

# NOSTALGIA DIGEST®

FEBRUARY/MARCH 2000



**JACK BENNY**  
With Six Delicious Flavors



# JACK BENNY'S COMPETITION

BY BILL OATES

In 1990, Joan Benny saw to it that her father Jack's intended autobiography be published as *Sunday Nights at Seven*. The



title, a reference to a life-time guarantee made by CBS President William S. Paley, reinforced Jack Benny as such an important fixture on radio that the time period was forever his.

In order to appreciate the twenty-three year career of radio's premiere comedian, the devoted Bennyphile must look at the comedian's stay on *three* networks (both NBC Blue and Red, as well as CBS) and at least *eight* different time slots.

The journey began when he took his first foray into early network radio on May 2, 1932.

The atmosphere into which Jack Benny debuted held at least two major differences from the classic post-war Benny years. First, time slots were not as clearly defined in half and full hour segments. Quarter hour segments, sometimes daily or twice or thrice weekly, were more prevalent.

More importantly, the bulk of early 1930s broadcasting contained a variety of musical aggregations, for example, from a tenor and piano accompanist to entire philharmonic orchestras.

Into this heavily musical atmosphere entered Jack Benny, who was heralded a scant two months earlier on the March 19, 1932 *Ed Sullivan Show*.

---

*Bill Oates, of Kouts, Indiana, is a high school English teacher and author.*

---



Jack Benny

During the week that Jack Benny premiered on radio at 9:30 New York time, his debut met with very little fanfare. Appearing on the same page as "Science News" but not too far removed from other entertainment information, the May 1 *New York Times* listed a relatively incomplete schedule of what was on the air.

More often than not, musical groups were usually listed in the "Outstanding Choices" radio column, and once in a while comedians like Eddie Cantor or Ed Wynn might find a place with the favored offerings. No special mention was made of Jack and company and, as a matter of fact, the first Monday show was listed as "Olsen Orch., Etta Shotta [sic], and Jack Benny, comedy" for Canada Dry on WJZ (NBC Blue.)

The Benny program followed Sinclair's *Wiener Minstrels* and preceded O'Henry

## JACK BENNY'S COMPETITION

stories. The Blue network already sent out *Vic and Sade*, Marion and Jim Jordan (not yet *Fibber McGee and Molly*), *Little Orphan Annie*, Lowell Thomas with the news, *Amos 'n' Andy*, and Paul Whiteman's Orchestra. Ironically, just prior to Benny on WEAF (NBC Red), Benny tenor-to-be Frank Parker sang at 9:00 with the *A&P Gypsies*.

They were followed on the "other" NBC by regular early Benny competition, *Parade of States*, with the May 2 offering celebrating Kentucky. *The Witch's Tale*, an early horror series, played on WOR (later on the Mutual network.)

On WABC (CBS) Pierre Brugnon sang with the Sondeus Orchestra, and later that evening, George Burns and Gracie Allen were all the rage as the featured comedians on the *Guy Lombardo Show* on the same network. Not too many months later, comedians would become the headliners as backed by the orchestras.

The reasons are not completely clear why the National Broadcasting Company called its two divisions Red and Blue. The organization began on November 15, 1926 when WEAF, twenty new affiliates and four other stations broadcast the initial four-hour show from the Waldorf-Astoria. Shortly thereafter, WJZ joined the aggregation with the intention of being the flagship for a second string of stations. The second edition of *Stay Tuned* (Sterling and Kittross) suggests that when AT&T engineers had to keep the two sets of network lines isolated, they used red and blue wires.

Perhaps one note of trivia is the little known fact that Jack Benny (or George Olsen as the show was listed) replaced two quarter hour sketches on the Blue Network's WJZ. The short programs, *Backward Turn Backward* and *Thompkins Corners*, filled the thirty-minute slot on



both Monday and Wednesday the week before the *Benny Canada Dry Show* debuted. The flagship station of the Blue Network was shoring up its talent, but Jack Benny and company would soon leave for a brief stay at rival CBS.

To compare the programming in the Chicago area when Jack Benny first appeared on his own show, one must understand Chicago area radio and the lineup of early network affiliates at that time. During the spring afternoons, Depression weary Chicagoans found escape listening to the powerful 1932 Cubs on WBBM. Later that evening the station featured local musical talent opposite George Olsen and Jack Benny, who were heard over WMAQ. The *Chicago Tribune* did not even list the first Benny show, although some area papers showed that it followed the *A&P Gypsies*.

