sawing at violin strings in his present capacity. Lyons thought a minute. That was fifteen years ago. He's been thinking along those smart lines ever since. "Jack, we're going to get you a band," he said. "We're going to get you the best and biggest band that there ever was, and you are going to stand in front of it with your violin, but you're not going to play, you're going to talk. That will be our excuse, because you know how to handle a violin, for the most expensive band in theatrical history."

JACK had discovered, by that time, that his purring -voiced monologue had possibilities. Contrary to published reports that Jack's Navy Relief Society appearances, during his stretch as one of Uncle Sam's sea dogs, had showed him that he could wise-crack, Jack's first experience with the spoken word on the stage came when he was a part of the long -forgotten New York Winter Garden show. Charles King, then an ace



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Termite Terrace headlines



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Preston Blair is being interviewed in New York by Ed Hulse.
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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...
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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

Vengeance Valley - Director: unknown
Production Date: 1960
Stars: Tom Puss and Ollie Bungle Rating: ★★★★★
Review: 'Vengeance Valley' is based on the Tom Poes comic strip 'De w...
2 hours ago

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singer, had an act with Jack wherein he kidded Jack into talking. "Why don't you say something?" he'd cue, and Jack would put aside his violin and talk. This was a Lyons idea, too.

They assembled the band. Using circus parlance, it was the "costliest aggregation of musical artists ever assembled into a jazz orchestra." Joe Venuti, now with his own band, was first violinist. Jack and Arthur made no profits; salaries for the band took them all. But it did just what the boys wanted. It established Jack as a personality. They kept the band one year, then dropped it. Jack was lifted from a "curtain raiser" to dignity. He could stand alone as a theatrical artist.

From that moment on, Jack Benny was a "prestige name" in show business. First a vaudeville headliner, a talented master of ceremonies, he became an integral part of musical shows, night-club entertainment, Earl Carroll's Vanities, a Sam Harris farce, films (Hollywood Revue of 1929, Chasing Rainbows, Trans-Atlantic Merry-Go-Round, Broadway Melody of 1936, The Big Broadcast of 1937, plus others). Five years ago Benny and radio discovered their natural affinity for each other.

AS FAR back as the glorified band era of Benny's career, Lyons has been grooming Jack for just the sort of success he is now enjoying. A dignified, respected position in the theatrical world. Jack Benny's name stands for decency, integrity. Integrity is the main plank in the Lyons platform for Benny. Lyons (and Benny, too) is proud of the fact that whenever an important office comes up in theatrical circles, a benefit, or something, almost without exception Jack is the first to be asked to head it. The theater world appreciates that quality in Jack. As for Benny, his biggest pride, just about, is his membership in the Friars' Club. It was Jack, incidentally, who reached into his pocket and saved the club from dissolution when its debts overwhelmed it. Jack didn't tell me, of course. He wouldn't.

If Jack has any fault, it is his generosity. Every month his auditor finds cheeks that are unaccounted for. "What does this mean?" he'll inquire of Benny. "Oh, tha-at," says Jack, wriggling a little uncomfortably. "Oh, yeah that's the fellow who did a tumbling act in a bill I played fourteen years ago. Met him on the street the other day. He's been having a tough time. It's just a little check I made out to tide him over the rough spots."

It is only by accident that these gratuities are noticed. Somebody whom Jack has helped tells someone else. The Lyons office does not believe in publicizing them. Jack cringes at the very thought of mentioning them. About the only thing that can bring Jack's blood to the boiling point is mention of his charities and his more than comfortable income. The recent unauthorized mention in a national magazine of Jack's plump bank-roll made Jack furious. His thought is "What about the man in the street?" Why do I want to shove my good luck in his face?"

JACK is definitely class-conscious. He even sees insurance agents. He said to me once: "I have to see them. They're trying to make a living, aren't they? If I won't see them, and no one else will, how can they sell anything?" He accepts his large salary because it enables him to distribute much more happiness, and to relieve more need, than he could without money.

If Jack is noted for his integrity, he is also noted for his overwhelming modesty. It [If] he were playing three months straight at the Palace Theater, which would be a record, Jack would probably say, off-handedly, if you asked him how he was doing, "Oh, all ri-ght," giving the impression that he was three leaps ahead of The Wolf. Lyons, who keeps close tab on Benny's tours, tells of an experience, two years ago, in Chicago, that exemplifies Jack's overwhelming modesty. Jack calls Lyons, or Lyons calls Jack—they always talk together on the phone at least once a day, whether Jack is in Hollywood or Manhattan.

During the Winter of 1934, Lyons booked Jack into the Chicago Theater. When the week came for Jack to play the house, up blew the biggest blizzard the city had seen for years. Lyons cursed himself for booking Jack in the dead of a middle-western Winter. If he had waited until toward Spring, bad weather wouldn't confound the grosses. The blizzard was a honey. Snow knee-deep, wind howling along the canyons of State Street, blasting in from Lake Michigan a few blocks over. Who was bothering about a theatrical attraction when it was dangerous to step from your door? Lyons thought he might as well learn the worst. He phoned, from Los Angeles, to the Chicago's manager.

HOW are things?" answered the manager. "It's a sight. People in line since five o'clock this morning, standing in snow up to their knees. We've got fires burning to keep 'em from freezing. The newsreel men are busy photographing the mobs and the blizzard. We hard to open the theater doors at eight o'clock this morning, instead of eleven-thirty, as we usually do. They'd have frozen to death if we hadn't."

Lyons waited for Jack's first appearance before he phoned Benny. "How is it going, Jack?" he asked, confident



Phil Harris laughs at a Jack Benny gag—and who wouldn't? They laugh together Sunday nights

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[Three Pigs Are Three-er Than One](#)

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of Benny's answer. He knew that his client was "knocking them over." Back came Benny's voice, small and discouraged, over the hundreds of miles of wires: "We've got tough competition, Arthur," he answered. "The worst blizzard in years. It's going to be hard."

"But I've just talked to the manager, Jack, said Lyons. "You're breaking good-weather records! You're doing sensational business. Let me talk to the manager again." The manager answered in a moment: "There are three thousand people standing in the snow to see him," he gloated. The Chicago Theater seats five thousand. Jack made \$64,000 for the theater during the blizzard week. He returned, with another blizzard, on a second engagement three weeks later and the boxoffice took in \$60,000.

Did Jack think that he was sensational? He did not. Oh, he was getting along, that's all. He soft-pedals all mention of success. Won't admit it to his nearest friend. He has stricken the word from his vocabulary; that I know to be a fact. At least, when it applies to himself. What can you do with a guy like that? A regular Clarence Buddington Kelland hero. Lyons has been trying for years to make Jack argue with him. Just recently he succeeded.

LYONS was delighted when Jack began to argue out managerial problems with him. He has even arrived at the point where Jack will actually read through the film scripts submitted for his approval instead of skimming halfway through the script and nodding his approval. Jack's success, particularly in the current "Big Broadcast of 1937," is due to his representative's insistence that Benny sit in on the story and the selection of his director. Lyons, the omniscient, knows that any good director that Benny approves is not going to bother with a bad story, so there is double protection that Benny will get the kind of screen material he needs. When he finishes "College Holiday," Jack will shoulder the burden of an all -romantic role co-starred with comedienne Carole Lombard in "Tightwad." It puts him in the class of the important romantic male stars like Bill Powell, Fred MacMurray, and others.

Jack's great success lies in his knowledge of timing, says Lyons. He instinctively knows whether to read a line "up" for a laugh or to read it down. "You've noticed his reading in his radio broadcasts. Some lines Jack gives a marked "down" inflection. Others he slides "up." But always in that creamy, poised, purring voice, with its boudoir overtones. Jack also has the ability, at a moment's glance, to see whether written copy has genuine humor. He writes some of his own copy. At the moment, he is training a number of young writers to supply him with radio material. His after -dinner speeches, which are excellent, are all written by himself. Then he brings them in to let Arthur see them.

THE most unusual feature of this Damon-Pythias friendship is that there has never been a written contract between the two. It's all verbal and sealed with a handshake. In show business, where competition is frequently cruel and unethical, this is a miracle. Only once was the professional association of Benny and Lyons broken. For two years Benny was handled by another organization. The personal friendship continued, but the two years were unhappy for the two men. Benny is now back in the Lyons fold without a written contract. Jack wishes, sometimes, that he had it down in writing. It would give him a secure feeling against some of the Hollywood wolves. But Arthur shakes his head. "It burns 'em up more this way, Jack," he says.

