

“The Jack Benny Program” (March 28, 1948)

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Essay by Kathy Fuller-Seeley (guest post)*



Jack Benny

Radio's most iconic comedian, Jack Benny performed for 23 years on NBC (1932-1948) and then CBS (1949-1955). His voice was as familiar to listeners as those of President Franklin Roosevelt or crooner Bing Crosby. Supported by his cast of zany characters, Benny and his comedy/variety program became an American institution, beloved by millions who tuned in every Sunday nights at 7:00 pm.

First sponsored by Canada Dry Ginger Ale and debuting on the NBC Blue network on May 2, 1932, the radio show actually began as a twice-weekly half-hour musical program (with tunes sung by Ziegfeld Follies chanteuse Ethel Shutta accompanied by her well-known husband George Olsen's orchestra) interspersed with brief monologues by Jack Benny.

Benny (born Benjamin Kubelsky, February 14, 1894 in Waukegan, Illinois) was a veteran performer, who had under his belt a 20-year career as violinist-turned-stand-up comedian in vaudeville, Broadway revues and movies. His Midwestern-inflected, easy-going “master of ceremonies” style of humor suited the intimacy of radio, and he assumed the transition to the new medium would be easy. He found to his horror, however, by the fourth of his Canada Dry broadcasts, he had run out of old stage monologues to recycle. He quickly brought in vaudeville writer Harry Conn. Together, Benny and Conn (who'd be with the show for four years) developed a fresh humor, a fourth-wall-breaking workplace situation comedy, in which Jack the host traded banter and barbs with the announcer, band leader and singer, in their convoluted joint efforts to put on a radio show.

From the start, Benny's show showcased satiric takes on the staid, stiff commercials that plagued network radio, gaining critical acclaim, but ruffling sponsor feathers. Canada Dry almost cancelled the program until their ad agency, AW Ayer and Sons, showed them stacks of fan mail praising the cheeky humor. The soft drink company did dump Benny in January, 1933 (after a brief stint on CBS), and Benny went through two more sponsors on NBC Red (Chevrolet and

General Tire) before his fortuitous pairing with General Food's Jell-O in October, 1934. The Benny program's outlandish ads for Jell-O (with jolly Don Wilson urging listeners to "look for the big red letters on the box!") in the years working with writers Ed Morrow and Bill Beloin, indelibly connected Jack Benny with gelatin and fun. Starting in 1944 for sponsor Lucky Strike Cigarettes, writers Milt Josephsberg, John Tackaberry, Sam Perrin and George Balzer created the the gags of the Sportsmen Quartet, who maniacally inserted "LSMFT!" into boisterous parodies of popular songs. The Benny program's commercials both tickled audiences and sold products at prodigious rates.

Benny's cast evolved in the first years, as changing sponsors and relocating to Hollywood for filmmaking chores brought a revolving door of bandleaders, singers and announcers. Mary Livingstone (born Sadye Marks, and Benny's wife) joined the cast in July, 1932, to play a fan of the program who became Jack's sometimes secretary and full-time heckler. Frank Parker and Don Bestor were popular cast members in the Chevrolet years (when the show moved back to NBC Red for a once-a-week broadcast). Benny hired Don Wilson in 1934 to be the program's permanent good natured, ample-waisted announcer (Wilson was soon lauded as possessing the greatest selling voice in radio). Benny brought on Phil Harris as band leader and Kenny Baker and then Dennis Day played scatterbrained young tenors. In 1938, the cast was rounded out with the addition of Eddie Anderson, who became one of the most prominent African-American performers in radio as he developed the role of Rochester Van Jones (Jack's impertinent valet and housekeeper). The characters' easy banter with Jack around the radio studio microphones, parodies of popular movies and murder mysteries, and kidding the sponsor's product made this workplace situation comedy fresh and enjoyable. After World War II, they were joined by classic characters such as infuriating department store floorwalker Frank Nelson, hapless violin teacher Professor (Mel) Le Blanc, long-suffering movie star neighbors Ronald and Benita Colman, the race track tout Sheldon Leonard, and Blanc's voicing of Polly the Parrot and Jack's ancient, wheezing Maxwell jalopy.

