COVER STORY

Newest Radio Hall of Famer: Eddie 'Rochester' Anderson

BY BILL OATES

Eddie Anderson was inducted into the Radio Hall of Fame on November 3, 2001, joining his "boss" Jack Benny and the scores of other performers who entertained us so royally during the Golden Age of Radio.

Salesman: Is your boss an old man?
Rochester: No.
Salesman: Is he middle-aged?
Rochester: No.
Salesman: Is he elderly?
Rochester: Wrap it up!

He had to keep track of his boss's hair, make sure a pre-World War I automobile kept rolling, and lovingly suffer with the cheapest employer ever.

Eddie "Rochester" Anderson

On New Year's Eve, he had to abandon his own evening's plans to share "Auld Lang Syne" with a pathetically lonely miser. And throughout their three decades of master and suffering servant relationship, no duo better understood each other and moreover created and amplified more endearing characters on radio and television than those of Rochester and Jack Benny.

Perhaps the greatest comedy ensemble to perform on the radio (and later on television) was the cast that was called *The Jack Benny Program.* The namesake would be the first to admit that his success lay in the workings of so many talented actors who, at the hands of equally capable writers, provided listeners with an incredible number of laughs per half hour show.

One member, Eddie "Rochester" Anderson, was not only an integral part of the group, but also became one of the earliest successful black actors to be accepted in a sea of white faces. From simple stage beginnings in Oakland, California to the number one show on the air, it was Rochester who rose to play opposite his "boss" in a way that audiences adored and anticipated

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for years. He became the first universally accepted performer of his race to be endeared to the hearts of all Americans and especially on Sunday nights.

Jack Benny and "Rochester"

Performing was almost a given to young Eddie Anderson. His father was a minstrel show performer (yes, a black man in a minstrel show) and his mother was of a rare breed of black tight-wire artists. Big Ed and Ella Mae Anderson ushered Eddie into the world on September 18, 1905. By age fourteen, he and brother Lloyd began singing in all-black revues in such prestigious spots as San Francisco's Presidio and in hotel lobbies. When the boys began touring up and down the Pacific Coast, father objected and the duo came home for awhile.

The job that was more acceptable to Big Ed provided young Eddie with a potential disaster that was turned into one of the most distinctive trademarks in radio. Hawking newspapers in Oakland's streets gave Eddie some spending money, but the theory was that the louder he yelled the more papers he sold. The future star yelled so loudly to out-sell his opposition that he permanently damaged his vocal chords. What seemed to be the death knell for a performer gave "Rochester" his distinctive raspy voice.

Later in his teen years, a second brother, Cornelius, was added to the group and the "Three Black Aces" began their career as a song and dance team. The parts for the trio grew as the 1920s progressed. In 1919 the team landed parts in the cast of "Strutting Along." After Eddie got one line in a stage comedy in 1924, he left the group to do a solo turn. This was not the end of the team, even though their more famous brother accepted more prestigious jobs, for later they played two and a half years at the famed Cotton Club night spot in Harlem during its heyday.

Movie producers noticed the talented young black man in the early 1930s. First Anderson got a small part in the film *What Price Hollywood?* A greater claim to fame came when he had a more prominent part in the all-black Warner Brothers film *Green Pastures* in 1935. But even though he had a small role, Eddie Anderson eventually found himself in the most famous production in film history, *Gone With the Wind.*

Anderson had been on the *Jack Benny Program* for two years when David O. Selznick requested that "Rochester" (to radio audiences) be tested for the part of Port, the O'Hara's house servant. A note from Selznick to the resident counsel at RKO studios said, "I think that George (Cukor) is right to test Anderson..." He did not receive that part, but rather it went to Oscar Polk. Instead, Eddie moved to the Hamilton's household as Uncle Peter.

Anderson's movie roles, some guess the number to be near sixty, continued into the

Gone With The Wind (1939)
Eddie Anderson, Olivia de Havilland, Vivien Leigh

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1960s. But, just as it was Jack Benny's lot to be a movie star before he was successful on radio, Anderson's greater claim to fame emanated from the Philcos and Zeniths of America for nearly two decades.

When Jack Benny needed character parts on his show he often dipped into his cast of supporting players: a Benny Rubin, Bea Benaderet, or Mel Blanc. It was Rubin who was to assume the Negro dialect part of a train porter in a 1937 show. He had mastered so many voices but, according to Jack Benny in his autobiography compiled by daughter Joan, script writer Bill Morrow noticed Rubin vocalizing the part nicely, but deemed the actor was "too Jewish looking." Even after an offer to don blackface, Morrow suggested that Rubin would "look" the same to the critical studio audience, only darker. (It would not have made any difference to the *listening* audience.) It was decided that the show should hire a Negro actor.

Eddie Anderson had taken a number of bit parts on radio prior to what was to have been another one-shot stint. One story goes that a phone call came to a hotel in Los Angeles that housed many black actors in 1937. Anderson picked up the call for another actor and reported to the intended's audition.

