



Sunday, 6 August 2017

Busy Benny

When Jack Benny started his radio variety show in May 1932, he was on the air not once, but twice a week. It wasn't until Chevrolet took over sponsorship in March the following year (after a respite of several weeks caused by being fired by Canada Day) that he hit the airwaves once a week. That's how things stayed when his radio show ended in 1955.

When Jack added television to the mix in fall 1950, he originally appeared only monthly. Part of it was because he had to fly to New York City to do TV; a trans-continental cable didn't exist at the time. Another reason he gave at the time was concern about over-exposure; once a week on radio was one thing, but once a week on television might, he thought, lead to audience burn-out.

Eventually, the show appeared every other week (though Benny also simultaneously hosted a number of episodes of *Shower of Stars* for several seasons). Finally, in the 1960-61 season, he consented to broadcast over CBS-TV every week.

Why the change? Jack sort of explained it in this feature story which appeared in the *Albany Times-Union* edition of Christmas Day 1960. It ends with a capsule biography. Whether Benny was actually interviewed by the paper or whether this story was put together from a network/producer/sponsor PR sheet is unclear.

HE'S NO LOAFER

Jack Benny Goes for Broke

By ED MISURELL

At an age where many men are thinking of retiring on their Social Security and savings and doing a bit of hard-earned loafing, millionaire Jack Benny has doubled his work load. The 66-year-old comedian has stepped up his video schedule, for the first time in 11 seasons on television, to weekly appearances. His decision to do a show every Sunday, night on CBS-TV has puzzled show business veterans. What made him take on this rigorous routine that has toppled such younger and famed funny-men as Jackie Gleason, Milton Berle, Red Buttons and George Goble.

Now well into his present season, Benny offered a number of reasons for jumping in where others have drowned in a flood of poor ratings. "The idea came at the end of last season," he explained during a recent visit to New York. "My wife, Mary, and I were discussing whether I should continue doing shows on a bi-weekly basis as I had been doing or do just so many specials a year.

LESS TENSION

"Mary pointed out that I had appeared in specials alone for a number of seasons and said that I would hate to go back to working under the pressure that such shows bring about — further agreed that the bi-weekly programs had taken on the aspects of small specials, with pressures still present to a certain degree." Straightening an ascot scarf tucked into the smoking jacket he was wearing, Benny continued, "Talking over the possibilities of doing a weekly show, I came to the concession that the problems which might arise could be solved quickly with little or no tension involved. And after reaching that conclusion, I went to my writers and asked them how they felt about the idea.



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"They were all for it even though it would mean more work and no more money. You see, they are paid on a yearly basis, no matter how many shows we do a season. They told me they had been talking about the coming season and had intended asking me whether I would consent to stepping up the schedule.

"Well," he went on, "since we did we have learned that with the weekly, half-hour format, you get into a groove that keeps you keyed up. Viewers know you're on each week and form the habit of looking forward to seeing you. Each show you do does not have to be a great one. If you miss now and then, it is not a tragedy. The viewer who watches you every week seems to understand this. If it were a special and it didn't come, off. he'd be ready to clobber you for letting him down."

WORKS ON 'IMAGE'

If he were a standup comedian doing monologues and gags on a weekly program, Benny pointed out, the job would be herculean. But since most of his humor springs from the legendary image the public has of him — a tightwad, coward and a poseur who thinks he is, but isn't, a great violinist and lover — many situations can be developed that play up these traits without undue strain on Jack or his writers.

Another important fact in reducing pressure is the long association Benny has had with his professional "family." Announcer and performer Don Wilson has been with him 27 years, his "valet," Rochester Anderson joined him back in 1937. Writers Sam Perrin and George Balzer and Hal Goldman and Al Gordon have been members of the organization for 18 or 12 years respectively.

"It's a great organization," said Benny. "We work hard but we have a great amount of fun, too. We each have respect for one another's judgment and that goes a long way toward eliminating any tension that might arise."

This video season, Benny said, marked his fiftieth year in show business. Born in Chicago in February, 1894, he grew up in nearby Waukegan, where his father ran a small clothing store. As a child, he began taking violin lessons and soon became quite an expert player. During high school he doubled between the Barrison pit and the school band. At 16, he teamed up with Cora Salisbury, the Barrison pianist, as a vaudeville duo. When she left the act, he joined talents with Lyman Woods in tours of the circuits.

HOW CAREER BEGAN

When World War I came along, Benny went into the Navy and soon found himself in the Great Lakes Revue, a unit which raised relief funds. One night during a performance, the lights failed. To keep the crowd from getting restless, Jack began to swap chatter with pianist Zez Confrey. The audience roared with laughter and Benny's career as a comedian began.

After the war he climbed to stardom in vaudeville and musical comedy. During the Los Angeles engagement of a Shubert musical, Jack met Mary Livingston and they were married in 1927 on St. Valentine's Day, his birthday.

Jack broke into the electronic medium of radio back in 1932 when he appeared on an Ed Sullivan show with the words: "Hello, folks. This is Jack Benny. There will be a slight pause for everyone to say 'Who cares?'"

Apparently, enough people (and sponsors) cared, for Jack was launched on a long career which made him a familiar voice to millions of listeners and, beginning in 1950, a familiar figure to millions of viewers.

Jack left CBS in 1964 after becoming angry with the network changing its lead-in to his show from *Red Skelton* to *Petticoat Junction*. As it was, network president Jim Aubrey didn't want him any more anyway. Benny's weekly visits into homes lasted one more season on NBC before he was dropped from the schedule. No matter. He merely went back to occasional shows and even had a script and shooting schedule ready for another special when he died in December 1974. Jack still had drawing power until he could, physically, draw no more.



Posted by [Yowp](#) at [07:04](#)

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1 comment:



J Lee 6 August 2017 at 07:35

Jack's show did bump back up into the Top 10 for the 1960-61 season, with the most of the added episodes being filmed instead of live (with Mary having retired after the 1958-59 season, Jack did very few filmed episodes in 1959-60, but was able to finally do the filmed ones in a three-camera format before a live studio audience at Desilu, instead of single camera/no audience to work around Mary's mike fright).

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