

*Ken Alexander
Remembers ...*

Jack Benny on Tour



On one of the Jack Benny radio shows in the 1940's, Jack made a \$4.98 purchase in a department store and handed the clerk a five-dollar bill.

"I'm sorry, Mr. Benny," the clerk said. "I'm all out of pennies. I'm afraid I'll have to go to the cashier's office up on the 15th floor and get some change."

"Oh, that's all right," Jack said. "I can wait."

"I can wait," along with "Now, cut that out!" "Yipe" "What happened to the gas man?" "Well!" and other phrases heard on the Jack Benny program, soon began to be heard in our household and, I imagine, in millions of households around the nation. Such was the popularity of the Jack Benny show.

Beginning in the middle 1930's, my family listened regularly to the Jack Benny program for years and years. Most of us think of Jack as a perennial 39-year-old, but I can remember when he claimed to be 38 — that's how far back I go.

All through the years, every Sunday evening at six, my dad would turn on the radio and for the next half-hour we would forget the Great Depression, or the war, or any other worries.

By the time I graduated from high school, in January 1947, I was a devoted Benny fan.

COVER STORY

On the Benny programs in late spring of that year, Jack and the gang began talking about Jack's upcoming vaudeville tour. First stop would be Chicago, where Jack would appear at the Chicago Theatre for a week beginning May 9. On the May 4 broadcast, Jack and the gang talked of the tour as they prepared for the trip.

I decided that I had to see Jack Benny in person, and on Saturday, May 10, I took the streetcar downtown.

Benny's engagement at the Chicago Theatre, as well as his entire personal appearance tour, was receiving a great deal of publicity, no small part of it due to the efforts of his friendly enemy, Fred Allen.

We all know that the long-running feud between Jack Benny and Fred Allen was not a feud at all; the two men were old friends. The purpose of their feuding was to entertain the public; however, there was a side benefit for both antagonists. When Fred, on his radio show, would launch a tirade on Benny's stinginess, or his violin playing, for example, listeners would decide not to miss next Sunday's Benny show to hear Jack's response.

By the same token, when, on the Benny show, Mary would say, "Jack, did you hear

what Fred Allen said about you on his program last week?" and Jack would dismiss Allen as a reformed juggler, the listeners would be sure to tune in Fred's show the following week to hear *his* response.

Thus, Jack and Fred each helped to enhance the other's radio audience while the public sat back and enjoyed the fireworks.

Prior to Benny's personal appearance tour, Fred mentioned the tour on his show. He did so in a derogatory way, of course, but his intention was to pique the public's interest in Jack's tour.

Besides the references to the tour on Allen's show and on Benny's own program, other comedians mentioned the tour on their shows. If all these mentions had been paid advertising, they would have been worth many thousands of dollars. In fact, the advance promotion for the Benny tour was probably the most extensive ever for a vaudeville tour up to that time.

To further promote interest in the Benny tour, Fred Allen wrote a letter to Nate Platt, of Balaban & Katz, who booked the acts at the Chicago. Fred's letter was printed in the May 14, 1947 edition of *Variety*, the show business weekly. It read as follows:

Have just received word that a strolling player, one Jack Benny, currently appearing at the Chicago Theatre, is making snide references to me during his alleged performance. If Mr. Benny continues to malign my character, and cast aspersions on my ability, I will sue the Chicago Theatre for \$2,000,000. After paying my taxes, all I have left is my good name and I am not going to permit Mr. Benny to foul that.

Since I cannot come to Chicago to reply to Mr. Benny's scurrilous attacks, I have taken this means of fending off Mr. Benny in kind.

Before shoes were invented Mr. Benny was a heel. His false teeth are so loose they are always clicking. The last time Benny walked into the lobby of the Palmer

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CRAZY ABOUT
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people... Raising the roof
with their happy-go-
lovin' shenanigans!

