



A Visit With Jack Benny

by Dr. Charles Beckett

It was five minutes before my appointment to interview my favorite radio personality. I practically ran up the steps to the entrance of the Hillcrest Country Club. I was met by a solemnly dressed man who ushered me into a small alcove just off the main dining area. There, in the corner of a large overstuffed, brown leather couch was a fragile looking man nestled into one of its corners. He sat relaxed, legs crossed. He was wearing large horn rimmed glasses and smoking a cigar.

I froze. Then a gentle voice said "Come in." I ventured slowly toward the seated figure who had been an idol of mine for most of my life.

I started to introduce myself. "Mr. Benny..."

"Please. Call me Jack."

I bravely approached the couch. Jack Benny unfolded from his cross legged position and offered his hand in greeting. I quickly took it, nervously introduced myself and explained the reason for my visit. He nodded his head in acceptance. "Please. Sit down," he said in a voice I had come to know so well from his radio broadcasts. He pointed to a matching overstuffed chair fronting

his couch. I quickly obeyed. My throat felt dry and tight, but his friendly gaze reassured me. He nodded again, gesturing with his hand for me to begin the conversation.

Where to start? "Mr. Benny. Uh, Jack." I jumped right in, with what I thought would be some appropriate pre-interview warm-up comments.

"You've been called the greatest comedian of your time. For over thirty years, you made millions of people, including me, laugh, with your special brand of humor and your on air personality as a stingy, self-centered and ageless thirty nine year old

bachelor." He chuckled softly at my description. Then he said, "Actually, I was in show business for fifty eight years - but go on."

I gulped, nodded in acknowledgment of his correction, and continued. "For many years, you entertained us in front of our radios, TVs and movie screens with your wry, self deprecating humor. In addition, during World War II and the Korean War you traveled the world during your vacations entertaining American, Canadian, British and Australian troops, and visited numerous military hospitals to cheer up wounded soldiers. I know your

travels must have sometimes taken you to remote and dangerous places."

Continued on Page 3



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21st Annual OTR and Nostalgia Convention, April 20 – 21, at Ramada Plaza, Cincinnati, OH; Contact Bob Burchett, 10280 Gunpowder Rd., Florence, KY 41042 (888) 477-9112, haradio@hotmail.com

18th Annual Radio/TV Classics Live will be held May 4 & 5, at The Buckley Performing Arts Center, Brockton, MA; Contact Buckley Center Box Office, 1 Massasoit Blvd., Brockton, MA 02302 (508) 427-1234, Web Site: www.radioclassicslive.org

2nd Annual Mid-Atlantic Nostalgia Convention, Sep 13 – 15, at Clarion Hotel, Aberdeen, MD; for information call Michelle or Martin Grams, Jr. at (717) 456-6208, Web site is www.midatlanticnostalgiaconvention.com

32nd Friends of Old-time Radio Convention, Oct 18 – 21, at the Holiday Inn, Newark, NJ; For information contact Jay Hickerson, 27436 Desert Rose Ct, Leesburg, FL 34748 (352) 727-6731, JayHick@aol.com, web site: <http://www.fotr.net>

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RETURN WITH US NOW...

-2-

March, 2007

“Dangerous places? Are you talking about my travels or my vaudeville audiences?”

I continued on, unfazed - well, almost. “I also know you personally financed many of your overseas USO trips, paying musicians, singers and other performers out of your own pocket.”

“I think you just blew my image.” His laugh had a rolling lilt to it.

Benny, a generous, giving, and modest man in private life, was known to become embarrassed when someone brought up the subject of his many charitable benefit performances. But, I felt these contributions were too important not to be mentioned - at least briefly.

