



Sunday, 2 April 2017

The Contradictions of Benny

No introduction is needed for this fine piece on Jack Benny and his show from the March 1948 pages of *Radio Best* magazine, a publication based in New York. The only observation is I somehow find it tough to believe that a small town boy circa 1910 growing up with a Lithuanian immigrant father said "Gee whiz, Pop." The article was accompanied by some very nice NBC publicity photos but the on-line scanned version of the magazine is poor so they haven't all been reproduced.

THE DOUBLE LIFE of Mr. J. Benny

By Flavius Friedman

A long time ago, when the Jack Benny of today was still little Benjamin Kubelsky, he was minding his father's haberdashery shop in Waukegan one evening when a stranger walked in and handed Benjamin some money. Kubelsky *pere*, seeing the cash in the register later, asked his offspring what he had sold.

"Nothing," said his son "He just gave me some money on his account."

"But what was his name?" insisted Mr. Kubelsky.

"I don't know," said Benjamin. "Gee whiz, Pop, do you have to have his name, too?"

Not long afterwards a customer came in and purchased some ties, handkerchiefs and shirts and departed without leaving any cash.

"But it's all right," Benjamin told his father later, "he told me to charge it to his account. And this time I got his name."

"Name!" the old man screamed. "That fellow has no account in my store!"

Jack Benny, at 53, according to his intimates, is only a little less naive than the youthful Benjamin Kubelsky who could be flimflammed so easily by a smooth-talking sharper. "Benny," said Ed Beloin, one of his former writers, is probably the most unsophisticated man I know."

Yet Jack's radio self-portrait of a sport-jacketed, Beverly Hills Simon Legree, who makes Dennis Day mow his lawn as well as sing for his \$17.50 a week, is taken as pure gospel by the 25,000,000 people who listen regularly to his Sunday night half-hour over NBC. Benny's mail still bristles with indignant letters demanding that he pay Rochester a living wage. (Rochester gets over \$1000 a week.) Even Mr. Whiskers once fell for the Benny myth, when the WPB, a Government war-time agency, sent Jack a business-like letter requesting that he turn in his legendary Maxwell to the scrap drive.

Strangers still turn their heads when Jack lunches or dines in Romanoff's or the Brown Derby, curious to see if he will leave either a nickel or a dime tip. Benny always overtips lavishly, both because that is his nature and because he is almost pathologically sensitive about his penny-squeezing "reputation."

The truth is, no one knows the real Jack Benny—no one, that is, outside of Jack himself, and he is only a shade more voluble than the late Calvin Coolidge. Millions of words have already been printed about this man who is the highest-paid comedian in radio. His scrap book, if he kept one, would in sheer stacked-up wordage make the Sears, Roebuck catalog seem like something marked "Reading Time: 10 Seconds," yet Benny still remains one of the most elusive, paradoxical figures in show business.

Benny is a fabulous personality, not so much because of his stratospheric Hooper rating, or his individual brand of humor or because he virtually revolutionized the pattern of radio comedy. Jack is radio's most intriguing figure because he has for more than 15 years succeeded brilliantly at the business of manufacturing

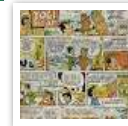


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[Yogi and Flintstones Comics](#) - Some time ago, reader Richard Holliss

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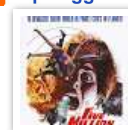
[Bugz' Livez: Antz \(pt. 2\)](#) -

We continue along last-week's trail, following closely behind the protruding abdomen of a marching ant, as his column descends into the depths of a subter...

8 hours ago



Rip Jagger's Dojo



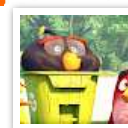
[Five Million Years To Earth!](#) - It's felt like five million years

sometimes. I've yearned to have "Five Million Years to Earth" *or as it's otherwise know* Quatermass and the Pit i^n my ...

10 hours ago



Movies with Michael



[Movie Review: The Angry Birds Movie 2](#) - Michael's Movie

Grade: B+ To be honest I didn't care for the first "Angry Birds Movie". I simply just did not find that film enjoyable. That is what made ...

14 hours ago

laughter when he himself is anything but a funny man.

To an observer watching Benny prepare his Sunday program, he looks for all the world like a harried, cautious Seventh Avenue garment manufacturer worrying about his next Spring's line.

There is nothing uncomplimentary in this. The creation of a Benny broadcast is an arduous, painful, seven-day-a-week task, worth every penny of the reported \$22,500 weekly check Jack gets from the American Tobacco Company. Benny's product comes from the sweat, toil and savvy of The Boss himself, from a quartet of the highest-priced writers in radio and a superlative surrounding cast whose talents all mesh like the jewelled gears of a Naval Observatory chronometer. Jack's competitors—Fred Allen, Danny Kaye, George Burns and other—frankly admit that when it comes to judging comedy material, Benny tops them all.

