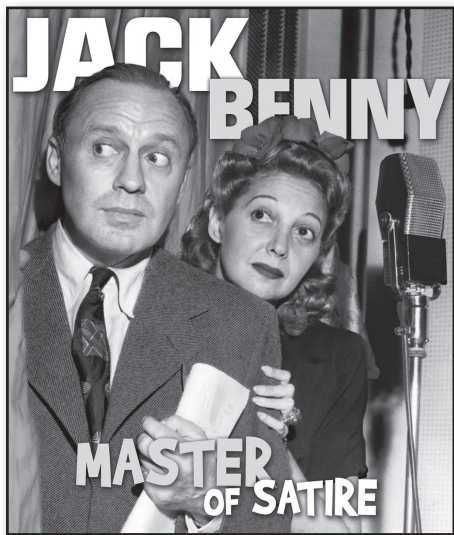


# JACK BENNY

## Master of Satire

Program Guide by Elizabeth McLeod

When you think of Jack Benny's style of radio comedy, you think first of personality. From the start of his air career to his final television performances more than forty years later, Benny was first and foremost a character comedian, a performer whose approach to laugh-getting emphasized careful shadings of personality over simple yuk-yuk joke-telling. Few radio enthusiasts can tell you a particular "joke" Jack once told, but just about everyone with an interest in the performer and his programs can describe in intricate detail the nuances woven into that hilarious simulacrum known as "the Jack Benny character." When it comes to character comedy, Jack not only wrote the book, but also the dust jacket copy, the advance notices, all of the reviews -- and even the movie adaptation.



If you get the gag in that last sentence, well, you're a Jack Benny fan. And if you don't -- well, we'll pass over the obvious question of "why are you reading this?" and move right on to the explanation. Because when you say the phrase "movie adaptation" to a real Jack Benny fan, you're bound to get a smile in return. You might not think first of Mr. Benny when it comes to radio satire, but in fact he was a master of that lost art, and the quick-wit-

ted, side-eyed movie adaptation was one of his favored genres. And yet, even as a satirist, Jack Benny depended on character comedy to bring the laughs home.

While it wasn't until the 1930s that satire really gained energy in radio, cultural satires themselves are one of the oldest traditions of the American stage. The "afterpiece" of the nineteenth century minstrel show was the direct ancestor of the radio parody sketch -- with freewheeling, broad-based satires of grand opera, Shakespeare, and similarly weighty material. A good rule for any satirist in any medium to keep in mind is that "the more seriously a genre demands to be taken, the more promising a target for satire it is." And down through the decades, that rule remained sound. When minstrelsy gave way to the music hall and the vaudeville stage, satire remained a prominent element of the program. When vaudeville birthed the Broadway revue, satire moved to the very center of the stage. To star in a big-time Broadway revue was to become a satirist, whether you were originally inclined in that direction or not.

Jack Benny came to Broadway in the 1920s, and was already well inclined in that direction. His vaudeville act, honed in the years surrounding and during the First World War, emerged as a satire of a serious musical act. Jack's deliberately-mediocre fiddling was coupled with witty side remarks to create an act that let all the air out of every tres-serious classical violinist's routine. Jack wasn't the first performer to take this approach. In fact, vaudeville was full of "World's Worst Whatever" acts in the 1910s and 1920s -- but that meant that his act had to be that much better, that much more sharply realized than the competition to get bookings, to get billings, and to get the notices that meant entree to the big time. When Jack arrived, he did so on the strength of a well-earned reputation as a clever satirist.



Jack Benny

Meanwhile, radio took its time getting ramped up to the possibilities that the

medium held for satire. Programming in the twenties tended to take itself rather seriously, with dinner-coated announcers enunciating from the diaphragm as they unleashed evening-gowned sopranos and wing-collared tenors upon selections from Franz Lehár and Victor Herbert. That wasn't quite the full breadth of twenties broadcasting, but to the average listener it could certainly seem as though every antenna blossomed forth from a potted palm.

But even in such languid surroundings, little brambles of satire poked out here and there...and they brought the stage tradition of the parody sketch along in their trunks. By 1930, entire programs of satire -- conducted by such personalities as Bradford Browne's "Nit Wits" and the "KuKus" of Raymond Knight (above) -- were firing a constant barrage of verbal spitballs over the network air.



