



RETURN WITH US NOW...

RADIO HISTORICAL
ASSOCIATION OF
COLORADO

Volume 30, Number 9

RHAC 30th Anniversary Year!

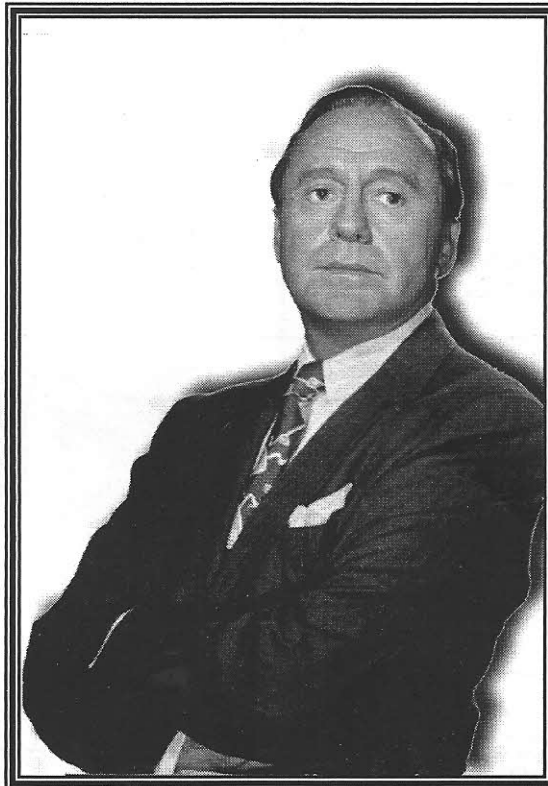
September, 2005

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 drawing, 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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Convention Schedules

30th Friends of Old-time Radio Convention, Oct 20 - 23, 2005 at the Holiday Inn, Newark, NJ; For information contact Jay Hickerson, Box 4321, Hamden, CT 06514 (203) 248-2887 JayHick@aol.com, or check our web site: <http://www.fotr.net>

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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

Old Time Radio Moments of the Century

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[The following article, by broadcast historian Elizabeth McLeod, is reproduced here with her permission. Ms. McLeod has listed her "top 100" 20th Century Radio Moments. We will be presenting 10 of her selections in RWUN each month for the next ten months.]

90. Elsie Hitz and Nick Dawson and the rise of Romantic Adventure: 1932

Sexual tension in serial drama is nothing new. The smoldering relationships of Elsie and Nick brought a vicarious thrill to Depression-weary women thruout the mid-thirties. The couple starred in three different series of "exotic, romantic adventure" during these years -- "Dangerous Paradise," "Follow The Moon," and "The Magic Voice." Different titles, different settings -- but the sublimated passion never changed. The concept of the "Super-Couple" is key to soap opera technique to this day, and it can be argued that Elsie Hitz and Nick Dawson were the pioneers. Granted, "Mary and Bob" of the Macfadden True Story Hour came first -- but Elsie and Nick had the mystique.

89. Who's Yehudi?? Spring 1940

Bob Hope was just another fresh-guy comedian thru the late thirties, and while he was a rising star on the Pepsodent Show at the dawn of the new decade, it took a chance exchange with stooge Jerry Colonna over possible names for announcer Bill Goodwin's infant son to capture the national imagination. Was "Yehudi" a figment of Colonna's imagination? A reference to violinist Yehudi Menuhin? Or a mysterious personification of prewar jitters? No one knows -- but that didn't stop all America from asking. And as Americans became Yehudi-conscious, they soon made Bob Hope the top-ranked radio comedian in the land.

88. National Defense Test Day 9/12/24

Broadcasters and the military join forces for an impressive demonstration of how radio can link the country together in the event of an emergency. The substance of the evening -- a series of rather tedious speeches, livened only by one general's seemingly-tipsy rendition of an old barracks song -- is less important than the technical skills necessary to make it all happen, as engineers flawlessly shift from point to point along a coast-to-coast network: demonstrating techniques that would become essential in the years to come.

87. A Christmas Carol: 12/25/34.

A holiday tradition begins as Lionel Barrymore appears for the first time as Dickens' covetous, grasping old sinner, in a segment of a three-hour Christmas Day broadcast over CBS, under the sponsorship of the Nash-Kelvinator Company. The tradition would endure in various formats for the next twenty years -- and, in recorded form, to this day.

86. The Death of Will Rogers 1935

The "Cowboy Philosopher" was a fixture on radio thruout the Depression years, and while he had a successful career in movies and as a syndicated newspaper columnist -- to say nothing of his many years on the stage --by the early thirties, most Americans knew him as the man with the alarm clock, giving out wry and sometimes even caustic commentary on the passing scene. His sudden death in the summer of 1935 sent a nation into mourning.