AS FOR the "boudoir overtones" in his voice, Jack is strictly a one -woman man. And Mary Livingstone, whom he married on January 12, 1927, is The Woman. If she has any rival, it is a little charmer of two, named Joan Naomi, the Benny's adopted daughter. If Joan said so, Jack would gladly toss up his career. Fortunately for us, Joan is just learning to talk, and she wouldn't demand that of her daddy, anyway. She doesn't demand anything of Jack, but gets far more that way. When Jack returned from a recent New York trip he brought Joan Naomi twenty-four new dresses, selected with care.

Mary Livingstone (born Sayde Marks) is as generous as Jack. She loves to buy things. Her pleasure is as much in their selection as in their presentation. Knowing her for so many years, Lyons says she has genuine literary talent, and, if she would set herself to writing, could make a name for herself. Lyons considers the Bennys an ideally happy married couple.

MARY has a brilliant wit. Jack adores people who make him laugh. He worships Mary, therefore. "Nat" Burns, known as George Burns, of the inimitable Burns and Allen, has that laugh -making ability. He can make Jack scream with laughter. They are the best of friends. Moreover, even their wives are good friends! George Jessel is another humorist at whom Jack cackles. "Cackles" is the word for it He has a chortle that rings out, and establishes him in any crowd.

The story of the friendship of Jack Benny and Arthur Lyons could spin on for pages. Lyons is full of anecdotes about his friend. Not only anecdotes, but genuine affection, the kind that springs from the heart and—yes, the soul. In a business where today's friend may be tomorrow's bitterest enemy, the deepness, the sincerity, the honesty of their friendship is something that can be described only as inspiring. The most inspiring part of the



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Who Killed Who (10)

friendship is that it will undoubtedly last as long as they live.

Jack Benny may be heard Sundays over an NBC network at 7 p.m. EST (6 CST; 5 MST; 4 PST); and later for the West Coast at 8:30 p.m. PST (9:30 MST).

Posted by [Yowp](#) at [07:01](#) 3 comments



Labels: [Jack Benny](#)

Sunday, 21 August 2016

A \$1,000,000 Violin

During World War Two, a reluctant Jack Benny handed over his beloved Maxwell car to the scrap drive. Of course, this was only a gag on the radio. But Benny really did contribute to the war effort, performing for soldiers around the world (sometimes in oppressive conditions) and emphatically plugging war bonds on his programme.

One of Benny's fans contributed a little something, too. A million dollars.

Well, perhaps we should qualify this a bit. We can't say for certain that Julius Klorfein was a fan of the Benny show. One of a number of press reports revealed his adult offspring were. Regardless, Klorfein achieved some brief fame when he pledged to buy \$1,000,000 in War Bonds. In exchange, he got a violin that Benny played on the air, on stage and as a child.

Klorfein was a little embarrassed by all the sudden attention, as you can see in this story from the *New York Herald Tribune* of February 23, 1943. He was one of those self-made success stories that Americans love—a poor immigrant who, through hard work, became a rich man and then gave back to his country.

Benny's Fiddle Puts Purchaser In the Limelight

Julius Klorfein, Who Paid Million in Bonds for Relic, Is Loath to Talk About It

Julius Klorfein, the man who created a sensation early yesterday at Gimbel Brothers' war bond rally by pledging himself to buy a million dollars worth of war bonds for the right to acquire Jack Benny's old violin, submitted reluctantly to his first press interview in a lifetime of anonymity. Mr. Klorfein, a genial, quiet-spoken man of fifty-eight, who is present of Garcia Grande Cigars, Inc., with offices in the Empire State Building, sent reporters scurrying to their files after he made his record offer, only to have them discover with amazement that there was not a single mention of his name in any of the accredited sources.

No Time for "Who's Who"

"I never went in much for publicity," Mr. Klorfein explained apologetically last night in his penthouse apartment at 411 West End Avenue. "I've just spent my life working hard and building up my cigar business, and I guess I didn't have any time to get in Who's Who or What's What or anything like that."

Jack Benny's old violin, the same fiddle the radio comedian played in Waukegan, Ill., when he was a youth, and played again almost twenty years later last month in Carnegie Hall, lay in Mr. Klorfein's lap as he spoke. Mr. Klorfein gazed at it fondly and strummed one of the strings. Asked whether he was a violinist, Mr. Klorfein smiled. "If I was a violinist I wouldn't be able to buy a million dollars worth of war bonds," he said cryptically.

Mrs. Klorfein, who married her husband thirty-three years ago when he was manufacturing the first Garcia Grande cigars in the window of a little shop in South Brooklyn, had to urge her husband to tell the reporter something about his life.

Cigar Maker at \$18

There was not much to tell, Mr. Klorfein said. He came to this country from Russia more than forty years ago. At eighteen he was sitting in a window making cigars and devising the formula for the Garcia Grande. The business grew, because the cigar he blended was mild and inexpensive. Soon there were factories making millions of Garcia Grande. Soon there were factories making millions of Garcia Grandes. Soon he was raising shade-grown tobacco in Connecticut, packing tobacco in Cuba, manufacturing cigars in Puerto Rico. Later he was a member of the Stock Exchange and the owner of valuable Manhattan real estate, including the twenty-story apartment building where he now lives.

"My hobbies are work and finance," Mr. Klorfein said. "I am active in many Jewish charities, and

once I backed a Broadway show, but it was a failure. That's about all there is to tell."

Wife Buys Some, Too

He added as an afterthought, "My wife bought some bonds at the Gimbel party, too. How many was it, dearest?" he asked Mrs. Klorfein.

Mrs. Klorfein said it was only \$175,000 worth—a mere bagatelle compared to her husband's purchase. "But, of course, I've been buying war bonds all along," Mrs. Klorfein explained.

She told the rest of the story. There have three children, two sons, Boatswain's Mate First Class Arthur Klorfein, of the Coast Guard, and Jerome Klorfein, and one daughter, Mrs. Maxwell Rapoport.

Mrs. Klorfein had just returned from a neighborhood public school, where she obtained her ration books. She is active in war work as a member of the American Women's Voluntary Service, and is a hostess at the Stage Door Canteen and the Merchant Seaman's Club.

"It was very exciting at the Gimbel party," Mrs. Klorfein said proudly. "When my husband's million dollar offer was announced for Mr. Benny's violin the auctioneer asked if anybody would top it. There was a hushed silence and then a lot of applause. My husband stood up and bowed. It was the first bow Julius ever took.

\$2,775,925 Bonds Sold

Including Mr. and Mrs. Klorfein's \$1,175,000, a total of \$2,775,925 in bonds were sold at the rally which started shortly after midnight in the spacious Gimbel's bargain basement.

Admittance to the rally, which was conducted by the American Women's Voluntary Services with the assistance of the War Savings Staff of the Treasury Department, was \$750, the price of a \$1,000 war bond.

Gimbel brothers contributed several items to the auction sale to match Mr. Benny's "Love in Bloom" violin—so called because that is the only tune ever to have been played by the radio comedian on the instrument.

Billy Rose, theatrical producer, pledged purchase of \$100,000 in war bonds for a letter written by George Washington dated July 28, 1780, and a man who asked that he remain anonymous pledged \$100,000 in war bonds for a Bible which belonged to Thomas Jefferson.

Mrs. Myron C. Taylor, co-chairman of the rally committee, announced that \$750,000 in war bonds were sold for admittance to the rally.

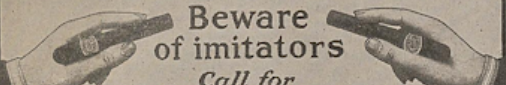
Danny Kaye, star of "Let's Face It," was auctioneer and master of ceremonies. Music was by Meyer Davis's orchestra. Brief speeches were made by Frederick A. Gimbel, managing director of the store; Bernard F. Gimbel, president; Mrs. Alice T. McLean, founder and president of the A.W.V.S.; Mrs. Douglas Gibbons, chairman of the war savings staff of the A.W.V.S.

Frederic Gimbel, in a short address, referred to the rally as "the world's greatest bargain sale."

He quoted Hitler as saying: "A department store is a monument to decadent democracy," and added: "All I can say is that this is the best answer of democracy to Hitler."