People, meeting Jack for the first time, stand around hopefully waiting for him to let loose with a barrage of boffolas. They go away disappointed. Jack gives strangers a limp handshake, a shy, almost distant "Hello" and seems eager to evaporate the next moment.

On the other hand, Jack can be the greatest audience in the world during rehearsals, howling with laughter, pounding the floor in glee over a line, while his cast, sits there dead-pan.



And yet Benny, as George Burns says, "is the greatest editor of material in the business. He's got the knack of cutting out all the weak slush and keeping in only the strong punchy lines." Because he has made the creation of comedy such a serious business, Jack knows better than any other man in the world what will be funny in his program. "I can't always tell when a line is good," he admits, "but, brother, I can tell when it's lousy."

Despite all this, despite his stature as "Mr. Radio," his consistent standing among the top five on the air, his huge earnings, his talent as a star-maker, the kudos paid him by the public and the trade, Jack Benny is still the "unhappy fiddler," (Why must comedians always want to play "Hamlet"?) Oddly enough, Benny really believes that if he had listened to his father, and practiced more on the fiddle when he was a boy in Waukegan, he would be a fine violinist today. He honestly envies the great virtuosos like Heifetz, Isaac Stern and Szigeti. He still remembers that Heifetz once told him he had a rich tone and that he should have continued with his music. The pre-comedy Benny was actually a soulful fellow with a violin. Unfortunately, it didn't get him any place.

Even Jack realizes this in his less pre-occupied moments. As his wife, Mary Livingstone once told him, "If you had kept up with fiddle-playing, you would have lost all the humor of being a lousy violinist on your program." (Jack is actually quite proficient.) But he can never seem to forget that he was once a fiddle player. Being no noodle, despite the role he plays on the air, Jack has managed to sublimate his musical yearnings. He has turned his frustration into one of the most riotously funny routines among all the running gags of his program—the "Professor Le Blanc" situation in which Mel Blanc, as the "Professor," gives Jack violin lessons and forever ends up with his buck-fifty unpaid.

Occasionally, however, Jack will rebel against the fate that has made him the comedian with the longest run in radio among the top funny men. He sets out to prove that he has other talents, only to wind up behind the personal eight-ball. Not long ago there was a party at Jack's \$250,000 Beverly Hills home, where expert pantaloons like Danny Kaye, George Burns and Georgie Jessel were panic-ing the guests, bouncing ad libs around like on many basket balls. After a couple of hours Jack turned restless. "Everybody gets laughs around here but me," he complained. "And in my own house."

Benny went upstairs, then came down again a short time later, made up like the corniest of gypsy fiddlers. He strolled among the guests, playing as schmaltzy an assortment of *tzardas* ever heard outside of the ineffable Rubinoff. Then he passed around a battered hat.

No one bothered to laugh.

Another time, at a Hollywood benefit for Greek War Relief, Benny, instead of his expected comedy turn, performed an elaborate concerto arrangement of "Love in Bloom." The surprised audience burst into applause, but Jack merely bowed to the conductor, bowed to the audience, then sauntered off the stage, his treasured violin under his arm.

The contradictions in the Benny personality show up in many ways. Take, for instance, his reputed inability to get off a fastie unless his scripting crew running interference for him. True, Benny is no rapier wit like Fred Allen or Henry Morgan. "Benny," said Harry Conn, his first writer, "couldn't even ad lib a belch at a Hungarian banquet." Yet Jack, when hurt or cornered, can dish it out as well as take it. Radio circles still chuckle over Jack's famed bout with Fred Allen, who had Benny hanging on the ropes with his ad libs. Jack stood it as long as he could, then said, plaintively, "You wouldn't dare do this to me if I had my writers with me."

On another occasion when Benny, Bob Hope, Fred Allen, Jimmy Durante and Jerry Colona were on a Christmas "Command Performance" for the Army, the photographer lined up the comedians for a series of pictures. Someone had to say something and Hope started it with a crack about his profile. There was a pause and Durante yelled, "Hey, you ushers, stand erect and give this jernt a little class." Neither Benny nor Allen

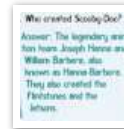


News From ME

Recommended Reading - This piece by Ed Kilgore may bring comfort to some of my friends who think that if Donald Trump wins a second term, he won't get a third because there will...
17 hours ago



Termite Terrace headlines



Screwing the Name Up: HB edition - A while ago I wrote about the spelling

Walt Disney. Today, I'll be talking about Hanna and Barbera. We all know that William Hanna and Joseph Barbera defi...
2 days ago



Fernando Llera Blog Cartoons



Trump is high on gun reform chances despite NRA resistance.

