



Sunday, 2 December 2018

The American Habit

Jack Benny's friends liked two Jack Bennys.

There was the one they saw and talked to in their daily lives. And there was the one they saw on television and had heard for years on the radio before that.

Jack found himself not only doing "cheap" jokes on the air and, occasionally, in interviews. At times, he was in character in front of his friends. They wanted to laugh at the tightwad, too.

Here's an example from a United Press International column of February 10, 1960. Jack also has time to tell the columnist why his character was so popular all those years, among other things. The quote attributed to Fred Allen, by the way, was actually made by Jack's former writer Harry Conn; Conn was basically saying his words made Benny. Jack's career lasted about 40 years after Conn stopped writing for him.

Jack Benny Is An American Habit After 28 Years On Radio, Television

By RICK DU BROW

HOLLYWOOD (UPI) — Jack Benny is an American habit.

For 28 years, it has been a Sunday night ritual in millions of homes to tune in the radio or TV set and listen to him portray himself as a miser who tortures people with his violin - playing and won't admit he's over 39. There are those who believe that's the way Benny really is, with the result, says Benny, "that I have to overtip." Yet no penny-pincher was ever more popular. Why? The answer is the key to his show's continued success.

Underdog From Beginning

"From the beginning," he explains, "I was the underdog, the guy with all the human frailties."

How did he conceive the cheapskate character?

"Well," he recalled at lunch on the terrace of the CBS-TV studio, "it was, in a sense, an accident. Years ago, I did a couple of jokes about being cheap, and they got laughs. So I added a couple more and established the character."

"It's a lot easier to work now because I don't have to establish the character when I walk out on a stage. People are laughing in advance."

Several months ago, for instance, Benny addressed the Beverly Hills Bar Association, which includes many of his friends— but on-stage, even they expected him to be in character, and he was.

Lincoln His Favorite

"My favorite lawyer," he said, "was Abraham Lincoln. Lincoln once walked 12 miles barefoot to return a library book and save three cents. That's my kind of guy."

When the lawyers appointed him Chief Justice of the "Ancient and independent Province of Beverly Hills," he replied that he was "glad to know that the violin is no longer my only means of support."

"I don't deserve all these kind words," he added, "but as a friend of mine said. 'I've got arthritis and I don't deserve that either.'"

Off-stage, however, no actor could be more different from his role. Benny is serious, generous, an accomplished violinist, and freely admits to being 65.

His seriousness highlights his one flaw as a comedian. He is no ad-libber. His old feuding partner on radio, the late Fred Allen, once told him: "You couldn't ad lib a belch after a Hungarian dinner."

Needles Himself

Benny needles himself. Once, when Allen was heckling him, he said: "If I had my writers here, you wouldn't talk to me like that and get away with it."



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Movies with Michael



[Movie Review: Once Upon A Time ... In Hollywood](#) - Michael's Movie

Benny's generosity is best-known to the musicians of many of the nation's symphony orchestras. For the last three and a half years; he has played violin concert dates in such cities as St. Louis, Detroit and Rochester, N.Y., for the benefit of the musicians themselves.

He refuses to accept pay for the concerts, which have poured about \$1,700,000 into the treasuries of non-profit symphony associations to further the cause of good music.

"I used to be a musician," said Benny, "and I know classical music is a losing business. I admire and love people who devote their lives to it. I fool around a little, of course, during the concerts but it's worth it to make it a success."

The concerts have been such a success that last November, in Washington, D.C., he was awarded the Laurel Leaf Award of the American Composers Alliance for his distinguished contributions to music.

Music Above Politics

A guest at the affair, Vice President Richard M. Nixon, joined Benny at the piano for an impromptu duet. Benny, who claims his music is above politics, also is a bosom friend of another sometime accompanist, former President Harry S. Truman, who appeared on his TV show last October.

"He was the easiest guest I ever got," said the comedian. "Our friendship started when he was Vice President and I went to Washington to make an appearance for Franklin D. Roosevelt.

"I met Harry at dinner, and we became quite friendly. We always exchange things on our birthdays. It's not political at all.

"A funny thing happened once when I tried to call him on his birthday, which I do every year. I was in Palm Springs, and I called my secretary in Hollywood six times to make the call — but he didn't answer.