Raymond Knight

But such homegrown satirists would not dominate the medium. When Broadway suffered the most disastrous season of the 20th Century over the Depression-strangled fall and winter of 1931-32, every comedian who was anybody packed up his gag books and ran an "At Liberty" ad in *Variety*, hoping beyond hope to land something substantial enough to see them through. Jack Benny had made his way to Hollywood as the Twenties were roaring their last, but after a couple of features and a handful of shorts, movieland's appetite for his particular style of humor seemed fully slaked. Broadway, as noted, was essaying a convincing impersonation of a doornail, and the picked-over skeleton of vaudeville had even less to offer. Even burlesque's flap shoes were on their uppers. Only radio seemed to offer the hard-working comedian a way forward, and when Eddie Cantor hit the jackpot on the *Chase & Sanborn Hour* in the fall of 1931, the stampede was on. Every Broadway comic, every former Broadway comic, and every comic whose closest approach to Broadway was to spend an unemployed night sleeping in the IRT Times Square station, cooked up a radio act in desperate hopes of a break.

Jack Benny was one of the lucky few. *New York Daily News* Broadway columnist Ed Sullivan knew and liked Jack from his revue days, and had recently picked up a broadcasting job over at CBS. Sullivan's sponsor, a brand of hair tonic, was seemingly operating under the misconception that their new star was Walter Winchell. Ed found himself in an active and constant search for guests to fill out his program. On March 19, 1932, Jack Benny stepped before Sullivan's microphone for a guest spot, and he did so with a monologue dripping with satire. "This is Jack Benny talking," he declared. "There will be a slight pause while you say 'who cares?'" Benny had mastered the role of a fatuous master-of-ceremonies during his stage career, had carried that persona into films, and seemed born to play a similar role on radio. The effectiveness of this Sullivan appearance led directly to his first continuing radio job, on NBC for Canada Dry.

It was on the Canada Dry series that Benny laid the groundwork for his entire broadcasting career. With scripts carefully crafted by Harry Conn (below), Benny's radio character began a steady evolution from that satirical MC figure into an even broader caricature of assorted social



Harry Conn



Jack Benny with writers Bill Morrow and Ed Beloin

flaws. That characterization fit increasingly well into the movie and play satires that Conn began to emphasize in the second half of each program. Invariably, Jack himself would play the male lead -- and the more unsuitable he was for the part, the more effective the comedy. Even before the crystallization of the famous vain, cheap Benny character, Jack's epicene delivery made his appearance in heroic roles incongruous -- and he played up the contrast for all it was worth.

Mary Livingstone, a key member of his supporting cast before the end of his first year on the air, made an effective female lead in the sketches. She could be screechy or sarcastic, as the role required, and established the pattern to be followed for the rest of the program's run. Jack's an-

nouncer, bandleader, and tenor of the moment found themselves playing whatever other parts each week's sketch might require.

When Bill Morrow and Ed Beloin (bottom left) took over as Jack's writers during the 1936-37 season, the Benny show's weekly sketches reached the zenith of their satirical power. Conn had been a Broadway writer, tied to a Broadway vision, and while unquestionably funny, that vision was stage-bound in its scope -- never quite fully pushing into the realms of absurdity possible with radio comedy. Morrow and Beloin, however, were young men with a taste for the ridiculous, and they fully indulged that taste under Benny. It was Morrow and Beloin who really cemented the exaggerated elements of the "Jack Benny" character, raising Jack's cheapness and vanity to increasingly absurd levels during their tenure. In addition, they found full outlet for those traits in sketches satirizing the bombastic movie dramas of that period -- not just as specific parodies of particular films, but as wide-ranging genre parodies. Just the thought of a flabby, middle-aged, petulant Jack filling the role of an Errol Flynn or a Tyrone Power was enough to get a laugh, let alone the actual deployment of that characterization in a full sketch -- to say nothing of the risibilities possible in casting Jack, Phil Harris, Don Wilson, and Dennis Day in a parody of the all-female film *The Women*. Plus, the continuing Western parody feature "Buck Benny Rides Again" proved such an indelible success that it could reappear after a decade's hiatus without losing a step. "Our play this week" took on a lesser importance in the Benny show of the mid-1940s and beyond. A new writing team would move the program to more of a situation comedy format, emphasizing the "real life" doings of Jack and his gang. However, satire and parody never totally disappeared from the program. In fact, with an increasing emphasis on guest stars, sketches (when they were featured) took on an even broader satirical scope. The movie parodies were still there, augmented now by satires of trends in general popular culture. By the early 1950s, the Jack Benny Character himself had been sharpened to a razor edge by nearly twenty years of careful cultivation, a character so reflexive as to produce laughter by the mere fact of his presence in an incongruous setting.