Jack Benny had recently taken the Super Chief from New York to Los Angeles and the character of a real porter loomed as a potential gag candidate on the Easter show of that year. What resulted was the landing of a part and a lifetime job rewritten so that "Rochester" Van Jones would become Benny's definitely underpaid and often highly critical valet. The routine went—

Jack: Hey, porter, porter!
Rochester: Yas-suh.
Jack: What time do we get to Albuquerque?
Rochester: What?

Jack: Albuquerque.
Rochester: I dunno. Do we stop there?
Jack: Certainly we stop there.
Rochester: My, my!
Jack: Hm.
Rochester: I better go up and tell the engineer that.
Jack: Yes, do.
Rochester: What's the name of that town again?
Jack: Albuquerque.
Rochester: (laughs) Albuquerque. What they gonna think up next?
Jack: Albuquerque is a town.
Rochester: You better check up on that.
Jack: I know what I am talking about! Now, how long do we stop there?
Rochester: How long do we stop where?
Jack: In Albuquerque.
Rochester: (laughs) There you go again.
Sound: (Train whistle, twice)

Five weeks later the character reappeared in the show when he stopped at Benny's house when the train came again to Los Angeles. Jack eventually hired the man away from the railroad and the character was adapted as a permanent member of the cast (the first Negro in a major radio production). And so the arrangement continued on radio, then television until the regular show left TV in 1964.

Anderson confessed that he had to raise the pitch of his voice for the character. His normal sound was lower, and if he put more pressure on his voice he got the correct vibration. Of course, sometimes that voice cracked mid-word over the air sending the Boss into tears of laughter. The only competition Rochester had for voice jousting came when Andy Devine was required to play opposite the valet in the Buck Benny sketches.

The Benny show starred performers whose early careers relied on commonly accepted racial stereotypes, and the programs of the late 1930s reflected a closer tie to those now-dated jokes. As an awareness of the damaging comedy became more evident and after there was a radical writer turnover in the early 1940s, Jack Benny, an extremely sensitive leader, liberalized his treatment of the Rochester character. Late in Anderson's career, civil rights activists sought his name for their cause, but because he appreciated the fortunes that had befallen him he distanced himself from their requests.

Jack Benny went to bat for his fellow performer more than once. Rochester had been the subject of a controversy when, in a well-publicized case, a film in which he appeared called *Brewster's Millions* was banned in Memphis. The problem, according to a local newspaper, was that the film portrayed "too much social equality and

***Buck Benny Rides Again* (1940)**
Phil Harris, Jack Benny, Eddie Anderson

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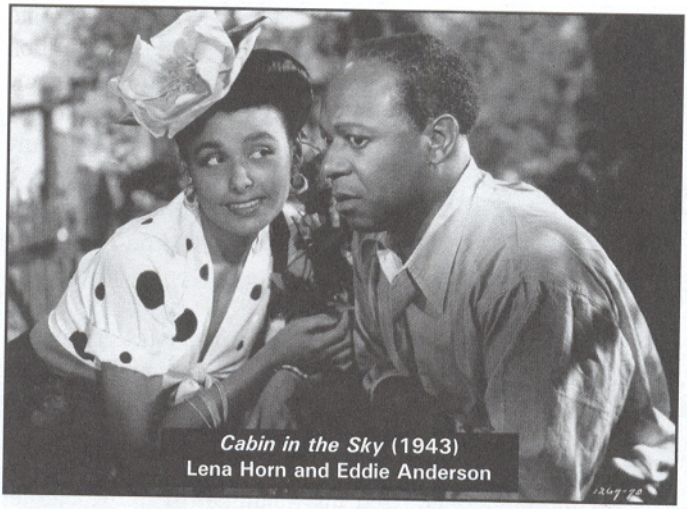
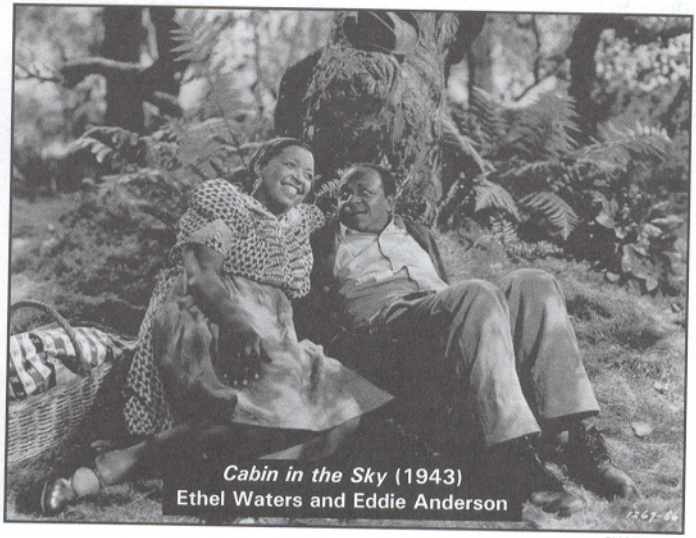


Cabin in the Sky (1943)
Lena Horn and Eddie Anderson

PHOTOFEST

racial mixture." Prior to this 1945 film, Benny had boosted his black cohort's posture when the film *Buck Benny Rides Again* experienced its world premiere in Harlem's Victoria Theater. An enthusiastic crowd, urged on by emcee Bill "Bojangles" Robinson, roared its approval as Rochester entered the stage smoking, as he said, "one of Mr. Benny's cigars." In another instance of support, Benny checked out of a hotel that suggested, by this time famous, Rochester's occupancy might upset some customers from the South. The former son of a Jewish immigrant, Benny Kubelsky, also left a restaurant with his entire entourage when a similar suggestion to remove Rochester from the group was made.