**BARRY
FITZGERALD**
**DIANA SONNY
LYNN • TUFTS**

**"EASY COME,
EASY GO!"**

JACK BENNY ON TOUR

House wearing false teeth, he said "hello" to a friend and three elevators went up. Benny has no more hair than an elbow. He is so anemic, if he stays out at night he has to get a transfusion so his eyes will be bloodshot in the morning. His feet are so flat he can wear a wheatcake for an arch-supporter. He has no bones. His shins are two xylophone notes stolen from an old vaudeville musician. If the musician ever takes his notes back, Benny's shins will collapse and he will be two feet shorter.

The reason Benny is playing the Chicago Theatre is that he is visiting his sister in Chicago. He is too cheap to pay for a hotel room. Playing the theatre, he can sleep in the dressing room. This makes the Chicago Theatre the biggest flop-house in the world. During the night Benny is sleeping in his dressing room and during the day, when Benny is on the stage, the audience is sleeping in the theatre.

*Yours in high dudgeon,
Fred Allen*



FRIENDLY FOES: BENNY & ALLEN

In these days of tiny multiplex movie theatres, it may be hard for young people to believe that the huge Chicago was once a movie theatre, but it was. In show business parlance, it was known as a "vaudefilm" house; its program consisted of a first-run film plus a vaudeville show. The headliner of the vaudeville show was always a nationally known entertainer, very often one who had achieved popularity through the medium of radio. There were usually a couple of lesser known opening acts as well — perhaps a singer, a juggler, an impressionist, or a comedian. Music was provided by Lou Breeese and the Chicago Theatre Orchestra, which had about 18 members.

Balaban & Katz didn't use the term "vaudeville" — especially with reference to the grand Chicago Theatre. Vaudeville was dying, and B&K chose to call their shows "stage extravaganzas" or "stage presentations." Irrespective of what they were called, the acts at the B&K Chicago were among the best in the nation and they were presented proudly. The newspaper ads while Benny was in town, for instance, called the show "The Greatest Show Value the World Has Ever Known."

The productions were always slick and well rehearsed. The acts were introduced by an unseen master of ceremonies, whose voice came through the theatre's sound system.

The troupe in the Benny show comprised — in addition to Jack himself — Phil Harris, Eddie (Rochester) Anderson, the Sportsmen Quartet, and Marjorie Reynolds.

The movie on the bill at the Chicago was a Paramount release, "Easy Come, Easy Go," an "easy-to-love story" starring Barry Fitzgerald, Diana Lynn, and Sonny Tufts.

Mary Livingstone and Dennis Day, although they were not members of the vaudeville troupe, travelled to Chicago

with the company to take part in the Sunday radio show.

Don Wilson didn't come to Chicago; his place on the broadcast was taken by the NBC Chicago announcer Norman Barry.

Many vaudevillians would complain about having to do five shows a day. And well they might, for doing a show five times a day must certainly be a grind. Jack Benny and the gang had a schedule in Chicago which was even more grueling: On Friday, May 9 — opening day — they did six shows. For the remainder of the run, they did seven shows a day.

Late on the night of Saturday, May 10, hundreds of people were lined up on the sidewalk on State Street waiting to get into the theatre. Even though there were no more shows scheduled that night, Jack did an emergency eighth show at 12:45 a.m. Sunday. Jack Benny was 53 years old at the time.

In its May 14, 1947 edition, *Variety* reported, in a dispatch from Chicago:

Hard-boiled Balaban & Katz executives here frankly admit that the loyalty of Phil Harris, Rochester and, in fact, every member of the cast is a modern milestone in show biz. Scheduled to do an estimated 50 shows in one week, every one of them is by now so punch-drunk they keep asking, "Is this the fifth or the sixth show? Or maybe is this the last one of the night?"

The Chicago opened at 8:30 a.m. The movie began at 8:50 a.m. and the last Benny show ended at midnight. In order to squeeze in seven shows, the only movie shown was the feature film — no news-reel, no cartoon, no trailer. "Easy Come, Easy Go" runs 77 minutes, and Benny's stage show ran 53 minutes, for a total of



JACK BENNY'S SPORTSMEN QUARTET

two hours and 10 minutes (130 minutes). Multiply 130 minutes by seven shows and the product is 910 - the number of minutes between 8:50 a.m. and midnight. As you can see, not a minute was wasted; it was wall-to-wall entertainment.

