

# THE LOVABLE LUG

BY CLAIR SCHULZ

Deep in the files of the Columbia Broadcasting System a card contained these words about an actor written after his radio audition: "Excellent—a bet for *Gangbusters* and *Skyblazers*... Specializes in mugs, tough guys, gangsters, policemen." An interviewer described the man's expression as being "very like the puzzled look you see on the face of a dumb fighter as he comes out for one more battering in the tenth round."

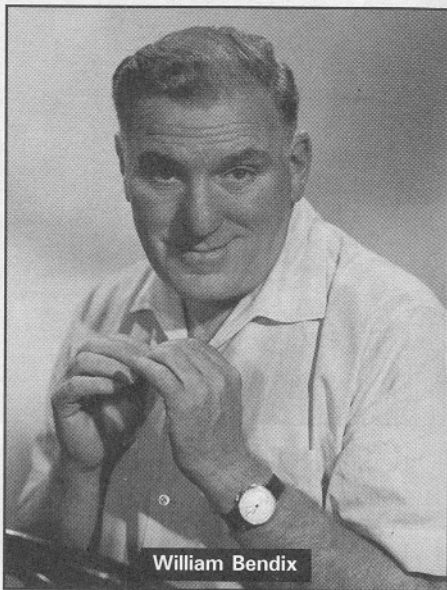


For a time William Bendix rebelled against typecasting and considered his face his misfortune until he met a character who taught him to accept life's vicissitudes with a philosophic "It's a losing fight."

To young Bill Bendix who grew up in a tough New York neighborhood fighting became a way of life on the streets, although he credited his mother's firm hand with keeping his name off police blotters. Because his father held a variety of jobs from musician to stevedore, Bill hardly had time to get into any trouble in one place as he passed through ten different schools in eight years.

Bendix, who loved playing stickball, passing a football, and swimming off the docks more than hitting the books, left school in 1920 at the age of fourteen to engage in a series of odd jobs, none of

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William Bendix

which brought him more pleasure than working at the Polo Grounds when both the Giants and Yankees played there.

There, in the shadows as locker boy and in the sunlight as bat boy, he got to know some of the legendary ball players of the time. Bendix claimed to have seen a hundred of Babe Ruth's home runs and to have contributed to Ruth's indigestion when he brought the slugger handfuls of hot dogs. Bendix filed these memories away and later retrieved them when he assumed the lead role in *The Babe Ruth Story* in 1948.

From 1923 to 1927 as a semipro baseball and football player sports continued to be in his blood and vice versa for it was during those years that his oft-broken nose received its distinctive shape.

In the 1930s Bendix engaged in a series

of jobs including running a grocery store, massacrering sentimental ballads as a singing waiter, counting automobiles crossing a bridge for the WPA, and selling cheese, a position he lost for eating too many samples.

His first nibble of show business came as a member of the Federal Theatre where, for \$17.50 a week, he performed in less-than-glamorous sites like gymnasiums, cellars, and school auditoriums. In 1939 as part of the New York Theatre Guild he appeared in several minor productions on Broadway and gained additional experience by playing summer stock in New England.

Later that year his breakthrough role, that of a policeman named Krupp in William Saroyan's *The Time of Your Life*, allowed him for the first time to support his wife and daughter with a respectable salary of \$100 a week and, more importantly, brought him to the attention of Hal Roach, who signed Bendix to a movie contract.

Although *Woman of the Year* is fondly remembered today as the first pairing of Spencer Tracy and Katharine Hepburn, it also marked the screen debut of William Bendix, cast in the role that would soon become his trademark, a tough cookie on the outside who could talk with a snarl but who everyone knew was a softie at heart with a sentimental side.

Because Bendix possessed the face of an ordinary Joe he seemed right at home playing soldiers in the war pictures *Wake Island* and *Guadalcanal Diary*, his work in the former earning him an Academy Award nomination for Best Supporting Actor in 1942. In *Guadalcanal Diary* he purloined the plaudits that might have got to top-



*Who Done It?* (1942)  
William Gargan, Abbott & Costello,  
William Bendix and cops

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billed Preston Foster and Lloyd Nolan and drew one critic's praise for his impressive performance that "adds humor and meaning to every scene in which he appears."

