

GEORGE BURNS

Still Misbehavin' at 100

BY BILL OATES



Living 100 years is quite an accomplishment, not celebrated by most, yet *entertaining* for nine decades of that time is even more miraculous.

George Burns celebrates the centennial of his birth on January 20, 1996, and his durability as a performer via a variety of media is legendary.

Like so many phenomenal entertainers of the twentieth century, removed only a generation or two from their families' European roots, Nathan Birnbaum grew up on New York's Lower East Side at the turn into the twentieth century.

"Every one should have an East Side in their lives," said fellow resident Irving Berlin. Other show business personalities who shared growing up in a section of that famed city include Jimmy Durante, Jack Pearl, Fanny Brice, Milton Berle, and the Marx Brothers to name a few. Ferreting about the tenement-lined streets taught so many of the primarily Jewish performers how to survive under adverse conditions and aspire to the dreams that their parents or grandparents had in mind as they passed through Ellis Island.

Young Nathan, with not exactly the best attendance record at school, was forced to quit his education altogether to help sup-

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port his family at age seven when his father died. It was from this time onward that the first of his life long romances was born (the second, but not in significance, Gracie Allen, came into that world of grease paint numerous routines and partners later.)

George Burns bounded onto stage at an important time in American theatre. Placing a varied bill of acts was popularized (and made respectable for women and children) by Tony Pastor in the 1880's. By the turn into the new century rail lines crossed the nation, and circuits used them to send hundreds of acts—the good, the bad, and the mediocre—to any town with a stage (a Legion hall, music hall, or opera house.)

By 1913, the medium was so popular that lavish houses were built for audiences to experience the cream of the vaudeville crop. During vaudeville's growth period, George Burns had worked with Captain Bett's seal, a dog, alone, and with numerous partners. The New York Palace opened its doors in March of that year, giving a chance to make it into the big time to young acts like The Peewee Quartet (young Burns singing), the ballroom dancing act of Jose and Burns, Brown and Williams (Burns sometimes on roller skates as Brown, replacing a guy named Edwards who was Brown before), and the comedy of Burns and Loraine (both did impressions of then big time headliners.)

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An MC held the show together with the fourth or fifth acts being the plum positions. The earliest acts suffered with a restless crowd, but the middle acts preceding intermission were most desirable, and the last acts were not enviable because they followed the sixth act, which was often an animal act.

Examples of Burns and Allen's vaudeville comedy style are evident in a number of motion pictures. As early as 1929 the team made the first of a dozen short subjects (the earliest was filmed at the New York Warner Brothers lot, and the rest were made for Paramount.) Not only do these early routines date from the vaudeville years, but George often wrote the material for the films as he had been doing for the stage. Of course, George's stock straight man and Gracie's illogic continued in their film as segments wholly Burns and Allen throughout the 1930's. Along with their famed dialogues on film is a vaudeville talent not fully realized on radio or television. The wonderful 1937 RKO film "A Damsel in Distress" had Fred Astaire teamed with hoofers George and Gracie. The husband and wife team kept up with the master dancer in several routines, not the least of which takes place on rides at a carnival.

Despite their success on film, George and Gracie's greatest medium was radio. Interestingly enough, it was on the BBC that the two first appeared on the air, when they were lured away from a vacation in England in 1930. NBC had turned down the comedy team during that year, stating that Gracie's voice was "too squeaky" for radio. After twenty-six weeks of vaudeville in Britain, they returned to New York to film most of their short subjects at Paramount's Astoria studio. (Coincidentally, the Marx Brothers were making "Ani-

mal Crackers" there as well.)

When not filming, the duo guest starred on a variety of shows (after working the Palace with Eddie Cantor, Gracie alone was asked on his show, and later star maker Rudy Vallee opted for both members of the team when they appeared on his Fleischman's Hour in 1932), until they were invited to add comedy to Guy Lombardo's Robert Burns Panatella Hour. When the famed Royal Canadian took his band to another network in 1932, Burns and Allen debuted on CBS as radio stars for the first time.

