

The Remarkable Radio

BY KARL PEARSON

This is Jack Benny talking. There will a slight pause for everyone to say, "Who cares?"

It was with these very words that Jack Benny made his radio debut on March 29, 1932, as a guest on Ed Sullivan's program on station WHN, New York. Benny's appearance was a one-shot "freebie" that ironically would lead to a successful 23-year career in radio.



JACK BENNY & MARY LIVINGSTONE

Jack's spot on the Sullivan program had been heard by an advertising agency executive who was so favorably impressed with Benny's talents that he suggested one of his clients, Canada Dry, sponsor Jack in a series of his own. The *Jack Benny Canada Dry Program* premiered on May 2, 1932 over the NBC-Blue Network. Billed as "The Canada Dry Humorist," he was heard on Monday and Wednesday nights. Also featured on the program were George Olsen's Orchestra, vocalist Ethel Shutta (Mrs. Olsen), and announcer Ed Thorgersen (who was later replaced by George Hicks).

The Benny character on those early programs is very different from the one that most listeners remember. Jack was a suave "Master of Ceremonies" who told one-liners. But even in the beginning, listeners found the Benny program different from the standard radio fare. Jack was the first comedian who openly kidded his sponsor and product, which was unheard of in the early days of radio. Most sponsors employed announcers who extolled the virtues of the product in an almost reverent manner. Jack poked fun at the sponsor and the product and radio listeners enjoyed it.

The Canada Dry Program switched to the CBS network on October 29, 1932, where it was heard on Sunday and Thursday nights. The switch to CBS brought with it a new cast: Ted Weems and his orchestra, vocalist Andrea Marsh, and CBS staff announcer Paul Douglas, who later became a successful film actor. The only holdover from the NBC series was Mary Livingstone, Jack's wife, who first appeared on the Canada Dry Program on August 3, 1932, as a fan from Plainfield, New Jersey. Mary's initial appearance on

Career of Jack Benny



JACK BENNY AND HIS NEW WRITERS (from left): George Blazer, John Tackaberry, Jack, Sam Perrin, Milt Josefsberg.

the Benny show brought such large volumes of fan mail that she became a regular member of the cast.

The switch to CBS did not last long. There were rumors in the trade that Canada Dry was not happy with their product being lampooned. Whatever the reason, the last Canada Dry Show was heard on January 26, 1933. Within a matter of weeks, Jack had a new sponsor, General Motors.

The *Jack Benny Chevrolet Program* was heard once a week on Friday nights over NBC's Red Network. A new cast was assembled, with Mary once again being the only holdover. The cast included announcer Howard Claney, tenor James Melton, and Frank Black and his Orchestra. Friday night became "Jack

Benny night" as listeners tuned in to hear one of the nation's most popular radio shows.

Jack and writer Harry Conn devised bits of business previously unheard on radio. The Benny program was one of the first to use the orchestra leader and other cast members as foils to the star. The Benny program was also one of the first to make major use of sound effects. In the early days of radio, cast members and guests merely walked up to the microphone with no creative way of blending them into the program. Benny and Conn created the door knock as a device to work characters into the story line. The most popular innovation of the Benny show was the satirization of current movies. One of the first satirizations involved the MGM picture "Grand

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Hotel" which Jack retitled, "Grind Hotel."

At the start of the 1933-34 season, there were some minor changes in the program as the Benny show moved to Sunday nights. Alois Havrilla replaced Howard Clancy as announcer and James Melton left the program to start a career of his own. Melton had become an important part of the Benny show and critics wondered if Melton's departure would affect Jack's popularity. Jack hired Frank Parker as Melton's replacement and proved the critics wrong. Parker became an integral part of the Benny cast.

Once again Jack's kidding of the sponsor's product got him into hot water. The president of General Motors did not find the broadcasts at all funny and ordered the Benny show dropped. Public outcry over the cancellation became so great that General Motors tried to get Jack back. General Motors' loss became General Tires' gain, as they were able to sign up Jack for a short 26-week series.

