



Sunday, 9 July 2017

## Johnny Green Looks Back

Jack Benny employed a number of bandleaders during his radio days, starting with George Olsen in 1932 and ending with Bob Crosby in 1955 (though Mahlon Merrick was handling both the orchestra and much of the comedy at the end). There was one who stood out from the rest of them, mainly because he's better known as a composer than a bandmaster.

He's Johnny Green.

At the end of the 1934-35 radio season, Benny had decided to move his show to Los Angeles because he wanted to make money in films. Orchestra leader Don Bestor wanted to stay in the east, so 27-year-old Green was brought in to replace him to start the 1935-36 season. By then, Green had already composed hit tunes such as "Out of Nowhere," "Coquette" and "Body and Soul." He was a recording artist who had also hosted his own weekly CBS show, *The Modern Manner* (with Bernard Hermann as his assistant). Green lasted one season. He moved on to Fred Astaire's programme for Packard. Benny benefitted, too. Green's replacement was Phil Harris, who turned out to be a wonderful comedy foil, and had a pretty hot aggregation.



What did Green think of his experience on the Benny radio show? Well, off the air they must have gotten along fairly well. Green invited Jack to be his guest at the opening of the Los Angeles Philharmonic's Promenade series in 1960. Benny didn't play, but the two of them got together for a series of benefit concerts in 1962. But on the air? It's a little difficult to tell from this story from the *Boston Globe* of December 9, 1979. Later in life, Green apparently insisted on being referred to as the more dignified "John" Green. The impression I get from this story is Green didn't wish to have been thought of as some kind of radio stooge, though he did appear on Benny's 40th Birthday TV show in 1958 (not stooging; he showed off his composition especially written for the programme). The reference to Benny is brief; the article deals with career in general.

Green outlived Benny. He died in Beverly Hills on May 15, 1989, age 80.

### A week and lifetime with Johnny Green

By Richard Buell

*Globe Correspondent*

"I am a compulsive talker. It always amuses me when they say, 'Mr. Green will now make a few brief remarks.' I show them. I really do.

When John (or Johnny) Green (Class of 1928) revisited Harvard recently as part of the "Learning from Performers" program, talk he certainly did, but he also conducted an orchestra (a film score by Erik Satie), played the piano (pieces by his friend Gershwin), and sang (some songs of his own, including "Body and Soul"). He also lectured on copyright law. And in a music colloquium, he described the agonies of learning synthesizer techniques when in his mid-60s.

Throughout a busy week in Cambridge, it was possible to get a strong impression of one of the more vivid musical careers of our day. Names—some big and glittering ones—abounded. Not only was there a sense of a full, ambitious life having been lived but of its simultaneously being turned into anecdote. One wanted an index.

John Green has been the practical musician par excellence. "I could orchestrate the telephone book and make you enjoy it," he remarked to some students at Paine Hall. "I never have any surprises when I hear anything of mine being played for the first time. Otherwise, I wouldn't be employed."

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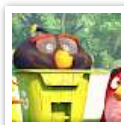


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Early in his conducting career—which has taken him to the Brooklyn Paramount, CBS, the St. Regis Roof, Symphony Hall, and MGM—he acquired the art of dealing with emergencies. He learned that you can have terrible accidents with a baton that's too long, especially if there are any loose toupees in the vicinity. As a music director at Metro, he was responsible for synchronizing the efforts of studio musicians on one part of the lot with those of Esther Williams and her cohorts in an Olympic swimming pool several blocks away. This conductor knows how to use—all at once—baton, metronome, stop watch, headset and “click tape,” and a waiting limousine.

(Cut to Harvard and Lower Common Room of Adams House. Bald, dapper, bespectacled composer at piano confides to throng of students.)

“This won't be one of those and-then-I-wrote evenings, I promise.

“First maybe I should try to answer the question, ‘Mr. Green, how did you get this way?’ Well, I couldn't help it.”



His New York City childhood (born 1908) was a rather middle European one. As both parents were always at the piano, the Beethoven and Shumann four-hand transcriptions were in his ears at an early age. It was also a trilingual household: young Johnny never knew whether afternoon tea would be served in French, German, or English.

Though father intended him for Wall Street, of course there were music lessons. He heard his first symphony concert at 4, was later mesmerized by Gilbert and Sullivan's “Gondoliers,” and at 12 made the acquaintance of Fred Astaire (then 22). He became what show biz people used to call an RT or rehearsal test.

Gertrude Lawrence took a shine to him. He wrote a song for her. She promised to have it included in her hit, “Charolett's Revue.”

Green to Harvard audience: “Will you listen to this—‘Now that you're gone, I'm lonely’—awful! This did happen sort of. The young composer got to hear his piece used in the theater as exit music.