Throughout the 1930's George Burns and Gracie Allen found time to make twelve feature films for Paramount and one each at RKO and MGM. The talent starting with the team at the mountain top company reads like a Who's Who of the era's best: Bing Crosby, W.C. Fields, Charlie Ruggles, Alison Skipworth, Carole Lombard, Ray Milland, Jack Oakie, Ethel Merman, Jack Benny, Bob Hope, and so on. The co-stars at the other two studios were similarly not very shabby: Joan Fontaine, Ray Noble, Eleanor Powell, Robert Young, and Eddie "Rochester" Anderson.

George and Gracie found no greater audience than they did with their weekly radio program that ran for eighteen years. They moved from network to network with a variety of sponsors until they found their greatest permanence on NBC for Maxwell House in 1945. Among their other sponsors were White Owl Cigars, Campbell's Soups, Grape Nuts, Chesterfield cigarettes, Hinds Cream, Hormel Meats, and Swan Soap. One final sponsor during the last radio season that would carry them into television was Carnation Milk, one of many products that had to be explained to Gracie. "How do you milk a carnation?" she would ask.

Over the years the show saw two major



CAST AND PRODUCTION STAFF of *George and Gracie's* 1941 radio season run over script for the first broadcast on October 7. Pictured with their backs to the camera, left to right, are Senor Irving Lee, Edith Evanson, and Bill Goodwin. Jimmy Cash is at Goodwin's right. Left to right in semi-circle facing camera are: Glenhall Taylor, agency producer; his assistant, Al Scalpone (partially in view); Dave Elton, NBC producer; Sam Perrin, head of the writing staff; Harvey Helm, writer; George Balzer, writer (with hand on face); Paul Whiteman, *George and Gracie*.

changes: at first it resembled vaudeville over the air, but later it became the domestic troubles of George and Gracie, usually instigated by her misunderstanding of a seemingly simple situation or because she just had to have a certain dress or car or visit with an important person. George explained that changes needed to be made when the show's ratings began slipping slightly in 1942.

Gracie had been playing a daffy, unmarried younger woman for years, and it was time to make official what the audience already knew, George and Gracie were married, so situations revolving around their domestic life became the fodder for

the writers. Two ongoing successful gags that Gracie pursued while on radio were her search for her lost brother on other radio shows of the 1930's and her bid for president in 1940, when she ran on the "Surprise Party" ticket.

Audiences were so amenable to her character, that they accepted her crazy endeavors as real, following schemes that originated on the Burns and Allen Show and poured over into other programs.

Music provided interludes in the program's silliness, and even Gracie soloed in early shows. Among the renowned orchestra leaders working with the show were Ferde Grofé, Bobby Dolan, Eddie Duchin,

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Ray Noble, Artie Shaw, Henry King, Paul Whiteman, Meredith Willson, and Harry Lubin. In the early years, like on the Jack Benny or Fred Allen shows, resident male singers like singing cowboy Dick Foran, tenors Jimmy Cash or Frank Parker, Tony Martin, or the Buccaneers male octet provided the serious musical number of the evening, but in the 1940's the orchestra took over this job, resulting in musical commercials that were as entertaining as the story line. It was also during this time that a skirt chasing announcer was added to the cast.

Bill Goodwin had been in radio for a number of years when George asked him to be a part of the cast. This meant that there were actually two announcers, Toby Reed assumed the "serious" announcing, while Goodwin joined in on the story line helping Gracie weave her scheme of the night, as he integrated information on Swan Soap or Maxwell House Coffee. His skirt-chasing activities made him the longest running other regular character on the show, following Burns and Allen into television until 1951.