Eddie Anderson's greatest film role came when Vincent Minelli was given his first chance to direct at MGM. *Cabin in the Sky,* though decidedly stereotypical by today's standards, was one of the most talent-laden musicals produced by the most prestigious of studios. It was Lena Horne who had the job of seducing Little Joe (Anderson) with her suggestive "There's Honey in the Honeycomb." This Black Everyman could only respond with the song "Life's Full of Consequences" as Kenneth Spencer (representing Heaven) and Rex Ingram (from Hell) fought for his soul. One tune, "Happiness is a Thing Called Joe," was one of the few added to the original Broadway score which already included the powerful Ethel Waters tunes "Taking a Chance on Love" and "Cabin in the Sky." Add to the ensemble John "Bubbles" Sublett, Louis Armstrong, Oscar Polk, Butterfly McQueen, Ruby Dandridge, and Duke Ellington's orchestra, and a cast of first caliber black entertainers were gathered for a highlight



Cabin in the Sky (1943)
Ethel Waters and Eddie Anderson

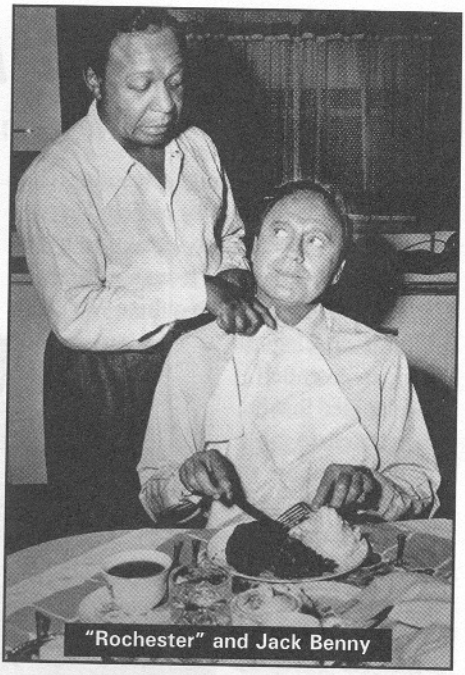
PHOTOFEST

of the 1942 film season.

Numerous other movie roles surrounded Anderson's career. Rochester played in several Benny radio screen spinoffs, including the 1943 film *The Meanest Man in the World.* In this film it was Rochester who suggested to the honorable but unsuccessful lawyer Benny to become mean and aggressive. Success followed Jack in this part, but he reverted to Mr. Nice Guy before he lost the girl and friends.

The last major film that included Eddie Anderson in an important role was *It's a Mad, Mad, Mad, Mad World* in 1963. This Stanley Kramer comedy spectacular included literally hundreds of famous comedians, including Jack Benny for a moment, in one of cinema's wildest chase movies. Rochester and Leo Gorcey drove treasure seekers toward the climax and the "Big W" where Jimmy Durante had indicated the money-hungry might find gold.

It is ironic that fan mail described Benny's horrible treatment/underpayment of the manservant, for the real Anderson was paid quite handsomely. It is, however, common knowledge that Eddie Anderson unnerved taskmaster Jack Benny with his tardiness at rehearsals. Anderson was notorious for being late for practice. He usually had excuses that were accepted reluctantly. After one threat from Benny, Rochester had the police escort him into the studio to vouch that he was delayed because of a traffic problem. Jack actually fired Anderson when an early Ronald and Benita Colman guest appearance was threatened by the valet's absence. Rochester was written out of the script, even though he explained that he was late because of a delayed plane arrival from San Francisco. Jack silently ignored Rochester's pleas until Mary intervened, saying that her husband was breaking Anderson's heart. The old softee relented and all was forgiven by the next week's show. One can hear



"Rochester" and Jack Benny

Rochester crying, "But Boss...." or "Aren't I a stinker?"

Eddie "Rochester" Anderson's job on the air was to keep track of radio's most successful, surrealistic household and, in doing so, broke the ground for other black actors such as Amanda Randolph, Louise Beavers, Eddie Green, and Ernestine Wade, who followed in his footsteps. He died at the age of 72 on February 28, 1977.

The acid test to the success of Eddie Anderson's career as a member of *The Jack Benny Program* is evidenced today when new listeners are exposed to the show or old listeners regroup for another reprise; the results show increased admiration for his contribution to a masterful ensemble of radio comedy. ■

NOTE-- To honor the induction of Eddie Anderson into the Radio Hall of Fame, many "Rochester" radio appearances will be featured during "Jack Benny Month" on Those Were The Days *this February.* *See pages 20-21.*