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The Jack Benny Show

By Elizabeth McLeod

For starters, let's consider one of radio's most familiar programs -- the Jack Benny Program. Modern listeners are fortunate that most of the run of this series has been preserved, via Jack's own collection of discs housed at UCLA. Several hundred programs exist, in generally decent audio quality, from 1932 to 1955. And the first thing a methodical listener will discover is that the shows from the end of the run bear little resemblance to those from the beginning.

Jack began his radio career carrying over his vaudeville and Broadway persona -- that of the suave, wisecracking Master Of Ceremonies. Listening to Jack's first show, presented for Canada Dry Ginger Ale on May 2, 1932, is rather perplexing to one not familiar with the pre-radio phase of the Benny career. The familiar cast members are absent, with the emphasis of the show on bouncy selections performed by George Olsen And His Music. And Jack's personality is very different from that which is best remembered -- no "cheap" jokes, no violin references, no running gags.



But if you listen closely, the ingredients are there. Jack's drawling, nonchalant delivery is a harbinger of laughs to come -- even if the jokes themselves are flaccid. (Even the old groaner about "drinking all the liquor in the US and then going north to drink Canada Dry" is wheeled out in a left-handed tribute to the sponsor.) This is an enjoyable show, a valuable souvenir of Depression-era radio -- but there's no hint that the flippant MC would go on to become radio's best-remembered star.

Jack began to hit his stride before the end of that first series, as writer Harry Conn cobbled together the basic elements of the "Benny" character, and the show moved away from its' musical roots toward a more comedy oriented format. Season by season, the pieces fell into place -- Mary Livingstone, Don Wilson, Kenny Baker, and Phil Harris. By 1936, when Conn left in a salary dispute, a standard pattern had been established -- the first half of the show featured banter among the cast members, and the second half a self-contained sketch parodying

some current book, play, or film. While containing some genuinely funny material, these

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shows often seem dated to the casual listener -- the topicality of the sketches is lost, and the point of the parody disappears with it.

Jack's next writers, Bill Morrow and Ed Beloin, were perhaps the most important hirings he ever made -- they gradually changed the entire direction of the show, moving away from jokes for the sake of jokes and toward character oriented comedy. It was during this era -- 1937 thru 1943 -- that the Benny show as we know it came to be. Jack's personality came into sharp focus during these years, with the very root of the comedy becoming the conflict between how Jack viewed himself versus how everyone else viewed him. The supporting cast assumed their own distinctive personalities -- no longer one-dimensional stooges, Morrow and Beloin built Livingstone, Wilson, Harris, Baker (and his replacement Dennis Day) into vivid comic characters. And most importantly, Morrow and Beloin introduced Benny's sharpest foil, Eddie Anderson's "Rochester."



Mary Livingstone with Jack Benny

The Morrow-Beloin shows are, in my judgment, the high point of the Benny run. The gags and situations are sharp and funny -- but with a manic, surreal edge. Carmichael the Polar Bear, the daft boarder Mr. Billingsley, flat-voiced Harry Baldwin and his constant interruptions, the wheezing Andy Devine and his "Hiya Buck!" -- all combined to give the Benny show a unique flavor during these years. Occasionally -- especially in their infrequent

explorations of Rochester's razor-carryin', crap-shootin' ways -- Beloin and Morrow stepped over the bad-taste line. But by and large these shows are still very funny, very entertaining, and very worthwhile.

In 1943, Morrow and Beloin were succeeded by George Balzer, Milt Josefsberg, Sam Perrin, and John Tackaberry -- and there was an immediate, noticeable change in the flavor of the show. While Morrow and Beloin had introduced "situation comedy" elements into the series, the new writers made them its central focus, placing Jack and his cast into storylines which carried over from show to show, weaving in new running-gag characters like Mel Blanc's train barker or Frank Nelson's caustic floorwalkers and countermen. These patterns continued for the rest of Benny's radio tenure -- and eventually turned the show into a full-fledged sitcom.

This transition had its pros and cons. A plot oriented format allowed an ideal setting for the full exploitation of the Benny persona -- and it's this "classic" period which defines Jack for most listeners today. But there's something missing too - the fanciful tone of the Beloin-Morrow shows is lost, and listened to with a critical ear, the Balzer-Josefsberg-Perrin-Tackaberry programs can often sound just a bit too calculated in their comedy -- a bit too "written-by-committee." The running gags eventually wear thin, especially when they're substituted for fresh comedy ideas -- which happened a little too often as the show moved into the 1950s.

Still, for a show that ran over twenty years, the Jack Benny Program produced remarkably few clinkers. And it endures today as one of the highlights of Old Time Radio.

Tune in for yourself -- and enjoy.

Just watch out for that polar bear in the basement.

Elizabeth McLeod is a journalist, researcher, and freelance writer specializing in radio of the 1930s. She is a regular contributor to "Nostalgia Digest" magazine and the Internet OldRadio Mailing List, maintains a website, Broadcasting History Resources, and is presently researching a book on Depression-era broadcasting. Elizabeth is always looking for 1930s radio recordings in all formats -- uncoated aluminum or lacquer-coated discs, vinyl or shellac pressings, or low-generation tape copies. You can contact her at lizmcl@midcoast.com