There were other supporting characters who came and went as the Burns and Allen show progressed. A character who provided voices on many radio shows was Mel Blanc, who gave Mrs. Burns the saddest mailman to walk a beat ("And remember, Mrs. Burns, keep smiling.") Elvia Allman was Gracie's girlfriend Tootsie Bagwell; Bea Benadaret assumed the part of neighbor Blanche Morton; and a variety of curmudgeons were frequently played by Hans Conreid or Gale Gordon.

By 1950, many of radio's best were trying out television, and the Burns and Allen Show was no exception. During the first season, the program, which started on October 12, 1950, was telecast live from New

York every other Thursday, alternating with The Garry Moore Show. Starting in 1952 the long running comedy was filmed from the West Coast and took on a new look. It soon began to lose the air of a "live" production as it had from its first season on radio, but the role of the omniscient George observing and manipulating Gracie as he spoke directly to the audience was developed into one of the most interesting characters of early television comedy. The peak year for ratings was 1953-54, when it was number twenty.

Gracie retired in 1958 and The George Burns Show debuted on October 21st of that year and lasted until April 14, 1959. During this altered season, all of the regular cast members remained, and there were references to Gracie, but there was not enough interest for the audience to just follow George, who played a theatrical producer working with aspiring starlets.

During its run on television in the 1950's, The Burns and Allen Show saw a number of cast changes. In the role of bedeviled next door neighbor husband there were four Harry Mortons: Hal March (1950-51), John Brown (1951), Fred Clark (1951-53), and Larry Keating (1953-58). Blanche Morton was played on radio and television by character actress Bea Benadaret. The two veteran radio announcers who hawked the sponsors' wares and commiserated with George were played by Bill Goodwin (1950-51) and Harry Von Zell (1951-58). The doleful mailman Mr. Beasley was played on television by Rolfe Sedan, and in 1955 Ronnie Burns joined the cast to play himself.

The final regular television series for George Burns started on September 14, 1964 and ran until September 6, 1969. Wendy and Me was an attempt to pair George with a daffy Gracie counterpart. In the comedy he runs a boarding house where Connie Stevens and husband reside.



"I love her, that's why!"

The pairing seemed logical, given George's success with a female partner with dizzy logic, and he had worked with Connie in Las Vegas just before the season was to start.

Gracie Allen suffered a fatal heart attack just a month before George's new show was to begin.

Like the trouper he is, George continued, but everyone knew, that as great comedy teams go, it is virtually impossible to dispel the audience's expectations for the substitute. Gracie was such a dominant character in entertainment for three decades that the new partner had impossible shoes to fill.

For George Burns the next step was not retirement from comedy- after all he was only in his early seventies- but rather a new approach to his love of entertaining.

After guesting on many shows and play-

ing stages like those in Las Vegas, another personal misfortune turned into a break for George Burns. Neil Simon's play "The Sunshine Boys" was being made into a motion picture, and Burns' great friend Jack Benny was slated to play the part of one of the aging vaudevillians. Before any shooting on the film took place, Benny died.

It was a second deeply personal loss to George Burns. When it was suggested that he take Benny's part in the film, the idea of doing justice to his long-time friend and vaudeville were enough of a draw. Not only did he succeed with partner Walter Matthau as two characters who were based on the successful comedy team of Smith and Dale, but he also carried home the 1975 Oscar as Best Supporting Actor, not a bad trick for one who had not been in a movie since 1939.

The motion picture roles, stage dates, and television appearances continued for George Burns. Among the other laudable films he made were "Oh, God" and "Going in Style."

He had planned some personal appearances in Las Vegas for his 100th birthday, but those plans were cancelled last September after he suffered a fall earlier in the year.

No other entertainer can make the claim that he has performed in every decade of the twentieth century.

Not only can George Burns say that, but he can also lay claim to being successful in making people smile from the early days of the Wright Brothers through those who enjoy digitized George and Gracie in the CD age.

In his own words: "Gracie and I loved it all. Whatever we were doing at the time we loved best at the time we were doing it. In short, we just loved show business."

Say "Happy Birthday," Gracie, on behalf of all of us. ■