WGN, then the CBS affiliate, carried *An Evening in Paris*. (Earlier in the evening the *Tribune* station played the *Linit Bath Club Revue*, which would later star Benny's feuding friend Fred Allen.)

WENR (NBC Red) carried the aforementioned *Parade of States* show. WCFL





Jack and Fred Allen

featured an organ recital, WJJD offered *Corn Crib Doin's*, and WIBO gave the timely *World's Fair Talks*.

By the second Benny show on Wednesday of that week, "George Olsen Variety" competed with the following: *The Eno Crime Club* (WGN), *Count of Luxembourg* (WIBO), and Nat Shilkret's concert (WENR.) Later that night, both NBC affiliates, WMAQ and WENR, broadcast the eternally popular *Amos 'n' Andy*. The local radio listings were a bit sketchy in those early days with many stations without published program notes.

For the second show of the season, on the following Wednesday at 8:15 Central Time, Olsen and Benny met with only slightly more formidable Chicago competition. With Benny on WMAQ, WENR featured soprano Gladys Rice from the network feed, while torch singer Helen Morgan and the Revelers Quartet were brought to the Midwest via KYW at 8:00 but with nothing else listed on that station at 8:30. WGN sent the *Eno Crime Club* mystery series to listeners in the local market.

Chicago stations did not always line up with the network feeds, while other stations might carry what was not heard on the usual station. (For example WGN, later a CBS outlet, carried Benny for a while, but WBBM also carried some CBS programs. And KYW, WMAQ, and WENR all had NBC programs. Confusing? Even more difficult is to establish what is on all of the stations, when local papers either excluded some programming or merely listed a slot as "music.")

Jack Benny and his competition remained fairly constant during the summer of 1932. Occasionally, a special concert or other event, like speeches during the presidential campaign of 1932, popped in and out of the schedule. By the time the last NBC program appeared during the first season, the show appeared as "Jack Benny, Ethel Shutta, and George Olsen's Orchestra."

One week later Benny and Canada Dry took the show to CBS (two times a week: Sundays at 10:00 and Thursdays at 8:15 Eastern Time), where the program headlined Jack Benny with the Ted Weems Orchestra and soprano Andrea Marsh. Not only was the focus changing to Jack Benny's stardom, but it also indicated the direction of prime time radio away from basically music to variety and comedy.

*Radio Guide*, which was in its infancy during the week of October 16-22, 1932 (Volume 1, Number 52), heralded "Benny Goes to Columbia Oct. 30." The article went on to report that the comedian who "clicked immediately with radio audiences" changed from violin playing to comedy because "talking is easier on the fingers and neck." He would be heard on "local outlet WGN" in Chicago after fifteen minutes of the Harry Sosnik Orchestra on Sunday and Abe Lyman's Orchestra on Thursday.

When the *Canada Dry Show* ended its



*The Jack Benny Jell-O Program*

From left: Phil Harris, writers Bill Morrow and Ed Beloin, Don Wilson, Jack Benny, Mary Livingstone, unidentified, Artie Auerbach, Dennis Day

ing Jack Smith each sharing fifteen minutes of his Thursday time slot.

For a comparison of what Chicago had to offer against Jack Benny on Thursdays, "Today's Features" in the *Tribune* listed the following: *The Norsemen* (WBBM), *Elmo Tanner's Star Dust* (KYW), Rudy Vallee (WMAQ), and *Temple of Music* (WLS.) After Benny, Kate Smith sang for fifteen minutes followed by Abe Lyman's Orchestra. Jack Benny had little to fear except the loss of his sponsor, which was exactly what happened.

Jack Benny's absence from radio lasted until March 17, 1933, when Chevrolet assumed the show's sponsorship. The program stayed in a Sunday night 10:00 time period on NBC Blue (WEAF New York - WENR Chicago) through April 1, 1934.

Benny's competition in Chicago in the spring of 1933 included: William Miller and the WGN Orchestra and a sketch (WGN), and the *Adventurers Club*

(WBBM.)

