



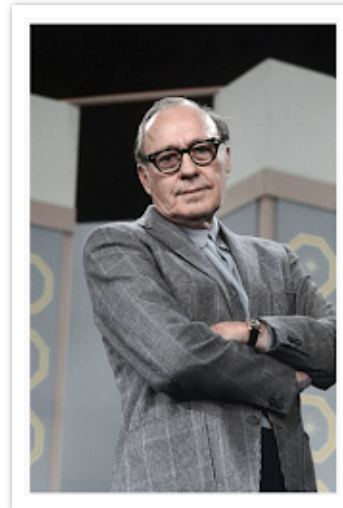
Sunday, 18 July 2021

Knowing Jack Benny

I suppose the question "What's Jack Benny really like?" is a legitimate one. A writer for one of the dailies in Los Angeles tried to answer it.

Here's a feature story from the *Evening Citizen-News* of January 15, 1962. It has a few inaccuracies—Jack was not born in Waukegan, his first radio appearance was not with Ed Sullivan, he knew Mary well before he got into radio—but it's a pleasant story about a pleasant man.

Benny mused about Broadway on occasion but rejected the idea of going on stage simply because of the time it would take up. And he would have to give up the concerts he loved doing, maybe more so than his television show.



Jack Benny — Comedian, Violinist, Philanthropist and Living Legend

By ED ADDEO

Besides being a comedian, musician, businessman and philanthropist, Jack Benny also a loyalist. It is this quality—loyalty—that has proved to be Jack's greatest asset, and it has more than any other factor made him something of a legend in his own time, a classic image that walks, talks, eats and does all the things that legends are supposed to do.

Jack, who will begin his 13th year in television, and his 30th in broadcasting, whose name is mentioned on every list of show business greats, and whose Beverly Hills headquarters is chock full of plaques, trophies and accolades of all sizes and kinds, has, almost to the man, the same people around him now whom he had when he started out in the big time.

His comedy format was so advanced when Jack started in 1932 with the lines "Hello, folks, this is Jack Benny. There will now be a slight pause for everyone to say 'who cares?'" that it has remained virtually unchanged throughout the years.

When he jumped from radio to television, his cast made no changes. All they did was put on make-up. There is no real Jack Benny. Jack Benny at home is Jack Benny in his office. Jack Benny the businessmen is Jack Benny on television. Jack Benny buying a cigar in a Beverly Hills shop is Jack Benny rehearsing for next Sunday's show. Jack Benny is Jack Benny.

In a studio at Desilu Productions in Hollywood, a group of people sit around a long, rectangular table every Tuesday. This group includes the players, director and writers connected with the "Jack Benny Show" to be filmed the following Friday evening.

The day before this scene, Jack parleyed with his writers on the new script for about an hour. This is the first reading, the time when kinks are ironed out, additions put in and timing and inflection practiced.

The casual air is almost unbelievable. Everyone just knows — is absolutely certain — that everything will go well, with no squabbles, scenes or hurt feelings.

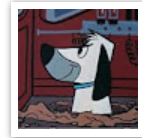
Jack and his crew, including Don Wilson, Dennis Day, Eddie (Rochester) Anderson and senior writer Sam Perrin go through the script in about two hours.

The following day there's a dress rehearsal, and they're ready to shoot. Simple? Uncannily easy? Smooth? Yes, but it's one of the few shows around that run so smoothly.

This is Jack's secret. This is where his loyalty rewards him. His writers, four of them, have been with him a total of 76 years. They know Jack Benny inside out—his likes, dislikes, pet peeves and manias in comedy.

Don Wilson, who's been with him 30 years, knows what Jack expects of him, has done the show thousands of

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times, and can probably do it blindfolded. The same goes for Dennis Day and Rochester who have also been with him from the start. There are few mistakes when the “Jack Benny Show” goes on the air. The man behind all this is somewhat of a genius, the same quality that seems to emanate from all the great men in show business. Jack will sit in rehearsal and think for five minutes about whether line should be said, “It’s easier to slip on the girdle” or “It’s easier to slip the girdle on.” A two-letter word can bother him for half-an-hour. On the set, Jack is relaxed, agreeable and far from temperamental. He’ll joke with the staff, give a short concert on his Stradivarius (which he carries wherever he goes), or suggest changes to the director. It is said that every director in the business would like to direct the “Jack Benny Show” because it’s such an easy job. Jack has a few taboos and flares in his comedy. “People laugh because they’re surprised,” he says. “They won’t laugh if they know what’s

coming. I don’t want the obvious in my show. The obvious is never funny.”