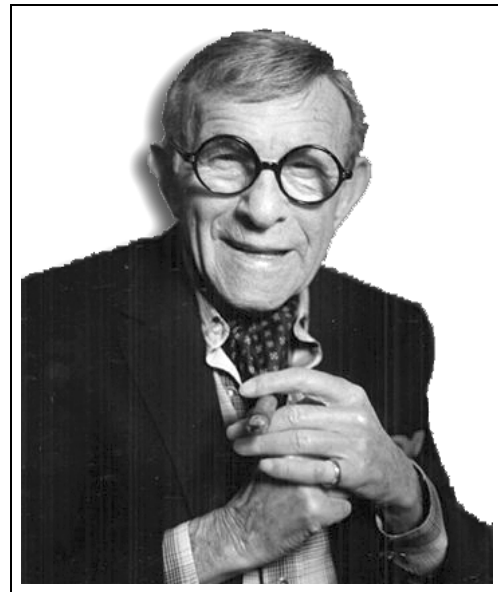
“You held a benefit for the Red Cross to raise blood for our military personnel. I know that for that performance the price of admission was donation of a pint of blood. Also, in 1950, you took your radio cast to New York to kick off a campaign for the Heart Fund, sponsored by the American Heart Association, to raise six million dollars for heart research, education and community service. He smiled as though reminiscing about those days. He said he remembered that at the end of that performance - still in character - he told the audience “Don’t worry folks. I don’t get any of the money. They just promised to let me count it.” He seemed amused at this recollection. The warmth of his smile made me feel more relaxed. Encouraged by his reaction to my comments, I felt I had to mention another of his contributions in the 1950s, when symphony orchestras were experiencing financial difficulties. To help them, he gave a series of guest violin performances with several symphony orchestras, including one at Carnegie Hall, accompanied by the New York Philharmonic Symphony Orchestra. His concerts raised almost six million dollars for musician’s pension funds and saved several symphonies from bankruptcy. In 1958, he played a concert in Kansas City to aid their struggling orchestra. Weeks before his arrival in Missouri, the Municipal Auditorium was sold out. He raised \$55,000 before playing a note - wiping out the orchestra’s entire deficit. And, if that wasn’t enough, President Truman was his master of ceremonies. Although recognized as a capable pianist, Mr. Truman declined to play, claiming he “didn’t want the audience to demand their money back.”

Benny was humble about his generosity in the giving of his time and talents to raise money for worthy causes. His response to my comments was,

“Well, there was a need. How could I not do my small part to help?” A pause. Then, he said, smiling, “You talk a lot, don’t you, kid?” He was right. I was still nervous being in his presence, and found myself bordering on babbling. But, he continued to smile. That was a good sign. So, I took his comment not as criticism, but merely as an observation. It was obvious he did not like to dwell on his personal contributions to so many deserving causes.

I felt maybe it was time to change the subject, and instead of me monopolizing the conversation, ask him some questions.

“As a professional comedian, what did you find funny? What made **you** laugh?”



Benny surprised me by laughing openly at my obviously unfunny question. He slapped his knee. His blue eyes seemed to sparkle and become even bluer. He suddenly looked ten years younger. I had finally said something he felt comfortable talking about. His response was immediate. “You asked the wrong question, kid. It’s not **what** made me laugh. It’s **who** made me laugh. I can sum it up for you in two words - George Burns. As you know, George and I have been best friends for over fifty years. With George, It wasn’t so much what he said, but how he said it. He didn’t say funny things. He said things funny. For instance, once, we were having lunch here at Hillcrest. I had just taken a sip of coffee, when he asked, ‘How’s your coffee, Jack?’ Now, on the face of it, that’s not funny. But, for some reason I laughed so hard, I sprayed a mouthful of coffee all over the table cloth.” He then told me of another time, when he mentioned to Burns that he hadn’t slept well the previous night, George asked him how he slept the night before. Jack told George

he slept well that night. George, in his dry, deadpanned manner, told him to just sleep every other night. Often, when Benny laughed, he didn't just laugh - he fell down laughing - pounding the floor. On occasion, he needed to be helped back up, weak from the exertion.

I asked him whether a story that George Burns had told about him was true. Burns had said that one time when Benny was giving a party at his home, he told Burns he didn't feel the party was going well, that he didn't think the guests were having a good time. So, Burns suggested he go upstairs, strip to his underwear, put on one of wife Mary Livingstone's hats, and make a dramatic entrance down the staircase. While Jack was preparing, George claimed he told the party goers what Jack was going to do, and that, when he came down, for them to just ignore him. Benny made his grand entrance down the stairs and was surprised when nobody seemed to even notice him. He went over to Burns, laughing, and said, "George, now the party's moving." Benny smiled and nodded, verifying the story.

Benny even tried, on occasion, to turn the tables on Burns. He told about a time he and Burns were on the road together, and shared a hotel room. Benny decided to try to make Burns laugh, which he rarely was able to do. So, while Burns was out of the room, Jack removed his clothes. When he heard the door opening, he stood on a chair, facing the door, with a lampshade on his head. Only, it wasn't Burns who came in. It was the maid with fresh towels. He said he didn't know who was more embarrassed, him or the maid. He admitted that his attempts to make George Burns laugh usually backfired.