When Jack moved into television in the 1950s, he gave himself over almost entirely to parody sketches, the broader and the more outlandish

the better. (This would also be the case for his series of full-hour variety specials, beginning in the mid-1960s.) And yet even in the most outrageous skits, he remained the Jack Benny Character -- dress him in a hippy wig and bell bottoms, but he's still just as cheap, vain, and petulant as he was standing by a radio microphone in 1937. Few radio performers had that degree of longevity or that degree of comic flexibility -- but then, no other radio performers were ever Jack Benny.

**GENERAL FOODS CORPORATION  
and  
THE AMERICAN TOBACCO COMPANY  
present  
JACK BENNY**

**with Mary Livingstone, Phil Harris, Kenny Baker, Dennis Day,  
Eddie "Rochester" Anderson and Don Wilson**

**Music conducted by  
Mahlon Merrick**

**Written by  
Bill Morrow and Ed Beloin  
Milt Josefsberg, George Balzer, Nat Perrin, and John Tackaberry  
Al Gordon and Hal Goldman**

**CD 1A: "Murder at the Movies" - 12/04/1938**

Broadcasting from New York, Jack and company perform a moving picture themed mystery.

**CD 1B: "Snow White and the Seven Gangsters" - 01/08/1939**

Benny and the gang offer a rough-edged take on a Disney animated classic.

**CD 2A: "Hound of the Baskervilles" - 06/11/1939**

Jack dons the deerstalker hat as Sherlock Holmes in his own version of one of Sir Arthur Conan Doyle's classic tales.

**CD 2B: “Stanley and Livingstone”  
- 10/22/1939**

Benny makes you forget all about Spencer Tracy with his own twist on this jungle classic.



Humphrey Bogart

**CD 3A: “The Women” - 11/05/1939**

Jack and the boys drag it up in their own version of MGM’s all-female drama.

**CD 3B: “Murder on the Bay Bridge” - 01/28/1940**

Broadcasting from San Francisco on behalf of the March of Dimes, Benny and company stage a crime drama with local flair.

**CD 4A: “The Frightwig Murder Case - Part One” - 01/25/1942**

After a harrowing accident in the Maxwell and an encounter with a quartet of shady lawyers, Jack and company present the first part of a murder mystery.

**CD 4B: “The Frightwig Murder Case - Part Two” - 02/01/1942**

Humphrey Bogart (above) hard-boils his way into the second half of the gang’s classic caper.

**CD 5A: “Algiers” - 10/24/1943**

Come weez Jack to zee Casbah, for the Benny team’s production of *Algiers*.

**CD 5B: “From Camp Muroc, California” - 01/23/1944**

Jack announces that his new film will be called *The Horn Blows at Midnight*...and he gets some acting practice by doing a love scene with Alexis Smith (below).

**CD 6A: “The Fiddler” - 10/20/1946**

Who knows many things because he walks by night?  
None other than The Fiddler!

**CD 6B: “Buck Benny Rides Again” - 03/05/1950**

Back in the saddle at last, Jack presents an all-new Buck Benny episode.



Alexis Smith

**CD 7A: “The Gold Rush of ‘49” - 09/24/1950**

In honor of California’s centennial, Jack and the gang present a play from out of the state’s storied past.

**CD 7B: “Murder at the Racquet Club” - 12/10/1950**

While in Palm Springs, Benny and his co-conspirators perform a thrilling tale of investigation into a killing that took place in a most unusual locale. Who dunnit? Is Mary a murderess?



Mary Livingstone

**CD 8A: “All Hands on Deck” - 04/20/1952**

In honor of the San Diego Naval Air Station, Jack and the gang take to the high seas in “All Hands on Deck” (or “Load The Guns With Tabasco Sauce, Here Come The Shrimp Boats!”)

**CD 8B: “Garden of Evil” - 10/03/1954**

Benny and his amigos salute a rip-roaring Mexican adventure film by doing some ripping and roaring of their own.

Elizabeth McLeod is a journalist, author, and broadcast historian. She received the 2005 Ray Stanich Award for excellence in broadcasting history research from the Friends Of Old Time Radio.



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