The Benny show took a brief hiatus during the summer, and the U.S. Navy Band filled in. When he returned on October 1, 1933, Jack Benny and company (Frank Parker eventually replaced James Melton) held their own in New York against an opera on WOR, fifteen minutes each of an orchestra and baritone on WJZ, and a dramatic sketch on CBS.

The meteoric rise continued as Jack Benny broke into the top ten programs that year, and the Black Orchestra did not lead the list of participants in the time slot. In the spring of 1934, Jack Benny (Mary Livingstone was soon included as a principal) faced the following in Chicago: the mystery sketch *K-7* (KYW), *Angelo Patri* (WBBM), and Frank Master's Orchestra (WENR.)

By the following season he was in sixth place, and, from March through December 1935, Jack Benny reveled in his new



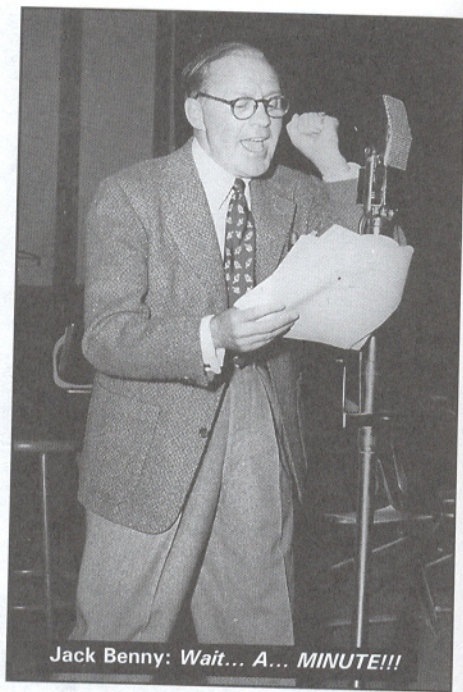
## JACK BENNY'S COMPETITION

status as number one on the dial.

When Benny starred on the *Chevrolet Show*, the primary competition came from now-forgotten music groups like Dorothy Fields and Jimmy McHugh or Rich's Orchestra. The second quarter hour on WJZ found *Vic and Sade* ruminating from their small house half way up the block. Throughout the Chevrolet reign, only the sponsor put the brakes on the comedian's attempts to become a favorite with listeners. Curiously, on the first show of this series, a young Frances Langford is listed as the singer instead of James Melton. The following week Melton is included but as an afterthought with "Zelma O'Neal, songs." Just before Jack Benny and crew left the air for the summer of 1934, a formidable rival emerged at CBS (WABC) in the form of then popular vaudevillian Lou Holtz and soprano Grace Moore.

Once General Motors tired of Jack Benny's style, General Tire took over with virtually no gap. The new sponsor moved the program to Friday at 10:00 Eastern Time (still on NBC, and sometimes at 10:30) until it dropped the show on September 28, 1934. Both of these General sponsors disapproved of Benny's insistence on more comedy and less music.

Near the final days of the run, Benny on NBC faced a pianist on WJR and Milton Kellm's Orchestra on WOR (now part of the new ABS network prior to the formation of Mutual.) CBS offered an unusually slotted forty-five minute show with then popular *Stoopnagel and Budd* at 10:00. To counter Benny's later start at 10:30, the two satirists preceded Benny's starting time and then finished the hour with music by Carilile and London at 10:45. In Chicago, WENR offered *The Variety Show* hosted by Don McNeill, WGN predicted the news with *Tomorrow's*



Jack Benny: *Wait... A... MINUTE!!!*

*Tribune*, and WBBM presented a female pianist.

The longest sponsor association with Jack Benny resulted when General Foods attempted to push its JELL-O into first place over leader Royal Gelatin. On the heels of the comedian's success, the General Foods dessert did quite well and heralded its six delicious flavors from October 14, 1934 to August 31, 1942.

When this version of the Jack Benny saga premiered on NBC via Chicago's WENR, WGN broadcast the *Palmer House Ensemble*, KYW offered *The Madhatters*, WBBM sold *The Singing Salesman*, and WMAQ sent out Mischa Levitzke, a pianist.

Two years after Benny took JELL-O to the top, Royal tried to regain its first place position by sponsoring the *Rudy Vallee Show*. However, the Jack Benny dessert continued its popularity so much that General Foods decided to achieve equal success with its Grape Nuts cereal on the same



show from October 4, 1942 through June 4, 1944.

