

Sunday 4 August 2024

Play, Don

Two men joined Jack Benny's gang on April 6, 1934. One stayed for years. The other didn't.

The date is when General Tire began bankrolling the show. Replacements were needed for announcer Alois Havrilla and band leader Frank Black from the Chevrolet programme. In fact, Benny was going to dump singer Frank Parker but it turned out the supposed successor, Bob Simmons, signed an exclusive contract for a show that never got on the air (*Akron Beacon Journal*, Apr. 6, 1934).

The diction-award-winning Havrilla, who, frankly, sounded too formal at times, was replaced by the jovial Don Wilson, whose likable personality kept him with Benny from radio into TV. Black, a fine orchestra leader, but who delivered his lines in a moan, left in favour of Don Bestor.

Bestor lasted through the half-season for General Tire and the first season for Jell-O, both on the NBC Blue/WJZ network. Bestor's lasting accomplishment was writing the five-note Jell-O jingle that was still heard on TV commercials in the 1960s (the Chipmunks sang it on *The Alvin Show*). Warner Bros. cartoon fans have heard a reference to Bestor. At the end of *Page Miss Glory* (1936), the title character leans downward and says "Play, Don," which is what Benny used to say to Bestor every week.

Benny and Bestor had worked together before. They appeared on an Orpheum bill in Western Canada and down the U.S. West Coast in early 1928. Bestor had a contract with Victor records at the time. Despite that, he wasn't just handled the job. One press report said five bands were up for the gig. Bestor (or a ghost writer) explained what happened in a story in the *Omaha Bee-News*, May 19, 1935. He was working on the Nestle show with Walter O'Keefe and Ethel Shutta (the main vocalist on Benny's first show for Canada Dry in 1932) just before jumping to Jack.

How It Feels to Be a Comedian's Stoooge By Don Bestor

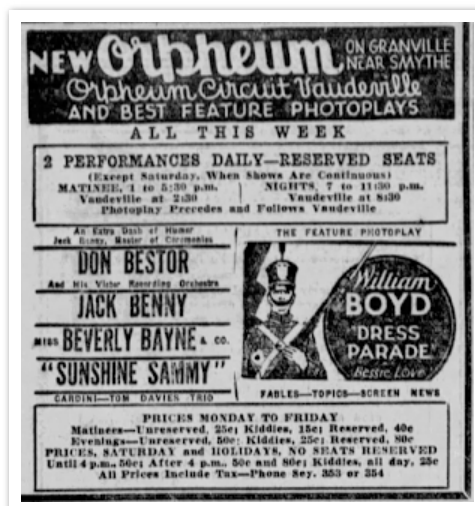
When the Jack Benny series of programs were in the process of realization, the sponsors, Jack Benny and Harry Conn, who writes the scripts, were casting about for an orchestra leader with not only a musically satisfying outfit, but with an ability to stoooge for Benny's barbs.

Arranged for An Audition

My agent arranged for an audition for me, but, as a matter of fact, both he and I didn't think a great deal of my chances of clicking. I'd always been sort of serious minded, I'd never read comedy lines and had



DON BESTOR



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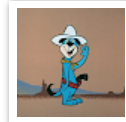


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vague misgivings at being able to do so capably. So when the studio officials and Benny notified me I was in you could have knocked me down with Frank Parker. (See, I was getting funny already). Before the first rehearsal, Jack came to me and said:

"Look, Don, we're going to build you up as a very intellectual chap. Fastidious dresser, very polite, very formal and all that. You're not a flippant guy and we won't write you the flip, Broad-wayish lines we did for Jimmie Grier, Ted Weems or any of the other orchestra leaders who have worked with me on the air. Rather, you're to be played up as serious and quite studious. O. K.?

I said I thought it was a fine idea. We talked some more and got down to rehearsal.

Benny Is Target Of All Jokes

That was more than a year ago, but Jack says it only seems like 11 1/2 months.

How does it feel to be a comedian's stooge? I wouldn't know, because I don't think I am one. Not that I'm above such plebian endeavors, but Jack Benny's style makes him the butt of all jokes at the hands of his assistants in fun. He says he can get more laughs that way than if he had all the smart lines himself. And who am I to argue?

A nice guy, Benny, though I still haven't that Christmas present he promised me a dozen scripts ago.

It would seem the Christmas present routine was a running gag. The *Star Weekly* from Toronto on May 18, 1935 mentioned:

Jack Benny has not yet given Don Bestor a Christmas present. Because he has been worrying about it so much on his radio programs, listeners have been coming to his aid. Hundreds of packages in red and green wrapping have come to Jack with instructions that he should give them to Don. To date the orchestra leader has received, among other things, 17 neckties, a birdcage, 3 batons, 6 worn-out pairs of shoes, 11 books and innumerable pairs of spats of various hues and descriptions.

