



Sunday, 12 May 2019

Harry and Hamlet

A charity event could be a jumping off point for any kinds of questions to Jack Benny. Benny did dozens upon dozens of musical benefits over the years, stopping all over North America.

In 1959, one of the cities where he filled a concert hall with laughter was St. Louis. One local newspaperman covered a range of things besides Benny's violin rehearsal: comedy (including the "sick" variety of Lennie Bruce, etc.), Harry Truman, TV vs radio, problems being a businessman and comparisons to Hamlet.

Jack Benny, With Strings Attached Famous Comedian, Here With Symphony Tuesday, Takes Violin Seriously

By Joseph Laitin

A Special Correspondent of the Post-Dispatch
HOLLYWOOD, Nov. 7.

JACK BENNY, the indestructible man of show business, is getting a big boot out of appearing with the nation's top symphony orchestras, and it isn't the clown playing Hamlet either. If Jack had stuck to his bow and fiddle the way his father wanted him to, he might easily have made second violin, and he knows it.

But Benny hopes he is making not only a contribution to the kitty by his benefit appearances, but that he is bringing people into the opera house who have never been there before. If there's one such person in St. Louis's Kiel Auditorium Tuesday night who has been attracted only by "an evening of gaiety and music with Jack Benny" . . . and returns another night because he's discovered he likes symphony music, Jack Benny will be a very happy man.

He's not stuffy about it. In fact, he never actually said it in so many words. But in a long informal chat the other day, there was no mistake that this is the way he feels about it. Jack Benny is an easy man to chat with, a difficult man to interview. For almost half a century, he's been one of the world's funniest men, and you wait for him to make jokes. He doesn't. Furthermore, too often Benny makes his point with a look, which is unquotable. You try to analyze his success—why, in a profession where the casualty rate is enormous, has this man always been king? Why is he so durable? There isn't any real answer.

Benny has always been right up there in the ratings ... not always number one, but never far down, either. Only last week the Daily Variety reported that Benny was contesting the long reign of Loretta Young as the queen of late Sunday night TV. For the first time in years, she was unseated, Variety reported, not by a Western, but by Jack Benny.

You would never get this dope from Benny himself. Some years ago I had a talk with Benny about ratings. At the time, he happened to be No. 1 in most polls. But Benny told me he had little faith in them. Why? I remember his answer almost word for word.

"I remember when I used to distribute circulars house to house for my father," he said. "I'd start out with a bundle, and conscientiously put one circular under each door. Pretty soon, I'd start putting two circulars under each door, then three. I'd pass an ashcan, and I'd toss a big handful in. But I never lied to my father when I told him I'd distributed all the circulars. So if I could do this to my own father, how can I have faith in the poll takers who are making an impersonal survey? It's only human."

The next time I saw Jack Benny was at a rehearsal a few days ago for his Spectacular on the CBS network tonight (6:30, Channel 4). I waited an hour for him to get through. He was all business. I never saw Benny chuckle once during that hour. He went over his lines again and again, bounced up and down several times as



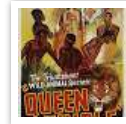
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though he were skipping rope to get a piece of "business" down pat, read some lines in a flat tone about a new business venture, a sugar bowl somehow came into it and I think a bowling alley, but exactly where the humor was, I'll never know unless I watch CBS tonight.

For, as anybody knows, one of the secrets of Jack Benny's professional durability is hidden somewhere in the fact that he doesn't just tell jokes. Character development, situations and timing have supplied the backbone of his fifty-year career as a comedian. It accounts for his long and profitable career, but doesn't quite explain why Jack Benny has become a veritable national institution, always as welcome as good news.

Who else could evoke a remark such as the one made by author William Saroyan: "Who does Jack Benny think he is—Jack Benny?"

The rehearsal for the TV spectacular dragged on until Ralph Levy, the director called it quits for the day. "If you don't need me any more," said Benny, "I think I'll get in some golf." He started to walk briskly toward the exit, with the pace of a man half his 65 years. I moved fast to intercept him; he hadn't expected me. I introduced myself and asked if I could have a few minutes. He amiably motioned to a couple of canvas chairs. We talked for over an hour and a half, in that huge rehearsal hall, the two of us there all alone.

He talked with child-like wonderment about his experience with President Truman as his TV guest, with unsentimental affection about his old friend Fred Allen, and with unconcealed anger about TV quiz shows and big money give-away programs.

"Mary was just saying to me the other day, 'If only Fred Allen were around today to see what's happening to the quiz shows,'" Benny said.

But he thinks the networks are now going a little too far in their effort to square themselves with the public. He can't see barring laugh tracks, for instance, which he considers essential in radio and TV comedy—even more important than live studio audience laughter. But he pointed out that laugh tracks should be artfully inserted to help the viewer at home enjoy the program more.

To bar the laugh tracks in the name of honesty, because it deceives the audience—"You might as well prohibit actors from using make-up because it makes them look younger," he says.

I asked him about his recent program with President Truman as a guest.

"I didn't sleep the night that was on. I went home and usually after any of my shows, I get a few phone calls, you know, so I waited up, but nothing happened. I thought the critics would murder me, but the next morning the letters, telegrams and phone calls began pouring in. It turned out to be one of the most successful programs. I even got letters from other comedians."

For President Truman he had glowing words. When the Truman segment turned out to have technical imperfection, Mr. Truman offered to do the whole program over again, but it was too late—the date for the show had been announced.