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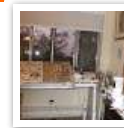


Sunday String Swing - *Continuing the thread from last Sunday's

post, as the following caricature of Django ...
3 days ago



The World of Knight



LAST NIGHT - The sky was a beautiful color last night.

1 week ago

Mark Kausler's CatBlog

Racketty Ann's Mystery Flight! - Here are pages 5 through eight of "Racketty Ann and the Lost World". There's delightful fantasy here as Racketty Ann and Bla Bla take a ride on the back o...
3 weeks ago



Peter Gray's Comics and Art



New blog on my Art work...Original art...prints for sale

petergrayart
ist@gmail.com for prices etc... -
https://petergrayart.blogspot

could think of anything to say. Allen started mugging and Jack jammed his hat on crosswise. "Well, at least I'll *look* funny," he quipped. Then Benny pulled a parking ticket out of his pocket. "I don't mind doing this show for free," he announced, "but who in heck is going to pay for this parking ticket?"

The delighted screams of the audience could have been heard all the way to Anaheim, Azusa and Cucamonga.

His studio audience, watching Jack do a warm-up before a broadcast, see Benny come out with all his own hair, see him tanned, genial and sassy-looking. He looks like a man with a million bucks in his pocket and a phone call from Lana Turner.

"Welcome to the Lucky Strike Program," he says, then flips the ashes off his cigar.

But that incredible Benny poise is ersatz. Jack's "deliberately cultivated suavity," said a friend, "conceals an almost irrational terror of an audience. Nobody watching him realizes that he is trembling inside and that every line he speaks and every piece of business he does requires an effort of will power. Even in the days when he was an unknown vaudevillian, happy to pick up a fast twenty-five dollars with a dog act, Benny had that magnificent poise. Once, Jack tried out a turn at the Academy of Music Theatre in New York—a vaudeville house not particularly noted for its polite treatment of entertainers who weren't too well known. Everything went—from boos to over-ripe tomatoes. As Jack came out on the stage with his violin under his arm and his routine "Hello, folks," opening, the Bronx cheers began. When Jack got to the center of the stage the raspberries were deafening. But instead of going into his act, Benny kept on walking obliviously toward the other wing. Just as he reached the wing he turned and faced the customers. There was an ominous silence. "Goodbye, folks," he said. Then he strolled off the stage and out of the theatre.

To his cast—Dennis Day, Mary Livingstone, Rochester, Phil Harris, Don Wilson and the others—Benny is simply The Boss. He is no whip-cracker, but he demands and insists on perfection. Benny is his own producer. He rarely glances at the control booth for cues. He can get together with the sound man and patiently go over an effect—the clank of the chains in his "vault," for example—as many as 40 times, until his meticulous ear is happy. Jack himself labors over the hilarious rhymed commercials that his Sportsmen Quartet sings—incidentally, one of the freshest new routines to appear doing the last twelve months. All of the painstaking Sunday-to-Sunday writing sessions are master-minded by Benny, though he may not contribute an original line of his own.

The Benny show has almost as many recurring situations and running gags on tap as the objects that fill Fibber McGee's closet. There's the broken-down Maxwell, the violin lessons, the Benny vault with its caretaker who never sees the light of day, the brash telephone operators, Mr. Kitzel and his "peekle-in-the-meedle," the synthetic feud with Fred Allen, the Quartet and a packet of others. On the whole they pay off with laughs. But even so shrewd a judge of material as Benny will occasionally rely too much on strictly local references—things like his "Eastern-Columbia, Broadway and Ninth" routines which at best ring hollowly on the ears of listeners away from Los Angeles.



One of the secrets of their success is that Jack and his wife Mary have a lot of fun when they work together on the program.

home, where he relaxes before he goes to sleep, has been described as "the worst mish-mash since the cyclone hit Leocompton, Kansas." Old scripts, recordings of broadcasts, books, magazines, newspapers and fan letters are piled high on very table and chair. In this cluttered room Benny the perfectionist finds a certain surcease



It's been said of Jack that he lives on a diet of black coffee and fingernails. It's true that he just can't wait to start to work and begin worrying every day. Benny arises at six in the morning, goes out for a couple of rounds of golf, then is ready for work. He is always the first on hand for conferences and rehearsals. Ten minutes before the end of a luncheon break, Benny is back in the studio, hunched up in a corner studying his script. He fumbles nervously with his hair, clamps his teeth on an unlighted pipe, keeps fingering his tie. He is no concerned about the carefully-contrived spontaneity of his show that he keeps the side men in the Phil Harris band away from the final Sunday rehearsals. Jack wants the lines to be as fresh to them as to the audience.

