



Sunday, 7 January 2018

Benny and the Boy

When was the first time you saw/heard Jack Benny?

It's a question Benny fans occasionally ask each other for fun. As a boy, I must have been aware of Benny on TV. I knew all his stock gestures. When I saw him on *Laugh-In*, I recognised him (and wondered what he was ever doing on a show like that). But my main experience with him through childhood was on rebroadcasts of his old radio shows. And I don't think my experience is that unusual.



The son of Herald Tribune Syndicate radio/TV writer John Crosby was introduced as a boy to Benny via the radio, except in his case, Benny was still doing shows for the CBS network. Crosby wrote about it in his column. He also touched on something that's bothered me about the Benny TV show—the laugh track.

Jack was vaudeville trained, meaning he waited for the laughs or applause to die down before going onto his next line. The same thing when he started in radio. You milk a laugh, you don't step on one. But when his radio shows started being recorded for broadcast and cut down to 29 minutes and 20 seconds, the sound editors didn't worry about such niceties. Solely to fit the broadcast in the allotted half hour, you can hear Jack reading his script while the studio audience laughs. It just sounds wrong to my ear. And when TV came along, it was even worse. Not only is Jack talking over the phoney laughs, they're the same laughs show after show after show. And I'm pretty sure you heard them on other shows, too. It's really obvious in the "mannequin" show that Crosby talks about.

The column appeared in the *Herald Tribune* on March 9, 1955.

Jack Benny Passes Test of Small Boy Audience

By JOHN CROSBY

The other night my son discovered Jack Benny. Of course, Benny has been around 40 years or so, but Michael just discovered him fast other night, largely because he was up a lot later than he should have been. And he practically fell out of his chair laughing at him.

That is a great test of a comedian to get a seven-year-old child to laugh at you. I remember when I was Michael's age the first comedian I ever saw—or first performer of any kind—was Fred Stone. And, years later, I recall Stone saying that he always tried to locate a child in the audience and bounced all the laughs off him. If you got the kids laughing, Stone used to say, you had the audience in the palm of your hand.

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As a matter of fact, there are two big tests of a comedian. One is the children, The other is whether he translates to foreign soil. Benny passes both of them very well. In England, for example, they write about Benny's art in the hushed, cathedral prose that we reserve over here for Sir Lawrence Olivier. It makes mighty fine reading, but an American reading it is likely to wonder if they're talking about the same old Jack Benny they've been listening to over here Sunday nights these many years.

To get back to Sunday night, I didn't have the heart to tell Michael that this wasn't the best of the Jack Benny shows. It was on film, and time and again this winter Benny has demonstrated that while film may enhance an actor, it doesn't enhance a comedian. At least, not Benny.

Benny has done some perfectly wonderful live shows this year, especially one with, Giselle Mackenzie. But all

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the filmed shows have come out pretty flat. There was one earlier, this year with Mary Livingston in which Benny wound up as a mannikin in a department store window. It should have been hilarious. It wasn't. The one last Sunday in which Benny escorts his Beverly Hills Beaver Patrol through a carnival was written with the usual loving care by Benny's crack writing crew of Sam Perrin, Milt Josefburg [sic], George Balzer and John Tackaberry.

• • •

And it should have been a howl, too. But it came out flat. Benny's famed timing seems to elude the film cameramen. He is a master at handling audiences—and there isn't any audience.

The canned laughter was even more painful than usual. Still, I never met an actor yet who doesn't yearn for film.

"You can cut all the mistakes," they will tell you if you give them a chance. Well, that's true enough, but they also contrive to cut all the enjoyment, all the spontaneity and much of the laughter. After all, the Benny movie career was pretty close to a disaster, and there's no reason to suppose that he's going to be any better on TV films than on movie films for theater.

Still, Michael thought it was great, if that's any comfort. One of the great things these days is watching a child get his first experience of the magic of the theater on television. God knows there isn't much of the real thing, but there are moments like Mr. Benny or "Disneyland." Watching a child watch "Disneyland" is an experience all of its own.

• • •

These are the childhood memories they are going to hark back to years later as I hark back to Fred Stone.

"Remember way back when we first saw Donald Duck." Long after they forget "Space Cadet" they'll remember the Disney animals with the peculiar affection that we of the older generation reserve for Betty Bronson to the first "Peter Pan" of my experience.

Posted by [Yowp](#) at [07:00](#)

Labels: [Jack Benny](#), [John Crosby](#)

2 comments:



J Lee 7 January 2018 at 09:18

Unlike Crosby, I like the single-camera shows that feature the regular cast and are filled with enough gags so you don't have any 'quiet time' (The 'Railroad Station Show' being my personal favorite here). But there were definitely some single camera shows that drag, because not enough is happening, but the scene is played to wait for home viewers' laughs, so the timing is off. Jack's filmed shows starting in late 1959 that were shot three-camera at the Desilu Playhouse before a live audience provide more energy though the chore of doing a weekly TV show did start to take its toll on the vibrancy even performed before real people by the final couple of years.

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Errol 9 January 2018 at 15:28

My first experience with Jack Benny was "The Jack Benny Program", followed by appearances on Carson and various television specials, his radio shows, then finally his movies "George Washington Slept Here" and "The Horn Blows at Midnight". I've always really appreciated Jack's radio shows. We constantly hear of great ensemble casts..well, Benny's gang was the best.

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Yowp



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