One memory led Benny to the next. It seems that when he talked to George on the phone, George would hang up in the middle of their conversation. "He'd say to me, for instance, 'Oh, Jack, there's something I want you to do for me.' 'I'd say, what is it?' and he'd hang up." George and Gracie Allen got married while performing in Cleveland. Since Jack was George's best friend, he thought the least he could do was call George and congratulate him. Benny sent Burns a telegram saying he would call that night. Jack was performing in Kansas City at the time. When the long-distance operator made the connection and Burns answered the phone, Jack said, "Hello, George." Burns replied, "Send up two ham and egg sandwiches and coffee for two" and hung up. But Benny was determined to congratulate the couple. So, later, he called again. George again answered the phone and said hello. Then, when

Benny said hello, Burns replied "What's keeping the sandwiches?" and again hung up. After telling this story, Benny said, "You'd think he'd be serious on his wedding night, wouldn't you?"

Another time, Jack remembered, some of the members of his television orchestra would get together once a week to play poker. Frankie Remley invited Jack to sit in with them one night. Benny commented, "You know, when they sit around and play poker, they dress like bums, so I thought I'd get all dressed up in a top hat, white tie and tails, gloves and a cane." But, Benny admitted that he made one mistake. He told George Burns his plan. When Jack arrived at Remley's house and knocked on the door, he heard a voice say, "Come in." On entering, he saw that everybody at the table was also dressed in top hat, white tie and tails and playing cards. Benny laughed. "Naturally, you know what happened. George called them and told them what I was going to do. Now, imagine doing a lousy trick like that to me."

Another story Benny told on himself was about an event that occurred during the early days of his and Burns' friendship, when the two of them played the Palace Theater in New York. George had performed there before, but this was Jack's first time, and, naturally he was nervous. On opening night, Burns finished his act, and then Jack did his. For an encore, Benny called Burns back on stage to do a little routine they had done together before. The format was for Benny to ask Burns questions. In Jack's words, "I asked them alright, but he wouldn't answer, just for the sake of driving me crazy on the stage. He left me standing there cold. Finally, when he wouldn't answer me, the audience got wise, knowing what a crazy guy Burns is, and they laughed because I was in a spot. Now, that takes a lot of guts."

Benny recalled another time, when he and Burns were at a party. Also at the party was a well known opera singer. After dinner, the guests gathered around in chairs, theater style, to listen to the singer perform. George, not a fan of opera, was in the back of the room. Jack was sitting in the front row, waiting, when Burns walked up behind him and said, "When she walks on to sing, if you laugh, you're a louse," then left. Benny said, "Now that's the worst thing in the world he can tell me. I know he's standing in back, watching. You don't know what I went through to keep from laughing, knowing that he's standing back looking at me, only waiting to see if I'll laugh. And, of course, I wanted to. I

thought I'd burst before she got through with her aria."

Benny's final comment about burns during our interview was, "That's how he is. It makes life interesting, doesn't it?"

In writing, these events probably don't seem very funny to the average man. But, Benny was no ordinary man. And, from Burns' mouth to Benny's ear, they were hilarious.

Author's comment:

Obviously, this meeting never happened. I wish it could have. But, the stories were just as Benny (or Burns) told them. When Jack Benny died, George Burns and Bob Hope were to deliver eulogies at his funeral at Hillside Memorial Cemetery in Culver City, California. Burns began his eulogy, but became so emotional he was unable to finish. Bob Hope completed a final, moving tribute to George Burns' best friend.

RHAC on the Internet



And now it's time to meet Fred Hobbs, the host of RHAC's internet show, "**OTR from the Rockies**".

Fred spent many years in radio and television broadcasting, elsewhere and in Denver, both in production management as well as being behind the mikes and in front of the cameras. Fred brings a style to our show that's reminiscent of those days we OTR folks still enjoy.

On the 4th Saturday of the month at 9:30p MST, go to www.yesterdayusa.com/saturdaylive.htm and click on the radio icon to hear our hour long program of interviews and OTR shows.

RETURN WITH US NOW...

-5-

From the Desk of the Editor

by Carol Tiffany



Greetings from the sunny south. Today's (record) high was 92! Your editor wishes fervently that she was still in wonderful cool Colorado. We wish all of you a happy (and GREEN) St. Patrick's Day.

