



Sunday, 16 July 2017

The Co-Comedians

How big of a television draw was Ben Blue in 1968? Not a huge one, I'd suspect. But that didn't stop Jack Benny from featuring him on one of his NBC specials that year.

Blue and Benny had worked together on the 1937 film "Artists and Models Abroad." Blue's name appeared in advertising for the movie—in much smaller letters than Benny's. By the 1950s, he was running a nightclub in Santa Monica but still dabbled occasionally in show business. In 1964, Blue was indicted on charges of personal income tax evasion, and was accused of filing false returns for his business.

At the start of 1968, Blue was appearing in the movie "Where Were You When the Lights Went Out?" with his name in much smaller letters on the advertising than Doris Day and Robert Morse. He was also appearing on the Vegas strip under the management of Lou Irwin. Around that time, Benny tabbed Blue to be on one of his specials.

It aired on March 20, 1968. One TV listing of the day describes it this way:

Ben Blue will vie with Lucille Ball in the Jack Benny Special Wednesday night. The show depicts a carnival with all its odd characters played by a host of stars. Benny himself plays everything from con man to owner of the carnival.

Lucy and Jack had been neighbours in Beverly Hills for a number of years and he appeared on "The Lucy Show," which had become dependent on huge guest names to prop up its ratings. One of Jack's ex-writers, Milt Josefsberg, went to work for Lucy. Their chemistry was already proven.

Also picked for the special was *Tonight* host Johnny Carson, who always acknowledged the extremely large influence Benny played in his developing his style.

Jack found nice things to say about the three co-stars in this story in the *Geneva Times* of March 16, 1968. The paper even featured Lucy and Blue on the front page of its weekend magazine supplement (but, oddly, not Jack). I suspect this story is straight from a production company release. Jack is pretty diplomatic about Miss Ball. She was apparently a tyrant at rehearsals.



Jack Benny Special On Wednesday

HOLLYWOOD — Think about Jack Benny, and what comes to mind — a penny-pinching comedian, perennially claiming to be 39, and a squeaky violin.

Lucille Ball, Johnny Carson, and Ben Blue also conjure up instant public images. But how does Jack Benny think of them? Benny expressed his views of them in connection with their forthcoming appearance as guest stars on "The Jack Benny Special," to be colorcast over the NBC Television Network Wednesday, March 20.

"Lucy and I have been friends for many years," said Benny. "I consider her one of the real great pros that we have in show business. There isn't anything she doesn't know about all the different branches of the business. She's a terrific comedienne who instinctively knows what to do and

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what not to about comedy. She knows equally as much about production and she'd be a great director."

Benny enjoys alternating shows with her. "She's a perfectionist and meticulous and I try to be the same," he said. "When she asks me to be on her show I don't even ask what the story is about or to see the script. I know it'll be good and I am positive that I will never be embarrassed. I think she feels the same way about me."

In short, Benny admires Lucy. "Lucy is the type of person I have great admiration for because I love show business and to be associated with the giants in the business," he said. "She certainly is a giant and loves to work hard. She can do really anything."

Benny is impressed with Johnny Carson. "I'm a great fan of Johnny's," he said. "Not only do feel he's a fine entertainer but I always notice a terrific improvement each year, which means he absorbs a lot, learns a lot and that he must study quite a bit to hold down the kind of job he has." Continued Benny: "He's not only a fine comedian but a great straight man. You have to be both, particularly in his kind of work. That's why everyone loves Johnny Carson as Johnny Carson." Benny considers Ben Blue a great comedian but an enigma. "I always felt that he was one of our great comedians," said Benny. "But something, which I can't figure out, has kept him from being one of our greatest visual comedians and pantomimists. He's a fine artist and actually conceded to be among other entertainers, a real funny man—a comedian in every sense of the word. Sid (Fields) is particularly good for Ben and is a great straight man."

Benny has managed to enjoy the best of two worlds—show business and music. Said he of the TV special, "I'm tremendously pleased with it." He is also pleased with his benefit concerts, realizing that he is doing more for music than he might have done had he followed strictly a musical career. "I don't do enough concerts to suit me," he said. "I like them better than anything. I practice a lot, anywhere from a half hour to three hours a day. I also listen to music quite a bit, particularly since I've been giving concerts. I found myself a lover of good music. I never realized I liked good music that much."

He feels personally rewarded in a special way. Said he: "The reason I like appearing with a symphony orchestra is that it's the most dignified background a comedian could be given. It is unusual and it doesn't fit anyone else, except maybe Danny Kaye."

Variety gave the special a lukewarm review. It praised Lucy, called the writing "clichéd," gave Jack a passing grade solely because was Jack Benny, but was sour about the walk-on appearances of George Burns, Bob Hope, Danny Thomas and Don Drysdale (among others). As it was, television would soon be moving away from variety shows, but Jack remained a star until the end. So did Lucy and Johnny. Ben Blue wasn't as lucky.

Posted by [Yowp](#) at [07:38](#)

Labels: [Jack Benny](#)

2 comments:



Mark Kausler 16 July 2017 at 21:42

Ben Blue's greatest stuff was in Hal Roach's Taxi Boys comedies of the early 1930s. Blue was teamed with Billy Gilbert as two incredibly brainless taxi drivers. Ben Blue's physical comedy was unique. He could wrap his arms around himself in the oddest ways, it was nearly impossible for him to peel a banana, he found creative ways to tear the banana apart, anything but peel it normally. Ben's wacky runs, and his elaborate way of running into a shot and skidding to a stop on his butt was as close to a cartoon style of movement as a human could get. Sometimes they would put the camera in overdrive during Ben's skidding actions to slow them down. The Taxi Boys series is an unsung classic, due in no small part to Ben Blue's physical comedy.

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J Lee 18 July 2017 at 12:13

Jack also featured Blue in a filmed episode from the 1959-60 season (a year when Jack didn't do many filmed episodes, in the season after Mary Livingston's retirement).

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#1288: Bird Call - #1288: Bird Call

10 months ago



Cartoons, Model Sheets, & Stuff



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