



Sunday, 18 November 2018

## Benny at the Crossroads

Was Jack Benny's weekly TV show shoved off the air by NBC or did he quit?

We may never really know the answer to that question.

We do know a couple of things because they played out in the media at the time. Jack was not happy that CBS's Jim Aubrey changed his lead-in show in the 1963-64 season to *Petticoat Junction*. Soon after the season started, it was announced Benny had signed a one-year contract with NBC for the following year. It would appear Aubrey didn't "fire" Jack Benny, as some fans (and authors) claim. He told CBS to stick it.

Also known is Aubrey put *Gomer Pyle* up against Benny when the 1964-65 season started and more people tuned into hear "Goooooolly, Sergeant Carter!" than "Well!" *Pyle* ended up as the third most-watched show that season. Not to Jack Benny, though. Whenever a TV show beat him in the ratings, he sniffed that the ratings weren't accurate.



Stories bubbled up very early in the season that Benny was done for or, at best, his future was uncertain. Finally, news came out in early April 1965—there doesn't appear to have been an official announcement by anyone—that Jack would continue on NBC but not on a series; he would do specials.

Whose decision was it? Again, we may never know. But something else we know is Jack was just past 70 years of age and leaning toward the idea of only being seen periodically (though whether that was brought on by a case of Gomer-itis is a matter of speculation).

Here's a feature story from the January 17, 1965 edition of the *Philadelphia Inquirer* Jack talks about how his script is put together—even Jeanette Eymann had a role—and what the future may have in store for him.

### NBC's Jack Benny Still Has Schedule Trouble

By HARRY HARRIS

*Of The Inquirer Staff*

ONE consequence of Jack Benny's shift to NBC this season after 15 years at CBS is that he can team with NBC-"owned" Milton Berle.

In the "Jack Benny Program" episode Friday at 9:30 P. M. (Channel 3) Benny-Berle boffolas stem from Jack's adoption of a "very large little boy" Milton, eager to inherit Jack's jack.

Benny's hopeful that the half hour will lure laughs, although he concedes, "It isn't always easy for a comedy show to do a great show with another comedian. It's the toughest writing job.

"When you have a dramatic actor as a guest, it becomes a real scene, and if it's essentially a funny situation, even an amateur, given the right lines, can get laughs."

He feels that this week's show is "different," but then, he notes, "no two of our shows are alike. There's no way to 'change our format,' because actually there is no format!

"Sometimes our show is like situation comedy, and sometimes I do a whole show in 'one' (on the portion of a stage closest to the audience). One of my best shows, a New Year's Eve show, I did all by myself.

"We use Dennis Day and Rochester about 12 times a season, but we never write shows for them. We just fit them in. This season we've added a new character, Jane Dulo, who plays a cook, someone new to heckle me in

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the house. I'm trying to keep up with the times with an 'integrated' house staff.

"We don't knock our brains out working in guest stars. When an idea looks pretty good, then we approach a guest. We've never had any trouble getting the people we want. The best way to handle a guest star is to treat him right, and no one has ever suffered on my shows, radio or TV.

"Sometimes we do make an all-out effort to come up with the right idea when we want a guest for young people, like a 'hot' singer.

"Everybody in my organization has been with me a thousand years. I sold my company to Revue, but I have my own offices and my own people, and they let me do what I want to do as long as I'm reasonable.

"They let me spend a lot of money, but if I wanted to hire Maurice Chevalier because I had one good line in French, they might say, 'Come on, Jack, \$8000 to say 'Voulez vous something?'

"My writers work differently from others. They go home and make notes, and then I edit with them, twice. There's more time spent editing than writing. "Do I know what gets laughs? Yes, but I can be fooled. I can be fooled easier than the writers.

"Sometimes they bring in a script and I say, 'I don't think that's funny.' If they don't agree, we discuss it a long time. As a rule, I have four writers, and if two agree with me and two do not, I lean my way.

"If there's no decision, I call the script girl and ask, 'Jeanette, how do you feel about this?' and then I sort of go that way.

"Once I was adamant. I was sure I was right. I didn't want a particular gag. The writers thought it was OK, and they said, 'The four of us could be wrong!'

"They're always insulting me, but I'm always apologizing to them. I'll apologize 28 weeks a year, as long as the show comes off. I don't want to have a lousy show just so I can say, 'See, fellows, I was right!'

"I've got to keep up the standard. More than that I can't do. We all do the kind of show we know how to do.

"Eventually I'm going to have to go off, though I'd like to get out before I'm *thrown* out. I'd prefer to have good shows and not be thrown out, but if I *am* thrown out, I'd rather it was with good shows."

Benny's present pact with NBC is for a single year, and whether he'll return next season is still moot. Although his time spot between Bob Hope, one of his best friends, and Jack Paar, whose radio career he once gave a tremendous boost seemed a promising one, his ratings have plummeted.