At Harvard in the '20s, the fact that he could introduce his friends, Gertrude Lawrence and Beatrice Lille [sic] to come and entertain the undergraduates didn't cut much ice: Hasty Pudding wanted no

part of him. But there was plentiful satisfaction for this economic major when his song “Coquette” became an international hit in his senior year.

The present day Johnny Green has a charming synonym for flop: “Catastrophric [sic] manhole cover.” He started on the first of several such soon after his sixth post-graduation month working on Wall Street, the company was excellent, however. Johnny Mercer, Gertrude Lawrence, and Jack Buchanan, whom Americans perhaps best know from the movie “The Bandwagon.”

As Green remembers him, Buchanan “was 9 feet tall and he couldn't sing and he couldn't dance. But when he opened his mouth, you belonged to him. He knew one step, but he could convince you that you were looking at Fred Astaire.” Buchanan took him to London, and Green wrote for him what was definitely not a manhole cover—“Mister Whittington.”

Back in New York, the young musician did various chores for CBS, then also very young. This could be very nice when it involved working with symphony orchestras and with Bunny Berrigan [sic], the jazz trumpeter, less so when he was employed as a dialectician on the Jack Benny Show for Jell-O.

“All the accents that Sam Hearn, who played Schlepperman, didn't do, I did.”

In retrospect, the later '30s looked like a marking-time episode to the present-day musician. There was the dance band that opened up the St. Regis roof and there were the records for Brunswick with Fred Astaire, records now universally esteemed. Then once more, a show whose scenery went straight from the Colonial to the warehouse. Those damned manhole covers.

If it had not happened that one evening as Green was leading a pit orchestra, Judy Garland walked in, and so did MGM producer Arthur Freed, and so did Louis B. Mayer ...

(Cut to much later—Hollywood, USA, 1955) John Green is wearing two very important hats: Director of music at MGM and executive in charge of music for Loew's, Inc. His desk is one that is crossed by many important memos, purchases, and properties. Today it seems the “fate” theme is sounding, inaudible to all ears but Johnny Green's, as the novel “Raintree County” (a recent purchase) comes to his attention. The composer foresees in it a psychological study with great musical possibilities. Metro exec Dory Schary discerns a neo-“Gone With the Wind: in the offing. It will cost MGM \$11 million, production will be held up because of star Montgomery Clift's serious auto accident.

A long, lush, end-of-an-era score does get written for it, though in the composer's words, the film proves to be “the bomb of all time.” This is to be the final nail in Dory Schary's coffin. In a few years, the resplendence of MGM Studio orchestra itself will be decreed out of existence. The thriving times are the stuff of legends and—like it or not—part of every American's pop-cultural heritage. What other corporate entity could have had on its payroll Red Skelton and Aldous Huxley? One way to describe Green's position in all this would be to say that he was Kapellmeister to the dream factory. Whenever possible, he displayed MGM's musical resources to advantage. His scoring of the “American in Paris” ballet is, to many ears, greatly superior to Gershwin's own.



about the spelling Walt Disney. Today, I'll be talking about

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

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#### 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

A week at Harvard reminiscing and being lionized seems a very short time when you think of the stories Johnny Green didn't tell. His expertise on movie music from the period before talkies—the era of pit orchestras in the big city “deluxe” houses, for instance. Rehearsing an ensemble of Harvard-Radcliffe musicians to accompany the Rene Clair film “On Tr'acts,” he demonstrated that Erik Satie wasn't remotely aware of the professional standards of the period—no cues, no timing in the score. And his memories of the Arthur Fiedler of 50 years ago for another example.

“Back then Arthur was what they call a ‘floater,’ moving from one section of the orchestra to another and, believe me, he was a celeste player. From Arthur, that instrument could actually sound nice a lot of the time, it's just a small, ugly anvil and Arthur's way of saying hello was, ‘Look here, John.’ I remember him asking if I'd conduct ‘Raintree Country.’ (for the Pops) It's ‘County,’ I told him. He said, ‘Whatever it is, how long is it?’ ‘Eight minutes.’ ‘Good, it's short and you won't have to learn ‘Fair Harvard, will you? Then goodbye.’ And he hung up.”



Posted by [Yowp](#) at [07:53](#)

Labels: [Jack Benny](#)

## 1 comment:

 [rnigma](#) 9 July 2017 at 18:03

Johnny Green scored the Herbert Marshall radio adventure “The Man Called X” during its CBS run. (Felix Mills scored the early Blue/ABC episodes and the later NBC run.) Green's scores were a high point of that show.

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[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

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6 months ago

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[#1288: Bird Call](#) - #1288: Bird Call

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