Central to the program's long-lasting fame, however, was the 1934 development of Jack Benny's comic persona, which turned from breezy, self-deprecating "Broadway Romeo" of vaudeville into a vain, miserly, hilariously hapless "fall guy." Benny transformed Jack into the ultimate "born loser," the butt of all his radio underlings' jokes, the boorish pretender insulted by everyone from movie stars to department store floorwalkers, and especially the target of Mary's withering zingers that punctured his overblown ego again and again, always to the delight of radio audiences. As the years rolled by, Jack's ever-more-absurd schemes to avoid spending money collapsed like his dignity, week after week, as his inflated ego was punctured by fate, abetted by his unruly radio cast.

This March 28, 1948 episode, featuring Jack Benny's most famous gag, took place 16 years into his radio program's run, when the characters and plot were as familiar as a favorite old bathrobe. What could Benny possibly do at this point to "top" himself after so long?

At the halfway point of the broadcast, Jack is walking down a neighborhood street at night. We hear him softly humming and his shoes contentedly tapping down the sidewalk. (He's carrying Ronald Colman's Oscar statuette, which he has borrowed to take home to show off to his valet, Rochester, but that's another story....)

Suddenly, a menacing male voice leaps out of the dark quiet, growling at Jack, *“Hey buddy... this is a stick up!... Your money...or your life?”*

Silence. All we hear is seconds of silence . . . and the nervous tittering of the studio audience. Silence, or “dead air,” was a risky proposition in commercial network radio broadcasting. It may have given listeners the impression that someone was thinking, but it often left listeners falling into a void of ether nothingness and loosened the grip of the advertisers over their attention.

Breaking into the tense stillness, the robber repeats his demand, *“Didn’t you hear me?! I said ...Your money...or...your life!?”*

Again the silence, stretching, stretching, but this time accompanied by the growing laughter of the studio audience, chortling at the absurdity of Benny’s continuing delay, each second compounding the hilarious suspense....

“I’m thinking it over!” Benny exasperatedly cries.

The radio studio audience exploded into roars of laughter, releasing a pent-up emotional response of relief and disbelief that swept across the auditorium. Their reaction was shared by millions of radio listeners in homes across the nation. Their beloved, fallible “fall guy” had faced a dire situation and responded in a hilarious, typically self-centered way. But this wasn’t simply a joke, and not quite a full comic routine; it was an exchange distilling an essential aspect of a continuing character, a moment that drew on more than 15 years of writers’ and performer labor as well as 15 years of audience familiarity with Jack’s infamously parsimonious character.

The “Your Money or Your Life” gag, so long in the making, was subsequently replayed by critics, fans and Benny himself for the rest of his radio and television career, and is key to his lasting legacy in American entertainment. The genius of Jack Benny’s humor is that it rarely stemmed from jokes with standard set-ups and punch lines. It stemmed from character, embedded in a narrative, in countless stories of a foolish man’s humiliation, enriched by the actors’ voices, tone, and timing, with radio comedy’s richness captivating the ears and imaginations of its listeners.

Jack Benny was a comic genius, an absolute master of comic timing, an innovative creator, a dedicated craftsman, and a meticulous program producer. A canny entrepreneur, Benny became one of the pioneering “showrunner” producer/writer/performers in broadcasting history. His modern style of radio humor did much to spawn a wide variety of comedy formats. In 1920s vaudeville, he helped pioneer a kind of stand-up comedy that did not rely on props, costumes, gags, or circus-like physical slapstick. In 1930s radio, Benny and his writers pioneered the character-focused situation comedy, the genre that’s remained at the heart of television’s broadcast schedule from 1950s “I Love Lucy” to 1970s “Bob Newhart” to far more recent “30 Rock.” His informal monologues and easy repartee with comic assistant “stooges” are the direct ancestors of Johnny Carson’s and David Letterman’s late night television talk shows.

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* The views expressed in this essay are those of the author and do not necessarily represent the views of the Library of Congress.