



Sunday, 23 July 2023

Starmaker Benny

If you're a fan of Jack Benny, you probably know his regular cast—Mary Livingstone, Don Wilson, Phil Harris, Rochester and Dennis Day. They weren't world-famous before joining Jack's radio show. They were afterward.

Granted, Harris appeared in an Oscar-winning short and had one of many band remote shows on network radio. But his character as a semi-literate party animal came from Benny's writers. Wilson had been a West Coast radio personality, mainly as a football announcer brought east by NBC. Again, Benny and his writers took the standard characteristic they had given to two previous announcers—a sponsor buttinsky—and added a joviality (which seems to have been natural to Wilson) and jokes about his weight and created a whole new Don Wilson.

There were other people who got their fame through Jack, and not necessarily people who were regulars on his show. The entertainment columnist for the North American Newspaper Alliance named a number of them in this Sunday feature article of March 27, 1955. The story about the Harris-Faye show is new to me. Harris and his wife had replaced Cass Daley on *The Fitch Bandwagon* before, essentially, taking the show to a new sponsor and changing its name.



Comedian Jack Benny Also Develops Stars

By SHEILAH GRAHAM

HOLLYWOOD, (NANA) — Leigh Snowden, a beautiful blonde with a highly provocative walk, had been in Hollywood for six months trying to crash television or motion pictures when she finally landed a walk-on role on a Jack Benny TV program and—boom! She was an overnight success.

With all due respect to Leigh's talent and charms, this parlay from obscurity to Benny to success is an old story. Everyone knows Jack as a great comedian on radio and TV, but few ever think of him as a talent finder and star-maker. But let's look at the record.

To go back to Miss Snowden. This delectable Memphis belle worked in San Francisco as a model before coming to Hollywood to make her big try. She got a couple of video bits, made the rounds of the studios and went through the routine of trying to meet casting directors and win auditions and screen tests. Nothing happened, as is the case with 99 of 100 such girls, even those as beautiful as Leigh.

Then Benny did a TV show originating from the San Diego Naval Base, and he needed a beautiful girl to walk across the stage during the show. Selecting Leigh for the part, he expected a reaction from his sailor audience—but even Benny was surprised at what happened.

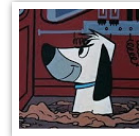
Girl Stops Show

Leigh walked across the stage on cue—and stopped the show completely. Ten thousand Navy men whistled, stomped, cheered and shouted until Jack brought her back on and introduced her. The results of her appearance were magical.

All the motion-picture studios became interested. Universal-International signed Leigh to a contract and now a rumor is current in Hollywood that three of the studios have banned her agent because they feel he didn't give them a fair opportunity to bid for her talents.

The same old Benny magic worked on behalf of Gisele MacKenzie, a very talented singer, musician and actress. Gisele sang on radio for a couple of years in Hollywood after arriving from Canada, but she was just another singer. Then Jack hired her to go on tour with him and wherever they played Gisele was one of the show's high spots. Jack discovered she had a fine talent for comedy as well as singing and he talked his sponsors, Lucky Strike cigarettes, into putting her on their "Hit Parade" TV show.

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Jack Benny, maker of movie and TV stars. Leigh Snowden is his latest talent find.

his raucous-voiced butler, the famous "Rochester."

Jack took Frank Parker, a completely unknown singer, and made him famous. When Parker left the show Jack discovered another unknown, Kenny Baker, and made him into a bigger star than Parker. Then Baker left and Jack looked for still another new singer. His wife Mary was responsible for his neat discovery, according to Jack. She heard an audition record made in New York by a young singer named Eugene Patrick McNulty. At the time Jack sent for him McNulty was making a fast \$12.50 a week but within a year he was famous as Dennis Day.

The famous Sportsman Quartet was just one of a hundred singing groups around Hollywood when Jack hired them to do a gag singing commercial—the first of what has since become a main feature of the show.

Fred Allen says that "Jack Benny isn't really cheap—it's just that he's got short arms and carries his money low in his pockets."

Really Generous

It's a funny line and a part of the Benny myth, but actually, Jack is one of the most generous men in show business. And he swears his interest in new talent is definitely not because he can get unknowns cheaper than established players. When Phil Harris, for many years his orchestra leader, was going to start his own radio show with his wife, Alice Faye, Jack let Phil keep the whole show package. He not only gave Phil full ownership, but even got NBC to give him the choice network time following right after the Benny program.

When established stars like Claudette Colbert, Barbara Stanwyck and even Marilyn Monroe want to do a TV or radio appearance to perk up their popularity, where do they go? To the Benny show—every time if possible. Even the entrance of such a fine dramatic actor as Ronald Colman into radio and television was caused by Jack. Colman and his wife, Benita Hume, made guest appearances on Jack's radio show and boom! The usual happened.

