

Friday, 14 February 2025

Re-Writing For Benny

Jack Benny was born on this date in 1894 (insert your own "39" joke here) and through his TV years, columnists found a way of marking it.

This time, we're going to skip those kinds of columns and go back to one published on his birthdate in 1937 by the *Los Angeles Times*.

There's no mention of his birthday. Instead the story involves writing the Benny radio show for the 4 p.m. (Pacific) broadcast, and then re-working it for the live repeat show for NBC red network stations in the West at 8:30 p.m., based on what got laughs on the broadcast heard elsewhere in the country.

The columnist also briefly mentions how Ed Beloin and Bill Morrow were hired by Benny, avoiding the reason Jack was "fresh out of material and writers."



Air Comedian's Gags Metered For Laughs

If Joke Rolls 'Em in Aisles, It's "B.W.;" Studio Audience Response to Jack Benny Humor Graded by Script Writers

By CARROLL NYE

Radio Editor

If you crash the control room at N.B.C. during a Jack Benny broadcast and peer over the shoulders of Bill Morrow or Ed Beloin, the Jesters ace writer you'll find them making "chicken tracks" on their script. What they actually are doing is grading the gags according to the response of the studio audience. Top rating is "B.W.," which signifies (pardon my French!) "belly wow." Lowest grading is "S.," standing for "snicker," and the intermediate ratings are "G.," for "good," and "V.G.," for "very good," with variations of plus or minus for all.

MARKED TWICE

The scripts are marked in pencil during the afternoon broadcast; then remarked in ink during the repeat broadcast for the West. When gags get the same response on both shows they are marked "D.," for "ditto."

A survey of Benny's last three "report cards" reveals that Mary Livingstone leads the parade of comics in the classroom with an average of B-minus, and Kenny Baker is tied with Benny with a rating of G-plus. Don Wilson's rating is low because he's friendly to Jack, while Phil Harris's score goes up every time he tiffs with the star. Andy Devine's first appearance on the program brought him a B-plus mark, but he subsequently slipped into a straight "G." groove.

TOPICAL JOKES

In general, the survey discloses that topical jokes and "ribs" on personalities in or out of the cast are the consistent "B.W." getters—which is gratifying to all concerned because the success or failure of the series has always hinged on that type of humor.

Puns or epigrammatic lines are only good for a snicker, and a subtle shaft of humor doesn't get a stronger reaction unless it is linked with a situation. In any event, no gag is expected to stand on its own—nor will the writers inject a series of unrelated gags. "Those methods were good in vaudeville," said Morrow, "hut the 'bang-bang-bang' comedy is a total loss in radio."

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Comments on an article will be limited to the first few days after it is posted. This blog is virtually retired, with daily posts ending Feb. 25.

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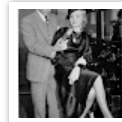


Jerry Eisenberg - The saddening news has come in

that Jerry Eisenberg has died. He was 87. Jerry was one of the crew at MGM under Bill Hanna and Joe Barbera. He was a seco...

1 day ago

Old TV History



News, Football and Dietrich - "Television came a step nearer

to reality," wrote Kenneth Frogley in the August 25, 1933 edition of the Los Angeles "Daily News" as he reported that W6XAO ...

6 days ago

Blogs to See

mc News From ME

ASK me: Artists' Styles - Someone who signs himself "Johnny Enzyme" — and who I'm guessing is not really named "Johnny Enzyme" — came across some political cartoons by Jack Kirby, w...

9 hours ago

ALLEN FEUD REGISTERS

Benny's feud with Fred Allen is apparently accomplishing its purpose, because every mention of the "Town Hall Tonight" star in the script is followed by a B-plus. An example was Jack's line: "I should stoop to arguing with a toothpaste salesman."

I rapped on the door of Morrow's Hollywood apartment last Wednesday evening and we enjoyed some chitchat until Allen's program came on the air. In the hour that followed, my host listened intently—knowing that he'd have some special work cut out for himself if Allen did a particularly good job of putting his boss on the spot.

After listening to that “rib” I gather that Morrow and Beloin started burning the midnight oil. Anyhow, we’ll hear the result today.

PUT HIM ON SPOT

"We should worry," said Morrow. "We put Fred on the spot when Jack announced last Sunday that he'd lost his violin, and made the drawling comedian rush out a new routine."

"In fact, we never let ourselves worry about our show because it is impossible to write good comedy under pressure. We're serious, but relaxed—and that's the way Jack expects us to work."

The pair of writers goes into a huddle with the headman after the Sunday night broadcasts to map out a general plan for the next week's show. Sometimes they evolve a routine for broadcasts two or three weeks hence.

THINK IT OVER

On Monday the writers think about working but seldom do anything about it. Tuesday, Beloin Invades Morrow's apartment (next door to his) and after a few hours of friendly wrangling they fill one "spot," which is taken to Benny for acceptance, changes or rejection.