Bestor's spats were another running gag. A number of press items came out about the May 5, 1935 broadcast, when Benny celebrated his third anniversary on the air, such as this one from the *Victoria Daily Times* of May 11:

Don Bestor, director of the musical destinies of the Jack Benny radio programme, has gone to Hollywood, by his own admission. Much to the surprise of Benny and the studio audience, Bestor appeared for his second programme at Hollywood's NBC studios clad in a grey sport ensemble, with low shirt and flowing tie. And, horror of horrors, he had no spats on. "Bestor, where are your spats?" shouted Benny across the stage. "The southland has got me at last," Bestor answered.

Other papers continued the exchange:

"Well, after this," reprimanded Benny, "don't forget your spats. What do you think we built that 'spats' gag up for anyway?"

The *Brooklyn Times Union* of May 12 reported the retort this way:

"After this," counselled Benny, "come in shorts if you want, but don't forget the spats. Your musicians will not recognize you."

Some other Bestor-related high-jinks on that same show, first as mentioned in Jo Ranson's column in the *Brooklyn Eagle*, then from "Michael O'Dial" of the *Regina Leader-Post*.

Benny got so fussed up at missing a line that he completely forgot about introducing Parker's vocal number. The tenor-comedian had to do the honors for himself and in turn became so confused he announced one of Don Bestor's tunes instead. The Benny cast, however, is so adept at ad-libbing and taking advantage of boners that the slip was not noticed on the air.

Jack Benny had Omaha as the winner of the Kentucky Derby in his script three days before the race, but was touted off the winner and bet on another horse an hour before. It was all because Don Bestor got a wire from a friend at the track who had a "sure thing." Hence that "crack" Sunday night.



Movies with Michael



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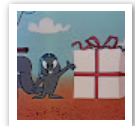
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Mark Kausler's CatBlog

Felix Home Alone - Hi Readers, Here's Felix from 19320828 to 19320910. The Sundays involve the farm animals rehearsing for the Summer Olympic Games, and Felix winning the sho...

1 week ago



Above: Jack Benny, star; Mary Livingstone, star stooge; Don Bestor, maestro; Frank Parker, soloist; Don Wilson, announcer, and the band.

When he was on the Benny show, Bestor had band singers named Joy Lynne and Neil Buckley, but there seems to have been no consideration to employ the vocalists on the programme.

From the mid-1940s on, there was a joke about Dennis Day and Phil Harris having “two shows.” Bestor had two shows as well, at least during the month we’ve been talking about. Band remotes were big between 10 and 1 in the morning back then, with engineers plugging patch cords into Nemo inputs from various hotel ballrooms.

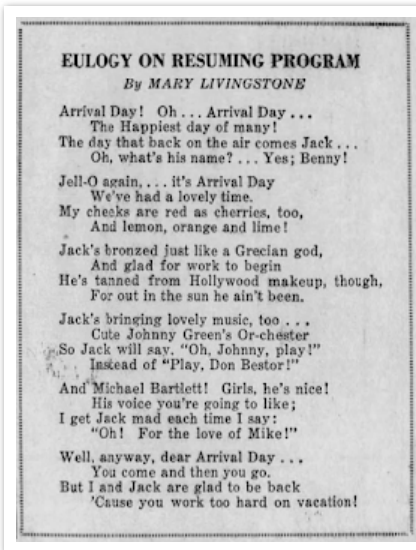
Bestor and his orchestra were heard on the Don Lee network on the West Coast almost nightly; one of his air dates was picked up on the full CBS network. It involved a bit of juggling on Bestor’s part. The first part of the month, his band was in the St. Francis Hotel in San Francisco. The *Oakland Tribune* reported on Sundays, Bestor let someone else lead his band in the Bay City. On the Benny show, the *Los Angeles Times* revealed he waved the baton in Hollywood over Harry Jackson’s orchestra.

The *Los Angeles Evening Post-Record’s* Dylan Wright had some gossip on that, published July 17, 1935, three days after the final Benny show of the season.

Don Bestor didn’t like the orchestra they gave him for the Jack Benny shows. The musicians’ union wouldn’t let him use his own band for the program. However, he used the same band which Bing Crosby used and which does much of the movie work locally. Bestor will not be with Benny when his NBC half hour resumes in the fall and it looks like big rivalry among other bands for the berth.

Bestor, reports said, wanted to go back East and perform there, as Benny was staying in California making movies for Paramount. In the fall of 1935, he also played on a 15-minute programme, apparently on transcription.

Benny responded by hiring pianist/composer Johnny Green. He found a replacement for Frank Parker in Michael Bartlett, who survived only five shows before Kenny Baker replaced him. Jack still didn’t quite have the show put together the way we remember. Phil Harris, Rochester and Dennis Day were yet to come.



Posted by Yowp at 07:36

Labels: Jack Benny

Termite Terrace headlines

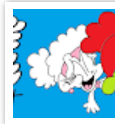


A Mistake Only Charlton Could Make - The Jetsons,

here mistakenly referred to by their Spanish name, Los Supersonicos, in Charlton's Huckleberry Hound#3.

3 weeks ago

Pete Hale



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