Six days after the last Chevrolet Program, Jack made his debut for General Tires on Friday, April 6, 1934 over the NBC-Red network, taking Mary and Frank Parker with him. Joining the Benny cast were the two "Dons," Don Bestor and Don Wilson. Bestor was a popular orchestra leader of the period and Jack's phrase "Play, Don" became the country's latest catch-phrase. Former NBC sports announcer Don Wilson delivered the General Tire commercials and took part in various skits. The Wilson-Benny relationship was to become long and fruitful. During the "two-Don" phase of the program Jack referred to his announcer as "Wilson" to avoid confusion with orchestra leader Bestor.

While the General Tire Program lasted only 26 weeks, several more radio innovations occurred during its short run. One of the more unusual ideas involved showing exactly what went on before or

after the broadcast. On one program Jack was "late" for the broadcast and listeners heard him in a taxi on his way to the studio! This was a very innovative idea for 1934.

"Jell-O again, this is Jack Benny talking" was first heard on October 14, 1934 over the NBC-Blue network as Jack and his cast made the switch to "Jell-O" gelatin, manufactured by General Foods. As Jack later said, having worked for General Motors, General Tires and General Foods, "Having three generals in a row ain't bad for a guy who was in the Navy, not the Army.") Benny was now heard in the time slot that he would occupy for the next 21 years, Sunday nights at 7 p.m., Eastern time. By January, 1935, the program was one of the top three favorites in the country. On the last show of the 1934-35 season, Fred Allen and Portland Hoffa made their first appearance on the Benny program, a year and a half before the start of the famous Benny-Allen "feud."

The second season for Jell-O brought two major cast changes when Don Bestor and Frank Parker left the program. Bestor was replaced by orchestra leader Johnny Green, who portrayed a brash ivy-league type. Parker was initially replaced by Michael Bartlett, but the Benny writers were unable to create a suitable character for Bartlett. His replacement was a young tenor named Kenny Baker. Another network change occurred as the show switched to NBC-Red.

The Benny program rode the top of the ratings scale throughout the 1930s. Bill Morrow and Ed Beloin, Jack's new writers, developed new characters and situations. Schleppeiman, played by Sam Hearn, was a new character who always seemed to run into Jack wherever he was, greeting him with "Hello, stranger!" A Pullman porter heard on one of Jack's train rides was played by Eddie Anderson. Anderson's appearance drew such favorable audience response that he became a permanent part of the Benny cast as Jack's valet Rochester. Movie parodies



A GREAT RADIO TEAM — Don Wilson, Eddie “Rochester” Anderson (standing); Jack Benny, Mel Blanc (seated).

such as “Lost Horizon” and “Anthony Adverse” were also big favorites with the fans. And in the fall of 1937, Jack’s famous Maxwell roadster made its first appearance.

In the fall of 1936 the Benny program moved from New York to NBC’s new Hollywood studios. Johnny Green was the only cast member unable to make the move (he was doubling as leader on the Fred Astaire Packard Hour). Green’s replacement was the wisecracking Phil Harris. Phil’s arrival brought another long-

term cast player into the Benny fold. Other characters soon appeared on the show. Mr. Billingsley, a boarder at the Benny house, was played by Elliot Lewis. Frank Nelson had several bit parts, including an early “train station” routine. Mel Blanc first appeared on the Benny Show as Carmichael, Jack’s pet polar bear. One of the many running gags of the Benny show involved Carmichael, who lived in the basement at Jack’s house, tangling with the gas meter reader. The gas man was never seen again.

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In the summer of 1939 Kenny Baker left the Benny program to strike out on his own. Once again the critics felt that an integral part of the Benny cast was leaving. Baker's replacement, Eugene Owen Patrick McNulty, became even more popular than Baker and would remain with Jack for many years. After a name change, Dennis Day joined the Benny cast on October 8, 1939, along with his "mother," played by Verna Felton.

In May, 1941, Jack celebrated his tenth year on radio. NBC presented several special tributes to Jack, both on radio and at a special banquet in his honor. The most impressive tribute to Benny occurred at the dinner when he was presented by NBC with a permanent deed to the 7 p.m. Sunday night time slot!

