

FEUD FOR THOUGHT

Fred Allen *vs.* *Jack Benny*

BY BILL OATES

They were both born in 1894, they began working at NBC in 1932 for the first of many seasons, and they both played the famed Palace in New York.

Those achievements are relatively important ones in the combined lives of Fred Allen and Jack Benny, but the most memorable episode was the feud between the two that radio listeners enjoyed for years until Fred Allen was unceremoniously forced off the air in 1949.

Using a feud to generate audience appeal in twentieth century entertainment was not unique to Benny and Allen, for as early as 1909 the vaudeville team of Gray and Graham and the Four Musical Cates found that fighting in the press helped fill seats. A mock feud was created for radio in 1927 when N.T.G. (Nils T. Grantlund, a famed sportscaster) locked horns with vaudeville song and

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dance man Harry Richman. After that a Ben Bernie-Walter Winchell verbal spar and the W.C. Fields-Charlie McCarthy bout started on the airwaves during the 1936-37 season. Without a doubt, no entertainment feud during the century topped the Benny-Allen squabble for prolonged insults and audience-attracting ratings.

Although they were born just several months apart, few other facts about the early lives of Fred Allen and Jack Benny run parallel. Benny was born Benjamin Kubelsky to saloonkeeper and later haberdasher Meyer and his wife Emma, Orthodox Jewish immigrants, on February 14, 1894 in Chicago. About a thousand miles to the East, in Cambridge, Massachusetts, Allen was born on May 31 of the same year as John Florence Sullivan, growing up with an aunt in a poor Irish Catholic family.

Allen finished his public schooling and then began playing local vaudeville houses, while Benny was being expelled from school before spending the rest of his teen years experimenting with how he performed on stage. Just as they were teething in the entertainment profession, World War I interrupted: Jack Benny joined the Navy where his shipmates preferred his story telling to his violin playing, and Fred Allen was touring the vaudeville houses of Australia when the War started for the British Empire.

With the peace dividend came both comedians pursuing the higher rungs of the vaudeville circuits. Ascending the entertainment ladder with a "burly ventriloquist act" (a midget on the knee), juggling, banjo playing, and "snappy patter," Fred Allen made it to E. F. Albee's famed New York Palace theater in 1918 and flopped just as quickly. It was Allen's job to replace an acrobat on Sunday, then a sinful act on the Lord's day, but Allen's artistic redemption was not forthcoming, for he was cancelled after the first show. Eight years later, after pairing up with Bert Yorke, Allen achieved success as that same renowned vaudeville house.

While successfully touring on the Keith vaudeville circuit, Allen uttered the famous line to a rude orchestra leader: "How much do you charge to haunt a house?" Allen and Yorke skyrocketed to fame as quickly as the conductor fled the theater. At the same time, Jack Benny moved up vaudeville's ladder as well until he landed the job of master of ceremonies at the Palace in 1927, a job that he would occupy for the next two seasons.

Fred Allen's remembrances of vaudeville recurred numerous times as part of his radio show. Among his favorite guests from pre-radio days was Doc (George) Rockwell, a popular monologist who played a tin whistle and commented on the status of man and health. Many others played on the



various installments of Allen's shows, and, in 1942, Allen, supported by Jack Haley and Ben Bernie, attempted to revive the lost stage entertainment.

Allen abandoned the Palace act after he split with Yorke in 1926, but his marriage to Portland Hoffa, a chorus girl from the *Passing Show* of 1922, returned him to stage prominence with his bride

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as his new partner in 1927. He had courted her for four years and kept her nearby when she was added to the cast of *The Greenwich Follies* for the 1925-26 tour. The team of Fred and Portland opened the *Disappointments of 1927* with eighteen minutes of talk and Allen's banjo, just before they played the Palace on a same bill with Fanny Brice and the Gus Edwards revue.

Jack Benny returned from his stay with the United States Navy and continued to hone his style of talking and violin playing. After three tries at Palace immortality, Benny rejected his partners, and it was as a solo performer that he was successful. In the book *Sunday Nights at Seven* Benny related how, when he was touring the West coast, that he was convinced to go on a double date with a department store clerk from the May Company (actually, he had met her twice before, but the third visit found Cupid hitting the mark.) After months of playing in *The Great Temptations* and a family pow-wow at a Chicago stop (the girlfriend's sister Babe and Jack's father included), the former Sadie Marks became Mrs. Jack Benny. She was reluctant to perform and content to be the wife of the vaudevillian, but Sadie was called upon when Jack's "dumb girl" partner took sick in 1928. Nervous but loyal to Jack, Sadie agreed to be a temporary stand in, but when the original partner returned, Jack was convinced by his manager that the act was dead unless the girl from the hosiery department rejoined Benny. Eventually, she acquired the name Mary Livingston, legally assuming her new moniker and enduring her destiny to be with her husband on radio.

