



Sunday, 22 August 2021

Sorry, No Seder

A number of tales have grown up around Jack Benny—in some cases, repeated by Benny himself—which simply are not true. One is that his first radio appearance was with Ed Sullivan in 1932.

Wrong. That wasn't even his first network appearance. But Jack and Ed were long-time pals and evidently it led to Benny being hired to star on his own show a few months later (and bandleader George Olson told a different story about that). Arguably, it was his first significant radio broadcast.

Then there's the story that Jack met Mary Livingstone (née Sadye Marks) at a Passover seder in Vancouver in 1922 at the invitation of one of the Marx Brothers, who were on the Orpheum bill with him.

Wrong. It never happened.

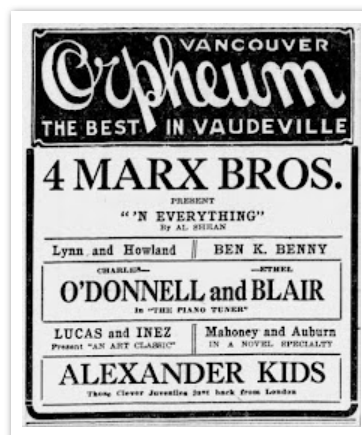
At no time did Benny and the Marx Brothers work in Vancouver in 1922. It's true they *were* on a bill together in Vancouver, and it was during the time Mary was a girl. But it was not during Passover. It is quite possible Zeppo took Benny to the Marks' home for a party while they were in town; there's no reason to disbelieve it. The story circulated for a number of years but the "seder" part seems to have been pasted on at a late date. In fact, Jack claimed it in his autobiography (contained within the book authored by his daughter, Joan).

First off, the year was 1920 and Jack was still being billed as Ben K. Benny. Their run at the Orpheum began Monday, March 8th. But Passover that year began Friday evening, April 2nd. It could be Jack attended a seder on that evening, but it would not have been in Vancouver. He and the Marxes were on stage in San Francisco that week.

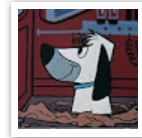
His 1920 appearance in Vancouver featured seven acts of vaudeville along with "the usual Canadian and British pictures and an orchestral offering by the Orpheum musical organization under the leadership of William Pilling." Here is the *Daily Province's* review and an ad:

One of the season's most entertaining bills of vaudeville opened yesterday at the Orpheum Theatre when the talented Marx Brothers and assisting company furnished the headline attraction. Their act is called "'N Everything" and it contains a little of almost everything including some fine singing, dancing, piano and harp playing while Julius Marx kept the audience in the best of humor with his clever quips. The act is clever and well staged and dressed and the fun is dispensed with a generous hand.

One of the most original acts seen here for some time is that presented by Charles O'Donnell and Ethel Blair in "The Piano Tuner." Charles is a gymnast and his stunts while they are screamingly funny are also extremely clever. Another unique act is that of the Alexander Girls, three very talented juveniles who dance and sing well. A feature of their act was the lavish yet tasteful gowns they wore though their act does not by any means depend for its success on the clothes. The "few minutes with Ben K. Benny" were all too short. He plays the violin well and is a still better comedian. His comedy is new and never forced and the big applause he received was merited. "A racy conversation" brings again to Vancouver Basil Lynn and Howland. Lynn first came here as the English Johnny in "The Bride Shop," and Vancouver has a very real regard for his line of comedy. Most stage



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Johnnies who come this way per the vaudeville route are merely straight fools with little to commend them. No so Mr. Lynn. His work is to the life and beneath it runs a fine vein of clever humor. His partner is the possessor of a fine voice. Dan Mahoney and George Auburn supplement some unusually clever club throwing with a rippling line of comedy and their act made a distinct hit. Lucas and Inez close with an exceptionally clever trapeze performance. The lady has been kindly death with by nature and to her gymnastic work she adds a beauty of form and face which makes it most attractive. The performance closes with the usual pictorial features. There are no disappointments on this week's bill.

Jack's return appearance in Vancouver was three years later. He was overshadowed by Harry Houdini, who got some publicity for the opening on Wednesday, February 28, 1923 by climbing the *Vancouver Sun* newspaper building at 125 West Pender (across from what later became known as the Sun Tower). However, we shall stick with the *Province* for the review the following day:

With the great Houdini as the headliner, this week's bill at the Orpheum Theatre is undoubtedly one of the best of the season. From first to last there is not a dull moment. It is a diversified bill embracing good dancing, singing, comedy, acrobatics and mystery and the opening house last night was not slow in showing its appreciation.

Interest centred around Houdini and his clever wizardry. After showing how he had successfully worked himself loose from a frame to which he had been securely fastened by a committee of Chinese on the other side of the Pacific. Houdini is shown in a thrilling airplane race and collision.

Inviting a committee from the audience on the stage, Houdini then performs his spectacular Chinese water torture cell trick (his own invention), in which he escapes from a small water-filled enclosure while suspended head downward with his feet securely fastened in stocks. He also does the famous Indian needle trick in which he is supposed to swallow four papers of needles, about three yards of silk thread which ultimately is drawn from his mouth with the needles nearly threaded.