With only 77 minutes between the end of one stage show and the beginning of the next, Jack and his troupe couldn't wander far from the theatre. There was, of course, the matter of Jack's Sunday radio show at 6 p.m., followed by the Phil Harris and Alice Faye show at 6:30.

Even with the radio shows, Jack and his crew still did their seven shows at the Chicago that day. The rehearsals for the broadcast most likely were held a day or two before the gang opened at the Chicago.

Norman Barry, who was the announcer, recalls that the rehearsal took place in Benny's suite at the Ambassador East Hotel. The cast of the radio show — Jack, Mary, Phil, Dennis, Rochester, Barry — guest star Marjorie Reynolds and Jack's writers worked for about three hours.

The Script was not in its final form when the first reading began. Jack and the writers would change a word or a line or cut a bit of dialog. They refined a couple of jokes about Chicago. There was a good

JACK BENNY ON TOUR

deal of joking at the session. Barry recalls that Rochester was particularly funny. Barry remembers Jack and the gang as very nice people.

This session in Jack's hotel suite was not a full rehearsal; there were no microphones, there was no orchestra, no sound effects man. The cast sat around a table reading the script — that was it. There never was a dress rehearsal. The next time the group assembled to read the script was when they did it "live" on the NBC Radio Network. What a group of professionals they were!

The Benny broadcast originated that day (Mother's Day) in the Eighth Street Theatre. Thirty seconds after it ended, the Phil Harris and Alice Faye Show began on the same stage.

Norman Barry had been told in advance how much Benny would pay him for announcing the broadcast. When he received the check, however, it was for double the amount he had been promised.

Immediately after the broadcast, the gang had to rush back to the Chicago Theatre for another show.

Despite the tough schedule, I can report that everyone in that vaudeville show was bright-eyed and alert. As for Jack himself, his timing, his delivery, his facial expressions, his gestures and body language seemed so spontaneous, his routine seemed so fresh, that he might have been doing it for the very first time.

I had seen Jack Benny in movies, but I had regarded him primarily as a radio comedian. Seeing his show at the Chicago, however, convinced me that he was equally at home in a radio studio or on a stage. After all, he had been a vaudevillian for 15 years before he ever appeared on radio.

Although I was 17 at the time, there were not many people in the audience who were

that young. Nate Platt noted at the time that there were very few autograph-seekers among the crowd during Jack Benny's run. The people who came to see Benny were older than those who made up audiences for Frank Sinatra, for example. Platt saw this as the beginning of a trend away from the bobbysoxer type of vaudeville attraction.

The stage show began with Lou Breese and the Chicago Theatre Orchestra playing "Love in Bloom" to introduce the star, who strode onstage with a jaunty gait, a walk which was familiar to millions who had seen his movies. Television would soon make it familiar to millions more.

Wearing a dark business suit, Jack opened the show with a monolog. He told how happy he was to be back in Chicago: "It's such an exciting town," he said. "There's so much to see and do. Why, we've only been here a week... Ten bucks gone — just like that." (LAUGHTER) "Next time I'll have to come alone." (MORE LAUGHTER)

He took some verbal shots at Fred Allen, and he ridiculed the Lucky Strike commercials on his radio show, poking fun at the tobacco auctioneers and the sponsor's slogans, including "L.S./M.F.T." And he singled out this bit of ad copy:

In a cigarette, it's the tobacco that counts. And Lucky Strike means fine tobacco. So round, so firm, so fully packed. So free and easy on the draw.

"In a cigarette, it's the tobacco that counts," Jack scoffed. "In a cigarette, what the heck else *would* count?"

Following his monolog, Jack introduced the members of his troupe and worked with them onstage. He was heckled by Phil Harris, who then sang "The Dark Town Poker Club" and, of course, his signature song, "That's What I Like About the South."

