



Sunday, 4 June 2017

## Larry Stevens

Lightning never strikes twice in the same place, the old saying goes. And sometimes, it's true. You could ask Larry Stevens.

When singer Kenny Baker left the Jack Benny show just before the end of the 1938-39 radio season, he was replaced with a complete unknown, thanks to the keen ear of Mary Livingstone. The newcomer's name was changed to Dennis Day. He turned out to be a great find. Not only could he sing, but Jack and his writers discovered Day could act and do a few impersonations and dialects that were more than passable for Benny's comedy purposes. When Day left to join the U.S. Navy in April 1944, Mary tried to do it again. Another complete unknown was hired the following November to replace Day.

She should have remembered the lightning.

Larry Stevens certainly could sing. Hedda Hopper revealed in her column of November 4, 1944.

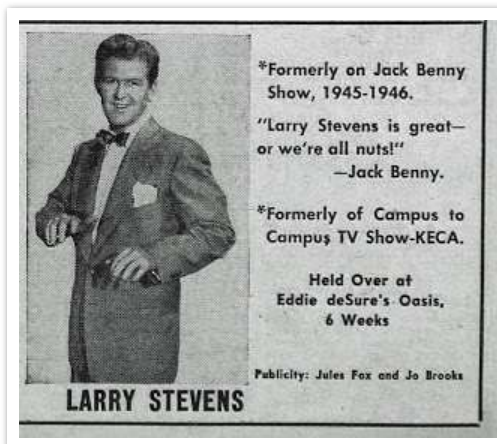
Larry Stevens, who was christened Dave, and who begins singing with Jack Benny, used to assist at the Turnabout Theater, helping with puppets and singing the Snake Song with Mr. Noah. He was applauded nightly. Then at Cocoanut Grove, when a spot-light was turned on him, he got up, sang it—and four more songs. Then Freddie Martin remarked, "Who knows? Perhaps tonight a star is born." It was that night one of Benny's spies heard him.

Stevens actually hadn't appeared on the Benny show when the column was published. In fact, Hopper broke the news about the hiring in her newspaper space on October 25th. Then she reported on November 17th that Stevens had signed 12-record contract with Victor. It seemed that he was on his way.

There was only one problem. Stevens' job description on the Benny show required more than singing. He had to act. And it soon became evident to Benny's people, ad agency or NBC that Stevens either couldn't, or they didn't think he could. Within a month, one show had Dennis sending a letter to Larry, but it was Mary Livingstone who read it, not Stevens. A sketch on one broadcast had Stevens give a total of one short sentence. And on a show toward the end of Stevens' tenure, he sang a song without any introduction and then disappeared. Someone wasn't happy with him. *Variety* reported on April 11, 1945: "High on the scuttlebutt list is replacement of Larry Stevens on the Jack Benny show by Don Reid, who has been thrashing with Jack Kirkwood." Benny was quoted in another publication on June 10th that Stevens was staying and the only person who could replace him was Dennis Day. And that's what eventually happened.

Perhaps the situation might have worked out better if the writers had done the same thing as the earlier writers when Day joined the show—used a buffer character to take most of the on-air load and help him get settled in. Actually, Verna Felton playing Stevens' mother the exact way she played Dennis' mother could have been pretty funny. Instead, Stevens was left to mouth a few golly-gosh-Mr.-Benny type lines, sing for two minutes, and do little else.

Day returned to the show on March 17, 1946. The previous week on the air, Jack wished Stevens well on his



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future endeavours. One radio columnist back East speculated Stevens would be easily picked up by another show because he was as good as anyone else out there. It never happened. Radio didn't want Larry Stevens. (He tested at 20th Century Fox, though). So he packed his bags and went on a theatre stage tour, the Benny cachet fresh in the audience's mind. But the tour ran out, as all tours do.

However, before we get to more of Stevens' post-Benny career, let's pass along the one feature article we found about him while he was still on Jack's show. It was published in *Radio Life*, the fine Los Angeles radio magazine, on January 7, 1945. Those of you who are up on your Benny know how he was "discovered" according to the radio show. That's outlined in this story. Larry comes across as a sincere young man in this piece; his feelings seem very similar to Dennis Day's in interviews in 1939 after Jack and Mary plucked him out of a New York radio programme.

## It Could Happen to Him!

By Betty Mills

### *Young Larry Stevens Never Had A Lesson in His Life, Thinks he Owes Singing Break to Luck*

THEY SAY that the story of Cinderella only happened in a fairy tale—and that was a very long time ago. They say that Hollywood is no land of magic—that's another fairy tale, too, dreamed up by press agents. But somebody forgot to account for the story (all true too!) of young Larry Stevens, Jack Benny's new singing discovery.

Larry is the twenty-one-year-old, handsome six footer who was introduced to the coast-to-coast Jack Benny audience early in November. His script introduction was as Aladdin-like as his real introduction to the ether waves. Guesting that night on the Lucky Strike show was Dunninger, the "master mentalist". Written into the script as reading Benny's mind and assuming Jack was looking for a singer to replace Dennis Day, now in the United States Navy, Dunninger advised him to hasten to a filling station at the corner of Third and La Cienega where he would find the answer to his prayers. Jack, accordingly, found singer Stevens as the station's attendant, and listening to him sing while he worked, offered him the job. Poor Jack had been 'auditioning' everybody on the program, even John Charles Thomas and Frank Sinatra, only to find they were already working. Funny as this may seem, it's even funnier to realize that Larry's introduction in the script was almost based on truth. It nearly happened that way.

"Golly, it's so wonderful, I have to pinch myself to see if I'm awake," enthused Larry. "I just can't imagine this happening to me—why, I'm just like anybody else."