Mrs. and Mrs. Julius Klorfein and Jack Benny's former violin at their home, 412 West End Avenue, New York City—Knox/Photo



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The *Herald Tribune* didn't quite tell the whole story. A wire service piece from the *St. Petersburg Times* of May 23, 1943 quotes Klorfein:

"Benny's violin has caused me a lot of grief," he said. "Actually I didn't bid on it. I had previously subscribed for one million dollars in bonds during the February drive and somebody thought up the stunt of tying the violin in with the purchase."

Klorfein wasn't finished. He bought three million dollars more in bonds by September.

After the war, Klorfein busied himself with large real estate and stock exchange deals. He died at his home in New York on November 27, 1958 at the age of 79. The Associated Press obituary mentions how he arrived in the U.S. from Poland with \$35 sewn into his clothing, and his activity in several Jewish philanthropies, but nothing about Jack Benny or violins. Somehow, I suspect Mr. Klorfein would have liked it that way.

My thanks to Kathy Fuller-Seeley for passing along this clipping.

Posted by Yowp at [06:53](#) 0 comments



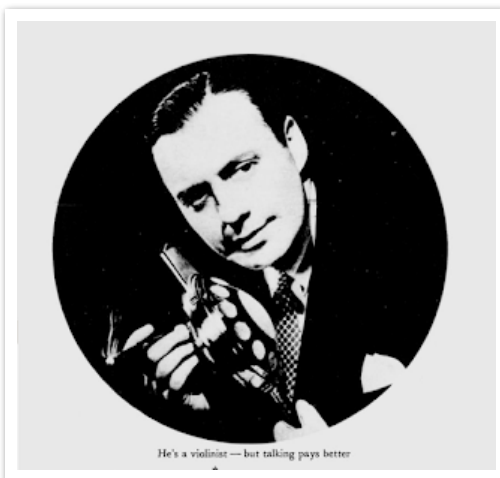
Labels: [Jack Benny](#)

Sunday, 14 August 2016

Jack Dempsey and Jack Benny

The author of "Beggars of Life," "Shadow of Men" and "Jarnegan" was apparently a close friend of Jack Benny. At least, that was averred in a feature story published in *This Week*, a newspaper magazine supplement in January 1936. It was also reprinted in *The Jewish Post* on February 13, 1936, which is the version you see below. It appeared under the title of "Jack Benny's Secret" in *This Week*.

There won't be much here that will surprise people familiar with the details of Benny's early life and rise to fame. What may be interesting is the in depth conversation with heavyweight Jack Dempsey, which author Jim Tully indicates was a turning point in Benny's career. There were a few references to Dempsey on the Benny radio show, specifically to the "long count" fight with Gene Tunney in 1927 (the broadcast of which came out of his radio in 1950 after being stuck inside all those years).



Radio's Number One Man

Close-Up of Jack Benny

Jack Benny, just voted the most popular radio entertainer by the radio editors of America for the second successive year, is one of our most unique personalities. In this intimate sketch Jim Tully, distinguished author, journalist and screen writer, who is a close friend of Benny, gives us cut insight into the career of radio's number one man.

After being voted the most popular person on the air by the radio editors of America, Jack Benny announced that the high honor did not please him, his reason was, "There's no place else to go."

He is happily married to his able radio helper, Mary Livingston. His wife calls him "Doll". "To be different, I call her "Doll."

He is not superstitious, except that "I don't like to sleep more than thirteen in a bed." His diversions are bridge and casino.

He engages an entire new troupe each year for his radio act. Except in unusual circumstances, he rehearses only once. "To rehearse more often takes the spontaneity from the act."

Harry Conn has written all his radio patter for three years. Previously, Benny wrote everything. The strain became too great. "Conn is well named," says Jack.

Sauve and charming, Benny has enormous good breeding. Ten years his close friend, I have observed in him the fine sensibilities of the born gentleman — courage without bluster and tact without deceit. His real name is Kubelsky.

His father was a small merchant; he now is living in retirement at Lake Forest, Illinois. It is about ten miles from Waukegan, where Jack was born. Mayer Kubelsky has a passion for music. When Jack was six, his father bought a violin for him.

"There was never much money in our homes, but we always found enough for violin lessons."

He was dismissed from high school in the second year. His father was not chagrined. His son would still be a great violinist.

Young Benny took his violin and went to the local theatre in Waukegan, where he was employed — as a doorman.

Jack continued to study the violin, and was eventually rewarded with a promotion — he was placed in charge of the property room. Within a year he was given a position as fiddler in the orchestra.

"My father was pleased. My genius was at last being recognized. He remained a year, augmenting his small salary by playing at dances throughout Lake County. A turn came in his life. He met Arthur Freudenfeld, the manager of a rival theatre.

He took a job with Mr. Freudenfeld, at an increase in salary and the promise of a golden future.

During his third week, four famous brothers played at the theatre. The name was Marx.

After the show, they wanted Jack to accompany them.

"No," returned Jack, "I've got a good job here."

The Marx Brothers went on their chaotic and highly successful way. The theater closed in two more weeks.

Despondent, the young man soon sighed for more worlds in which to be conquered. Finding none, he went to work in his father's haberdashery store. Growing restless, the boy who had been brought up to be a great violinist went on tour through the rural sections of Illinois and Wisconsin, doing a "single". His classical playing fell flat. After several months it remained "just another small-time act." The war, changing so many lives, did not miss the son of Mayer Kubelsky.

The young fiddler enlisted in the navy, and was sent to the Great Lakes naval training station near his home.

An entertainment was held. All the dignitaries, including the officer in charge, Capt. William A. Moffett, attended. Jack volunteered to appear with his violin.

There was another young fellow from Milwaukee at the naval station. His name was Pat O'Brien. In a dilemma, Jack went to the future screen star. "I can't give them classical stuff," Jack admitted to O'Brien.

"You don't have to. Put your violin under your chin, pretend to play—then single out sailors in the audience and kid 'em."

"That's dangerous," said Jack.

"No, it isn't—it's all in fun."

Jack went on, put his violin in place, drew the bow with elaborate ceremony—and did not play.

The audience was expectant. He made another pretense—and did not play.

"I was having an argument with Pat O'Brien this morning about the Irish navy."

Applause followed.

In this way Jack went through the entire performance and did not play a single note.

When the entertainment was over, Captain Moffett sent for the young sailor.

"I believe," said the world traveled commandant, "you have found something new—don't play at all—keep pretending—you'll get laughter through the element of surprise."

Jack remembered.

"I told you," said O'Brien.

The war over, the sailors-for-a-day went their wandering ways on land again.

After several years in the "sticks," Jack at last made the "big time." He appeared second on the bill at the Palace theater, New York, then the mecca of all vaudevillians.

Jack had his first case of stage fright. The same sort of repartee that later was to make a radio nation laugh did not click here. "I died the death," he said.

A dismal week followed. He changed his repartee, played classical music. To no purpose.

He was sent to Scranton, Wilkes-Barre, Altoona. His act was again successful. Again he returned to the Palace at New York. The act died again.

In despair, the young trouper remained, trying vainly to conquer the city. Weeks passed. He was out of work.

At last he was offered booking in Toledo. He did not have railroad fare.

"My father had his own troubles." He went to a man who had been loud in his friendship. Could he borrow \$25.00? The man refused. "He saw my act at the Palace," explains Jack, smiling.

Bewildered, his appearance in Toledo 30 hours away, he explained his predicament to another trouper, who was also out of work. "I've forgotten his first name," says Jack. "He was the brother of Eddie Webber."

"I've got \$48.00 dollars left. I'll loan you \$25.00."

He reached Toledo on time.

He wired the loan to young Webber out of his first week's salary. In two months he received word that Webber had committed suicide. "Out of work and no money." The incident touched Jack. "If he were only alive now," says the famous master of radio wit.

He might not have appeared in New York again for a long time, except—he met the champion of the world, Jack Dempsey.

"Why don't you try New York?" Dempsey asked.

"I did and flopped twice."

"Put her there," said Dempsey—"so did I. It's stage fright—the people are the same there as anywhere else—I found that out—it was me. Go on back and lick 'em."

"I tried that too," said Jack Benny.

"But you didn't lick yourself first," returned the champion.

Benny returned to the Palace. This time he was not the same. The taut, nervous manner had gone. The second week he was moved to fourth on the bill.

"How'd you do it?" I asked.

"I kidded Brooklyn," was the answer.

From then on he was a "big timer" in vaudeville, and by "kidding" all the acts each week, he often remained in one city for a month.

Always he carried his violin—and did not play. One afternoon Bert Wheeler hid his violin. "I had to hurry out and borrow another one before I could go on."

