



Sunday 18 August 2024

Writing For Benny

Jack Benny was regularly on radio or television for 33 seasons and, unlike pretty much every comedian on a variety show, only used a handful of writers.

After Benny and his first writer, Harry Conn, parted very unamicably in 1936, the majority of those who came afterward stayed with him for years.

One of them, Milt Josefsberg, wrote a book about his time with Benny, while George Balzer gave a number of interviews over the years. Both had nothing but good to say about Jack, and Jack had nothing but good to say about them.

Here's how he put it in a column that appeared in papers starting July 1, 1964.

TV Comedy Writing Is Serious Business

For at least 38 of his 39 years, Jack Benny has been a regular visitor in the nation's living rooms. He will be around again next season, returning to NBC after a lengthy sojourn at CBS. Here Jack, in an unaccustomed serious vein, gives tribute, where at least part of the credit is due, to his writers. Still, without Benny and his fabulous sense of comedy timing, those writers would not be a part of an American institution, "The Jack Benny Show." Today Jack Benny is the writer—as a guest for Cynthia Lowry, who is on vacation.

By JACK BENNY

Written For The Associated Press.

HOLLYWOOD, Calif.—We have many guest stars on my program. But before these personalities are scheduled to appear, I get together with my writers and we come up with a point of view that will fit each one. Actually, we always start out with a clear slate—we let ideas grow, tossing them back and forth.

The one program that is the exception—one that we pretty well know about ahead of time—is the annual show we do with James Stewart and his wife Gloria, my neighbors in Beverly Hills.

As almost everyone knows, the business of writing comedy is a serious one. Those who doubt this need only visit my set on Stage 2 at Revue Universal Studios. Look for the saddest-appearing men around.

They will be my writers. They get together to play with ideas. They call me after a while and say: "Jack, we've got it. This is fine. We think we have a good story-line now."

They tell me where they are going with the show—what the script will be. We spend a great deal of time editing. We never let a show reach the cameras exactly the way it was first written.

But when you stop to think about it, my four writers have good reason to be happy fellows.

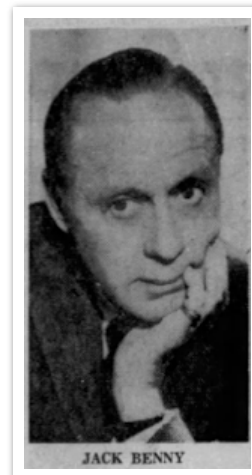
In addition to their unprecedented tenure with me, their love of life can be explained by the two Emmys and six Emmy nominations they have received from members of the Academy of Television Arts and Sciences.

They have the opportunity to write lines for some of the biggest names in the entertainment business. They have an employer who bears no resemblance to the miserly figure they have created.

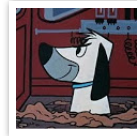
My writers are Sam Perrin, George Balzer, Al Gordon and Hal Goldman. I think their team work is a record lifespan for a group of comedy writers. Perrin and Balzer have been writing for me for 22 years. Gordon and Goldman can chalk up 17.

I can be fooled more easily than my writers. Sometimes I make the mistake of reading a script and saying, "Fellas, I don't think this is very funny. I think the lines should be changed." Every time I do that, I spend more time apologizing than you'd believe.

But once I was adamant. I was sure that I had them this time. I kept arguing, and one of my writers said: "Jack, you may be right, the four of us could be wrong." Well, it turned out to be the same old story, and



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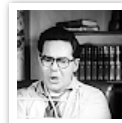


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2 hours ago



Jack Benny

I wound up saying: "Sorry Fellas."

Benny seemed to have a sense of when a gag had worn itself out. By the 1970s, he was telling reporters he was downplaying the "age 39" gag because he felt it wouldn't work on television when he was in his mid-70s. George Balzer elaborated on this in what looks like a PR release from Benny's production company or CBS. It appeared in newspapers starting Jan. 11, 1964.

Shaping The Character Of Jack Benny

Comedy has changed noticeably in the past two decades and so have comedians—even Jack Benny.

Benny, whom almost everyone knows as the one man in the world who has made time stand still and who hasn't spent a dime foolishly in all his 39 years, nonetheless has undergone a subtle metamorphosis.

This comes from a fellow who should know. He is George Balzer, a comedy writer who has helped shape Benny's public character for more than 20 years and who continues behind the scenes with "The Jack

Benny Program" on the CBS Television Network.

The fact is that some of the things consistent with Benny's character simply aren't appropriate today, Balzer says.

"Take money, for example. Today, Jack will spend money almost recklessly if there's a good reason for it—a reason like, say, he's under hypnosis and not accountable for his actions," smiles Balzer.

Too, in the old days, Benny never would give Rochester, his companion and Man Friday, a day off.

"Now," says Balzer, "he'll cut Rochester for high card to see who does the housework."

Jack Benny couldn't drive a Maxwell today, Balzer says, because "a Maxwell would be too expensive to maintain."

Therefore those wonderfully evocative Maxwell jokes, like the rear tires being recapped with old tennis shoes and Jack feeling that someone was sneaking up on him when he drove on dark nights, are confined to the files. Balzer and his fellow writers—Sam Perrin, Al Gordon and Hal Goldman—are keeping Benny a cheap and vain character, but in terms of the 1960s.

But, Balzer says, "He wants the entire cast to get laughs. Sometimes he'll change funny lines we've given him and give them to another character."

One thing about Benny never changes, Balzer points out: "He always wants to be the butt of the jokes—the fall guy."

Balzer wasn't in the writers' room when Jack put together his final TV show in 1974. Hal Goldman and Al Gordon were. So was Hugh Wedlock, Jr., who wrote off-and-on for Benny with partner Howard Snyder starting in 1936, though neither got credit in the radio days. There were a few age jokes, a bunch of cheap jokes, and references to Mary Livingstone and Rochester. The writers' material still worked.



JACK BENNY

Posted by [Yowp](#) at [06:56](#)

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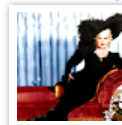


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