"So I called Harry direct and got him in about one second, right on the dias where he was sitting in Kansas City. I wished him a happy birthday. Then I called my secretary again and still couldn't get him."

What does Benny think of Nixon, and Truman as pianists?


"Well," he said with his classic pained look, "they play a little in one key."

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1 day ago

Blog Archive

- 2019 (214)
- ▼ 2018 (379)
 - ▼ December (32)
 - Bandmaster With the Barrel
 - Self-Effacing Benny And the "Old" Days

[Dean Elliott](#)[Rescuing Paper Lanterns](#)[Can You Guess This
Pun?](#)[Hail to The Chief](#)[The Ward on Christmas](#)[Bedtime For Sniffles](#)[Christmas Cards With the
Stars](#)[Generous Jack](#)[The First Christmas
Cartoon](#)[Is There Snow Saving
Jerry?](#)[Swallow the Presents](#)[Santa Comes Down Your
Radio](#)[Drop It! Drop It!](#)[Opening Night](#)[He's Walking](#)[The Don'ts of Bullwinkle](#)[More Tom and Jerry
Violence](#)[Creatures of the Haunted
Ship](#)[Uncle Moe Plays Santa](#)[At's-a Scrappy](#)[She's Not Forever
Blowing Bubbles](#)[The Secret of Jack Benny](#)[The Scoop on a Boop](#)[Frying Duck](#)[This Trolley is Out of
Control](#)[The One, The Only,
Fenneman](#)[I Like Rubber Hose](#)[The Sun Sets \(With
Some Help\)](#)[The American Habit](#)[Some Words From
Walter Lantz](#)[► November \(32\)](#)[► October \(31\)](#)[► September \(34\)](#)[► August \(35\)](#)[► July \(32\)](#)[► June \(30\)](#)[► May \(31\)](#)[► April \(30\)](#)[► March \(31\)](#)[► February \(28\)](#)[► January \(33\)](#)

- [2017](#) (380)
- [2016](#) (396)
- [2015](#) (389)
- [2014](#) (390)
- [2013](#) (388)
- [2012](#) (397)
- [2011](#) (106)

Labels

- [Aline Mosby](#) (16)
- [Art Davis](#) (30)
- [Bad Luck Blackie](#) (9)
- [Bob Clampett](#) (72)
- [Bob McKimson](#) (51)
- [Bob Thomas](#) (53)
- [Chuck Jones](#) (133)
- [Columbia](#) (25)
- [Cynthia Lowry](#) (24)
- [Dick Thomas](#) (12)
- [Don Patterson](#) (16)
- [Earl Wilson](#) (6)
- [Erskine Johnson](#) (36)
- [Felix the Cat](#) (24)
- [Film Daily](#) (50)
- [Fleischer](#) (136)
- [Frank Tashlin](#) (21)
- [Fred Allen](#) (37)
- [Fred Brunish](#) (9)
- [Friz Freleng](#) (126)
- [Gene Deitch](#) (16)
- [George Pal](#) (9)
- [Grant Simmons](#) (3)
- [Hanna and Barbera unit](#) (91)
- [Hanna-Barbera](#) (2)
- [Harman-Ising](#) (54)
- [Henry Morgan](#) (13)
- [Irv Spence](#) (8)
- [Jack Benny](#) (400)
- [Jay Ward](#) (29)
- [Jimmy Durante](#) (15)
- [John Crosby](#) (78)
- [John Sutherland](#) (23)
- [Johnny Johnsen](#) (25)
- [Kenny Baker](#) (6)
- [King-Size Canary](#) (6)
- [Laugh-In](#) (10)
- [Maurice Noble](#) (12)
- [Mel-O-Toons](#) (4)
- [MGM](#) (498)
- [Norm McCabe](#) (4)
- [Pat Matthews](#) (10)

Paul Julian	(13)
Sara Berner	(5)
Screwy Squirrel	(32)
Spider-Man	(1)
Terrytoons	(67)
Tex Avery	(412)
Tom and Jerry Human	(24)
Tralfaz Sunday Theatre	(14)
Ub Iwerks	(64)
UPA	(51)
Van Beuren	(80)
Vernon Scott	(40)
Virginia MacPherson	(14)
Walt Disney	(125)
Walter Lantz	(212)
Warner Bros.	(520)
Who Killed Who	(10)

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