



Sunday, 5 September 2021

The Perspiring Palm

To radio listeners in 1932, Jack Benny was a rising comedian who made fun of his sponsor on the air. Behind the scenes, things were a little more tumultuous.

Canada Dry wasn't happy with Benny's show, which debuted May 2nd. It pulled the programme off NBC and moved it onto CBS at the end of October. Benny lost his bandleader and singers as well as his announcer as they were bound by contract to remain at 711 Fifth Avenue. More significantly, Canada Dry saddled Phil Baker's former stooge, Sid Silvers, on the show as a writer.

Silvers started coming up with a storyline that included more and more of him. That would mean less of Benny's wife, Mary Livingstone. Benny wasn't happy, Livingstone wasn't happy and original writer Harry Conn wasn't happy. The three of them forced a showdown. Silvers was out before year-end. Canada Dry soon decided the Benny show was a huge headache and pulled it off the air entirely. The last Canada Dry show was January 26, 1933.

(Evidently there were no hard feelings. Silvers stooged for Benny in the MGM feature *Broadway Melody of 1936*, co-written by Conn).

Jack had become popular enough on the old Stromberg-Carlson that *Radio Guide* profiled him in its October 1, 1932 issue. The show hadn't moved to CBS yet; that came at the end of the month.

I believe the "manager" being quoted is Harry Baldwin, who appeared on Benny's show until his induction in World War Two.

Meet the Artist

Jack Benny

BY LEE RONELL

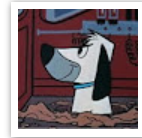
WE sat and talked and watched many busy people scurrying around that thirteenth floor of the National Broadcasting Studios.

Or rather I sat and talked and watched Jack Benny did nothing but say "Hello, Pal" . . . "Howre yah, Westerner?" Well, well, well, if it isn't Ned, you old so and so." Because everybody on that thirteenth floor knows

Jack Benny. The Canada Dry Orchestra members all have admiring smiles for Mr. Benny. The receptionist has a great big grin for him. And everybody else has many hellos." In fact, every time he really got going on what promised to be an interesting statement about something or a revealing fact about himself . . . another person had shouted "hello" . . . and ankle over to see what Mr. Benny was doing at the moment. Considering that the Canada Dry rehearsal had to start rehearsing in just a very few minutes. I thought it a bit inconsiderate of Mr. Benny to have so many friends, and inconsiderate of him to greet them so effusively. But that's Jack Benny, folks. Just a great big "hello" man. Cordial, beaming, unexcitable, very nonchalant. Wouldn't dream of snubbing anybody. Not the least bit high hat.

You'd hardly know Jack Benny off the air. I begged him to say something funny. He groaned. And his manager . . . only one of the various "stooges" that was hanging around, intercepted with, "He can't say anything funny. Never does." And Mr. Benny said, "If even my manager says I'm not funny, I guess I'm not." Most of his ideas for his continuity come to him on the golf course, he confided to me. Just as he gets his stance all perfect and his eye on the ball . . . he gets a thought. That's why his golf is so bad. But he loves it. He loves golf and his wife. They've been married for six years . . . I mean Benny and his wife. And still just as delirious. No scandal mongers have anything to do with the Benny's. They realize it's just unnecessary eye-

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strain . . . peeping through the Benny keyhole on Central Park West. Mrs. Benny is known professionally by any one of a dozen names on the stage and air . . . and has recently put in some work for Jack's program. "She only appears to help me out," says Jack. "In fact she never had any connection with the stage before she met me. She married me and part of the marriage vows said something about being a 'help-mate' so she got included in my work. That's what you call utilizing a wife."

Jack Benny started trouping years ago.

Started off from his home town, Chicago, Illinois, and traveled around the various vaudeville circuits in these United States. Several seasons with the Shuberts and Earl Carroll on Broadway. Several more seasons making Hollywood pictures for Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer ... the biggest of which was "The Hollywood Revue." Some more time spent making "shorts" for Paramount and then back to New York to be master of ceremonies at the Capitol and other large playhouses on Broadway.

Canada Dry was Jack's first try before the mike ... and it got him pretty panicky at first.

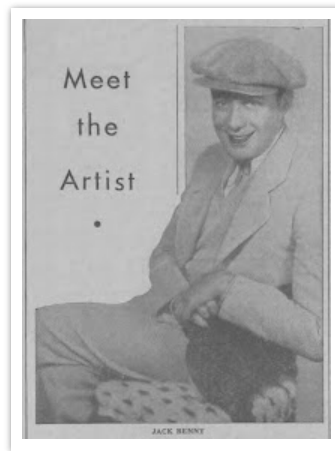
"The second time I was on the air I dropped one page from my continuity script without realizing it. When I came to that page, I stopped . . . dumb. I couldn't talk. I couldn't look around. I thought nine hours had passed and the end of the world had come. Ethel Shutta, standing next to me, discovered my plight and thrust the missing page into my perspiring palm. Nothing like that catastrophe could happen on the stage. You could bluff it out. But not over the air."

Jack's got no ambition. I mean he doesn't care about being president or anything pretentious like that. He wants to keep going on pretty much as he is. Wants to stay on the air as long as he doesn't go stale, he started off being terribly funny and he says very seriously that it's up to him to keep the pace. "You never compete against others on the air," says Jack. "You compete against yourself. It makes no difference if you're better than somebody else. You've got to be as good as you are at your best. If you start off with a bang . . . you've got to keep it up or you flop. Listening to others on the air doesn't mean a thing. What they're doing doesn't affect me directly. It's what I'm doing that makes the difference."

"Canada Dry" a page sang out.

"That's me," said Mr. Benny. "Say, I forgot to tell you what I dislike. I dislike interviews. Not good at them at all. You should talk to the wife. She can tell you things about me that she never thought of before. Why don't you get in touch with her?"

For his fans, Jack never got stale. He stayed on the air, albeit reduced to occasional specials, until his death in 1974. Despite any "dislike," he kept doing interviews until then, too.



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