Marjorie Reynolds, without whose pres-

ence the show would have been all-male, lent her considerable feminine charm to the proceedings. Jack tried to romance her, but she, unimpressed, gave him the brush. Then Phil Harris moved in and she found him irresistible. Miss Reynolds also sang a couple of popular songs of the day.

When Rochester sauntered onstage, he amazed not only the audience but also his boss. Clad in a rich, dark green, brocaded robe, pantaloons, and a huge turban, he looked like a prince from the Arabian Nights.

At the time, I wasn't able to see the significance of Rochester's getup. Later, however, I read that he had bought a wardrobe which enabled him to have a different costume for nearly every performance. His reason for doing this was merely to amuse the audience — and Jack. In this he certainly succeeded.

Rochester had some dialog with Jack and he did a song-and-dance routine.

The Sportsmen sang two songs: "Why Did I Ever Leave Wyoming?" and "Sippin' Cider."

After all the members of the troupe had performed, Jack announced that now he would like to play "Love in Bloom." He turned toward the side of the stage and said, "My violin, please."

At this point, one might expect to see a nice-looking young man or woman walk out from the wings bearing the violin,

which he or she would present to the soloist. That didn't happen.

The violin came skittering along the floor of the stage as if it had been kicked from the wings. It came to rest at Benny's feet. The violin bow followed a second later.

With a look of chagrin, Jack picked up the instrument and the bow and walked forward to the apron of the stage. As he placed the fiddle under his chin and raised his bow, everything happened at once:

The spotlight, which had been shining on Jack, was doused. The footlights did a quick fade. The house lights went dark. Behind Benny, the curtains closed. The movie screen lowered, also behind him. The movie began, the Paramount fanfare blaring from the loudspeakers.

Jack played for a few seconds; then, realizing that his efforts were futile, he

removed the violin from under his chin, shrugged, and slunk offstage. That's the way he ended his show. It was a very funny bit, but it was a most unusual way to end a show.

Most entertainers, when they finish a performance, will milk the audience of all the applause they can get. They'll come out and take a bow again and again as long as the applause continues.

The adulation of the public — the bows, the applause, the curtain calls — is one reason many people enter show business, and



JACK BENNY AND "ROCHESTER"

JACK BENNY ON TOUR

they can't be faulted for that. Applause is an audience's way of saying thanks for a job well done, and all of us appreciate a thank-you, no matter what kind of work we do, no matter how much we're paid.

I'm sure that Jack Benny liked to hear the sound of applause as much as any other entertainer. Yet, when he concluded his act, the applause lasted only a few seconds. We knew that Jack would not be coming out for a bow because the footlights had been doused. Besides, when he disappeared into the wings, the movie had already begun.

Jack Benny was America's best-loved comedian and had he chosen to end his act in a more conventional manner, the audience would have given him an ovation. Evidently, though, when given a choice between leaving his audience clapping and leaving them laughing, Jack Benny chose to leave them laughing.

He must have been secure in the knowledge that the audience loved him; he didn't need to be reassured by their applause. Jack Benny was a man with very little ego and a great deal of class.

Although the Chicago charged only regular adult prices during the Benny engagement, the box office gross for that week set a new record: \$113,466. In the theatre's 26-year history up to that time, the next three runners-up were Danny Kaye, who had grossed \$92,000 for the first week of a two-week run; Frank Sinatra, who had sold \$91,000 worth of tickets, and the Andrews Sisters, who, together with the Bob Hope film "Monsieur Beaucaire," had grossed \$90,000.

Of the \$113,466 taken in during Benny's engagement, the Benny troupe received \$51,733. (The theatre deducted \$60,000 from the total and paid Benny 50% of the remaining \$53,466 — \$26,733 — plus a

\$25,000 guarantee.) Thus, the amount paid to Jack Benny and company for the week was also a record for the Chicago.

