



Sunday, 19 March 2023

Creating Jack Benny

Jack Benny went from a man whose comedy had never been done before, to a man whose comedy had always been done before.

Benny starred in his own radio show in 1932. Canada Dry was his sponsor. If they thought they were buying Jack's old vaudeville routines, they were mistaken. Benny got laughs by making fun of his sponsor. The sponsor wasn't altogether happy about being ridiculed and Benny was sent packing within a year (after a failed attempt to foist a new writer on him).

Jack and his writers, over the years, then evolved a series of characters and situations—eventually so numerous, they could play mix and match and call on them at any time. By the time Benny was cruising along in television in the '50s, he continually dragged out his old routines, sometimes slightly reworking huge portions of old radio scripts. It had been done before, but still got laughs.



Here's a syndicated story explaining how the show was put together for weekly television. It appeared in papers as early as Sept. 9, 1960. The photo below accompanied the article. The irony is Mary Livingstone was no longer part of show. She refused to go on camera, though Jack was able to cajole her to appear on very rare occasion. Mary developed into a fine comedienne, at least within the context of the Benny oeuvre, but stage fright overcame her as time went on. Jack stays in character at the end.

Jack Benny Reveals Secrets of Survival

Avoiding Bad Taste Policy in TV Shows

Editor's Note: This article was written for the North American Newspaper Alliance by a veteran of the entertainment world and one of its top stars who gives much credit for his success to his writers and to the insistence that nothing of an offensive nature must appear on his television shows.

By JACK BENNY

ANYONE who has been around the broadcasting business as long as I, and continually employed at that, rates a job in the government's Civil Defense Agency. He knows all there is to know about survival! Last autumn my gang and I returned for an 11th season of television. Since you don't have your second year of life (something which has always confused me) our first show was in effect the 10th anniversary of our video debut. Of course, it was many years prior to that that my good friend, Ed Sullivan, introduced me to broadcasting. I was an experienced vaudevillian at the time and had won some recognition in major Broadway musicals.

Ed put me on his radio show and as I stood there before that pugnacious microphone my first broadcast words were:

"Hello folks. This Is Jack Benny. There will be a slight pause for everyone to say 'Who cares?'"

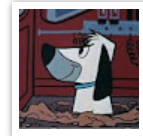
The fact that people cared then and have cared enough since to keep our program going through close to 1,000 radio and television broadcasts is largely a tribute to my writers.

Ad Libs Not Answer

Fred Allen once told me "You couldn't ad lib a belch after a Hungarian dinner." Well I don't know about that. I've done some rather wonderful things after Hungarian dinners.

Nevertheless unless, you are a genius—which I am not—or the luckiest man alive, you cannot survive long in this business relying on ad libs alone. Allen was pretty good at it—he once said I was the only violinist who makes you feel the strings would sound better back in the cat—but even Fred, the

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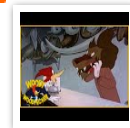
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comedians' comedian, had his troubles with TV.

You survive and prosper in this profession by preparedness—and my best “ad libs” are those my writers and I have worked on a long time.

When I was a youngster starting out as the only knickerbockered member of the pit orchestra at the Barrison Theater in Waukegan, comedians could break in their acts in the small time and gradually improve the material as they profited by audience reaction. But this electronic stage we operate on today is different. You need a new act every time you're on— and there is no opportunity to be lousy.

Long-Time Associates

I have four writers and they've all been with me a long time. When I want the “new boys,” for example, I ask for Hal Goldman and Al Gordon. They've been with me only 10 years. Sam Perrin and George Balzer are in their 18th year. Of course, I'm a guy who believes in togetherness. Don Wilson and Rochester have been around almost as long as I and Mahlon Merrick has been my musical director 25 years.

I have a suite of offices in Beverly Hills and the writers have a big room there, complete with coke, coffee and cigarette vending machines so they won't have to go out for a coffee break. As you can see, their comfort is uppermost in my mind.

We don't keep track of who comes up with what bit of funny business. None of us cares who creates which joke and, anyhow, usually we're all talking at once while a secretary tries to take verbatim notes. Naturally, she can only transcribe those words she hears. Since we all occasionally outshout the other, the result is a pretty good mixture of all our thoughts.

We start with a situation premise for a show and go on from there. While we make changes and improvements right up to the moment of putting the show on film or tape, this can't be construed as deadline writing because we work on scripts many weeks ahead.

If we have one guiding policy, it is to avoid bad taste. Let me give you an example. I think the so-called school of “sick comedy” is atrocious. I don't like jokes about Buchenwald or what happened at the theater the night Lincoln was killed I don't use material which seeks a laugh at the expense of somebody's grave misfortune. You can learn a lot of things in this business but you can't learn good taste Either you have it or you haven't.

Show Preparations

I've said that my writers and I huddle first to decide on a story premise. Then they go to work on the first of several script drafts. I edit the material, suggest additions and changes. Finally as the date of broadcast approaches, we call in all the members of the cast and read the script aloud in my office — each doing his own part. This gives us an approximate idea of timing and also an indication of where doctoring is needed.

Everyone goes home and memorises his lines—we don't use teleprompters or “idiot cards.” Two days later we start two days of intense rehearsal and the third day we put the show on film or tape. The writers are present through the entire operation and contribute refinements up to the second the cameras function.

This year we are doing a show every Sunday night. In that initial TV season a decade ago, I did only four programs. The next year we did six, then ten, and the last few years we were on every other week. But a weekly show is easier for me because we can use running gags and anyhow once our steam is up we roll. I suppose if anyone were to ask the secret of our success I'd have to say we work hard— and don't try to reach for the moon. You cannot have a blockbuster every week. You cannot expect to be on top of every popularity poll.

Try to Amuse

We try never to be lousy. That way we are frequently quite funny. We seek to amuse. And it isn't simple. The writers must produce every week.

This means I must keep them in good humor and never offend them.

I lean over backwards to do this. For instance, a few years ago when Al Gordon, the youngest of my writers, had been with me only a relatively short time, he nagged me into betting \$20 the New York Giants would win the world series. Cleveland was Al's choice. I'm not much of a gambling man but Al was insistent.

Well, the Giants won the first game and Al insisted on paying me. But I didn't want to take his money—he had a child and a new home. So I suggested we bet double or nothing on the second game. That night I was \$40 ahead.

Now I was really in a quandary. If I took his money I'd feel guilty. And if I didn't he'd be offended. So we double-or-nothinged again. Surely it was now Cleveland's turn to win a game.

Well, you know what happened. New York won in four straight and I ended up with \$160.

Which only goes to prove that considerate treatment of others always pays off.



Jack Benny and His Wife, Mary Livingstone.

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