Previously, he says, he was out of TV's "top 20" only once when scheduled against the potent "Bonanza."

"I knew I was in trouble," he recalls, "when one night Bill Paley (chairman of the CBS board) called from New York, where programs are on three hours earlier, to say, 'I saw the show you're doing tonight and it's wonderful, so be sure to look at it.'"

"I thought I'd watch the first half of 'Bonanza' and then switch, and you know what happened? I got so interested, I wouldn't go to my own show. If wouldn't, how could I expect others to?

"That was a very tough spot; you can't get a tougher one than being against the middle of a good hour show."

This season, however, apparently has posed a tougher one he's pitted against one of the most popular of the new entries, a consistent Nielsen "top 5" contender, "Gomer Pyle, USMC."

"I don't believe in ratings," Benny quips. "I put 90 phones in my house and I didn't get one call, not even from friends!

"I can't believe they're authentic when I find that one phone call can make a difference of thousands of watchers. And I don't see how a show can be a half point before or behind another show.

"I don't put much stock in them, but it's very difficult for me to say that *now*. When I was No. 1 in radio, that was the time to say I didn't believe in ratings!

"I guess they have to go by something, but I'd prefer they went by the quality of the show and how the sponsors are doing with the sale of their products." Although he'll be 71 on Feb. 14, St. Valentine's Day, "39-year-old" Jack has no intention of retiring.

"As George Burns says," he notes, "I'm too old to retire and too old to be thrown out. Besides, I have nothing to retire to.

"Force a man to retire and you've got an old man. I have fun working all the time. It doesn't make so much difference what I do, as long as I do *something*.

"I'd be satisfied to do a few TV shows each year and a lot of concerts.

"I hope I'll be around for a long time, and not only on NBC. I have a schedule that's so well organized that Irving Fein, my executive producer, can tell me what I'll be doing four months from Thursday at 3 o'clock.

"For me it's very, very easy. Editing takes far less time than it used to. My boys know what I'll take out or add to.

"I work about 12 or 13 hours a week. Saturdays, Sundays and Mondays, I have nothing to do if I don't want to. I don't have to be back until Wednesday, and Thursdays everybody works but me, blocking out the cameras. I show up if I feel like it.

"So I'm past 70, but I don't look it and I don't feel it. I agree with Chevalier. When he was asked how it felt to be 75, he said, 'When I think of the alternative, I like it.'

"How would I like, by some miracle, to go back to really being 39 again? I'd want to do it only if I felt as good as I feel now!"

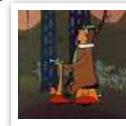
Posted by [Yowp](#) at [07:20](#)

Labels: [Jack Benny](#)

Grade: A- Review: An affectionate (though not exactly uncritical) love letter to 60's cinema that is irresistible. If I were to give you ...

9 hours ago

#### Yowp



[Scooter Looter Cycle](#) - \*Scooter Looter\* is one of the Hanna-

Barbera cartoons that's chock-full of short cuts and the kind of cartoon that never would have been made the following...

1 day ago

#### Termite Terrace headlines



[Popeye Cans the Spinach \(Commercial Corner\)](#) - Due to the Tom and

Jerry hiatus, the monthly commercials are returning. This month we'll look at Popeye canning the spinach and advertising with other a...

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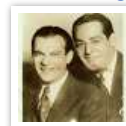
#### The World of Knight SATURDAY AFTERNOON



ON - Nice view. I actually drew it into a panel today.

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#### [Mark Kausler's CatBlog](#)

[Racketty Ann's Mystery Flight!](#) - Here are pages 5 through eight of "Racketty Ann and the Lost World". There's delightful fantasy here as Racketty Ann and Bla Bla take a ride on the back o...

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**Supervised By Fred Avery: Tex Avery's Warner Brothers Cartoons**



Coming Soon To This Blog...

1 month ago

**What About Thad?**  
**Chris Reccardi Interviewed**  
- I don't want to start a practice of publishing an interview every time someone from Ren & Stimpy dies, but Chris Reccardi (1964-2019) was too important a f...  
2 months ago

**Likely Looney, Mostly Merrie**

**That's all, folks!** - My posts have gotten thinner over the years. I'm aware of that. I've been hopeful for a long time, that I can remain active with blogging and sharing furth...

6 months ago

**Kids, Eh?**  
**#1288: Bird Call** - #1288: Bird Call  
10 months ago

**Cartoons, Model Sheets, & Stuff**



**Pete Hothead Model Sheets** - Here are a few model sheets from the first Pete Hothead short. Released in 1952 and directed former Tom & Jerry animator Pete Burness. Ted Parmelee was the...

1 year ago

**Dr. Grob's Animation Review**

**He Poses for his Portrait** - 'He Poses for his Portrait' is the second of only two surviving Newlyweds cartoons Émile Cohl made in the United States.

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