



Sunday, 5 February 2023

I Never Ate Jell-O

Out of curiosity, I did a newspaper search of this date 50 years ago to see what Jack Benny was up to. Lo and behold, there was a feature article about him in the *Burlington (N.C.) Times-News*.

This article had been released to subscribing papers by the North American Newspaper Alliance earlier. In those pre-internet days, it was not uncommon for feature pieces to be spiked (that is, put on hold; I worked in a newsroom decades ago that still used spikes on the wall for wire copy).

This version was published in the Bergen County *Record*, January 18, 1973

The story answers a question some Benny fans ask now and again—did Jack use his sponsors' products? In the case of his two best-known sponsors, the answer is "no."

The jokes were on Jack

By DAN LEWIS

Entertainment Columnist

HOLLYWOOD — Jack Benny was guest of honor at a party tossed by NBC and the parent RCA corporation the other night. As one would suspect, it was filled with great fun and nostalgia. What makes a Benny function fun-filled is that Jack not only likes to tell stories about himself, but enjoys repeating what others have said about him.

It was of course more than coincidence that the tribute should be paid to Benny on the eve of his first television special of the season, "The First Jack Benny Farewell Special" (tonight on NBC-TV, 9-10).

Probably the greatest tribute to Benny was reflected in the presence at the party of Bob Sarnoff, chairman of the RCA board and its chief operating officer, Julian Goodman, president of NBC, and Don Durgen, president of NBC-TV.

Jack was presented with a special gift, an old RCA radio set, 1929 vintage. When he flicked the dial, memories flooded the room, as the voice of the late Fred Allen boomed from its speaker via playbacks from his old radio show.

In the acid style that characterized their hilarious feud in radio's golden days, Allen was heard declaring: "Benny was born ignorant, and has been going down ever since." And. "Benny has a pig on stage so it can eat the things the audience throws at him. Some weeks he has two pigs."

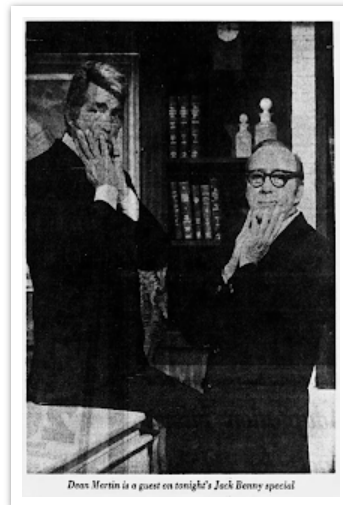
Jack stood on stage listening and laughing hard. Then he recalled another Allen gag. "They planted trees in my honor in my home town of Waukegan, Ill.," Jack recalled. "Allen said 'How can they expect the trees to grow in Waukegan when the sap is in Hollywood?'" Jack loved telling the story.

Jack also made some startling observations: "All the time I was so successful with Jell-o (as his sponsor) I never ate a drop of it. I hated Jell-o."

Later, Jack's sponsor became Lucky Strike cigarettes. "I never smoked in my life," Jack declared. The stories about Benny's alleged cheapness have been legendary. Jack does nothing to discourage them. Even at this party, he helped perpetuate the legend.

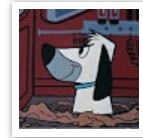
He revealed that while he was sitting at the table with Bob Sarnoff during the dinner, he said he wanted to show Sarnoff that all the stories about him were untrue.

"You know, Bob," Jack recalled telling Sarnoff. "I'm not cheap, I'd like to pay for this dinner here



Don Martin is a guest on tonight's Jack Benny special

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tonight."

Sarnoff protested. Jack persisted.

Finally, Sarnoff told Benny, "No Jack, I'd feel better if you let me pay for it."

"Well, Bob," Jack responded, "if you're [sic] health is involved. . .all right."

40 TV critics were invited to the dinner. It appears the *Chicago Tribune's* Clarence Petersen was one as he reported on it, and had more quotes from Jack:

"When it comes to commercials, people will remember what you said when they are laughing at the same time. I'll never forget the first time we did it. I was nearly thrown off the air.

"Because the first company I ever worked for was Canada Dry Ginger Ale. We had one that I thought was so funny, where I told the listening audience . . . that the product was so good that we had a salesman whose territory was the Sahara Desert, and this salesman ran into a caravan of about 30 people who were dying of thirst; so our salesman gave each of them a glass of Canada Dry Ginger Ale, and not one of them said it was a bad drink.

"Now that's funny, isn't it? And do you know I was nearly thrown off of that show. They were gonna say: 'How dare you? We can't have that kind of negative advertising!' "

Among the guests was Jack's long-time friend, George Burns. Petersen recounted:

From the sidelines, George Burns ventured onto thin ice by recalling one of Benny's earliest stingy jokes.

"YOU DID A JOKE about taking a girl to a cafeteria," said Burns, "and you said she laughed so loud she pretty near dropped her tray."

Benny stared for a moment, then exploded: "You just spoiled the joke! Now, I want to show you how a great comedian . . . I want to show you how you spoiled that joke. I remember that joke. Now here's the way you tell it: 'I took my girl to a *restaurant* and I told her something and she laughed so hard that she dropped her tray.' *That's* funny. You immediately spoiled it by saying I took her to a *cafeteria*—well, for crissake, in a cafeteria she *would* have a tray. You ought to be ashamed of yourself!"

It was one of the few times Benny has got the best of Burns, but Benny also told of a more typical exchange:

"NOT LONG AGO THE FRIARS Club of New York gave a dinner for George and me . . . so we go to New York, to the Plaza Hotel, and take a suite of rooms—a living room and two bedrooms, a bedroom for him and a bedroom for me.

"Now, I said: 'George, let's get to bed early tonight because tomorrow we've got to think, and we've got to work tomorrow night. It's a dinner for us, and we're both going to have to make speeches, so let's get to bed early.'

"So I go to bed. I want to show you what this man can do. It's unbelievable.

"About 3:30 or 4 o'clock in the morning, I feel something tugging at my arm, and I wake up, and it's George, standing there with a deck of cards in his hand and I can hardly open my eyes. I'm sound asleep and he is standing there and he says, 'take a card.'

"So like a damn fool, I took a card. And he says to me, look at it.'

"I can hardly see. So I looked at it and he said, 'put it back in the deck.'

"And I, like a fool, I put it back in the deck, and he says, 'thank you' and went back to his own bedroom.

"I didn't sleep for the rest of the night."

And no one slept at the Jack Benny party either. Benny even played the violin for us, which was enough to sour the wine in your glass, but it left a very good taste in your mouth.

Sad to say, Benny's first farewell special was just about his last. He planned a series of them and work had begun on the third when he died of pancreatic cancer just after Christmas in 1974.

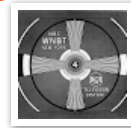
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