The troupe gave their last performances at the Chicago on Thursday, May 15. In the next edition of *Variety* (Wednesday, May 21), Balaban & Katz took a full-page ad to thank Jack for his efforts and for the results they had produced.

Next stop: New York, where Benny and company would play a two-week engagement at the Roxy Theatre. Jack and the gang must have been both exhausted and exhilarated during their train ride to New York after their brilliant success in Chicago.

The Broadway community, too, was in a state of excitement in anticipation of Benny's arrival. Speculation was rife as to whether he would break the Roxy's box office record. Showmen were making bets on how much the Roxy would gross.

The second week of the run would include Memorial Day, which fell on a Friday creating a three-day weekend — a definite plus for theatre attendance. (This was before the practice was begun of observing certain holidays on Mondays; Memorial Day was observed on May 30, regardless of what day of the week that happened to be.)

Jack and the gang opened at the Roxy on Wednesday, May 21, with a show at 11:30 a.m., which turned out to be a historic event in the annals of vaudeville: Without any advance notice to the public, Fred Allen emerged from the audience, walked onto the stage, and interrupted Jack's monolog. What followed was a delicious, face-to-face confrontation between the feuding comedians.

Fred declared that Jack had killed vaudeville 15 years ago and had now returned to the scene of his crime. He said that he had been guaranteed that he would die laughing at Benny's performance and since he

A WORD OF APPRECIATION
to a Grand Trouper —
A Gentleman of the Screen,
Radio and the Theatre —
JACK BENNY

You have just completed the most phenomenal engagement the Chicago Theatre has ever enjoyed. Your tireless efforts, playing as many as eight shows a day, your complete cooperation with every department of the theatre and its staff, has been a refreshing experience to each and every one of us.

Of course, we expected you to break the theatre's record for boxoffice and attendance — but never in our wildest imagination did we anticipate such a remarkable showing as you scored — 24% greater than any previous high. We never saw such crowds even in the most exciting days of the World's Fair.

It was a strenuous week for you and your gang, but throughout all the excitement and strain, you maintained your affability, gentleness, graciousness, and friendliness. Your single determination was to entertain as many as possible of the thousands who jammed the theatre every day from early morning to past midnight. To accomplish this, you literally spent all your time in the theatre.

We are grateful to you for your unselfish devotion; to Phil Harris, Rochester, Marjorie Reynolds, and the Sportsmen Quartet, for their fine cooperation. Like yourself, they worked diligently and hard, and took it with a smile.

You gave Chicago a great show it will long remember.

You are indeed a grand trouper, a gentleman of the screen, radio and the theatre.

John Balaban

THIS AD SALUTING JACK BENNY APPEARED IN VARIETY, THE SHOW BIZ PUBLICATION

was still alive, he asked for his money back.

Jack wouldn't agree to refund the entire price of the ticket; he suggested that they prorate it: the Sportsmen should be worth 15 cents. Marjorie Reynolds was worth a quarter. Rochester should be worth 20 cents. They haggled over Phil Harris.

And so it went — Allen and Benny feuding onstage and the audience delighted to be there to witness it.

(The original plan had been to have Fred planted in the audience with a hand mike, but it was felt that autograph-hunters might surround him and disrupt the act. Besides, the people in the balcony would not have been able to see Fred sitting beneath them.)

The surprise appearance by Allen was played up in the papers, sparking further interest in the show.

Benny and company's performance in

New York was essentially the same as the one they had given in Chicago. At the Roxy, however, a brief routine was presented by the Roxyettes and the Esquires as an opening act.

The schedule at the Roxy was far less demanding than the one at the Chicago had been: the troupe did 32 show a week, as opposed to the 49 they had done during their week in Chicago. Even so, Benny had the potential to entertain almost exactly as many people each week at the Roxy as had seen his show during the week in Chicago. This was because the Roxy had 5,886 seats, as opposed to the Chicago's 3,869.

The top ticket price at the Roxy during Benny's engagement was \$1.50.

On the first Sunday of their engagement, the Benny troupe broke the Sunday record