As dim-witted detective Brannigan in Abbott and Costello's *Who Done It?* he proved to be an adept scene-stealer in comedies as well. His antics during the handcuff bit, according to Bob Thomas in his book *Bud and Lou*, prompted Costello to storm into producer Alex Gottlieb's office and demand that Gottlieb never again "put anybody who's funnier than me in a picture of mine!"

If the histrionics of a shackled Bendix brought laughs in a supporting part, his dual role of a poetic marine and a chorus girl in *Abroad with Two Yanks* generated twice as many guffaws two years later in 1944. The sight of the corseted, burly Bendix singing "I Need a Man" while dancing sedately amazed the character played by co-star Dennis O'Keefe and amused audiences who welcomed wartime fluff in their local theatres.

Although Bendix had some funny moments as a gangster who wouldn't stay dead in Fred Allen's *It's In the Bag*, his metier continued to be dramatic roles. As the one person who had to endure more pain than any of the other survivors floating in *Life-*

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boat he earned one of the highest tributes given to an actor when a writer for *The New York World-Telegram* stated that "William Bendix, who has never been bad in a film, has never been better."

In the title role as *The Hairy Ape* he brought some sensitivity to brutish stoker Hank in the adaptation of Eugene O'Neill's play, prompting one critic to call it "his all-time high performance" and to claim that his work in the film "rarely falls below excellent." As Hank, a man bent on a course of murderous revenge against a woman who insulted him, Bendix seemed well-cast because in real life slights and ridicule wounded him deeply due to his inherent desire to please everyone. He took adverse criticism perhaps too seriously, though conversely he never nurtured a "Hollywood ego" over the pieces of puff distributed by Paramount.

At Paramount he developed a friendship with Alan Ladd and also an image as a roughneck in the Ladd vehicles *China*, *The Glass Key*, *The Blue Dahlia*, *Two Years Before the Mast*, and *Calcutta*. The disparity between the blond good looks of the one actor who spoke in carefully-worded sentences and the plain features of his

stocky colleague who delivered his lines in his characteristic Carnarsie dialect made for a natural contrast on the screen even in movies that didn't cast them as adversaries.

Of all the films Bendix made the one that turned his career in a different direction and eventually gave him a lasting identity was a now-forgotten B picture called *The McGuerins of Brooklyn*. Irving Brecher, who had written screenplays for the Marx Brothers and MGM musicals, saw in Bendix's performance as a strong-willed schmo the embodiment of the oafish character who would blunder through *The Life of Riley*, a comedy radio show he planned to produce.

The audition was a mere formality and in January 1944 Bendix stepped into the lead role in a series that would become his steady meal ticket until 1951.

Unlike other situation comedies in which geography and social status remained anonymous or of little import, *The Life of Riley* set the scene virtually every week by reminding the folks at home that the Rileys, solidly entrenched in the working class, lived in a bungalow within coughing distance of smoggy Los Angeles. Millions of Americans could identify with Chester A. Riley who, lunch box in hand, trudged

daily to and from his work as a riveter at an aircraft plant.

Even though many listeners knew first-hand the economic struggles of a middle class family, the writers took the sting out of the similarities by making Riley not only arbitrary and stubborn but also nearly illiterate and clearly obtuse. Every week they would place self-revealing words in Riley's mouth



*Blue Dahlia* (1946)  
Alan Ladd and William Bendix

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that we understood but he apparently did not such as "It's time you learned that if you don't ask me questions, you won't get a foolish answer" or "You can't win an argument with a moron and I ought to know" or "I'll dig around in my head and come up with something concrete." The gags in which Riley cut himself deepest sometimes came when the voices of Alan Reed or Frank Nelson would haunt Chester as his conscience by claiming to be in his head to which Riley would reply, "That's a lie! There's nothing in my head."