General Foods shifted Jack's sponsorship from Jell-O to Grape Nuts cereal in the fall of 1942. Wartime shortages and increased sales kept Jell-O in short supply! Another change occurred a year later when a new team of writers (George Balzer, Milt Josefsberg, John Tackaberry and Sam Perrin) were brought in to boost sagging ratings. The new team streamlined the



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program format and created many new characters and story lines.

Changes continued into 1944. Dennis Day entered the Navy and left the show in April. For several weeks into the fall season many singers including Frank Sinatra and Martha Tilton filled in until a temporary replacement for Dennis could be found. Larry Stevens became the new singer on the Benny program on November 5.

The year 1944 also saw Jack's association with General Foods come to an end. On October 1, 1944, Jack began his 15-year association with Lucky Strike, an association that continued into television. At first Jack had been scheduled to sell American Tobacco's Pall Mall brand of cigarettes, but prior to the season's start he was switched to the more popular Lucky Strike.

The Jack Benny Program now entered its "classic phase." Many of the shows which listeners fondly remember are from this period. In 1945 there were a number of classic Benny "firsts." On the January 7th program Jack made his first trip to the vault, first ran into the racetrack tout, and

Chuck Schaden's



SPEAKING OF RADIO

Conversations with . . .

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| <input type="checkbox"/> Dennis Day | <input type="checkbox"/> Edgar Bergen |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Rudy Vallee | <input type="checkbox"/> Harold Peary |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Kate Smith | <input type="checkbox"/> Elliott Lewis |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Don Ameche | <input type="checkbox"/> Jack Benny |

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SPEAKING OF RADIO

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had his first encounter at the railroad station with train announcer Mel Blanc. Mel also made his first appearance in April as Jack's long-suffering violin teacher, Professor LeBlanc. On September 30, 1945, listeners heard the two NBC switchboard operators as Jack tried to call home. A few weeks later Jack tried to listen to the World Series on the radio for the first time. Also heard that fall was one of the most outlandish contests in radio: The "I Can't Stand Jack Benny Because" contest! Adding to this classic phase of Benny programs, was the return of Dennis Day after two years in the navy. Appropriately enough, Dennis made his return appearance on St. Patrick's Day, 1946.

Two classic routines first occurred on a 1948 broadcast. On the March 28th show, Jack borrowed Ronald Colman's Oscar and was held up on the way home. Listeners heard the famous "your money or your life" routine for the first time and Jack spent the next several weeks trying to borrow Oscars from other stars in an effort to replace Colman's stolen one!

The Jack Benny program made radio history during the 1948-49 radio season as it switched from NBC to CBS. Critics felt that it was a daring move to switch networks mid-season and many once again predicted trouble for Benny. Once again Jack proved the critics wrong by starting with a higher rating on his first CBS show than that of his last NBC show!

By 1950 radio was a slowly dying medium. Jack remained loyal to radio by producing a high-quality program week after week. The Benny program was still one of the highest-rated programs on the air. New bits such as Mel Blanc's "Si-Sy" and "Cimmarron Rolls" routines convulsed listeners. Movie spoofs on "High Noon" and "King Solomon's Mines" along with guests such as Bob Hope, Fred Allen and Al Jolson continued to provide top-notch entertainment.

Phil Harris left the Benny program in June 1952, to spend more time with his



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own popular "Phil Harris-Alice Faye Show." His replacement was bandleader Bob Crosby, Bing's younger brother. Bob fit into the Benny program nicely.

The last new Jack Benny radio program was heard on May 22, 1955. Radio as a form of popular entertainment had been replaced by television, (Jack made the transition into TV in 1950) and it was CBS that decided to end the radio series, although it continued in reruns for at least three more years.

Jack Benny left his listeners with a radio legacy, having starred in 925 radio shows of his own, along with countless guest appearances on other programs. In December 1967, Jack donated his personal collection to the University of California Library in Los Angeles. Included in the collection were recordings of many of his radio shows. Several years later tapes of a number of recordings in the Benny collection came into general circulation and these, along with other Benny shows, rediscovered by collectors provided fans with the chance once again to enjoy classic radio entertainment.