Another quirk Jack has is that he prefers to integrate the commercials into the script, rather than leave the show for “a word from our sponsor.” And his commercials are some of the funniest bits in the show. Good natured jibes and improvisations on the message while still sending the message clearly through are a hit with audiences, and Jack was quick to seize the method.

On comedy itself, Jack doesn’t think it has changed much, “although the audiences are much better now.

Audiences have matured and changed much more than comedy has— not that it should, mind you.”

Jack, who has been 39 for 29 years, is vigorous for his age. (He doesn’t wear a toupee). There is a slight slowness about him, which is to be expected, but it also breathes a vitality that is amazing. In a time where comedians are falling off television like lemmings, Jack still rides the crest of popularity and hasn’t slowed down. The teamwork and familiarity of his staff makes his work easier, but the energy expended is still more than most people generate in a week.

The man was born Benny Kubelsky, the son of a clothier, Feb. 14, 1894, in Waukegan Ill. He eased into show business like many of his era did, knocking around in a few small jobs until he found an audience that wanted more and more, under the name of Ben Benny. Confusion with another comedian, Ben Bernie, led to the adoption of another name, Jack Benny. His first broadcast was on Ed Sullivan’s radio show in 1932 and his appearance led to his own show. He had already attained stature on Broadway and was immediately a hit. He’s been going ever since.

Once on his radio show, a part called for a girl to break in and read her poems to Jack. A youngster named Mary Livingstone got the part, was a hit, and became a regular. She later became a regular in the Benny household when Jack married her. They now have a daughter, Joan, and a few grandchildren.

Jack, contrary to the popular image, is far from cheap. He even goes out of his way in private life to shun the “miser” image he has created. He overtips waiters wherever he eats.

Perhaps the one thing Jack can’t shake is his genuine love for the food in New York’s Automat, a place where nickels are deposited in slots that open to present the food ordered. To combat the jokes that arise whenever he eats there, he recently threw a black tie affair in the Automat, hiring a band, and giving all the guests \$2 worth of nickels to buy their food. The Benny character is summed up by the comments of the people who have worked for him all these years. Don Wilson calls him “quite a fantastic man, who picks up the ball and runs with it.

“Jack will bend over backwards to help a guy get a start or better himself in the business. He once forstalled a show so that I could sign for a Broadway part. He could have got someone else to do the show, too.”

Dennis Day, the tenor singer with the Benny group, says that Jack “has a loyalty that is hard to equal.” He says Jack is a “very generous person who is good to everyone around him.”

Jack has played benefit concerts on his Stradivarius. People like Leonard Bernstein have said of him “Benny has done more than raise the thousands of dollars to erase operating deficits of major orchestras. He has brought multitudes of people, who would not otherwise be there, into the concert halls to prove that good music can be entertaining and rewarding.

Musicians like Jascha Heifetz and Mischa Elman refer to Jack as “one of the boys,” and often commend him on his violin aptitude.

“I’d rather be referred to as a comedian than a musician,” Jack replies to the age-old query: Is he a musician with a comedy sideline or vice versa? “I’m really not that good.”

Jack, who lives fairly quietly with his wife in Beverly Hills (“If Mary found a good cheap toothbrush, she’d buy 300 of them”) enjoys playing golf (he shoots around 90) and manages to get out for a round almost every day. His greatest pleasure is playing the violin, at which he frequently practices in his dressing room.

He says he has no future plans. “I like what I’m doing now,” he says. “It’s not hard really. I would like to do a

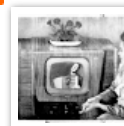


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Broadway play soon though.”

The big impression when digging into Jack Benny’s life is that there isn’t a single person who can find something bad about him. He draws praise from a clerk who has just met him, to people that have watched him, lived with him and worked for him for decades.

Asked to define something unflattering about himself, Jack’s reply is “I’m a little impatient, I guess.” But then no one will agree with him.

Posted by Yowp at 07:20



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