As to the vaudeville friendship of Benny and Allen, it can be explained thus: the road to the top of vaudeville was long, paved with many acts, and those who

made the journey became part of a fraternity, that protected and defended each other for years to come. It is a known fact that after Fred Allen became a wealthy performer, a down and out vaudevillian could gain a few dollars by approaching this radio star who had made it. Both Benny and Allen crossed paths numerous times, lived near each other when they worked in New York City, socialized with other stage performers, and wound up on the first great radio network, NBC. Among the Benny's "best friends were married couples" who were in show business (the Allens, the Cantors, Burns and Allen, and so forth) and when in the same city, groups of them got together for an evening of fun.

From its birth in 1927, the National Broadcasting Company defined what would become the talent over the airwaves for the next two decades and did so by luring many away from shrinking stage opportunities. After Jack Benny made a hit at the New York Palace, soon thereafter he became the master of ceremonies for Earl Carroll's *Vanities*. A guest shot on columnist Ed Sullivan's March 29, 1932 radio show created for Benny the chance to become Canada Dry's radio funny man two months later. In the fall of that year and on another night Fred Allen was snatched from the clutches of a darkening Depression Broadway to star as Linit's bath time comedian. Fred had appeared on an early radio spot in 1928 when the *WLS Showboat* and his vaudeville troupe crossed paths in Fort Wayne, Indiana. In the late 1920's Jack Benny believed that the wireless phenomena was only a fad and rejected early offers to appear on radio. Both comedians grew with the medium, refining characters and situations that would eventually become the best over the airwaves for years to come.

If one were to listen to Jack Benny of the early years, he would come off as a wisecracking, devil-may-care host hawk-



year-old violin player. On December 30, 1936 Steward Canin executed Franz Schubert's "The Bee" magnificently, and, with a pizzicato shot heard across the network, Allen crowed, "Ten years old and you play 'The Bee' so well - Jack Benny ought to be ashamed of himself." Strangely enough, it was Benny, with clothespin on nose, who mocked Allen earlier in a skit, "Clown Hall Tonight" on April 5, 1936. Benny's preface to the parody was "Are you listening, Freddy?" Fred Allen, who had often mentioned entertainers on his show, must have heard Benny for he attacked one of the top comedy programs for the sake of a seemingly short-lived laugh. Allen could only gain, for Benny's Hooper rating as a comedy show during the 1936-37 season was a close second to Eddie Cantor, and *Town Hall Tonight* was a distant fourth (Burns and Allen were in third place.)

ing the beverage once available at soda fountains that was now for sale for a nickel in bottles. As the 1930's progressed, a heavy announcer joined the cast, several tenors sang, a seemingly drunk band leader flaunted his curly locks as a magnet for the opposite sex, a nebulous female girl friend critiqued the stinginess and agelessness of the host, and a real African-American actor took a place on one of the most popular radio shows ever. On the other hand, Fred Allen moved to develop timely situations in a makebelieve *Town Hall* of New Englanders, unusual guests, and neverending political and social commentary. Once the two shows were established, Benny for General Foods' JELL-O and Allen for Sal Hepatica and Ipana, the late Depression audience was in for a fight, the likes of which had never before experienced in American entertainment.

Fred Allen often welcomed common folk, usually from the East Coast, to his hour long show. Among them were singers from universities, an eagle whose habits were a disaster, an escape artist, athletes, and a seemingly innocuous ten-

During the first week of 1937, the JELL-O show response to Allen was a fact that at ten years old Benny could play as well as Canin. The following week the Benny cast began a long running gag in the form of a question: "Did you hear Fred Allen last week?" This infuriated the show's namesake who called Allen a "reformed juggler" (for a time Allen was billed as the World's Worst Juggler in vaudeville.) Before Fred Allen could retort, Benny proclaimed (February 7, 1937) that he could play "The Bee" with one hand and "Love in Bloom" with the other but actually played neither on the show. To this Allen replied (February 10, 1937) that Benny's not playing was like a "breach of promise" and proceeded with his first "Cavalcade of Benny House" skit.

As unplanned as the feud was, it fueled the shows' writers and even writers from other programs on which the comedians appeared. When Jack and Mary guested on *The Lux Radio Theater* on February 15, 1937 in "Brewster's Millions," Cecil B. DeMille joked about

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Benny's obsession with "The Bee." For a return *Lux* show on September 26, 1938, Jack had to endure famed violinist Efrim Zimbalist playing the disputed song during the intermission of "Seven Keys to Baldpate."

As the 1936-37 season wound down, more verbal darts were thrown by each comedian. Benny doubted Stewart Canin's real age a week before Allen appeared to fight Benny on the JELL-O show. They exited the stage with blood in their eyes, but returned laughing and reminiscing about the good old days in vaudeville. There was no clear cut winner and the bout continued for years.