When Jack Benny returned to the air in the fall of 1935 on WENR, the primary competition at 7:00 Central Time came from WGN's *Even Song*, WMAQ's *K-7* mystery, and Alexander Woolcott's *Town Crier* on WBBM. When the Benny show premiered in October, the *Tribune* criticized the comedian's new season. Even though "Michael Bartlett and Johnny Green have replaced Frank Parker and Don Bessor" the audience seemed to be growing "monotonous (of the Benny show) particularly the Livingston poems." On the other hand, kudos were proffered for the relatively new *Lux Radio Theater* show on CBS on Mondays at 8:00 Central. Little else challenged Jack Benny in either the 6:00 or 7:00 Central Time slot on Sundays through the 1938-39 season. One CBS upstart in the fall of 1937, *Open House* with Jeanette MacDonald and Don Ameche, seemed qualified but failed in the ratings.

Two dimensions in programming emerged in the late 1930s and early 1940s that offered completely different alternatives to the *Jack Benny Show*.

Late in 1939 CBS began war news coverage at 6:00 Central, while the following year WGN sent big bands like Dick Jurgens and Lawrence Welk from the Aragon and Trianon ballrooms. In 1941, FM programming, like that on Chicago's W59C, gave additional competition to early Sunday evening audiences.

During the war years, Jack Benny's rivals came from a variety of genres. Lawrence Welk (and subsequent orchestras) continued in popularity over WGN, while WEA (WJZ in New York) gave listeners fifteen minutes of news commentary from Drew Pearson (yes, the infamous "Dreer Pooson") and fifteen minutes of local news. WBBM and WABC in New York (until it became WCBS in 1947) of-

fered a variety of alternatives from the network including *Secret Weapon* (1942-43), *This is the Underground* (1942-44), Kate Smith (1944-45), and *The Thin Man* (1944-45.)

Not until the post war years did CBS offer any long lasting competition for Jack Benny, when *Blondie* competed from 1945-46, as did *Gene Autry* from the fall of 1946 to the spring of 1949.

The only other remarkable alternative to Jack Benny during the late 1940s came from Mutual's *Sherlock Holmes* starting in the fall of 1947 and running through the spring of 1949. However, two great broadcasting achievements caused a phenomenal furor in 1949, when CBS raided NBC's talent and television began expanding.

The entertainment section of the *New York Times* began including regular television listings with radio programming in the fall of 1948. By that year, the four TV networks (ABC, CBS, Dumont, and NBC) offered a full lineup of shows. While Jack Benny was following *Ozzie and Harriet* on the radio over WNBC (formerly WEA) until 1947, WNBT (NBC) telecast twenty minutes of the live comedy *Mary Kay and*



Jack and writer John Tackaberry



## JACK BENNY'S COMPETITION

Johnny and ten minutes of news. WABD successfully sent the *Original Amateur Hour* with Ted Mack via the Dumont network; WJZ (by this time part of ABC) split the half-hour with *Pauline Frederick's Guestbook* and film shorts; and WCBS looked back at the week's news. Ironically, independent WATV ran B Westerns, and sometimes they starred Gene Autry, Jack Benny's radio competition on CBS.

The other great force in radio programming in the post war years came when William S. Paley of CBS decided to buy the best comedy shows that NBC had to offer. Jack Benny represented the greatest catch for the network, which brought him first to a new radio home but later tied him to a television network, a power in the entertainment industry that seemed unstoppable in 1949.

Jack kept his 7:00 radio slot when he moved to CBS, and, as was mentioned earlier, the time period was guaranteed to him on CBS radio. Opposite Benny, Mutual programmed *The Adventures of the Falcon* for one season; ABC ran the forgotten quiz show *Think Fast* for one year; and NBC decided that Jack Benny's replacement would start one half hour earlier (6:30 Eastern.) If NBC believed that *Hollywood Calling*, a one-hour quiz show, would recapture its early Sunday night audience, it was sorely mistaken. By January, the Benny replacement was cancelled and another grandiose plan was concocted to woo radio listeners back.