The violin act became famous and had many imitators in the vaudeville world.

Now a headliner, he again met the Marx Brothers in Vancouver. They took the young vaudevillian with "the line of patter" to the home of Mary Livingston. They saw something of each other during the week. A desultory correspondence followed, and then stopped.

He later played Los Angeles—for six weeks. He met Miss Livingston again. She was then the competent young buyer for a "style shop."

They were married.

Harry Rapf, M-G-M official, was in the audience during Jack's last week. He was casting for "Hollywood Revue of 1929"—and signed Jack to a long-term contract. He next appeared in "Chasing Rainbows." Then idle for months, at \$1500 a week, he became restless.

Getting an offer to appear in Earl Carroll's "Vanities," he asked and obtained his release from M-G-M. He might have gone on for two years at the huge salary, but "I preferred to be busy."

He appeared in New York with "Vanities," and later went on the road. "Then I got the radio bug."

His contract with Carroll had several months to run. Given his release at the cost of many thousands to himself, he returned to New York "to try radio." A long period of idleness followed. He could not "catch on." Advertisers considered his repartee "too smart" for so wide an audience.

A New York columnist, Eddie Sullivan, asked him to appear as "guest artist."

"Many have been given credit for getting me my first break; it belongs to Eddie Sullivan."

They remain friends today, another proof of the age-long friendship between the Irishman and the Jew.

His idea of radio comedy is unique in that he is always "on the spot." He allows any members of his company to "get a laugh" at his expense.

In his current film, "Broadway Melody of 1935," he plays the role of a columnist who is knocked down several times.

"They made a sucker of Jack," was the shrewd Walter Winchell's comment.

Jack Benny's wife is the most exceptional woman in Hollywood. She has no desire to appear in films with him.

"My baby and the radio are quite enough," she explains.

When asked if Hollywood was inimical to married life, she smiled, "Not if you're married to Jack Benny."

The Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer studio officials are preparing Jack Benny to follow in the footsteps of the debonair William Powell.

This seems like a large undertaking. But they know Jack Benny.

The radio and screen star has but one regret. His mother died at the dawn of his success. Father and son talk of her every time they meet.



Posted by Yowp at [07:24](#) 0 comments



Labels: [Jack Benny](#)

Sunday, 7 August 2016

Jack Benny Comes Out for Liberace

In the 1950s, Liberace made critics shudder and retch. They derided his perma-smile, his musicianship, his masculinity. And he wasn't even as way-over-the-top as he became in the 1970s.

Amidst the chorus of derision came a voice of defence. It was from none other than Jack Benny.

Actually, it might have been a case of Jack defending himself. He had Liberace as a guest star on his TV show of January 17, 1954 (you may be able to find it on-line). A month later, he found himself in Boston where reporters asked him why on earth he'd have a maiden auntie like that on his programme. Hadn't he seen John Crosby's syndicated column just days earlier that ripped apart Liberace and his act? (You can read

the Crosby column and reaction [in this post](#)).

Well, of course, the answer was simple. Jack Benny was no dummy. He knew Liberace had a huge audience, and having Liberace on his show meant a potential huge rating. And he praised Lee to the assembled throng of media, while talking about his show in general. This is from the *Boston Globe* of February 24, 1954. The headline of the story has taken on a different, and quite ironic, meaning since then.

“Hello-o-o-o- J-a-c-k”

Benny Comes Out For Liberace

By ELIZABETH L. SULLIVAN

Jack Benny had to come to Boston to find out about the John Crosby-Liberace controversy. The repercussions have not reached the coast yet and Benny has been busy these past few days emceeing the Friars' dinner in New York, putting on two radio shows in the East, preparing for next Sunday's telecast and appearing as a guest speaker at last night's Bonds for Israel dinner in the Hub.

“Why, Liberace is the nicest person you would ever want to meet!” shouted Jack. “And that is why he is successful, because he is natural. His mannerisms are not affected. That's the make-up of the man.

“We've been friends for years. He has had numerous requests for TV appearances and when he selected my show to be first, I felt deeply honored. When Liberace showed up for rehearsal, he walked into the studio and in that smiling, monotone way of his, said.

“Hello-o-o-o- J-a-c-k.”

“Before I knew it,” continued Benny, “I was doing the same thing . . . wearing a Liberace smile.”



Benny, incidentally, was holding a press meeting at his suit in the Somerset Hotel, and he had everyone laughing. “It isn't possible to please your audiences. For instance, you would think from the ratings that everyone watches ‘I Love Lucy.’ But there are viewers who despise that show. By the same token there are viewers who like Liberace and there are those who do not.

“I'm no exception. Recently I did ‘The Horn Blows at Midnight’ on the Omnibus telecast. The first dozen responses said the performance was wonderful, but the same mail brought in a half dozen that said I was lousy.

“Liberace is breaking box office records all over the country. He played Los Angeles recently and tickets were

unavailable. He is not a phony. If he were, people would sense it sooner or later and he would have faded into obscurity.

“In order to put Liberace on my TV show, his act would have to be of a different nature. If he were to sit down and play the piano in full dress, it would be just another Liberace performance. So I told him that the cast and myself would don the tails and he would have to wear a lumber jacket. Liberace roared. He was all for it.

“That proves what a regular guy he is,” emphasized Benny. “And if I could think of a good reason to have him back on my show again soon, I'd recall him.”

A Plug for Next Show

Benny says it is impossible to turn out topnotch shows every week. “I don't attempt it. But if next Sunday's show is not the best show I've ever done, I'll drop dead!”

Benny had reference to a comedy skit with Helen Hayes.

“Preparing shows for radio and TV require different methods,” said Jack. “In radio, a lot is left to the imagination. On TV, the shows have to be seen. I don't have formats for each, even though it seems as if I do. I have the same radio case, but each TV lineup is different. We aim to do good shows, not spectacular ones.

“Mary dislikes both radio and TV, although she loves show business for me and she is extremely fond of show people.

Rochester is wonderful, both on radio and TV.

“Incidentally, I don't wear a toupee!” exclaimed Benny. I did wear on once for a movie and it gathered momentum as a gag . . . just like the age 39 gag.

“There's something funny about 39 . . . it's like halting at the old-age figure of 40! Next year I'm planning a big production on TV as I actually decide to go into 40. It's going to be a mammoth affair.

“Just like Joan's wedding, smiled Benny. It takes place next month. Mary is in a dither and will be glad when



it's over. Of course, we have to invite everyone. It's a big event in Joan's life and we hope it will be a lasting marriage."

Posted by [Yowp](#) at [07:19](#) 0 comments



Labels: [Jack Benny](#)

Sunday, 31 July 2016

Maybe I'll Try Radio Instead

Jack Benny had a very short-lived and uneven vaudeville partnership before launching his radio career on May 2, 1932. He appeared on stage with comedian Lou Holtz, who mounted a revue that opened at Warners' Hollywood Theatre on Broadway just over two weeks earlier on April 18th. That's Holtz in a 1935 radio show to your right.



Benny dominated radio and was incredibly successful on television, beloved when he died in 1974 and someone who attracts new fans to his old broadcasts even today. But in 1932, Holtz was the mega-star. He pulled in \$75,000 for an 11-week run at Warners' Hollywood. Jack apparently got \$2,000 a week. But then vaudeville died. Holtz's agents put out feelers. He landed his own show on CBS for Chesterfield cigarettes starting in May 1933, but radio was never really his medium and he was never a star on TV. Unless you're a real fan of the golden, pre-Depression era of vaudeville, you've probably never heard of him.

Money was the centre of Benny's appearance with Holtz. He took the spot of Harry Richman, who had been pulling in even more cash than Holtz.

In the '30s, New York was littered with newspapers and each had its own theatre critic; the bigger papers had more than one. So let's see what the *Brooklyn Daily Eagle* published the day after the opening of the revue.

The Theaters

By **ARTHUR POLLOCK**

Lou Holtz Presents the Third Edition of His Vaudeville Revue, Adding Jack Benny and the Extraordinary Borah Minnevitich

Lou Holtz replenished his Vaudeville-Revue at the Hollywood Theater last night, making this, the third edition, all new except himself and the notables he picks out of the audience for purposes of introduction. The new didos are looser than the last but better. For one thing Jack Benny replaces Harry Richman as co-star with Mr. Holtz. That's a big step in advance. Mr. Benny is much easier to watch and listen to. And there is Borah Minnevitich!

