

# A Skelton Scrapbook

BY CLAIR SCHULZ

It doesn't take much imagination to picture an adult scolding a boy with the words "You're acting like some kind of clown" and the child replying with a quivering lip, "I can't help it." If that youngster happened to be Red Skelton, both parties were right on the money for he certainly was some kind of clown and he could not have been anything less than what he was: a born laugh-maker.

Richard Bernard Skelton wasn't actually born under the big top in Vincennes, Indiana on July 18, 1913, but he came mighty close for his father was a clown with the Hagenbeck and Wallace Circus. As the only redhead in the family, it didn't take long for Richard to acquire the nickname that would one day be seen on marquees around the world.

Because his father died two months before Red was born the four Skelton brothers had to go to work as soon as they could to support the family. At the age of seven while selling papers as a newsboy Red found that by sassing people on the street they would make a purchase just to get rid of him. Seeds planted then in his brain would sprout later in the form of Junior, the "Mean Widdle Kid."

Perhaps Skelton's first big laugh came the day in 1923 when he accidentally fell off a stage while trying out for a medicine show. For a couple of summers he trav-

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eled with the Doc Lewis Show and later with a stock company of actors before spending some months walking in his father's big-shoed footsteps as a clown for the same Hagenbeck-Wallace Circus. For a short time he considered becoming a lion tamer — until the day he saw Clyde Beatty being clawed in a cage.

By 1928 Red had joined the burlesque circuit doing live versions of comic strips such as Mutt and Jeff as well as acting in parodies of popular Broadway plays. Two years later while at the Gaiety Theatre in Kansas City he met an usherette named Edna Stillwell who became his bride in 1931. Meeting Edna could be considered the turning point in Skelton's career because she not only encouraged him to get ahead in show business and arranged for tutoring so he could earn his high school diploma via a correspondence course but she also had a flair for knowing what tickled funny bones and for writing witty dialogue.

The Skeltons performed for a few years as a vaudeville team without much success until they clicked with Canadian audiences for half of 1936 at a Montreal theatre. The highlight of the act became Red's extended pantomime of a man dunking doughnuts. Eating four doughnuts a show three times a day brought down the house, but it also brought Red's weight up thirty-five pounds.

Skelton found a more amusing alternative which was kinder to his waistline in the form of the "Guzzler's Gin" routine.



This bit, which he performed countless times over the years, involved a liquor salesman freely sampling of his own product until he became so inebriated he could hardly stand up. Red, who had always been a keen observer of human behavior, credited his ability to mimic drunkards to watching the unbalanced steps children take when they are learning to walk.

His new act at the Paramount Theatre in New York proved to be such a hit that it led to a guest shot on Rudy Vallee's radio

program in 1937 and a small role the following year in a Ginger Rogers film, *Having A Wonderful Time*.

In 1939 Skelton became a regular on *Avalon Time*, a radio show that mixed songs by Red Foley and band numbers with tidbits of comedy. The playful character that delighted millions later was already very much in evidence as he broke up cast members with ad-libs like "I think I'll look on the next page to see if there are more laughs" and "We get more fun out of this than the audience."

However, the program was laden with wheezes that were old even then (e.g. Man: You want to see Big Chief Running Bear? Woman: Certainly not. Tell him to put some clothes on) and Skelton did not have much opportunity to stretch out in his other strength besides pantomime, sketch comedy.

Red earned small parts in two Dr. Kildare pictures as an orderly, then hit the jackpot in *Whistling in the Dark* as Wally Benton, a radio detective known as The Fox who has to solve a real case. Suddenly, after just one starring role, Skelton was called "the comedy find of 1941" and "the comic who will give all other comics a first-class run for their money."

Just as Universal had been cashing in on the demand for Abbott and Costello movies so Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer quickly turned out two more Wally Benton films, *Whistling in Dixie* and *Whistling in Brooklyn*. Unfortunately for Skelton, MGM's strong suit was musicals, not madcap silliness, so throughout the duration of his contract with the studio, he bounded back and forth between ninety-minute frolics in which he dominated the action and syrupy songfests like *Ship Ahoy* that restricted him to providing comedy relief. *DuBarry Was A Lady* (1943) is a period comedy that might today be regarded in the same favorable light as Bob Hope's *Monsieur*

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*Beaucaire* if it had been strictly a farce spotlighting his talent instead of an intermittently amusing revue equally memorable for Gene Kelly's graceful moves and Cole Porter's music. Likewise the plot of the picture that bears one of his trademarked expressions as the title, *I Dood It*, took frequent detours while Jimmy Dorsey's Orchestra, Lena Horne, and Eleanor Powell played, sang, or danced.

At times Skelton must have considered himself waterboy for Esther Williams. Playing her husband in her first major role as the *Bathing Beauty*, he helped her get her feet wet, but he also helped himself to a juicy bit impersonating a ballerina. In *Neptune's Daughter* Red and Betty Garrett played second fiddle to the romance between Esther and Ricardo Montalban, although they did have a chance to sing their version of the Oscar-winning "Baby, It's Cold Outside." After sticking his head in for a cameo in *The Dutchess of Idaho*, he managed to inject some chuckles into *Texas Carnival* to balance the Williams-Howard Keel songs by pretending to be a swaggering oil tycoon.

When left on his own and given a solid plot, Skelton demonstrated that he could make a picture without the singing and dancing and still leave audiences saying, "That's entertainment." Red, like Buster Keaton, was adept at playing, with or without words, ordinary men like clerks and ushers who stumble up or down life's ladder in hilarious ways as he did

in *The Show-Off* and *Merton of the Movies*.

