



Sunday, 20 June 2021

50 Years of Laughs

Jack Benny had a very good idea of why he was a success. He expounded on it for years in the press. Here's an example from March 10, 1963. The writer was the TV editor for the *San Diego Union*, which was evidently hooked up with a syndicate.

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Self-Knowledge Benny Asset

BY DONALD FREEMAN

HOLLYWOOD, Feb. 24 (CNS) — "This is the greatest season I've ever had" said Jack Benny as he relaxed in his studio dressing room. His mood was reflective, light-hearted, even merry.

And why not? After 30-odd years of radio and television, the Benny shows this season have indeed hit a high water mark. As for Benny himself, he is that rare bird among the comedians — he is shrewdly detached, an expert at the difficult art of self-appraisal. He doesn't, moreover, use a superlative lightly. It was significant that he saw fit to repeat this particular one.

"The greatest season yet," Benny went on, nodding agreeably. "Each year our shows have always been a little better but this year we've had more new things, new ideas. Not that I thought in other years we had a bunch of lousy shows—that we've never had!"

By way of emphasis, he stared a characteristic Jack Benny stare. Then resuming:

"I happen to have a theory about this business — you should never press. Never try to top yourself. Once you try to top yourself, you start straining.

"MY KIND OF COMEDY lasts because, one, I try not to strain and, two, because my character — the Jack Benny character — includes a composite of all the faults people may have, all the human frailties. He's stingy and vain and insecure — insecurity is based on stinginess which is the fear of the future. Who isn't afraid of the future?

"So — we exaggerate, we make a joke of it and people recognize something of themselves.

"There's a lot of everybody," says Jack Benny, thoughtfully, "in Jack Benny."

Benny has started a run at the Ziegfeld Theater in New York — a venture that delights the vaudevillian in him. Benny played the Roxy, a movie house, in 1947; otherwise this engagement marks his first Broadway appearance since he left Earl Carroll's Vanities 31 years ago to enter radio, being introduced thereon by a smiling journalist-eminence named Ed Sullivan.

"I THOUGHT back then that maybe if things worked out, I'd have a little future in radio," Benny said, with a small shrug. "But if anybody would have said, 'Jack 30 years from now you'll still be going strong,' I'd have said, 'What are you — crazy?' But then, nobody in this business thinks they'll last. We always wonder, where will the material come from?"

"And where," I asked "does it come from?"

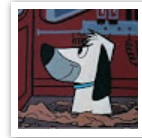
Benny shrugged again. "All I know is, you can't plan a character," he said. "You can't say, 'Look, fellas, let's invent this cheap vain character who drives a Maxwell, keeps his money buried in a vault and has a butler named Rochester and wears a toupee' — actually, it would be funnier if I really wore a toupee, which I don't. But all of this adds up to 'Jack Benny.'"

"And that kind of a character you can't plan. If it works it works and people begin to accept everything about it — the fat announcer, the silly kid tenor. And after 30 years it all gets a little easier because people know that character so well."

BENNY PAUSED. "People have been laughing at me for 50 years now — 50 years! That's more years than I



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am! So I can't be too lousy a comedian. But I'm also a better editor of material than people realize. A lot of comics would last longer if they knew themselves as well as I know me."

Our conversation turned to the violin, the instrument that Mr. Benny plays with such — uh, dedication.

"Listen, I practice an hour a day on the violin," Benny said. "If I didn't practice, I'd get even worse. I used to holler at Giselle MacKenzie all the time. I'd say, 'Giselle, you can play the violin so beautifully and you hardly ever play!' It makes me sore when I think of how hard I have to work just to play lousy.

"Most people think I can play better and just play this way for a joke," Benny said, then added, resignedly,

"But if I could play better, then it wouldn't be funny."

Posted by [Yowp](#) at [07:08](#)



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1 comment:



Dave K 21 June 2021 at 07:20

"He doesn't, moreover, use a superlative lightly."

Of course, one of Benny's most endearing traits according to friends and family, was a tendency to jump to hyperbole when casually describing any object at hand ("This is the greatest cup of coffee I've ever had!")

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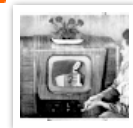
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