A few are missed from the last edition, Hall LeRoy and Mitzi Mayfair for instance. No one fills the gaps they leave vacant. The third version needs a good dancer. It has a lively young man to sing songs, sentimental ones about the girl he loves or anything else the audience asks for. He's too lusty to be a crooner, but he means it just the same.

And for those who have long adored Blossom Seeley, there she is, as large as life and working hard, and seriously, Benny Fields meanwhile helping out. Her following is a large one. She is one of the bill's assets.

Borah Minnevitich and his harmonica symphonists are the real hit of the evening, though. He has something genuine to contribute to the show, a gift of a quality none of the other players have to offer. A fine musician himself on his mouth organ, he has gathered together an orchestra of ragamuffins of all sizes and senses of humor and they play beguiling music on their throbbing instruments while he directs. He doesn't say anything. Most of the comedy is silent. But it is good comedy, he is an oddly humorous leader and the music is really very fine, like nothing to be heard anywhere else. Minnevitich has his little touch of genius.

A young girl named Martha Raye, with a wide and mobile mouth and insinuating hips, sings eagerly. There is some dancing and a sketch or two. The rest is Holtz and Jack Benny. They are content with a simpler kind of comedy than that manufactured by Holtz and Richman in the preceding edition, and the effect is better.

Benny's poise is more genuine than Richman's, so the fun is less oily. The two kid each other and the audience and offer at one point in the evening what is perhaps the funniest, if also the boldest, of those jocularities about effeminate men who go about with their hands on their hips. Later, as a couple of Hill Billies, they sing a song called "West Virginia Gal" that is very amusing.

Hillbilly music was starting to become popular in the Depression and went in for a lot of ribbing. Jack himself did yokel sketches on his radio show, especially in the '30s, and featured a makeshift act called "The Beverly Hillbillies" (no relation to the later TV series) that was part of his stage act and even appeared with him on television. And, as you can see, jokes about "effeminate men" were perfectly acceptable in an era when white guys appeared on stage in blackface, and comedians used thick Yiddish, Swedish, Irish or German dialects to get laughs. Holtz was a dialect comedian and that kind of humour fell out of favour after the war.

The revue closed days before Benny began his radio career. Holtz jumped aboard the S.S. Bremen on May 5th for a vacation in France and England, turning down \$3,000 to appear at the Palladium in London.

Fast forward to 1949. Benny was one of the top stars in network radio and had been for years. CBS had fought NBC (and the IRS) for his services. Holtz was trying to hawk a five-minute non-network "Laugh Club" radio series on transcription discs. Maybe he should have taken the big money at the Palladium when he had the chance.

Posted by [Yowp](#) at [07:15](#) 0 comments



Labels: [Jack Benny](#)

Sunday, 24 July 2016

More Lolly on Jack

Not one of the Hollywood gossip columnists ever wrote a bad thing about Jack Benny, at least that I can tell. All the columns I've ever run across praise him for being a kind and gentle man and not anything like his radio character (a point I suspect Mr. B. wanted the columnists to make clear, considering how many times he talked about it himself).

Louella Parsons of the Hearst chain was particularly friendly. Perhaps it's because Benny fed her ego by inviting her to appear on his radio show three times (something he never did with her rival, Hedda Hopper). She devoted her entire column to Jack on a number of occasions. We've posted a couple of them [here](#). Here's another one from newspapers of November 30, 1952.

Mrs. Parsons never hesitated to make herself part of the story. She does so again in this column.



Jack Benny Is Generous, Not Stingy

By LOUELLA O. PARSONS

Motion Picture Editor

International News Service

HOLLYWOOD—I was rushing to meet Jack Benny at my house, and as we drove up to the door, I said to Collins, my driver, "Oh, dear, that's Jack Benny's car now."

"No ma'am, Miss Parsons," said Collins, "Mr. Benny drives an old Maxwell."

This will give an idea of the impact of Jack's Jokes. All of his radio listeners firmly believe Jack is the stingiest man in Hollywood, and that he wants all the glory for himself. Nothing could be farther from the truth. After 20 years. Jack still makes these gags seem true, but in reality he is one of the most generous of men, the kindest, and the people who work with him swear by him. He will never do anything to keep others on his show from going out on their own and making good, as witness Dennis Day and Phil Harris, both of whom started with Jackson (as they call him) and now have successful shows of their own.

Jack is one of the few entertainers who has stayed on radio, and can stay as long as he wishes.

His format, which varies little throughout the years, is still a must in many, many homes.

However, he is going to do a TV show once a month. "There are so many places where television does not reach," said Jack, "so I will do both radio and TV this year."

He takes radio in his stride, and everyone has a good time on his show. That's one of the reasons it's a success—the merriment comes over the microphone. I told him I can always hear Mary Livingston's laugh above all else.

"Mary doesn't care at all about show business," he said, "and she is so good. She would bow out anytime. She's also a wonderful critic but do you know where I go when I want to know whether my show is good or bad?"

"To Mary's great friend Barbara Stanwyck," he answered. "Barbara is completely honest. She'll say, 'you missed the boat' or 'that is a good show.' When she says the show is good she means it." In the course of our conversation I told Jack another reason I think he is so loved is because he never resorts to off color jokes. His shows are for the whole family. Other comedians often say something so suggestive it brings a blush to people who aren't used to innuendo, but Jack never offends in the slightest.

Jack was born near Waukegan, Illinois (not far from my hometown, Freeport), on Valentine's Day, and still says he is 39 years old. His real name is Benny Kubelsky, and the boy who became Jack Benny and played on the fiddle has come a long way.

The Bennys have been married since January, 1927—and in all those years there has never been a breath of scandal connected with either of them, Jack has made "The Horn Blows at Midnight" pay off by kidding himself and the picture, which isn't in any language, a work of art. But I happen to know that it made money anyway. In fact Jack has never made a picture that didn't. Rochester calls Jack, "Mr. Benny, star of stage, radio and screen." Now he'll have to add "and television" to the list.

If there were more Jack Bennys, Hollywood would be a better place. But I feel as do those who love him, that they broke the mold when they made this fine person.

A number of people in Hollywood didn't have as high of an opinion about Parsons as she did about Jack Benny. Eventually, Parsons simply became irrelevant. The studio system that kept the stars—and her—in business disintegrated. In the meantime, Jack Benny, who had been in show business even longer than Parsons, carried on into the 1960s and 1970s. He was still a star when he died in 1974. When Parsons died in 1972, she was part of the past.

Posted by [Yowp](#) at [07:16](#) 2 comments



Labels: [Jack Benny](#)

Sunday, 17 July 2016

The Hensir of Comedy

There seems to have been a fascination with how Jack Benny and his writers put together the Benny radio show. We've posted several contemporary newspaper columns about it. Here's another one.

This is from Earl Wilson's column in the *New York Post* of January 22, 1945. The radio show being discussed aired the night before. And "hen, sir" was part of the dialogue.

Gag Busters in Action—Jack Benny's Brain Trust

I'm a candidate for a booby hatch today. I've survived a Jack Benny gag-rewrite session.

Assigning myself to find how Jack manufactures his jokes, I hopped up to his 33d floor penthouse at the Sherry-Netherland. In an orangeish dressing gown, chewing a cigar that had gone out a long time ago, Jack faced the crowd—17 people by actual count—and asked, "Where the hell's Phil?"

Meaning Phil Harris.

Nobody knew. Mary Livingston said maybe he couldn't get a cab. Rochester ran around behind a long cigar, showing off a yellow shirt and a blinding tie.

Phil arrived to chants of "Always late, always late" from the crowd, and read his part. Coming to the word "humanitarian," he innocently read it:

"Human-tarian."

One writer fell down laughing. "You don't have to write jokes for Phil," Jack said. "He reads things wrong anyway." Finally the rehearsal ended.



"Everybody scram but the geniuses," somebody in authority said. "Just the writers stay."

This your clever reporter had come to hear—the four writers, probably top joke men in the country, probably each a \$25,000-a-year man, cutting and polishing the first rough script. They sagged into chairs or onto couches, with coats off and collars opened. Jack lighted his cigar—which went out. He kept chewing it. They began kicking jokes around. Jack wanted a gag about him appearing before FDR. Somebody would ask, "Did the President like you?"—and then the gag.

"Roosevelt laughed and Jimmy Byrned," said Writer George Balzer of Van Nuys, Calif., but he took it back with a wince.