Benny suddenly looked up, with a grin on his face. "Say, I just happened to think of it, I was trying one afternoon to reach Mr. Truman on the phone in Independence, but I couldn't get through. Next morning at rehearsal, I was called to the phone. I was kind of groggy, I guess. I couldn't make out what the fellow on the other end

of the line was saying. 'Who is this, anyway?' I asked: The voice on the other end of the line said, 'They told me you were trying to get me, Jack.' I said I wasn't trying to get anybody, but who IS this? 'This is Harry, Jack I started to say 'Harry who?' but caught myself just in time. I almost died. They never even told me it was long distance calling."

Benny seemed rather pleased that he had been able to recall this incident, not to underline his recent happy association with the former President of the United States, but perhaps because it was an anecdote that seemed to fit rather neatly into the behavior pattern of the character the public has been in love with for years —Jack Benny, the fall guy.

Did he prefer TV to radio? "Sure, it's more fun." Is there anything in show business he'd like to do that he'd never done before? "Yes, I'd like to do a play on Broadway, a comedy." Did he want to make another movie? "No, I'm not interested in the movies. I've made 20 movies. Fifteen were good, but they all made money."

(Poking fun at his film flops has been as much of a prop in the Benny routine as the tightwad.)

Inevitably, in a serious discussion with a comedian, one gets around to discussing the high casualty rate among comics, especially these days.

He expressed sympathy for the younger comedians—except for the "sick" comics. "I don't like jokes about Buchenwald," he said, his voice rising for the first time. This was the nearest he came to an emotional outburst, but it was only momentarily. "But to the young people today, making a joke about one of Hitler's concentration camps is like one of us making a joke about throwing Christians to the lions or about what happened at Ford Theater the night Lincoln was assassinated." There was long silence. "I don't even like those jokes," he added. "You can learn a lot of things but you can't learn good taste; either you've got it or you haven't."

Jack Benny can speak with authority; good taste comes as naturally to him as good timing. "You know," he went on, "the younger comics don't have a chance to develop. Fellows like myself and Bob Hope and Eddie



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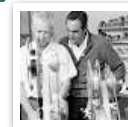


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ist@gmail.com for prices etc.. - https://petergrayart.blogspot.com/ Will update it like I do on facebook.
2 weeks ago

Cantor we had years to develop. I used to play joints in East St. Louis long before I ever played at the Orpheum downtown."

How did he happen to start playing the violin with symphony orchestras? "Isaac Stern, my closest friend, talked me into doing it." Does he enjoy giving concerts? "It makes me feel good when the musicians tell me that a lot of people will come to hear symphony music for the first time just because I'm playing with them, and then they'll come back again just to hear the symphony. That's the way it was with me and ballet. You couldn't drag me to ballet, but one night someone did and I discovered I enjoyed it. Now I go as often as I can."

Would he liken his love of appearing with symphonies to the classic story of the clown who wants to play Hamlet? "That's not bad. Yes, you could." Does President Truman play the piano as well as Benny plays the violin? Benny looked shocked, even hurt.

Then, talking as if to a child, Benny said: "Oh, no. Mr. Truman doesn't practice."

Did Mr. Benny take his violin playing seriously? Again, in the same shocked tone, he replied: "The last three years I've been practicing like a fiend, and this can be very trying at my age."

His official biography, of course, notes that Jack began taking violin lessons when he was still in swaddling clothes, and back in Waukegan, he was considered a child prodigy. In fact, Benny started his vaudeville career with the violin.

Benny sometimes gets wistful about this.

"I should have listened to my father and practiced more on the fiddle."

Is he sorry he decided to become a comedian rather than a concert violinist? "Sometimes I felt sorry about it, but now that I'm successful I'm glad I did become a comedian. Now I have both things going for me."

Because Benny is one of the richest men in show business, there is a myth that he is a good businessman, particularly because he comes from a mercantile family. I asked Benny about this. He spread out his hands, palms upwards. "Talk figures and you lose me. I couldn't understand business when I was a kid in my father's haberdashery store and I don't now."

His father recognized his lack of business acumen long before Benny did. He was minding his father's shop one day when a man came in and gave young Benny some money, which he later turned over to his father.

"What did you sell?"

"Nothing, he gave me some money on account."

"Account? What account?" What's his name?"

"I don't know. Gee, do you have to have a man's name when he gives you money?" But young Benny was a smart boy. He made mistakes but he learned fast. The father stayed with him in the store next time to keep an eye on him. A customer came in, bought scads of shirts, socks, ties and handkerchiefs and told Benny to charge it. The man left with his purchase.

Young Benny walked over to his father and said triumphantly: "That was a big sale. He said to charge it, but THIS time I made sure to get his name." The father looked aghast. "You got his name? Only he hasn't got any account here. I never saw him before in my life."

That possibly did as much as anything to get Benny into show business, This is only a guess because it would be more accurate to say it terminated his business career.

In the big rehearsal hall, it was getting late and I suggested he might still get in a few holes of golf. Benny stirred himself out of the chair and stretched. "No, it gets dark too early these days. I think I'll go home and practice on my fiddle." We began walking down the long corridor to the exit and suddenly Benny turned to me and said:

"You know, I'm going to appear with the St. Louis Symphony Orchestra in a benefit concert on Nov. 10. It would be nice if the Post-Dispatch could mention this in the story. There are always a few tickets left unsold." I promised I'd try to get it in.

Posted by [Yowp](#) at [07:26](#)

Labels: [Jack Benny](#)

1 comment:

Errol 13 May 2019 at 10:48

Somewhere, I have an old VHS copy of The Jack Benny Program where he visits President Truman. The White House portions are very muffled in sound quality. The beginning and end are clear. Still, a funny and enjoyably show. Obtained it from the now out of business " Video Yesteryear. " out of Sandy Hook. They offered a huge collection of public domain movies, silents, television shows, etc. Back in the day, I loved thumbing through their monthly catalog.

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