Bendix's delivery of these and other lines was so perfect that he squeezed more laughs out of simple statements than the jokes merited. When Riley

enigmatically claimed to neighbor Jim Gillis, "I'm engaged to be married... but don't tell my wife," we can almost see Gillis doing a double take at Riley's dead pan. When wife Peg forgave him "for all the nutty things I've done," Riley blithely added, "Now I know why we make such a nice couple. You're even nuttier than I am," a punch line Bendix served up so delectably that it is still funny after repeated playings. Anyone who listens to Bill's reading of this half-hearted ad which, at the insistence of his conscience, Riley placed in a newspaper for a fur he found and doesn't smile belongs in the Buster Keaton Stone Face Club: "If you think I found something you think you lost, try and prove it."

Being fatuous and funny week after week is no easy matter as listening to the puerile chatter emerging from the mouths of Jerry Lewis and Marie Wilson fifty years ago proves. Somehow Bendix was able to im-



*Life of Riley Radio Show*  
William Bendix and John Brown

bue lines like "Hand me a piano" before launching into some treacly lyrics about mothers with an air of spontaneous asininity that induces us to chuckle and say, "That's something that nitwit Riley might really blurt out on the spur of the moment."

Bendix made Riley such a good-hearted lummock that we forgave him for stumbling weekly into predicaments which were exacerbated by his obstinate behavior. Paula Winslowe capably played the patient wife who tolerated the hot-tempered but soft-headed klutz, and John Brown did Jekyll/Hyde double duty as Gills, who often laid traps for his neighbor, and as Digby O'Dell, the friendly undertaker, who dispensed good advice and whose entrance could be predicted when the soliloquizing Riley, in the midst of one of his dilemmas, would toss out a straight line such as "I'll never be in any deeper than I am right now."

Versions of O'Dell's famous signature lines, "You're looking fine, Riley. Very

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natural" and "I better be shoveling off," became the "in" way to begin or close conversations across the country, and Bendix through Riley also contributed to the colloquialisms of the time with his remarks of "My head's made up," "It's a losing fight," "You're hanging an innocent man," and "What a revoltin' development this is." If such a book as *Bartlett's Familiar Expressions* existed in the post-war years, *The Life of Riley* would probably have earned as many entries in it as any other radio program.

Bendix, who routinely exhibited his range as Riley by going from pigheaded autocrat to whimpering weakling in seconds, continued to appear in a variety of movies while working on the series including a musical fantasy (*A Connecticut Yankee in King Arthur's Court*), a western (*Streets of Larado*), comedies (*Kill the Umpire*, *A Girl in Every Port*), message pictures (*The Time of Your Life*, *Johnny Holiday*), and crime melodramas (*The Dark Corner*, *Detective Story*).

Of course, when Brecher wrote the scenario for and planned to direct *The Life of Riley* there could be no one else to take the part of Chester Riley than William Bendix. Ironically it was because Bendix had contractual commitments to complete *The Life of Riley* and other films that prevented him from being part of the cast for the initial TV version of *The Life of Riley* which ran from October 1949 to March 1950. Jackie Gleason assumed the part of Riley in that aborted effort, but it became clear that Gleason possessed a brash, insolent edge ill-suited to playing a simpleminded, well-meaning family man and that his talents would be better utilized in a show without children where he could pace back and forth spouting his half-baked theories to a doubting wife.

Late in 1952 with a lull in his movie career and no radio show to prepare for Bendix began filming episodes of *The Life of Riley*, which premiered in January 1953 and became an NBC Friday night regular until August 1958 when it retired into Rerunland. Changes from the radio cast included Marjorie Reynolds as Peg and Tom D'Andrea as Gillis. Neither John Brown nor the character Digger O'Dell appeared in the Bendix version of the Riley saga.

The Riley viewers saw on television did not disappoint for just as Bendix sounded like a blue-collar stiff so his craggy appearance might easily have prompted those at home to say, "Now there's a guy who looks like he works in a factory."

The plots still centered around Riley's mismanagement of the family's affairs including sticking that prominent nose into the activities of his children, although complications involving Riley's eccentric friend Waldo Binny (Sterling Holloway) figured in numerous episodes. When gronathous Bendix appeared head-to-head with Holloway whose husky voice often gave way to squeaks better suited to the throat of Henry Aldrich viewers might easily have said aloud, "There's a guy who looks like he works in a factory listening to a guy who sounds like he swallowed the factory's whistle."

