



Sunday, 18 March 2018

Jack and George



George Burns and Jack Benny were practically lifetime friends. The two first crossed paths in vaudeville in the early 1920s. In 1974, Jack gave his final wire service interview before his death with George Burns chiming in. Burns replaced Benny in the film *The Sunshine Boys* when Jack died.

New York gossip columnist Cindy Adams talked to the pair about each other in a feature story published in the May 1963 edition of the *TV Radio Mirror*. Despite the click-bait style sub-headline, there's no trash talking. Just funny stories and a demonstration of how close the two were.

Jack Benny & George Burns

what they say to each other's face!

what they say behind each other's back!

I first met George Burns a couple of years ago, when he was starring at Harrah's Club, one of the classier saloons and gambling emporiums in Lake Tahoe, Nevada. Being that Burns and Allen had been a team since the Stone Age, and being that this marked Burns' debut as a solo performer without Allen, this naturally was what the man was expected to talk about, breathe about and think about. Therefore, I naturally expected this would be Topic A in conversation.

"George," I said, "the songs and jokes you do all by yourself are wonderful. The audience adored . . ."

"Yeah," said George. "Jack was here for the opening, you know. Mary, too."

"Jack?"

"Jack Benny."

"Well, I'm sure he loved the act because it's so terrific that . . ."

"Yeah," said George. "Jack helped with the act, you know. Let's face it, he's reasonably successful, so sometimes I listen to him."

During this, George, a sun-worshipper, was cutting a dashing figure at poolside with a peaked cap on his head and a soggy stogie in his mouth. Neither ever got removed. And never once did the cigar impede the talk. George Burns can squat for twelve years at a stretch and never run out of anecdotes. The only thing he runs out of are characters. All his stories center around Jack Benny.

It seems that, 'way before Mary entered the picture, Jack knew Gracie. Back some four decades ago (George: "It's exactly 38 years." Jack: "It's exactly 40 years."), Jack dated a girl whose assets included a roommate named Gracie Allen.

Although they worked few shows together (Jack: "Maybe a half dozen times in all." George: "Just once at the Palace Theater in Indianapolis."), Jack and George were already devoted buddies who knew one another from hanging around the same booking offices, the same hotels and the same girls.


"In those days, Jack was making \$450 a week in vaudeville and," gags George, "I think he's getting more now. Incidentally, he was doing those same stingy jokes, even then. We enjoyed one another right away. Besides, he used to laugh me up and, since he was earning more than me, whenever he laughed I thought I was a hit!" Meanwhile, back at the unemployment office, Gracie was looking for someone to team up with in a comedy act. She told this to her roommate who told it to Jack who told Gracie he had a friend. George, who was working with someone who might just be what the doctor — or, at least, Gracie — ordered. Gracie came. She saw. But she conquered George, not the other fellow. And so, a couple of years later, between shows in a theater in Cleveland, George Burns took unto himself the wife that he'd already taken as a partner and — like


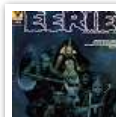
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it says in the storybooks — they've laughed happily ever after.

The cigar in George's molar's bobbles overtime when he describes his wedding night: "Jack was working in Omaha (Jack: "Kansas City.") so he wasn't present for the ceremony. Gracie and I were earning \$250 a week. We lived strictly in two-bucks-a-day hotels, but for our honeymoon we figured we'd go the whole route and blow \$7 a day. We checked into the Statler at four in the morning, but the desk-clerk explained our day officially started at six.

"Well, we weren't gonna pay no extra seven bucks, so we sat in the lobby for two hours.

"The wedding was scheduled for eight that morning. But the justice of the peace was furious because he'd planned to go fishing that day, and he married us so fast that it was eighty cents on the taxi meter when we pulled up — and ninety cents when we left. He wasn't going to let any marriage kill his fishing.

"Anyway," grins George gleefully, "we were dead tired from sitting in that lobby, so we went to bed early. At two A.M., the phone rang. It was long-distance. It was Jack. Now I know his voice, see, so the minute he said 'Hello,' I said, 'Will you have the waiter send up another order of ham and eggs, please,' and I hung up. Four o'clock the phone wakes us again. It's Jack. All he said was, 'Hello . . . hello,' and I said, 'I'm still waiting for the eggs.' Not another word and I hung up."

George, who, as Jack Benny says, "is conceded by most comedians to be the funniest man in the business," continued with his crackling dry wit. "I always hang up on Jack. Always. In the middle of any conversation, I suddenly hang up. It started once when he talked so long I couldn't stand it. So right in the middle of a comma, I hung up on him. He thought it was a riot. Next time, I did it again. I did this three times in a row, and each time he got hysterical. Finally I figured it isn't funny anymore, so I stopped. Well, he was hurt. He thought I was mad at him. Since then, I hang up on him every single time we talk on a phone. It isn't funny anymore, but I don't want him to think I'm mad."

After this poolside chat, I didn't see George for two years. Our next meeting was at his office. He was the talk of the industry because he'd just discovered the rising star, Ann-Margret, and had just packaged a CBS-TV series, "Mister Ed," so this naturally was what the man was expected to talk about, breathe about and think about. Therefore, I naturally expected this would be Topic A in conversation.

"George," I said, "you're doing so well without Gracie that ..."

"Yeah," said George, "Gracie would have quit even sooner if not for Jack."

"Jack?"

"Jack Benny."

"Well, in any case, you're doing so sensationally that . . ."