"Roosevelt hasn't laughed so much since he saw Herbert Hoover," flung in either John Thackaberry of Houston, Tex., or Milt Josefsberg of Brooklyn—I forget which. They were in their '30s. The fourth writer, Sam Perrin, of the Bronx, held his script mirthlessly, but business-like. He is 40ish. Silence gripped the room. A clock ticked loudly while the geniuses thought. The script girl, Jane Tucker, waited for a witticism she could write down.

Perrin called out, "Did the President like your show? You say, 'Oh he liked it swell. He sat next to Gen. Hershey and now I'm in 1-A.'"

Jack smiled—for the first time so far. "I would put it in," he said. Jane Tucker wrote it down in her script book. "That'll play good," one writer said. That's what they said repeatedly—it would play good.

I listened as they hauled gags out of their heads for an hour and a half, and threw most of them away. Occasionally a writer would have a paroxysm of laughter over his newest joke, yell it out, and nobody would laugh. I gave them one of my own gags. They gave it back to me. Two writers wanted to get in a gag about Col. Elliott Roosevelt's dog.

"It's a good laugh, but I hate to pan anybody, and I'm afraid of it," said Jack. Out came a joke about Don Wilson arriving late: "He lost his priority on an elevator." Out came another where Jack asked Phil Harris, "How do you keep warm—Red flannels?"

"No, Black Label."

They were running too long. Jack wanted a joke about how skinny his legs look in knickers. "You look like two champagne glasses with ridiculously long stems," one writer suggested. Another thought he looked like V for Victory upside down. But another one came up with "You have to tie knots in your legs to make it look like you have knees."

"Got that Janie?" said Jack. She had already written it down.

I was restless. But apparently loving it, they weren't. They were meticulous. For 5 minutes, they discussed a gag in which Jack complained to a waiter about an egg costing 20 cents. "What's in an egg that could make it cost 20 cents?" he said.

"Well, sir," replied the waiter, "it's a whole day's work for a hen."

The burning issue was: Shouldn't the "sir" be at the end of the sentence? "... It's a whole day's work for the hen, sir." I think it was Josefsberg who said "sir" after "hen" would produce a new word, like "hensir."

"Like saying, 'Somebody's at the door. Will you please hensir?'"

Our session had gone on almost two hours, and they were only in the middle. It was orderly, nobody even had a drink, and all I could think about was the new word, "hensir." Jack denied the story he has no hair—said he has hair at home he's never used. So on that I left, thinking how nice they were, and, also, how long could they stay sane?

Benny's writers continually found ways to work old jokes into a new script, and the "hen, sir" was no exception. The new version appeared on the radio show of May 3, 1953. Jack was, in real life, appearing for several weeks at San Francisco's Curran Theatre. On the show he complained about the price of a breakfast at the Fairmont Hotel. Only the audience didn't get a "hen" this time. Said waiter Mel Blanc: "Well, it's a whole day's work for a chicken." But joke continued:

JACK: That's a very old joke.

MEL: Well, I thought it was funny when I heard it last night at the Curran Theatre.

Benny's writers did it again.

Posted by Yowp at [06:52](#) 1 comments



Labels: [Earl Wilson](#), [Jack Benny](#)

Sunday, 10 July 2016

It's TV Day

The big money in radio was gone in 1951. No one knew better than Dennis Day.

Day had been axed by NBC in July because he wouldn't reduce his demand for \$11,500 a week for his radio package. The same thing happened to Judy Canova, who was let go making \$8,500 a week but told she could come back for \$5,000. The big sponsorship money to pay the stars was moving faster and faster from

radio into television. (Day, by the way, was getting \$12,500 a week to sing in Las Vegas).

Jack Benny wasn't a cheapskate like he played on the radio and Day wasn't a naïve kid he portrayed. He proceeded to do what his mentor Benny had done several years earlier—played NBC and CBS off each other to land a new contract. He finally signed with the former, reported *Variety* on October 31, 1951. It was a TV-radio deal sponsored by NBC's parent company, RCA. Not only did the contract let NBC plug its TV sets on the Day programme, it plugged Dennis' records, which happened to be on the RCA label.



As the ink on the signed agreement dried, Day hit the promo circuit to push his coming TV show and fit in a mention for his new movie while he was at it. Hence this column by the Associated Press found in papers starting November 26, 1951 which also focused on Day's savviness.

Dennis Day Prepares for Video Debut

By BOB THOMAS

HOLLYWOOD, Nov. 27. — (AP) — Eugene Denis McNulty [sic], better known as Dennis Day, portrays a dim-witted character on The Jack Benny radio show. If Day is dumb, many another show business personality would like to have the same brand of ignorance.

Here are some examples of Day's dumbness.

1. After years of biding his time, he landed himself a fat movie contract with Twentieth-Fox.
2. He is the only Fox player who has television rights.
3. He just signed a TV contract with NBC after weeks of bidding by that network and CBS.

Day, who talks like a normal human being and not the breathless, half-baked character he plays on the radio, indicated that he doesn't believe in rushing into things. He has had many movie offers but not until a couple of years ago did he sign up for one picture a year at Fox. The deal kept him a free agent for TV, while most other movie contract players were prohibited from the new medium.

The tenor is presently working in "The Girl Next Door" and will play a whimsical ax murderer in his next film. He has another film to follow that one, and so his TV show may not debut until the fall of 1952.

"They wanted me to start in January," he said. "But since I'm virtually doing three pictures a year instead of one, I may have to put the TV show off. Anyway, I'm in no hurry to get started. I've seen too many performers jump into TV before they were ready. Now the public is getting tired of them."

A few weeks ago, Day was in the enviable position of being wooed by the networks. Each day, top emissaries from NBC and CBS would visit him at the studio. Each call hiked the bidding price up a notch. Finally he accepted NBC's offer.

"It will be a variety show format," he said. "I made pilot films of both kinds—variety show and situation comedy along the lines of my air show. The situation comedy show turned out to be deadly. It just doesn't seem adaptable to TV."

Day indicated that he would concentrate on getting good writing for his show, "That is the most important element in a show's success," he said. "The trouble with a lot of the writing on TV today is that the writers are still thinking in terms of radio technique. They concentrate on gags. Fortunately there are a lot of new young writers coming who realize that TV depends on sight, not gags."

Day's own radio program is off the air and he said he might be giving up radio altogether.

"Jack (Benny) may drop his air show after this season," he reported. "Jack was very happy with his last TV show and thinks he has found the format that will work for him in TV. And I think he's right. He was playing the real Jack Benny and people loved him."

With Benny and others threatening to desert it, what will happen to radio?

"I guess it will be limited to recorded shows and music," Day observed. "Daytime radio will still be the same, but all the big nighttime shows will be dropping off. There's no money in radio any more."



Day's variety show debuted (or is that day-buted?) on February 8th, alternating weekly with Ezio Pinza. He tried to go the sitcom/songs route he had trod successfully on radio, with Verna Felton, Hanley Stafford and Kathy Phillips slotted as regulars. Day wasn't so successful this time. On the East Coast, the premiere was opposite CBS' *Mama*, which had a 40 share. Directors came and went. Writer Parke Levy bolted in late March; his final episode didn't air in the East because of a blizzard in the Denver area cutting the NBC circuit. A show doctor was hired in May. The programme was replaced by a dramatic show in June and re-worked during the summer hiatus, returning in the fall.

Incidentally, the "ax murderer" movie role mentioned in the story never materialised and I have not been able to find out what it was supposed to be. However, *Variety* reported on March 13, 1952 that a deal was set for Day to play one of the leads in *Gentlemen Prefer Blondes*. Not only did it not happen, but a lead in *Gentlemen Marry Brunettes* announced in the *Hollywood Reporter* a year and three days later didn't come to pass. In fact, Day never made another movie. Of course, mentor Benny had been out of the movie business by that time, too. Sticking to the small screen never hurt either of them.

Posted by Yowp at [07:24](#) 3 comments



Labels: [Bob Thomas](#), [Jack Benny](#)

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.

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 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, saving : "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 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*."

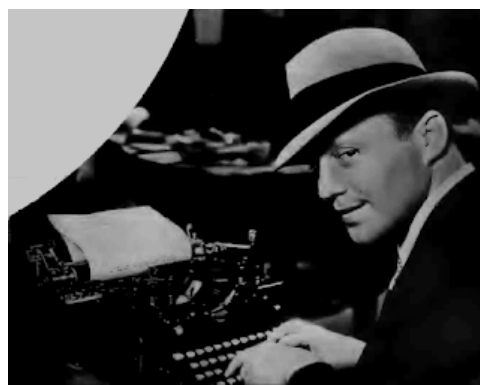
But he didn't look very upset about it. And there you have Jack Benny—the man to whom nothing ever happens, except a steady climb to success, a busy life, a happy home and an adopted daughter he's quite screwy about. Their best friends are Burns and Allen. When the Bennys are in New York they live at 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](#) 0 comments



Labels: [Jack Benny](#)

Sunday, 26 June 2016

Not 40!