Jack Benny faced little competition in the waning days of network radio. Mutual/WOR continued to broadcast original dramas (*Affairs of Peter Salem* in 1950, *Under Arrest* in 1951, and *Crime Fighters* in 1952), but by 1953 the *Rod and Gun Club* became the mainstay. ABC/WJZ folded even earlier, offering *Sammy Kaye's*



*Serenade* live in 1950 but then shifted to recorded plays and music the next two years.

The National Broadcasting Company decided to pull out all of the stops in November 1950, when *The Big Show* premiered starring Tallulah Bankhead. The network originated the variety program from New York for most of the shows and presented ninety minutes of tremendous entertainment. The show started at 6:00 its first season and 6:30 the next. The intention was to capture an audience and hold it through the Benny show at 7:00.

Unfortunately, two demons forced the demise of the show, and neither one was named Jack Benny. First, production costs on *The Big Show* lost NBC over a million dollars per season. Secondly, television was growing too quickly to maintain a radio audience. Ironically, RCA television regularly bought advertising on *The Big Show*.

Jack Benny's radio competition the last few years held few problems for him, and the television fare opposite the comedian until 1952 was also little to speak of. But



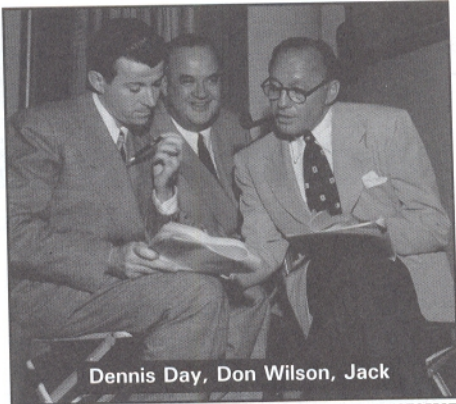
the novelty of the one-eyed appliance drew audiences to anything that flickered in its black and white orb. In 1952, three formidable television challengers to Jack Benny's radio audience emerged: former screen cowboy Gene Autry (in his third year at CBS), comedian Red Skelton (starting his first run on TV at NBC), and the audience request show *You Asked for It* (an early ABC success.) Dumont telecast *The Georgetown University Forum* in 1952 but scored more ratings points with ventriloquist *Paul Winchell and Jerry Mahoney* the following year.

By 1953, television listings preceded radio listings in the newspapers, and Jack Benny was among the few who remained as a traditional radio entertainer. Even he began appearing on television with increasing regularity; although not until the fall of 1960 did he appear weekly.

The last two seasons that Jack Benny presented new shows on radio (1954-55) he experienced no radio challenges, but the competition from television improved in quality. In the fall of 1954, CBS began *Lassie* at 7:00 on Sundays, and when Jack had a television show (at this time he alternated with Ann Sothern on *Private Secretary*), he started at 7:30.

Throughout his broadcasting career, Jack Benny was never on at television at 7:00 - in the early years of TV he would have been opposite himself on radio. *You Asked for It* (ABC) and *People Are Funny* (NBC) represent the last major television shows to play against the Benny radio show at 7:00 through the spring of 1955. The following fall, Edgar Bergen took the 7:00 Jack Benny time slot, when the ventriloquist and Charlie McCarthy started their new 55 minute show (they actually started after five minutes of news at 7:05) and gave listeners one more season of old style radio comedy.

By the time Jack Benny settled into his



Dennis Day, Don Wilson, Jack

PHOTOFEST

familiar Sunday night radio slot, his popularity had grown to the point that playing opposite the comedian was a death knell.

Stations were at their best when they programmed completely different entertainment and tried to reach the few who preferred not to listen to the popular comedian. However, if audiences opted for humor, their best bet was with Benny.

Forty-five years after the last original *Jack Benny Show*, radio listeners continue to be amazed at the remarkable craft that makes the program work.

Just as faithful Chicago listeners of old time radio elected Jack Benny their number one favorite show in 1999, an honor that reflected the high ratings given to the program from the mid-1930s through the television years, new listeners continue to find the show to be a very attractive medium for idle hours. Even Jack himself might be amazed to hear his old shows digitally restored and available on CD a half century later.

And fifty years after the president of CBS made Jack Benny the offer of a lifetime time slot, no one else in radio or television has ever been given and guaranteed such a position. ■

*NOTE-- February is Jack Benny Month on Those Were The Days. See the listings on pages 24-25.*