"Yeah," said George, "You know, Gracie wanted out of the business for four years before she finally retired. She'd been working all her life, and she was tired. I hated to cancel a sponsor who was offering us forty weeks of TV plus twelve weeks of repeats. Besides, I was afraid that, without her, I'd have to quit, too. And I love to work. That's the reason, when I okayed that final year, I called Jack and Mary to break the news for me. Gracie was staying at their Palm Springs house. Jack and Mary helped a lot. They explained how wonderful it was for us and how ordinarily actors throw parties when their options are picked up. I'm certain that, if not for them, she wouldn't have done that last season."

As long as Jack Benny has been alive — "thirty-nine years" — the Bennys and the Burnses have been a close quartet. Even the wives have much in common. They were married within a year of each other. The Burnses became Mr. and Mrs. thirty-seven years ago. The Bennys, thirty-six years. Both wives teamed with their husbands professionally. Both women wanted out. Both women are out.

The two couples occasionally vacation together. They've gone to New York, Europe and Vegas together. The Burnses live within four blocks of the Bennys in Beverly Hills. They see each other constantly. The womenfolk have been known to lunch or shop together. Come a holiday or birthday, they exchange lingerie, nighties or "some inexpensive little doodads like silverware, glasses or something for the house," since each decided long ago that the other has practically everything.

Although the men began the friendship, it's well-known that the ladies could have finished it. It's an accepted fact that not only can women change the face of a foursome, but down through the centuries the frail li'l female of the species has rechiseled the destinies of whole families . . . whole countries. Take Helen of Troy, the Duchess of Windsor, Elizabeth Taylor. . . . However, both men disagree that the wives could kill off their friendship, because it is far too enduring. However, they agree that the parallel of their wives' theatrical background — and now retired foreground — makes for a tremendous closeness.

The first time I met Jack was a year-and-a-half ago, when he taped several television shows from New York. The night before, he'd taken over the Automat on 45th Street and Fifth Avenue for a black-tie party. In line with the professional Benny "stinginess," he personally handed each guest a \$2 roll of nickels. To see Helen Hayes in a floor-length gown and elbow-length gloves jockeying apple pie from a glass window, or to catch



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

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Arlene Francis carrying ermine and diamonds and a tray of corned beef, was a beautiful sight. Naturally, it had been a tremendous party, and naturally I figured this would be the major topic of discussion.

"Jack," I said, "it was so funny at your party when . . ."

"Yeah," Jack said, "too bad George wasn't there."

"George?"

"George Burns."

"Well, I'm sure he'd have howled the way you . . ."

"Yeah," Jack said. "But he'd have deflated me somehow. He always does. It's very easy for George to make me laugh. Mary can be quite witty at times, too, but mostly we three just sit around and scream at him."

He explained how he prepared Mary for her first introduction to George — who, although straitlaced Gracie doesn't sanction it, is known to toss off lavender verbiage. True to form, George teed off this meeting with a few four-and five-letter words that not even Webster knows — "Just so Mary could get used to how I talk real fast." George explained later.

"It's just that everything he does breaks us up, and he knows it. As a result, he's always planning how to make me laugh," continued Jack. "Like at the Command Performance last year. We were walking down a dark London street at two A.M., and George stopped to look into a basement window. A little further on, he bent down to look into another one. Each time I stooped down, too, but I saw nothing. The third time. I ran over to ask what he saw. And he said, 'Nothing. But I'm in England and I don't want to miss anything.'"

"Once, we were at somebody's home when an opera singer was giving a recital. Everything was fine until George sat down behind me. He didn't do anything. He just whispered. 'Now whatever you do, don't laugh.' That's all I needed. Just his power of suggestion. Before you know it, my shoulders heaved and I couldn't control myself. I had to leave."

The fact that Jack is wildly susceptible to George is best illustrated by the time Jack said to him. "Now, listen, don't try to be funny today." Being an Eagle Scout, George didn't try to be funny. Suddenly, Jack started to guffaw maniacally. George looked startled. "I didn't say anything," he said. "Yeah," giggled Jack, "but I know what you're thinking!" The upshot is that Jack is always trying to make George laugh, and George's always deflating him. "Once," grins Jack, "he was in Minneapolis and I was so desperate to break him up that I concocted a really hysterical telegram. I worked hard on it. I threw everything I could into it. It was about fifty words, and it was really a riot. I got a return wire from him. All it said was, 'Don't worry. I won't show your wire to anyone.'"

(Author's Note: When George told the story, the wire was "over two hundred words." When Jack was told Burns' version, he giggled happily and said, "That's George. The world's biggest liar.")

During my visit to Benny's dressing-room, he sat slumped in a chair while the makeup man was pretending he was a Rembrandt and Benny's beautiful, familiar face was a canvas. Between the artiste crayoning his eyebrows, and this interviewer recording his adlibs, and the fact that he was due to face millions on television in three minutes, Mr. Benny was so high-strung and nervous about the whole thing that he was yawning altogether.

At the end of the hour's discussion on George Burns, Jack said, "By the way, just what was it you wanted to interview me about?"

"George Burns," I said.

"Oh, my God, honey," yawned Jack as he sauntered onstage, "We've been friends for so long I couldn't possibly think of anything to say about him!"

— Cindy Adams

"The Jack Benny Program" is seen on CBS-TV, Tues., at 9:30 P.M. EST.



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

Labels: [Jack Benny](#)

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[bigguy1960](#) 19 March 2018 at 18:47

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One of the best episodes (of many where Benny appeared) of The Burns and Allen radio show has Gracie convincing George and Jack to become Gypsies, who sing (George) and play (Jack on his violin) sad Gypsy songs. They demonstrate for announcer Bill Goodwin. Gracie: "Wasn't that sad?" Goodwin: "Its miserable!"

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