Jack Benny was known for, among many things, his perennial age of 39. The full-stop before he could hit 40 came comparatively late in the radio career, February 15, 1948 to be precise. On the air, it took him about a dozen years to gain three years of age prior to that.

A first-person, tongue-in-cheek feature story bearing Jack's name was published in *Collier's Weekly* of February 19, 1954. We've given a sidebar portion of it in [this post](#). Now here's the full article. Unfortunately, I don't have good copies of the photos that accompanied it (they were from various photo services) so what you see attached to the post are substitutes from my files.

After 39 Years—I'm Turning 40

By JACK BENNY

THE day started like any other in Beverly Hills. The sun forced its way through the early morning smog, the birds in the trees began to cough and I tumbled out of bed, happy, carefree and ready for the next 24 hours—like any healthy young animal.

Early rising is a ritual with me. Unlike my nocturnal brethren in show business, I am matutinal by nature. (I have always been matutinal, but never knew how to say it until I made an appearance on the Omnibus television program with Alistair Cooke. He slipped me the word, as he put it, "as a lagniappe." I don't know what lagniappe means, but the next time I see him I intend to ask.)

Anyway, the morning to which I refer began normally enough. I flung open the bedroom windows and started my daily dozen. I had just gotten around to the knee-bending exercises when I heard the stairs creaking and I knew that Rochester was on his way up with orange juice and coffee. Then I remembered that this was Rochester's day off. Suddenly I realized it wasn't the stairs that were creaking. It was my knees.

The shock straightened me up. I tried the knee-bending exercise again to make sure I had heard right. There was the same creaking—only this time louder, like somebody scraping a fiddle string. I winced. I can't stand bad violin playing.

I've always expected that sooner or later I'd start showing signs of wear. But I never expected the signs to be audible. I stood there, listening, and my eyes settled on the wall calendar, as they frequently do: it was a gift from Marilyn Monroe. After a moment or two, I glanced down at the date. It was February 1, 1954! In less than two weeks, on February 14th, I, Jack Benny, would be forty!

Forty! I shuddered, and my eyes fogged. The clock on the dresser seemed to be ticking faster, in a deliberate effort to hasten the fateful date. Cold chills and hot flashes coursed intermittently through my body. In a sort of hazy stupor, I could visualize myself sitting on a park bench with Barney Baruch, feeding the pigeons. As reason slowly returned, I realized that Father Time had been waving his scythe under my nose, and I had been too comfortably ensconced in the sage and durable age of thirty-nine to heed the closeness of the blade. Trifling occurrences that I had dismissed as unimportant came back now to plague me with their full significance.

Lately, I had noticed that the Martinis were getting stronger, the hills on the golf course steeper, flirtations scarcer. Perhaps I had been cutting too fast a pace for a man on the brink of forty. I would have to change my habits. No more carousing with the boys. From now on, Charlie Coburn, Guy Kibbee and Lionel Barrymore would have to fun around without me.

In the following days, I underwent a transformation. I brooded and fretted, found fault with everything. I changed from a bright, lovable young man to a bitter, churlish, middle-aged curmudgeon. Rochester was on the verge of quitting. Polly, my parrot, wouldn't talk to me. I insulted the people on my radio and television shows. I even began to hate myself—and I was the last person in the world I thought I'd ever hate.

Finally I decided I would have to adjust. After all, it isn't a crime to be forty. A pity, maybe, but not a crime. I got a grip on myself and went to see my doctor. That is, I didn't exactly go to see him. I invited him over to my house for dinner. It was friendlier than going to his office . . . and much less expensive.

After a modest meal, I led the conversation around to the state of my health and my impending birthday. The doctor was reluctant to talk business at first, but a couple of quick ponies of brandy loosened his tongue.

"When most men reach forty," the doctor said, "they find themselves up against a psychological block. Forty is considered the gateway to middle age and nobody wants to make the trip."

I refilled his glass and he continued his dissertation:

"A man seems to feel, and with some reason, that while he's in his thirties he's within shooting distance of his youth, but when he hits forty he's all shot." He helped himself to some more cognac.

"That all depends on the health of the individual," he went on. "Now, I'm forty-eight and I'm far from shot."



Why, I can outdrink two twenty-four-year-olds put together."
I hastily put away the cognac bottle.



I had drawn some cheer from the doctor's observations. But I still was not satisfied. I yawned in his face a couple of times so he could get a look at my tongue. I saw his quick professional glance, and his lack of comment was reassuring.

I took the little wooden hammer out of the nut bowl and casually put it down on the table within easy reach of his hand. Then I crossed my legs and waited. Sure enough, he took the bait. He picked up the hammer and tapped me on the knee. I hadn't realized my reflexes were so fast. If he hadn't pulled his head back just in time, I would have punted his teeth into the kitchen.

The doctor remarked that he hadn't seen such knee action since Nijinsky. If I took care of myself, he said, I could live to be a hundred and forty. Keeping the doctor's visit on a social basis, I said, "Doc, if you had a patient like me, what kind of diet would you put him on?"

He told me everything I wanted to know and it didn't cost me a quarter (including the price of the cognac). However, the diet he prescribed was disquieting. I was limited to expensive steaks

and chops, lean cuts of meat, fowl and a few green vegetables. Bread and gravy, potatoes and rice, the old standbys that regularly graced my table, were taboo. Under my tutelage, Rochester had become proficient at preparing some wonderfully economical dishes . . . braised beef hearts, fried pork livers and country gravy, breaded fishcakes and the hundred different kinds of hash that help the housewife stay within her budget. I was loath to discontinue this fare, especially since my freezer was full of beef hearts and fishcakes. Besides, Rochester was now so expert at preparing this type of food it would be a pity to make him stop.

Rochester Offers an Ideal Solution

After turning the problem over in my mind, I finally found a way out of the dilemma. Rochester was not on a diet. There was no reason why he couldn't go on eating beef hearts and fishcakes, even though I was stuck with steaks and chops.

As I walked the doctor to the door, I felt reassured. Still, I had been unable to think of a way for him to take my basal metabolism. I began toying with the idea of inviting him to dinner again. I could make the invitation for two and ask him to bring his machine with him. As we shook hands, I held the grip, and fed the doctor one more leading question.

"So you think I'm in good shape, eh, Doc?"

"Yes," he said, struggling vainly to get his hand loose, "but I think you ought to drop by the office for a checkup in a week or so."

"Another checkup?" I asked, taken off guard.

"But you just gave me one."

"Well, you can't be too safe," he grunted, tugging at his hand. "Besides, a man of your age can change overnight."

All my old fears overwhelmed me again. In fact, I was so staggered that my grip turned to mush, and the doctor, released suddenly, went flying out the door.

The doctor's pessimistic remark left me frustrated and disappointed. But I was able to find consolation in the fact that even though the body was beginning to sag a little as birthday number forty crept closer, mentally my faculties were never sharper. I still retained all my old cunning and guile. Besides, I decided, even though I might change by tomorrow, I was still in good shape tonight, so the money expended on food and drink for the doctor had not been entirely wasted.

When the Plumber Comes to Dinner

Feeling a little better, I checked my supply of cognac and was pleased to find there were still a few pints left. Not that I drink myself, but I like to keep some in the house for my guests. Next week, I'm having my plumber over for dinner. There's an annoying leak in the kitchen drainpipe, and I'm sure that after Herman imbibes a few samples of the grape, he'll be under that sink like an old firehorse, I'm counting on quite a saving, because the plumber's fee is usually higher than the doctor's.

The next morning I could find no perceptible change in my health, in spite of the doctor's dour warning.

Nevertheless, I bathed and dressed carefully to avoid taxing my strength, and, wary of my protesting knees, I



had Rochester help me with my socks and my shoelaces. Then, after a cautious breakfast of orange juice and hot vitamin-fortified milk, I set out on my program of readjustment.

First I dropped in to see my old friend and colleague, Eddie Cantor. Eddie had long since endured the experience I was now undergoing, and I hoped to acquire a few tips on how a man should dress, behave and adapt his philosophy when he reaches forty. Eddie proved to be a disappointment. He beat around the bush and seemed reluctant to discuss the subject.