#### Is Different

Looking at Larry over a small table in one of NBC's deserted script rooms, *Radio Life* decided that in spite of what *he* says, he *isn't* like everybody else. He's different because of what he calls his "gift"—his high baritone voice. He's different because he is *that* success story that happens to one out of a million people.

On February 23, 1923, Larry was born in San Francisco. When he was a one-year-old, his family moved to Los Angeles, where they have lived ever since. Larry, his brother, mother and father, used to form their own quartet and sing for pleasure. Although Larry never had any music lessons, his mother, who once sang professionally, encouraged him to develop his voice.

He lived a very normal childhood, went to Fairfax High in Los Angeles, where he was more interested in athletics than singing, and appeared in all of the school's extravaganzas. From high school he went to work for the Turnabout Theater, opening with it in 1941 as a puppeteer. Although he longed for a singing career, he was contented to wait and gain experience through singing with the Turnabout's chorus. This lasted for a year.

Then came the managership of a filling station—yes, the same one at Third and La Cienega.

This lasted until he was called into the Army Air Forces in 1943. He was discharged seven months later when his father died, and he became the sole support of his family.

#### Happened at Grove

Larry went to work in a defense plant—and then it happened! One night he and a party of friends went to the Cocoanut Grove where maestro Freddy Martin conducted a weekly bond drive, "Melodies for Uncle Sam," via the Blue network. If one bought a bond he was entitled to perform in any way he wanted. Larry sang—and a star was born. The audience wouldn't let him sit down, and he sang encore after encore. Agent Lou Irwin asked him if he would like to meet Mary Livingstone, who was in charge of finding a new singer for the Benny show. Mary liked Larry and wanted Jack, who had just returned from overseas, to hear him. He was signed and now fills the singing spot.

"Mary and Jack are the most wonderful people in the world. I owe everything to them," he smiled. "I have always listened to their program and finding myself a part of it is almost unbelievable."

Asked if he were scared on his opening night, he laughed and said "Sure," but guessed everything went well. With the exception of the fact that he is a high baritone instead of a tenor, he fills the traditional role of Benny singers. He is red-headed, has blue eyes, and weighs 165 pounds. He prefers sport clothes and wishes he could always wear the old pair of blue jeans he has had for years.

He likes to relax on the dance floor or over a gin rummy game. He doesn't smoke or drink and is a regular member of the Hollywood Presbyterian Church where he used to sing in the choir. Larry likes to read although he has no favorite authors, and is fond of all types of music.



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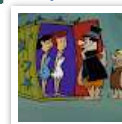
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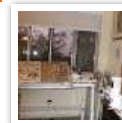
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New blog on my Art work...Original art...prints for sale petergrayart

ist@gmail.com for prices etc... -  
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Foremost in his thoughts is the security of his family. His mother, his brother, who attends UCLA, and he live in a house in Beverly Hills. His ultimate ambitions are to own a convertible Cadillac and a motor boat—and maybe someday to act.

But he is so thrilled over his present good fortune that he plans never to worry, but let fate have its way. Bing Crosby is his idol, although he thinks Sinatra is good too. He thinks it's "swell" that he can meet the people that he's heard about all his life.

"Hey, let's go have a hot dog. I love hot dogs, eat 'em every day. You do like them, don't you?" he questioned, jumping up. "Yeah, I love 'em with everything and a great big generous helping of onions. See, I'm no different from anybody else!"

Eventually, Stevens ended up back in radio. He moved to Chicago for a 15-minute show on WBBM weeknights at 10:30 p.m. starting in February 1948. He was gone in two months. Back to Los Angeles he trekked, appearing in Billy Gray's Band Box. This was the time television was taking off and looking for talent. In September 1949 he landed on a 15-minute show called "Campus to Campus" on ABC that ran just prior to weekly college football games. That gig was gone by November. He began working at the Oasis, a black nightclub, with Scatman Crothers emceeing. *Billboard* proclaimed "he's as out of place as a ballet dancer at a hoedown."

Stevens was hired to host a 15-minute morning TV show on Tuesdays and Thursdays on KNXT in December 1952. The station moved him in January to a half-hour on late Sunday afternoons, a timeslot he held for three weeks before the show went off the air. Ruefully noted *Variety* in an edition the following November: "singer Larry Stevens is running an employment agency in Beverly Hills. That's show business." He didn't appear on TV again until 1956 when he landed a regular job on Hal Davis' variety show on KHJ, though it's unclear how long that lasted.

Late in life, Stevens appeared at radio nostalgia shows and at least a pair of interviews are circulating on-line. He even did a bit of performing, his vocal range much lower than it was on the Benny show. He died of cancer on April 5, 2000.

"It's like a Horatio Alger dream," Stevens once told the *New York Post* about his time with Jack Benny. That description doesn't quite fit his career afterward; he turned out to be a journeyman entertainer. Still, he wanted to perform and got the chance to do it in front of appreciative, paying crowds for a number of years. And appeared regularly on a Number One radio show. It's more than others who had the same dream could say.

Posted by [Yowp](#) at [06:58](#)

Labels: [Jack Benny](#)

## 2 comments:

 [J Lee](#) 4 June 2017 at 07:16

I suppose part of the problem may have also been that Day came in replacing a singer who had obviously left thinking bigger things were ahead in Hollywood, while Dennis left in service of the U.S. Navy in World War II. He was coming back so there may have been a certainly reluctance to do all that much with someone who was a short-term member of the ensemble (though Stevens' extended number of future jobs that lasted only a little while does seem to show an inability to connect with the audience).

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 [Cris43130](#) 4 June 2017 at 08:14

J Lee hit the nail directly on the head. Larry Stevens was never meant to be permanent so why invest in him like he would be?

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

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