This issue of RWUN features an interesting article from Dr. Charles Beckett with an innovative style as he alters his usual straight-on factual narrative for a more whimsical approach. Additionally, we have an article from Danny Goodwin concerning one sponsor's creative use of the dreaded "dead air"! We hope you will enjoy this issue.

And, if you look down and to the left, you'll meet Fred Hobbs, the host of RHAC's monthly internet show. Fred says to check out the show, then send him a request for one of your favorite stories.

As usual, we are in need of articles, quizzes, and other materials for this year's newsletter. Please send in any ideas or articles you may have either via E-Mail or regular mail. All OTR-related topics are welcome.

Good listening to all...



New in the Tape and CD Libraries

by Maletha King

This month we continue with "Jerry at the Circus". It just reminds us that circus people are like the rest of us, with problems and triumphs every day. It really is a great series and, although it will not keep you on the edge of your chair, it is very interesting and will give you lots of good listening.

Our snow from last December is finally starting to leave and we can start our plans for the next summer of good listening to old time radio. As a recently widowed person, I have been able to spend lots of time with my OTR shows and they certainly do help to make the days pass pleasantly

March, 2007

Popular Cleanser, Great Cleaner, Terrible Sound Effect

"Old Dutch, the cleanser that polishes as it cleans." ---
Russ Young

By Danny Goodwin



In order to be successful, radio relied completely on sound. Whether it was words, music, or funny noises, they were all vital. Since radio commercials during the golden age were heard only on radio and nowhere else, they also needed the services of sound.

If you have read other articles I have written, you should know when I open an article with something that makes you want to exclaim "duh!"--- there is usually an exception to the rule. Guess what, gang? There is an exception for the use of sound on radio. Silence on radio, that's disastrous!

While other radio sponsors relied on sound, there was a product that believed "Silence Is Golden" for its success. The quiet product in question was Old Dutch, the cleanser with the famous "Old Dutch Girl" chasing that nasty dirt with her stick.

It all took place on an Old Dutch Cleanser commercial heard on a 1939 broadcast of the BACHELOR'S CHILDREN serial program on the Mutual Network*. The commercial began with announcer Russ Young describing how Old Dutch cleaned sinks, pots, and pans better than any other cleanser. The reason why was "Seismotite," an ingredient that cleaned and polished the surface it touched without scratching. To prove Old Dutch didn't scratch, a real live "Coin Test" was conducted at that moment for the listeners to hear--- and DIDN'T hear!

To prove the honesty of the test, Young

informed the listeners that housewives were selected to witness what was going on. First, two pieces of glass were placed on a table. When this was done, some Old Dutch Cleanser was sprinkled on one piece of glass, and the infamous other cleanser was sprinkled on the other piece of glass. When both cleansers were applied, a coin was needed to perform the test. Now comes the moment of truth. The coin was placed on the glass with the other cleanser and moved slowly in a circular motion on the glass. For the few seconds it was done, the listeners heard a nauseating scratchy sound. It wasn't static from the radio, but the sound of the other cleanser scratching the surface of the glass. Now it was Old Dutch's turn. The coin was cleaned off and moved to the glass with Old Dutch. It was moved the same way as before. Instead of that disgusting scratchy sound, the listeners heard nothing but silence. If there was any noise during this phase of the test, it was the radio's fault!

You might be wondering what does the Coin Test prove? The noise heard from the other cleanser meant that product had disgusting grit. It scratched the surface while it was being cleaned. Granted, the surface was clean, but the surface was ruined. Over time, this could get very ugly! The noise not heard from Old Dutch meant its amazing Seismotite combined cleaning and polishing for a smooth and clean surface without scratching.

The result of the Coin Test ended in a split decision. For sound effects, the other cleanser won easily, but for cleaning and polishing without scratching, it was Old Dutch hands down. Since the housewife cared more about cleaning than hearing sound effects, her choice was to use Old Dutch for cleaning sinks, pots, pans, and other surfaces of the house when a cleanser was used.

Old Dutch may not be fondly remembered for its sound effects during the history of radio's golden age, but sound effects don't necessarily promise clean and polished surfaces. That was why housewives preferred to use quiet Old Dutch Cleanser than any other cleaning product of the era.

** Editor's Note: It's a good bet a similar Old Dutch Coin Test commercial was also heard on BACHELOR'S CHILDREN over the stations of the Columbia Network. The program was on the air on both Mutual and Columbia at the time.*

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