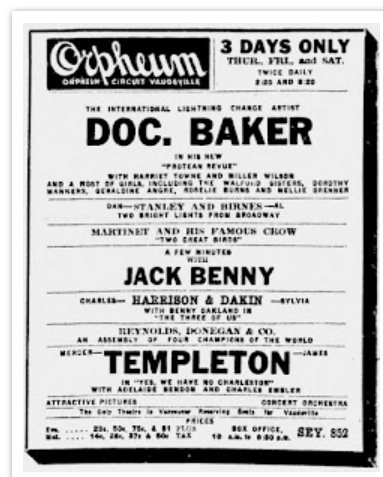
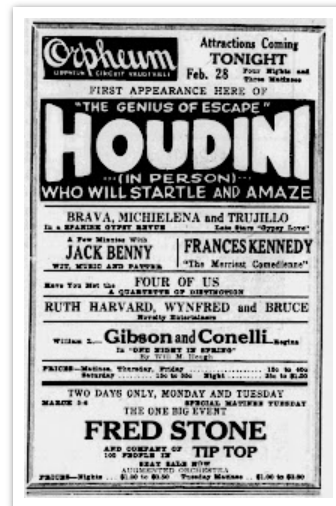
W.L. Gibson and Miss Regina Connelli offer another one-act playlet of Will M. Hough's, entitled "One Night in Spring." It is not of the ordinary run of dialogue and is full of laughs.

Jack Benny is back again with his violin, and for twelve minutes he holds the attention of the crowd with a lot of original patter in which he is ably abetted by a fine voice and an engaging natural smile. He was given a big hand. Frances Kennedy, "The Merriest Comedienne," also single-handed has little trouble in getting her act across, her pleasing personality being presented with plenty of snap and finish. The novelty of the turn was the appearance of the second bass, a man of unusually small stature for the heavy end.

Ruth Harvard-Wynfred and Bruce are a smooth working trio of flying trapeze artists, the male member providing a real thriller at the close. Brava, Michielna and Trujillo earned applause in a fine Spanish dancing revue. The orchestra played another excellent programme which with the Aesop's Fables and Pathe News pictures round out one of the best bills of the season.

Jack still wasn't headlining at his next stop in Vancouver starting Thursday, January 14, 1926. But he was appearing on the same bill as a crow. The *Sun* reported the next day:

Dance and song planetary influences ruled at the Orpheum Thursday night, melody and syncopation, costume and scenic effects, songs and jests swinging into the ken of the audience to the accompaniment of incessant applause. Rushing from change to change with unbelievable speed, Doc Baker, versatile and a personality that appeals from the start, offers a "Protean Revue" in which his expert masculine dancers and the promised "host of girls" cause the audience to regret when the colorful act is finished. The genial "Doc" is better than ever. Jack Benny carried the art of single-handed entertainment far beyond the majority of artists, even including in that statement the other outstanding stars of theatrical life. He has the audience from the start. The Templeton boys, with Adelaide Benton and Charles Embler, presenting music, songs and dances, are finished and polished players, putting over a big act that is almost a revue in itself, while Harrison and Dakin, with



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Benny Oakland, capture affections and memories in "The Three of Us," mirthful and delightful, a charming piece of work.

Stanley & Birnes are the Broadway bright lights of dance and humor, original and rousing, and Martinet and his famous crow do indeed form a rare and unusual pair of birds, feathered and human.

Altogether it's a powerful bill, right up to the best vaudeville standard.

By 1928, the new Orpheum theatre had opened and Jack made a final Vancouver date there. Things were different now. Instead of acts coming on one after another, everything was tied together by an emcee. And that was Jack. You'll note a familiar name on the bill as well. We wonder if Jack said "Play, Don," back then like he did on radio. "Sunshine Charlie" was the brother of Farina in the *Our Gang* series. The run started Monday, February 13, 1928 and the *Sun* praised it the next day.

There is a "critic's show" at the New Orpheum theatre this week—a show that will please those who are hard to please, those who require something better than the average to arouse their enthusiasm.

Several acts are uniquely excellent. Beverly Bayne stars in a clever playlet which is exquisitely acted. Miss Bayne is supported by Robert Toms and Leo Chazell. The playlet is clever and amusing.

Don Bestor and his Victor recording orchestra are good from the first note. Bestor is a real leader and he has the quality band that he deserves. Their beautiful precision, delightful musical color texture, perfect control, would delight any audience. Frankie Klassen entertains by dancing to the music.

"Sunshine Sammy," noted colored boy star of the "Our Gang" moving picture comedies, and his brother Charlie, present an entertaining comedy dancing act. These two boys are getting two [sic] big for kid pictures, but they are coming along fine as stage dancers and entertainers.

Cardini is a magician of wide attainments. He does tricks with cards, billiard balls and other articles which leave nothing to be desired. Cardini is about as finished a trickster as one could hope to see.

Jack Benny acted as master of ceremonies, and also put on a funny act of his own.

The Tom Davies Trio have a thrilling motorcycle racing exhibition on a saucer track.

The feature photoplay, "Dress Parade," with William Boyd and Billie Dove, proved enjoyable.



The next time Jack Benny appeared in Vancouver was on March 1, 1930. But not live. He was on the screen at the Capitol Theatre in *Chasing Rainbows*. About a month before that on February 5th, he promoted the movie on the weekly "Movie Club" show that aired for an hour on CBS on Wednesday nights. It's a broadcast Jack and Ed Sullivan would have you believe never happened.

Incidentally, Jack and Canadian partner Lyman Wood played the Orpheum (as "Benny and Woods") starting the week of January 29, 1917. The *Sun* crowed: "Benny and Woods gave ten minutes of syncopation, but they could have stayed for half an hour and the audience would have relished it more, for during their ten short minutes on the stage they made a real hit."

The "new" Orpheum in Vancouver still stands, thanks in good measure to Benny who performed a concert there eight months before his death to raise money for its restoration.

Posted by [Yowp](#) at [06:59](#)



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[AJL](#) 23 August 2021 at 09:32

Sunshine Sammy is Ernie Morrison, not Allen Hoskins, who played Farina. So, presumably, Sunshine Charlie is HIS brother.

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