85. Don Becker's Weak-End Satires 1928

Before he became a soap-opera writer/producer ("Life Can Be Beautiful"), Don Becker was a ukulele playing utility man at WLW Cincinnati. And he was also the medium's first notable satirist, parodying the conventions of radio at a time when they had barely been established. While recording artists like Jones and Hare had kidded the emerging medium on phonograph records, Becker took the idea even further: creating an entire fictitious network and making the day-in day-out effluvia of broadcasting into one big running gag. His weekly presentation of the programs of the "Lavender Network" and his depiction of the behind-the-scenes chaos have been echoed by innumerable comedians. Stoopnagle and Budd, Brad Browne, Raymond Knight, Fred Allen, Stan Freberg, Bob and Ray, even Saturday Night Live and Second City have all done it since -- but the forgotten Don Becker blazed the trail.

84. Shakespeare Summer 1937

Imagine a season in which the two major networks battled for listeners not with comedians or swing bands - but with the Bard himself. NBC's "Streamlined Shakespeare" offered condensed plays starring John Barrymore, while the CBS presentation of "Hollywood Salutes Shakespeare" gave movieland favorites a crack at the Classics.

83. The Fall Of William L. Shirer 1947

Was he fired for being too liberal? Or was he fired for being lazy? Was Shirer, later to be blacklisted, the victim and Ed Murrow the villain? Or was it all just a massive misunderstanding? To this day, arguments rage over the departure from CBS of the legendary newsman. The real, full story will probably never be known, but that didn't make the issues raised any less significant, as radio moved into a dark new era.

82. The Rise of Joe Penner Fall/Winter 1933

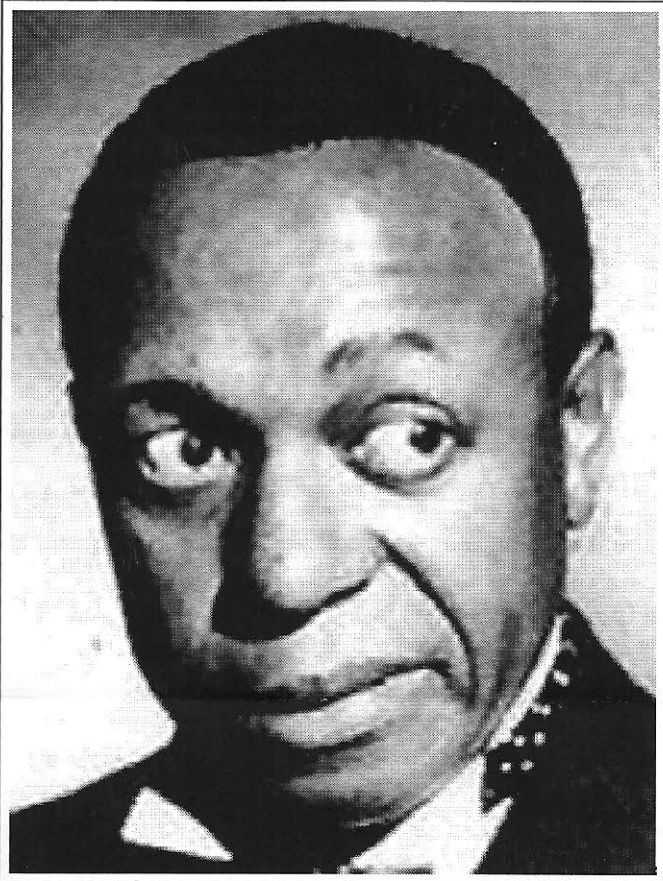
Tens of millions of otherwise reasonable radio listeners are captivated by a bizarre, manic child-man, whose piercing catchphrases echo across playgrounds and schoolyards, offices and street corners for nearly two years before the craze fades away. Academics have tried to dissect the Penner phenomenon -- but in fact there is no rational explanation for it. It just *is*.

81. Fall Of The City 4/11/37

Earle McGill's spectacular production of Archibald McLeish's chilling vision of a not-so-future war brings the Columbia Workshop to maturity. Hardly anyone was listening -- but many of those who did were themselves creative radio people, who were profoundly influenced by the program's power.

Eddie Anderson, More than a Supporting Player

by Carol Tiffinay



Eddie Anderson, whose trademark "Yes, Boss" was delivered in a unique and inimitable style, began life on September 18, 1905 in Oakland, California. He was the son of minstrel performer Big Ed Anderson and circus performer, Ella May Anderson. He overstrained his vocal cords as a 12-year-old newsboy hawking papers in his home town, which explains his unforgettable raspy voice. While still a boy, he appeared with his brother, Cornelius, in a Vaudeville song and dance act. He and his older brother were also members of "The Three Black Aces", singing for pennies in hotel lobbies. He eventually moved up to the *Roxy* and *Apollo* theaters in New York, which led to the Los Angeles *Cotton Club* in the west.

