



Sunday, 15 August 2021

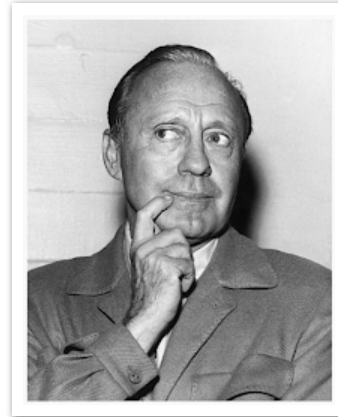
Next Stop, Kokomo

Phil Harris may have been born in Indiana and sponsored charity work there until his death, but his old boss Jackson helped benefit the state, too.

In 1966, Jack Benny appeared at Starlight Musicals in Kokomo, when he broke the theatre's existing attendance records by drawing 28,863 people for seven performances. His benefit concert with the Indianapolis Symphony Orchestra in November, 1960 helped launch the symphony's endowment fund program, earning for it \$35,000 in one concert.

The local paper in Kokomo put up two stories on its Sunday page on July 31st after the Benny (and entourage) performance. His featured singer was Wayne Newton, who was no unknown. He had a couple of hits on the charts that radio stations played for years. Still, Newton was almost reverential in his appreciation for Benny's boost to his career; see Joan Benny's book "Sunday Nights at Seven" for more.

There's a happy coincidence in the second story as the writer and Jack share some things in common. I have been unable to determine when Benny played the town in vaudeville. And it's a shame we'll never know the story about his visit that he couldn't print.



Benny Does Expected; Starlighter's Happy

By MARSHALL PITLER

Sunday Show Writer

Everyone knew what to expect. He's done the same thing for the past 40 years. But still Jack Benny had the largest opening night audience of this Starlight Musicals' season in the palm of his hand.

And he could not have let go, even if he wanted to. The Jack Benny Special was a guaranteed success.

There is a magic quality about Jack Benny which rivals nothing in the history of show business. This ageless wonder could recite the Gettysburg Address to 100,000 people, and the result would be hilarious.

Yes, everyone knew what to expect. The Benny Stroll, stance, stare, the gags about his money and age. Nothing was new, except the material, which was timely and in good taste.

Benny coordinated the entire show. He introduced the acts, was the brunt of his own routines with several well-timed interruptions, and actually hypnotized the audience with a very well-paced, fast running two and a half hour show.

One of his interruptions he did not plan. A light plane flew overhead, so Benny took advantage: "Darn! I hate it when they see the show for nothing."

Certainly, everyone knew what to expect. Benny had to play the violin. After threatening to play for almost his entire act, he finally did—and it wasn't "Love In Bloom." He caught us off guard by playing "The Bee" by Beethoven, [sic] and he did it quite well.

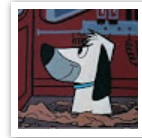
Benny delighted his audience by mixing among them collecting money in a tambourine in exchange for kisses from the gals. One gentleman even gave him green stamps, and by golly, he kept them.

Further attesting to his showmanship was Benny's selection of his co-star, Wayne Newton.

This humble, explosively talented young man added a clever balance to the show as he delighted his -fans with such numbers as "Rock-A-Bye," "Bill Bailey," and two of his hits, "Red Roses," and "Danke Schoen."

Although firmly established in the record industry, night clubs, and television, there is no end in sight for this six foot, two inch talent machine with the choir boy voice.

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It was his stroke of fortune that his voice never changed; for it gave him the "gimmick" which is so important in the wildly competitive show business. This young man never stops working. Even when singing a ballad, his entire body seems to be keeping time with the music. He plays the trumpet and banjo with great zest, and much to the planned objection of Benny, he handles the fiddle pretty well, too. Newton borrowed a page from Judy Garland's book of success by doing one of his numbers in the audience while grabbing the hands of his excited fans.

A delightful surprise was the first stage appearance of Doris Dodge, a very attractive little 10-year-old blonde from

California. Under the pretense of asking Benny for his autograph, she then goes into a comedy routine with him. They also play several duets together.

A perfect show opener was the amazing juggling of the Rudenko Brothers. They performed some extremely difficult routines with ease.

Jack Benny Has Magical Touch With Audiences

Editor's Note: Sunday Show writer Marshall Pitler squeezed his way backstage at Starlight Musicals last week to gather impromptu interviews with Jack Benny and Wayne Newton, stars of the Jack Benny Special. He jotted down these impressions of the stars.

By MARSHALL PITLER

With the exception of pretty, 10-year-old Doris Dodge, her teacher, and her family, no one was waiting outside Jack Benny's dressing room at Starlight on opening night.

Of course, there was a reason. Guards weren't letting anyone backstage. But the power of the press was evident, because my wife and I passed through the guards. When Benny emerged from his dressing room, I introduced myself as representing The Kokomo Tribune. He smiled broadly and said, "Kokomo, Indiana. Why I worked a theater in Kokomo 40 years ago when I first started in this business."

I jokingly told Benny that I was returning a visit to his opening night in Indianapolis, since he was in my opening night audience in Heidelberg, Germany, when our 84th Infantry Division opened our Army show, "It's All Yours."

I was shocked when Benny remembered the show. "Why sure, it was 1945. I was doing a show with Ingrid Bergman, Shep Fields, Larry Adler, and Martha Tilton," the comedian said.

By this time, everyone was relaxed, and we all behaved like old friends. Jack Benny was working his magic again. Just as he does with his audiences, he made us feel perfectly at ease.

Benny was thrilled with the Starlight audience. He beamed as he said, "I can tell by that long applause, at the end of the show. They really like it." When I told Benny that the Kokomo Civic Theater presented "George Washington Slept Here," he was highly amused. Benny played Newton Fuller in the film version of the play—the same role which I portrayed last spring.

As he left, Benny said, "Say hello to everyone in Kokomo for me, and remind me to tell you a very funny story about your town the next time I see you. You won't be able to print it though." I hope it won't take another 21 years to hear that story.

Wayne Newton's manager Tommy Amato told us that several years ago, he worked several Indiana cities, including Kokomo. He was playing in a night club trio.

Of course, this was before his association with Wayne Newton. He said he would like to bring Wayne to Kokomo for a concert sometime next year, if possible.

Newton, who earned his first \$5 bill at the age of 6, is a country boy with good "up-bringin." He is polite, gracious, and very humble. He told us of his initial success in Phoenix, Ariz., which led to his own television show.

Las Vegas bookings followed, and then came his big break—his debut at the Crescendo, in Hollywood.

He and his brother Jerry have always worked together. Jerry is slightly older than 24-year-old Wayne. He is an excellent guitarist and adds a great deal of good-natured ribbing during the show.

Jerry told us that he and Wayne are building their bachelor "dream house" in Las Vegas.



Posted by [Yowp](#) at [07:13](#)



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