Throughout the 1950s Bendix made guest appearances on comedy-variety shows and performed a number of televised dramatic programs including two of some historic note. On September 29, 1952 he starred as "The Hollow Man" on the final episode of *Lights Out*.

In 1958 during the first season of the *Desilu Playhouse* he played a man who had a recurring dream which placed him back in December 1941 trying to warn people about the coming attack on Pearl Harbor. That episode, "Time Element," written by

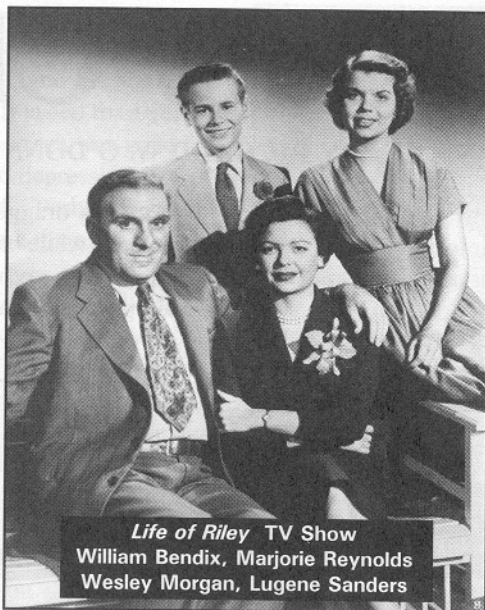
Rod Serling and centering around the juggling of the time-space continuum that characterized many of Serling's scripts, sold CBS on the idea of a new series that would eventually be called *The Twilight Zone*.

Bendix appeared at least once on virtually all the prestigious anthology programs including *Playhouse 90*, *Schlitz Playhouse of Stars*, *Fireside*

*Theatre*, *Screen Directors Playhouse*, *Robert Montgomery Presents*, and *Philco Television Playhouse*. In the summer of 1959 he played one of the unfortunate kidnapers in a special adaptation of O. Henry's story "The Ransom of Red Chief." Later that year he returned to thugdom one more time as a leader of the Tri-State Gang who found out it's a losing fight to tangle with Eliot Ness and *The Untouchables*.

Early in 1960 Bendix starred in his only other TV series, *The Overland Trail*, which attempted to follow in the tracks of the other westerns riding TV's crowded range at that time. The premise of a Civil War vet and a dexterous youngster played by Doug McClure interacting with different passengers in their stage every week made for a type of *Grand Hotel* on wheels, but after seven months it became just another desert drama to bite the dust.

Bendix tried several more times to score with a series. A 1961 episode of *Mr. Ed* misfired as a pilot for *The Bill Bendix Show* and an unpaired pilot for *Rockabye the Infantry* was produced in 1963. When CBS



cancelled *Bill and Martha*, a proposed series teaming Bendix and Martha Raye, the actor sued the network for breach of contract. Although Bill received a sizable amount for settling out of court, his alter ego Riley might have appraised the situation with a pithy "I got the dough but no show."

To an old trouper like Bendix the show had to go on even if it meant taking minor parts in featherweight films like *Law of the Lawless* and *For Love or Money* or appearing in summer stock productions of *Take Her*, *She's Mine* in venues so far removed from the bright lights that his most severe critics may have been strident crows in nearby cornfields.

He continued taking the roles that came his way until pneumonia claimed him at the age of 58 on December 14, 1964, less than three months after his last television appearance on an episode of *Burke's Law*.

Four years before his death Bendix took stock of his accomplishments in an interview in which he said, "I've had a long, varied, eventful career. I don't hate anybody and I don't have any bitter thoughts. I started out without any advantages, but I've been lucky and successful and I've had fun."

He lived the life of Riley so we could have the time of our lives. ■

NOTE— Tune in TWTD August 12 and 19 to hear William Bendix in *The Life of Riley*.