Finally, I put it to him point-blank. "Eddie," I said, "did you feel that your whole psychological structure changed when you became forty?"

Cantor answered that he wouldn't know; he never had been forty and he never intended to be.

You see, Eddie went from thirty-nine to sixty overnight, and the only one who ever suspected it was Ida.

After lunch, I left Cantor's house, still groping for a panacea to restore my confidence and bolster my shattered morale. As I walked down Sunset Boulevard, I felt that everyone was staring at me. I could almost hear people saying to themselves, "Look at him. He must be forty if he's a day."

I decided a few holes of golf might help my frayed nerves. I was going to take a taxi out to my club, but it was such a pleasant day I chose to walk. It was only seven miles and I knew a short cut, most of it paved. The only bad stretch was a half mile through a beanfield, but I knew the terrain like the back of my hand.

I started out briskly enough, but after a few blocks (he pace began to tell. My strides were slower and my breathing was faster. I thought a cup of coffee might pick me up, so I dropped into Romanoff's. Not Mike Romanoff's. This place is owned by a man named Joseph Romanoff. Joseph claims he is the real prince, and Mike is a phony. But Joseph is a very sweet fellow and doesn't want to make trouble, so he doesn't even use the name Romanoff's for his restaurant. He calls it Joe's Place.



As I sat on the stool sipping my coffee, the thought occurred to me that Joe was about forty, and his views on the subject of middle age might be worth hearing. "Joe," I said, "would you credit a man of thirty-nine with having a lot more stamina than a man of forty?"

"Mr. Benny," Joe answered, "in my place, I give credit to nobody and I don't care how old he is. Besides, we got no stamina here. If he don't want a hamburger, let him go someplace else."

Naturally, this answer was of no help to me, although I couldn't dispute the soundness of Joe's business acumen. I left Romanoff's considerably refreshed, but I decided against walking the rest of the way to my club. There was no point in expending my waning energy just to save a few cents. I took a bus.

All my life, I meditated as the bus weaved its way through the traffic, I'd been saving my money for my old age. Well, there was no point in saving for it any more. It was here.

I almost changed my mind when I looked up and saw an attractive young girl smiling at me. I smiled back, my spirits soaring at this evidence that I had not lost my great appeal for the other sex. Then, as she moved closer, my world collapsed again: she was merely after my seat! I settled back, and her smile changed to a dirty look. But a man of forty is obliged to conserve his strength, even at the expense of his manners.

Youthful Comic Worried Too

I was very much depressed as I entered the club. A lot of the boys were there, and I sat down and chatted with Jerry Lewis, hoping that he would cheer me up with some of his usual zany antics. But it turned out that Jerry, too, was in a somber mood. He confided that he was going to be thirty soon and he was worried about it. I found that I was unable to summon up any sympathy for this kid. There he was, a full 10 years younger than I; what did he have to worry about?

I was about to give up and go home when George Burns walked in and pointed his cigar at me. I broke up with laughter. George has a way of pointing a cigar that nobody else can top. At least, it seems that way to me. As everyone in Hollywood knows, I am George Burns's best audience. As a matter of fact, there's a rumor around the club that if George Burns were playing a date, I'd even pay to see him. Well, anyway, that's the rumor.

I invited George to join me for a little golf. By the time we teed off, I was in much better spirits. All during the game, George kept me in stitches. He really has the greatest sense of humor in the world.

George was wearing a big diamond ring and he called the caddy over and showed it to him. As the caddy looked at the stone admiringly, a stream of water shot out of the ring and hit him in the eye.

I had seen the trick work before, but the way George did it was so funny I became hysterical. The caddy didn't appreciate the humor until George gave him a dollar. Then the boy laughed louder than I did.

Make-Up Caused Healthy Look

After the game. I had a steam bath and a massage, and, thanks to George Burns, I set out for CBS in a much better frame of mind. We were rehearsing a TV show, and everyone in the cast remarked how healthy I looked.

I didn't bother telling them that I had just spent an hour with the make-up man. It was a few days before the show went on, but I always like to look my best. You can never tell who might drop in to watch the rehearsal.

I apologized to Mary Livingstone for my petty griping of the past several days. She tried to be kind and said she hadn't noticed any difference. Then I explained that the cause of my mental stress was the sudden realization that I would shortly be forty. Mary burst into that infectious laugh of hers. She said she just couldn't believe that was my right age. I wasn't surprised. No matter how often I tell people I'm thirty-nine, some of them refuse to believe I'm that old.

It was Mary who finally straightened me out, by reminding me of others in my age bracket who were carrying on with the vim and vigor of teenagers. Georgie Jessel, for one, was never concerned about age, either his own or that of whoever happened to be his date.

As Mary spoke, I thought of Bob Hope, whose case was so similar to my own. Maybe he was even a year or two older. But Bob was as frisky as a two-year-old colt, and covered a lot more ground. And what's more, the ground he covered had oil in it.

Then I thought of Bing Crosby. Bing had hurdled the forty-year barrier without drawing a long breath or a wrong note. His popularity had increased with the years, both here and abroad. In Germany, I understand, they still call him Der Bingle. I remember talking to my press agent once about giving me a build-up in Germany, finding a nickname for me comparable to Bing's. He started publicizing me as "Der Jackal." For reasons I don't remember, we were forced to abandon the campaign.

At home that night, I reflected on Mary's words and decided she was right. Aside from a pair of noisy knees, I had never felt or looked better. Oh, there were a few tiny signs of age. The brown hair that used to tumble over my forehead now tumbles all the way to the floor. And of course, there's the pitter patter of little crow's-feet around my eyes. But I'm lucky they're little; some crows have bigger feet than others. Anyhow, I don't mind having a few lines in my face. I think it gives me character.

I walked over and looked into the mirror. My eyes were just as blue as they ever were. And no matter what anyone says, I've never dyed them. I smiled, and noted with satisfaction that they were my own teeth smiling back at me. I tried to look at myself objectively, and after a few minutes I came to the conclusion that it was not by accident or camera trick that I projected so handsomely on the television screen.

I was now reconciled to the idea of being forty, although I knew it would be quite a while before I got really used to it. If seemed, in retrospect, that all my life I'd been thirty-nine. I suppose it's because so many things happened in that one year.

When Rochester called me downstairs for dinner, I was the old Jack Benny once more: gay, carefree, and bubbling over with the joy of living. I had shed my gloomy cocoon and emerged as a radiant caterpillar . . . fuzzy, but free.

Rochester had noticed the change in me and by way of celebration he had whipped up an elaborate dinner. He presented the menu to me with a flourish. I had decided to wait until my freezer was depleted before embarking on my new diet of steaks and chops, so there was a fishcake cocktail, pork liver *de fois gras*, *salade de la* plain lettuce, and for the entree, braised hearts of beef, with a new invention of Rochester's which he called city gravy. As I attacked the savory fare, I contemplated the new pattern of behavior I was to adopt as a man of forty.

A Generous Gift for Rochester

I would have to be a trifle more conservative in my dress. I called Rochester in to make him a present of my green plaid suit, but found he was already wearing it. I told him he could keep it without charge, but that the alterations would have to come out of his salary. I was in good shape for the transition so far as the rest of my wardrobe was concerned. True, I had two or three ties that were a little on the loud side, but I could have them dyed.

Rochester then suggested a birthday party. At first I was against the idea. The fuss and bother didn't appeal to me; besides, real friends should give presents whether they're invited to a party or not.

But then I reconsidered. The best way to handle an unpleasant situation is to face it squarely. Why not have a party? Why not announce to the world that Jack Benny, star of stage, screen, radio and television, was forty? Secretly, I had been entertaining the thought of fibbing a little. I could always say I was thirty-nine and get away with it. Yes, I actually considered that. But fibbing goes against my grain. And so I made my decision: a party it would be.

Rochester volunteered to contribute the cake, provided I paid for the forty candles. I told him that was satisfactory. I knew I wouldn't have to buy forty candles. I could get ten and cut them in quarters.

As I pen these words, the invitations to the party in celebration of my birthday are already in the mail, and I stand exposed to the world as a man of forty.

I hope the revelation will not come as too great a shock to my millions of fans who, as fans will do, have cloaked their idol with the mantle of perennial youth.

Today I face the future fearlessly, convinced that, after thirty-nine years of the best fruits of life, my next





thirty-nine years will be just as fruitful—and will last just as long.

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