Gisele did very well, audiences liked her, but there was nothing spectacular about her success. Then Jack brought her out to Hollywood for a guest appearance on a recent TV program and boom! It happened again. Now the whole country is talking about her great talent and the movie studios are after her.

"I might not have talent myself," Benny says, "But I sure can pick 'em."

Developed 'Rochester'

"Rochester," of course, is the classic example of what happens to those lucky enough to become associated with Jack. As Eddie Anderson he had kicked around show business for years, getting small movie jobs and touring the country with vaudeville units. Then Benny needed an actor to play a Pullman porter for one show and Eddie got the part. Little by little, Jack worked him into the show as

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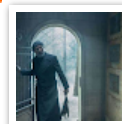
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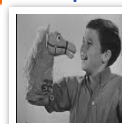
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- ▼ 2023 (212)
 - ▼ July (24)
 - Starmaker Benny
 - George Cannata
 - Tony Bennett Conquers
the Early 1950s
 - The Return of Carlo's Cat
 - TV of Yesterday
 - Let's Give Jim Backus a
Show
 - Cheering Hot Dogs
 - Stretched Duck
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Terry
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[Soitenly!](#)

[He Got It](#)

[More NOISE!](#)

[Life Begins at 39](#)

[Animating the Beatles In
Vancouver](#)

- ▶ [June](#) (32)
- ▶ [May](#) (32)
- ▶ [April](#) (31)
- ▶ [March](#) (31)
- ▶ [February](#) (29)
- ▶ [January](#) (33)
- ▶ [2022](#) (382)
- ▶ [2021](#) (380)
- ▶ [2020](#) (389)
- ▶ [2019](#) (376)
- ▶ [2018](#) (379)
- ▶ [2017](#) (380)
- ▶ [2016](#) (396)
- ▶ [2015](#) (389)
- ▶ [2014](#) (390)
- ▶ [2013](#) (388)
- ▶ [2012](#) (397)
- ▶ [2011](#) (106)

Labels

[Aline Mosby](#) (18)

[Art Davis](#) (43)

[Bad Luck Blackie](#) (12)

[Bob and Ray](#) (16)

[Bob Clampett](#) (113)

[Bob McKimson](#) (81)

[Bob Thomas](#) (66)

[Chuck Jones](#) (182)

[Columbia](#) (65)

[Counterfeit Cat](#) (10)

[Cynthia Lowry](#) (36)

[Dick Thomas](#) (18)

[Don Patterson](#) (24)

[Drag-a-Long Droopy](#) (14)

[Earl Wilson](#) (19)

[Erskine Johnson](#) (43)

[Felix the Cat](#) (36)

[Film Daily](#) (50)

[Fleischer](#) (206)

[Frank Tashlin](#) (41)

[Fred Allen](#) (56)

[Fred Brunish](#) (12)

[Friz Freleng](#) (190)

[Gene Deitch](#) (23)

[George Pal](#) (11)

[Grant Simmons](#) (10)

[Hanna and Barbera unit](#) (128)

[Hanna-Barbera](#) (8)

[Hans Conried](#) (5)

[Hardaway-Dalton unit](#) (7)

[Harman-Ising](#) (97)

[Henry Morgan](#) (14)

[Irv Spence](#) (12)

[Jack Benny](#) (607)

[Jay Ward](#) (35)

[Jimmy Durante](#) (21)

[John Crosby](#) (106)

[John Sutherland](#) (41)

[Johnny Johnsen](#) (42)

[Johnny Olson](#) (5)

[Kenny Baker](#) (6)

[King-Size Canary](#) (9)

[Laugh-In](#) (17)

[Legend of Rockabye Point](#) (6)

[Little Rural Riding Hood](#) (7)

[Magical Maestro](#) (10)

[Maurice Noble](#) (12)

[Mel-O-Toons](#) (5)

[MGM](#) (729)

[Norm McCabe](#) (10)

[Pat Matthews](#) (13)

[Paul Julian](#) (16)

[Sara Berner](#) (5)

[Screwy Squirrel](#) (41)

[Spider-Man](#) (3)

[Terrytoons](#) (116)

[Tex Avery](#) (636)

[The Cat That Hated People](#)
(10)

[Toby the Pup](#) (4)

[Tom and Jerry Human](#) (46)

[Tralfaz Sunday Theatre](#) (20)

[Ub Iwerks](#) (122)

[UPA](#) (76)

[Van Beuren](#) (137)

[Vernon Scott](#) (52)

[Virginia MacPherson](#) (14)

[Walt Disney](#) (203)

[Walter Lantz](#) (319)

[Warner Bros.](#) (845)

[Who Killed Who](#) (10)