When the 1938-39 season started, the feud began anew. Allen was called a "weather-beaten gargoyle" by Benny, who was now dubbed the "Waukegan whipper-snapper." Fred Allen's announcer Harry Von Zell substituted for Don Wilson on March 27, 1938, and, upon returning to the Town Hall, reflected on not getting paid by Benny just prior to the entire Allen cast taking shots at Benny's cheapness. The amazing frugality of Benny grew to Herculean proportions at the hands of Allen and his writers; this in turn gave the Benny writers increased opportunities to build on the radio character of Jack Benny. By the end of the season Allen mocked Benny and his new California home with the skit "The House that Jack Built."

Over the next three seasons the two comedians parodied each other, guarded against each other, and finally shot a feud-based film, "Love Thy Neighbor." Stewart Canin made the New York premiere in late 1940, but even with Eddie "Rochester" Anderson in the cast, the Paramount picture did not measure up to the radio fight, so back to the air-waves it went.

No feud truce was called during World War II, as was evidenced on one episode



THE BENNY-ALLEN FEUD continued on the motion picture screen in the 1940 film, "Love Thy Neighbor."

of the popular and talent-heavy Armed Forces Radio shows of the War, *Command Performance*. In December of 1942, a New York originated guest shot found Jack Benny and Fred Allen singing "Friendship" as a peace offering to the listening military audience. However, before the appearance finished, the team split when the two debated as to who would get top billing in their contrived new act. Allen also appeared on Benny's Lucky Strike show on January 14, 1945 to assume the job as judge for the "I can't stand Jack Benny because..." contest, a running gag. Famous lines from the feud were recreated for eager military audiences, a three round boxing match was staged to help the War Relief Effort, and before the War was over Benny played a very cheap trouble maker in Allen's film "It's in the Bag."

Fred Allen was on the CBS radio network for most of the War years, and when he returned to NBC in October of 1945, the feud began afresh starting with the network premiere. On the May 26, 1946 Tenderleaf show, Allen welcomed Benny and they discussed "giveaway shows." Of course Benny's cheap nature ran contrary to the concept; nonetheless, Allen created his "King for a Day" show as a skit on the show while Benny weasled his way onto the program to get something for nothing. The end result was a raucous literal de-pantsing of Benny,

a format for Allen's best insults, and a show that ran late as the audience screamed with delight. Ironically, it was the quiz show format on radio that helped cause Allen's removal from the medium three years later.

Two "Benny's Boulevard" parodies of Allen played, and Benny was humiliated on Allen's show more than once before the initiator of the feud was taken off the air. Jack Benny's appearance on Allen's final show was a fitting tribute to the man who attacked a higher rated program and who would invite his on air nemesis and long time friend to be one of his two last guests (Henry Morgan was the other.) Before Fred Allen mounted his "treadmill to oblivion," Jack Benny was once again made the butt of Allen's cheap jokes. Over the dozen years of the feud, Jack Benny's ratings continued to soar, while Fred Allen's remained steady at best.

Television diminished the feud but did not extinguish it. Allen appeared on a 1953 *Jack Benny TV Show* not to fight but to undermine its star. On the next Benny radio show, Fred Allen was a guest for the last time, once again reminiscing about the glory days of vaudeville. Nine years after Allen's death in 1956, Stewart Canin resurfaced once again to play "The Bee" on Benny's television show. And, to prove he too could play it, Benny followed suit. In 1971, while visiting Dartmouth College where Canin was a forty-four year old concertmaster, Jack Benny acknowledged the fact that because of the original challenge issued by Fred Allen thirty-four years earlier, Benny began seriously working on the violin. He then played to a nostalgic and enthusiastic audience, one of many serious concert turns now including "The Bee," second only in popularity in Jack Benny's repertoire to "Love in Bloom."

The feud had come full circle, but Fred Allen was not around to appreciate his old friend's pride in a vaudeville act well



done. In both men's autobiographies, they paid homage and respect to their true friendship: Jack Benny is "my favorite comedian," wrote Allen "and I hope to be his friend until he is forty. That will be forever." Benny said that Allen was generous, educated, intelligent, and "miles ahead of most other performers," but outside of discussions about vaudeville, Allen was a very disgruntled individual, someone Benny did not fully understand. Perhaps that is why the feud, balanced on both sides by two old vaudevillians, worked so long for so many years. In this element both men were great and their expertise at sustaining a wonderfully funny fight is a tribute to lessons learned in vaudeville and refined on their greater triumph radio. ■

(NOTE — Comedy highlights from Benny and Allen radio broadcasts may be heard on a 60-minute audio cassette tape (#161) called "Fred Allen Vs. Jack Benny." Their famous feud provides the entertainment as Jack does his take off on "Benny's Boulevard" and Fred does the "Pinch Penny Show." Featured are Mary, Dennis, Phil, Rochester, Portland, Jimmy Durante, Tallulah Bankhead. Available for \$6.95 plus tax at Metro Golden Memories in Chicago, or by mail for \$9.50 complete from Hall Closet, Box 421, Morton Grove, IL 60053.)