All this is part of the perfection Benny strives for and usually achieves. Yet Jack's own bedroom at

.com/ Will update it like I do on facebook.

5 weeks ago

Supervised By Fred Avery: Tex Avery's Warner Brothers Cartoons



Coming Soon To This Blog...

2 months ago

What About Thad?

Chris Reccardi Interviewed

- I don't want to start a practice of publishing an interview every time someone from Ren & Stimpy dies, but Chris Reccardi (1964-2019) was too important a f...

2 months ago

Likely Looney, Mostly Merrie

That's all, folks! - My posts have gotten thinner over the years. I'm aware of that. I've been hopeful for a long time, that I can remain active with blogging and sharing furth...

6 months ago

Kids, Eh?

#1288: Bird Call - #1288: Bird Call

10 months ago

Cartoons, Model Sheets, & Stuff



Pete Hothead Model Sheets -

Here are a few model sheets from

the first Pete Hothead short. Released in 1952 and directed former Tom & Jerry animator Pete Burness. Ted Parmelee was the...

1 year ago

Dr. Grob's Animation Review

Posljednji valcer u starom mlinu (Last Waltz in the Old Mill) - In this latter-day Zagreb Film studio short two grains change into a prince and princess who waltz around a remote water mill.

1 hour ago

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► **December** (33)

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from the strain. Here he wallows in mystery stories and listens to who-dun-its on the air—rarely to other comedians. "I know they're suffering, just the way I suffer," he once said. "If a gag of theirs doesn't get a laugh, I cringe."

Jack has been known to add \$1000 out of his own pocket to boost a guest fee for violinist Isaac Stern. His four writers who have been with him five years—Sam Perrin, Milt Josefsberg, George Balzer and John Tackaberry—together earn around \$5,000 a week. Jack keeps Artie Auerbach, the "Mr. Kitzel" of his show, on salary all year round, though he may use him but three or four times a season. Recently, when Sara Berner and Bea Benadaret—"Gladys" and "Mabel," the telephone operators—were written out of two programs at the last moment, because the shows were overboard on time, both girls received their full fees just the same. One year Jack spent more than \$100,000 on line charges to put on his broadcasts from remote camps and hospitals. This was Jack's own money, spent without publicity. And the troupe travels, Rochester stops in the same hotel with Jack and the rest of the cast, or Jack moves the troupe to a hotel where Rochester is welcome. Yet Jack, abnormally sensitive as he is to the feelings of others, can sometimes reveal a curious naivete. Preoccupied with the problems of his own program, Benny displays an odd surprise when he is confronted with the fact that there are also other programs on the air. Not long ago he used a couple of 12-year-old radio actors in the roles of "Steve" and "Joey," two neighborhood youngsters who, on the air, play football with Jack, fall for his tall stories and believe he is the superhero he claims to be. After a preliminary script reading, Jack told the boys they could leave, but to be back that afternoon at 2 for another rehearsal. After the boys had scurried out, John Tackaberry, one of Benny's writers, said, "Jack, I don't think that one kid will make it back on time today. He's got a 'conflict'."

"What do you mean?" asked Benny.

"Well," said Tackaberry, "that boy has a show of his own, you know."

"A show of his own?" repeated Jack. "Ohh."


Going into his record consecutive 16th year on NBC, Benny is still shrewdly playing to the listener in his living room at home, still using the narrative show with a framework of situations which he developed. Actually, Benny is the great revolutionist of radio. He was, as Fred Allen said, "the first comedian on the air to realize that you can get big laughs by ridiculing yourself, instead of your stooges."

Just where the once-skinny Waukegan kid who was born Benjamin Kubelsky got his superb sense of timing, is unimportant. But not even the most lukewarm can deny that Benny has it. Jack is able to get more laughs out of a pause, or a simple word like "Well," than other comedians out of a dozen pratfalls. Jack reads a line so that the very inflection makes it funny. He is "a masterly comedian who could wring a laugh out of an executor's report." Benny is still the only radio artist who has a lifetime option on NBC's choice 7 o'clock spot a Sunday night. Niles Trammel, president of the network, gave Jack that option back in 1941, no matter who sponsored him in the future. And for the next three years, at least, Jack will be toting home around one thousand dollars a minute, just for being the very opposite of himself on the air.

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

Labels: [Jack Benny](#)


1 comment:

 **J Lee** 2 April 2017 at 22:00

Very nice profile of the show from the height of its most successful period, without the more repeated anecdotes other profiles would use. Thanks for posting it.

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