Other situations are usually worked out on Wednesday, and by Thursday they give the boss a rough draft of the whole script. However, they often leave holes that aren't filled until the reading rehearsal Saturday, when the star comedian reads the parts for every member of the cast and injects new gags as they come to him.

Carole Lombard, their best and severest critic, hears most of the jokes while they are in the process of formulation, and Don Wilson's spontaneous laugh is Benny's barometer at the reading rehearsal.

It is something of a coincidence that Beloin and Morrow became Benny's writers. Ed peddled his first comedy script last winter to Allen, who passed it up because he writes his own material. However, Benny, being fresh out of material and writers, took the script at first reading.

Benny got in contact with Morrow, who had just finished a season writing for Phil Baker and Eddie Dowling, and the three of them met two weeks later in Detroit.

Beloin and Morrow locked themselves in a hotel room and turned out their first script—as a team. Jack accepted it, sent the lads to Hollywood and now has them under contract.

There's no mention of another writer Jack relied on around this time and who died in 1937. Homer Canfield's column in a number of southern California newspapers on June 19, 1937 gave him a brief tribute.

Hollywood, June 19—

WHERE THERE'S LAUGHTER THERE ARE ALWAYS TEARS. THE death that came to Al Boasberg in the quiet lonesomeness of Friday's early hours was a terrific shock to Jack Benny. As a result, plans for his Sunday program are still somewhat unsettled. But in true trooper fashion, it is expected the show will go on. (KFI, 7:30)



Benny not only looked on Boasberg as the tops in gagmen, but as a close personal friend. It will be hard not to read tragedy into his funny lines.

As the red light flashes “on the air,” radio’s No. 1 comedy program will flood through the network. Jack will joke people will laugh at a dead-man’s humor. And will continue to laugh for years to come. Boasberg’s prolific sense of the ridiculous gave birth to enough material to keep comedians supplied for years to come. It will be redressed and used many times over. like Charlie McCarthy, most funny men need to have someone else throw the words in their mouths.

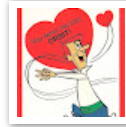
Just what was Al Boasberg's connection with the Jack Benny program? . . . Haven't we read so often that Ed Beloin and Bill Morrow were Jack's scriptwriters? are a couple of questions I've had to answer over and over today. True, Beloin and Morrow wrote the comedian's scripts. But Boasberg was the seasoning. After the script had been completed, he was called in as the gagman. Throughout the program he would plant lines to assure laughter. His was the touch that lifted the show out of the good program class to the top of the heap. May he find as much laughter on the other side as he gave here.

 **Fernando Llera**
Cartoons



More and
more
Mexicans
are finding
love online.
- ©2025

fernandolleracartoons.com
9 hours ago

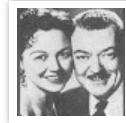
The Exposure Sheet

Jetsons
Valentine's
Day Cards -
Happy
Valentine's
Day

everyone! As this day approached, I noticed I did not make a celebratory post for the holiday last year. I decided to change that th...

10 hours ago

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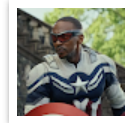


Turn Back
the Clock
1958 - Turn
Back the
Clock was a
regional

show that ended up on NBC (regional?) in 1955. They came over to AFRTS and shared songs from their personal colle...
11 hours ago

 **Cartoon Research**

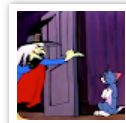
Have a Heart: The 50th Anniversary of "Be My Valentine, Charlie Brown" - Like the other Peanuts TV specials, this one had quite an impact on kids when it first aired fifty years ago.

Movies with Michael

Movie
Review:
Captain
America:
Brave New
World -

Michael's Movie Grade: B
While this may not reach the height of the first two Captain America movies, it is still a fun film. This movie is just as ...
19 hours ago

 **Toon and Jerry: Toon by Toon**



The Flying Sorceress (1956) - This short film marks the first

Tom and Jerry cartoon (and the 98th short film overall) of 1956, landing in movie theaters on January 28 of that year...

4 days ago

In our next Benny post, we will check in with one of his two writers, who will spill more (rather lame) gossip about Jack and putting together the show.

Posted by [Yowp](#) at [07:03](#)

Labels: [Jack Benny](#)

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[Felix and Danny](#) - Howdy Readers, As our introduction to this post, we present "Felix On His Stick Horse", drawn by my most beloved cartoonist, Cathy Hill. I love the ch...

[2 weeks ago](#)

[Pegbar Profiles](#)



[The Animator, January 1938](#) - The second issue of

The Animator is missing as of this writing, so here is the third edition from the start of January 1938.

*Snow White *had its Ca...

[3 months ago](#)

[Show All](#)

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