He began to appear in films, his best role being the featured role of "Noah" in "The Green Pastures" (1936). He continued in that vein, small featured film roles, until a chance pairing with comedy star Jack Benny on Benny's radio program in 1937 put

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Anderson on the map. He had only a bit part on Benny's Easter show as a Pullman porter, but his scratchy voice, superb timing and comic reaction to Benny's banter earned him a permanent spot. From that time he was heard as Benny's personal valet, Rochester Van Jones, and the role became so popular that he became billed as Eddie "Rochester" Anderson.

The humor and energy between Jack Benny and Eddie Anderson led to the development of a 23-year collaboration that delighted radio, television, and film audiences. The relationship between Anderson and Benny, full of sarcasm, wit and camaraderie, was at least partly responsible for the show's tremendous success across so many segments of American society, and the relationship became more complex and intimate as the years went by.

Between radio assignments, Anderson found the time to appear in many feature films; including "You Can't Take It with You" (1938), "Kentucky" (1938), "Jezebel" (1938), "Gone With the Wind" (1939), "Birth of the Blues" (1941), and three with Benny - "Man About Town" (1939), "Buck Benny Rides Again" (1940) and "Love Thy Neighbor" (1940). In 1943, Anderson appeared in the films "Stormy Weather", and "Cabin in the Sky", both of which are now recognized as "Black Classics."

After the films "Brewster's Millions" (1945) and "The Show-Off" (1946), Anderson concentrated on his partnership with Jack Benny, following him into television. In the 1950s and 1960s, Anderson appeared regularly on television, with Benny at times and in many other small roles. He returned to the big screen in 1960 for the role of a taxi driver in "It's a Mad Mad Mad Mad World".

Eddie Anderson died on Feb. 28, 1977 from long-standing heart disease. His significant contributions to Old-Time Radio earned him a spot in the Radio Hall of Fame in 2001.

Answers to the Jack Benny Trivia questions on Pg. 6

- 1) Gladys Zabisco
- 2) Ronald and Benita Colman
- 3) Mr. Kitzel
- 4) "I can't stand Jack Benny because..."
- 5) The Sportsmen Quarter
- 6) Canada Dry
- 7) Mel Blanc
- 8) The May Company
- 9) Dennis Day
- 10) The racetrack tour
- 11) Don Wilson
- 12) Alice Faye

From the Desk of
the Editor
by Carol Tiffany



Once again, greetings from Hurricane Central. As this is being written, the outer bands of Hurricane Katrina are rattling the windows and soaking the streets. Fortunately, Katrina is a much smaller and tamer storm than last year's Charley, Frances, Ivan, and Jeanne. However, since hurricane season extends into November, your editor is getting ready for more of the same.

This issue of RWUN is focused on one of the greatest OTR personalities, Jack Benny. Since many of the Benny shows from his almost 30-year run are available, most of us have listened to more than a few Jack Benny programs. Try our Benny Trivia quiz to test your knowledge of the show.

We are continuing Elizabeth McLeod's countdown of the 100 most Memorable Radio Moments of the 20th Century in this issue. I hope you are enjoying this feature.

Next month's RWUN will be our Halloween issue, focusing on some of the shows that thrilled and chilled us during radio's Golden Age. We will also revisit some of the winners from our "scariest show" contest of a few years ago for listening suggestions.

As always, your newsletter is in need of articles, features, and puzzles for future issues. You may send any ideas or contributions by E-Mail or snail mail to me at the addresses listed on page 2.

Good Listening to all...



New in the Tape and CD Libraries

by Maletha King

Before we tell you about this month's entries in the libraries, please let us remind you that when you rent cassettes and you find a problem with them, be sure to put your short explanatory note on the **outside** of the box.

This month the CD library will be offering over forty discs of "Escape" from the early fifties. This show is so well known that it really needs no description, other than to say that it is so well portrayed that you are inclined to feel that you are there for each show.

We conclude with a few discs of "The Chamber Music Society". These show are great examples of the offerings by the various bands that were so great in their day. A way to bring us out of the mood that "Escape" can be in. All of these show are available for our CD library. Tom Woessner.

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The Trivial Matter of Jack Benny

This quiz deals with both the characters and the actors on the Benny show as well as various plotlines. The answers are on page 5 above. Good Luck, everyone!

- 1) Every Christmas Jack shopped for a gift for his "girlfriend". Who was she?
- 2) Who were Jack's long-suffering next-door neighbors?
- 3) Who was the hot dog man who said "peekle in the meedle with the mustard on top?"
- 4) In 1945, NBC received more than 300,000 entries in a contest called...?
- 5) During the mid 1940s the middle commercial on the show was delivered by what singing group?
- 6) What company was Jack's first sponsor?
- 7) Who was the versatile actor who played Polly the parrot, Carmichael the Polar Bear, and the Maxwell?
- 8) Mary Livingstone worked as a clerk in the hosiery department of what store?
- 9) Eugene Patrick McNulty became what well-known Benny regular?
- 10) What Benny regular hailed Jack with "Hey, Bud...cm'ere"?
- 11) Benny's long-time announcer was...
- 12) Bandleader Phil Harris was married to film star....