



Sunday, 22 April 2018

## When Viewers Stop Viewing

It's remarkable how nobody complains when their ratings are good, but when they're bad, there's either something wrong with the system or the audience. The stars never blame themselves.

That went for Jack Benny, too.

Here's Jack complaining to the *Boston Globe* of July 10, 1967. The show he's referring that soured him on television was broadcast on November 3, 1965—it was his first special after NBC cancelled his series. Critics at the time gave it mixed reviews. Jack's response to losing the ratings war that night is to make a snide comment about *Green Acres* which a) had an audience that tuned in every week, something he didn't have any more and b) hadn't jettisoned the format that made it popular as Jack admits in the article he had done with his own show. Instead, Benny stole Bob Hope's format, which relied on guest stars (Elke Sommer was a Hope favourite for a while). While Hope eventually became a parody of himself, Jack never did.

True, there were some cringingly bad sitcoms on TV around that time. But Jack seems to have had a real bias against rural shows. He was annoyed when CBS put *Petticoat Junction* as his lead-in during the 1963-64, a show that turned out to get better ratings than him, ratings that he couldn't hold. It, of course, starred his former secondary player Bea Benaderet who, coincidentally, appeared on the *Green Acres* episode he complained about. In his last full season in 1964-65, *Gomer Pyle* had huge numbers against Jack. This is the same Jack Benny who used to love doing an old rural voice in broad hick sketches on his radio show.

His complaint about "too many satires" is especially hollow, considering the special he talks about working so hard on every line featured almost nothing BUT satires—on *Mary Poppins*, on California's surfing culture and even TV commercials. Benny, perhaps more than anyone, pioneered parodies on network radio with his funny send-ups of current movies and radio shows (especially Fred Allen's).

It's surprising reading his trepidation about being "in the round." That setting would appear to work to Jack's strengths—where he can make funny observations and joke around to an intimate group of people, then react. He was a master at it.

It appears the columnist ran out of space. The story ends abruptly. I would love to have read more of his anecdotes about Mary and George Burns. I'm sure he would have pleased his stage audiences with that kind of material, too.

### ***Movies? Television? Both Bewilder Benny***

By PERCY SHAIN

*Globe TV Critic*

Jack Benny is saddened by the state of television today.

"People accept too easily what is offered them," he said at a press luncheon at the Sheraton Boston. "The audience doesn't seem to care."

"If they don't particularly like the comedy shows that are on, they'll watch them anyhow. It's a way to relax.




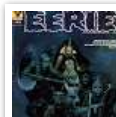
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They'll get into a robe and sit there and take whatever is fed them through the tube.

"After all, it's the best bargain I know of, and I know something about bargains. You can't beat the price.

"It beats me how some of these shows get on the air. They get their laughs stumbling over tables—things like that.

"Critics wouldn't give these shows two weeks. Yet they're still running. I can't understand it. It must be the kids that keep them going.

"That's one reason why I'm not doing as much television work as I used to. Why be so meticulous and try to get every line right in a situation. It just isn't worth it.



"I can remember not too long ago doing a special in which we took great pride. We had a cast full of stars and our big feature was doing 'Mary Poppins' as it would be made for an Italian movie. The best we could do in the ratings was to tie 'Green Acres.' That soured me. "I will say that my old show was easy to do, probably because the humor came from characterizations. But I have no desire to go back to it.

"Just one of two specials a year, a couple of 'Hollywood Palaces,' and maybe a Lucille Ball or Bob Hope show are enough for me. I expect to make no more than four appearances this coming season.

"But I'm not about to retire, either. I'll just do a little less and less each year. Just so's I won't have to drop out

entirely. Why should I? Bob Hope has \$9 billion and he's worse than I am.

"It's been a long career. I started when I was 16. I had 17 years on radio and 15 years on television. I remember how hesitant I was to make the switch. But it took me only four shows to get used to the new medium. It was like going back on the stage.

"I WAS SCARED"

"I was scared of going into the theater-in-the-round, too, at first. But it's worked out beautifully. I seem to be able to get to the audience in such a setting, particularly when the front seats are close up, as they are at the Carousel. I'm enjoying my week there.

"What I'd like to do now is act in a play and perform in South Africa. Those are about the only areas of show business I have not gone into. I almost played in 'The Impossible Years,' a wonderful comedy, but they'd have to wait too long for me and got Alan King instead. I thought he was great in it."

Jack, who is 73, doesn't think much of today's movies, either.

"So many of them I don't understand," he said. "Even one like 'Thoroughly Modern Millie.' Half of the things that happened went over my head. They didn't seem to have any motivation. There are too many satires, too. All those Bond imitations."

Jack laughs at his "tight-wad" image. Everyone knows it isn't true. But he goes further.

"SPENT A FORTUNE"

"I'll bet my wife and I are the two most extravagant people in show business," he said. "We've spent a fortune without making any particular issue of it.

"Mary has enough stuff to open eight stores. She went on a Paris shopping spree that was really something. She gets a big enough allowance but that isn't enough.

"She's always been that way—even when we didn't have it. But one thing about Mary. If I suffered reverses and didn't have the money to spend, she could adapt herself in a minute. She's that way.

"But she still loves the silliest things. We were paying \$150 a day for a suite in London and she shopped around to save 40 cents on bottled water. She's that way, too."

Jack talks with great affection of George Burns, "who still loves to break me up." He loves to tell stories about George.

"We were in Chasen's restaurant in New York," he related. "George likes cold things cold and hot things hot. He ordered vegetable soup and said, 'I want to so hot you can't carry it. If you can bring it in, I don't want it.'"



Posted by [Yowp](#) at [07:15](#)

Labels: [Jack Benny](#)

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[J Lee](#) 22 April 2018 at 08:33

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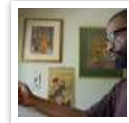
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It's also interesting that the CBS '60s rural comedies were helmed by George Burns' former writer and (in '65 still-current) business partner, Paul Henning, and actually hold up better than some of the other sitcoms of the era (at least the B&W episodes do for "Petticoat Junction" and "The Beverly Hillbillies").

Jack feeling a little lost at what audiences wanted seemed to negatively affect his '60s specials for NBC -- aside from trying to shoehorn him into the Bob Hope format, they also tried a little too hard to be current (as a lot of the comedians from the 40s and 50s were attempting during the major culture changes of the late 60s).

Jack's final series of specials in the 1970-74 period kind of got back to letting Benny be Benny and were the better for it, where the guest stars just being guest stars weren't supposed to be a draw all by themselves, and were written to better fit into the comedy built around Jack's persona.

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**Anonymous** 22 April 2018 at 18:07

Dick Chevillat was one of two Green Acres writers. Dick Chevillat also co-wrote The Phil Harris Alice Fay radio show... which was a wildly successful spin-off from the Jack Benny radio program.

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**TV Fan** 1 February 2019 at 22:37

Yes, the later Benny specials were much better. Jack was his old self again instead of wearing Neru suits and trying to be hip.

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