But Skelton had to go to Columbia on loan-out from MGM to get one of his best roles, that of *The Fuller Brush Man*, an inept salesman trying with Janet Blair's assistance to extricate himself from a sticky web of circumstances that implicates him in a murder. Two years later in 1950 MGM fed off the success of that film by putting Red in the similarly-titled *The Yellow Cab Man* and repeating the man-on-the-run story line.

By this time Keaton, recognizing that Skelton's talents were akin to his, had asked Louis B. Mayer for a chance to work with Red to produce comedies in his distinctive



"Guzzlers Gin Is A Smoooooth Drink"

style and had been turned down. However, Keaton's influence appeared on screen in the scene of *A Southern Yankee* in which, following Buster's suggestion, Red wore the "half and half" uniform of blue and gray which allowed him to walk across the battlefield unscathed and in *Watch the Birdie*, a remake of Keaton's *The Cameraman*, that featured Skelton in three different roles.

Although Skelton the movie actor may have vacillated between hits and miss, comedy and musical, and starring and supporting parts, Skelton the radio comedian was a success from the time his own program debuted in 1941. The show shot into the top ten almost immediately and stayed there for a decade, sometimes even challenging *The Bob Hope Show* and *Fibber McGee and Molly* for the number one spot.

During the war years Ozzie Nelson and his orchestra provided the music while wife Harriet sang and played foil to Red's ready-made cast of Junior, bumpkin Clem Kadiddlehopper, gravelly-voiced Deadeye, punchy Willie Lump-Lump, and impetuous Boliver Shagnasty (spelled, as Boliver always insisted, with "one shag and two nasties") in sketches introduced as pages taken from the "Skelton Scrapbook of Satire." The show went off the air soon as Skelton received his draft notice in early 1944. (Red claimed to be the only film celebrity to go in a private and come out a private. At least he wasn't demoted.)

By the time Skelton returned to radio late in 1945 Ozzie and Harriet had their own



**Red Skelton at Work with his Radio Sound Effects Team**

show, but he was ably supported by a new cast of Verna Felton and Lurene Tuttle who did all they could as Junior's grandma and mother to raise the brat who was quite aptly described by one of his victims as "a hot-foot with legs." Lurene and GeGe Pearson acted as girlfriends to Kadiddlehopper, the inane rustic who took pride in his stupidity and openly resented it when Mortimer Snerd threatened his claim to being America's foremost moron.

Despite the fact that Red and Edna had divorced in 1943 their relationship remained amicable as she assumed the roles of his business manager and chief gagwriter. From time to time Skelton would acknowledge her contribution as he did on the October 27, 1947 show when he said after delivering a mild joke, "I wrote it myself. It gives you an idea of what kind of material you'd hear if Edna didn't have anything to do with this."

Red's asides often provoked bigger laughs than the gags. When he saw a plum coming up he would say, "Prepare yourself folks. Here it comes." In the middle of an involved story he would interrupt



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himself and say, "Don't go. It's gotta get better."

Skelton could handle muffs brilliantly like the night Verna said "poodle" instead of "puddle" when he quickly added, "That's okay. It's been raining cats and dogs" or one of his own by explaining that "I fell in my mother's washtub and got a little bluing in my gray matter."

But if *The Red Skelton Show* had attempted to get by on bloopers and improvised lines it would have been levelled by a low-swinging Hooper and buried. The writers gave the Skelton crew a steady stream of decent jokes that were funny to the eyes and the ears such as the image formed when Clem said he used a mackerel on the roof of the barn as a weather vane because "that way you can tell which way the wind's blowing without looking up."

Most comedy programs that were not sitcoms regularly featured guest stars, but Red didn't need a big name to generate laughs or to raise ratings because he had his own stock company locked up in his larynx. At one time a laugh-meter registered his program drawing guffaws every eleven seconds, a record no show ever topped.

Of all the radio comedians who took the giant step over to television, none of them made a smoother transition than Red Skelton did. Whether the script called for jesting in a monologue, acting out a scene in pantomime, or cavorting in a sketch, Skelton was the right man for the job for twenty years from September 1951 to August 1971.

On TV Red showcased his repertoire of zany characters and over the years modified them a bit. The gallery still included Deadeye, although some of the larceny running through his veins had been trans-

fused into San Fernando Red, a con man who probably could have outfleeced Sgt. Bilko, and canvas-backed boxer Cauliflower McPugg, who borrowed some of Willie's grogginess. Junior, Clem, and Bolivar also came along for the ride. Hobo Freddy the Freeloader gave Red a chance to speak volumes without words. Skelton's version of O. Henry's "The Cop and the Anthem," detailing Freddy's efforts to get arrested so he could spend the holidays in a warm jail cell, became a Christmas tradition cherished by those who watched it every year.

Just as "I dood it" was a catch phrase in the early 1940s so another generation of children found pleasure in emulating Deadeye's "Whoa. Oh, c'mon horse. I said 'Whoa,'" McPugg's "There goes another flock of them," and the little jump and kick Red would do to the accompaniment of tinkling bells.

Few if any programs on television conveyed a greater sense of unbridled joy than *The Red Skelton Show* did. Skelton took delight in breaking up guest stars after they had delivered a punch line with "You're proud of that one, aren't you?" Celebrities from Vincent Price to Carol Channing to Mickey Rooney gleefully accepted a chance to romp with the small screen's finest clown. No doubt many TV viewers today who wonder where the fun has gone would eagerly welcome an opportunity to see once again that redhead with the impish grin cutting capers in their living rooms.

Since Red Skelton was called off this stage on September 17, 1997 at the age of 84, his legion of fans have echoed the words he often spoke with a twinkle in his eye after someone fluffed a line on one of his shows: "We're going to miss you around here." ■

(NOTE: Tune in to a four-hour salute to Red Skelton March 14 on TWTD.)