

COVER STORY

A GREAT NOSE, A GREAT MAN

BY CLAIR SCHULZ

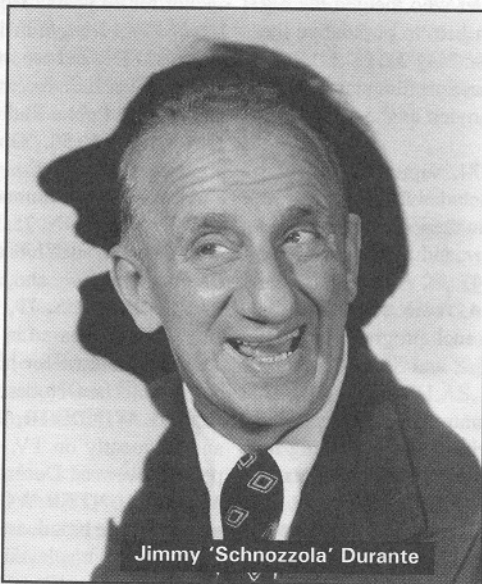
It stands to reason that anyone constructing an entertainer for the ages would hardly bring together elements resulting in a balding, big-nosed joker whose face bore more creases than a hobo's pants, who often said rather than sang lyrics in a gravelly voice, and who had difficulty reading speeches of longer than two lines or words of more than three syllables without tripping over his tongue. Yet logic has little to do with the life and lasting appeal of Jimmy Durante.

He couldn't even make a conventional first entrance. Unlike the dancer in the Beatles' song who came in through the bathroom window, James Francis Durante came in on a kitchen table on Manhattan's Lower East Side February 10, 1893. Photographs of Jimmy suggest that what he called his proboscitor was already blooming at birth, which he later used in jests of the "folks took one look in the crib and wondered of the stork had come to stay" variety.

But the teasing he encountered from

classmates was not a laughing matter. James endured the ridicule until the seventh grade, then left school to concentrate on playing the piano for a living.

Although his father wanted him to develop into a pianist specializing in classical music, Jimmy aimed at more practical venues that would bring in money right away such as playing accompaniment for silent films at local theatres. He developed an affinity for ragtime tunes and by age seventeen could be found tinkling the ivories in what might charitably be called



Jimmy 'Schnozzola' Durante

honkytonks at Coney Island or in Chinatown.

During those early years Durante became friends with waiter Izzy Iskowitz, who later changed his name to Eddie Cantor. In the 1940s and 1950s when Eddie and Jimmy would reminisce on radio and television about the good old days, they weren't just whistling "Dixie"; they were singing, making whoopee, and wondering how they were going to keep 'em down on the farm.

Although Cantor is sometimes acknowledged as the first person to encourage Durante to employ humor as part of his act,

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the quaint characters Jimmy met while pounding the keys in dives sharpened his wit by necessity. Close shaves in nightclubs with hoods bearing Runyonesque names such as Hurry-Up Harry, Pretty Boy Moran, and Razor Riley taught Durante that he better have a pleasing quip on hand to convince the mobsters not to shoot the piano player.

While working at the Alamo nightclub in 1918 he met a singer named Maud Jeanne Olson who became his wife three years later. But he had an even better reason to remember the Alamo: there in 1915 song-and-dance man Eddie Jackson softshoed into his life. Jackson became Durante's partner and, more importantly, a friend for life.

Jimmy insisted that the Alamo also figured in another important slice of the Durante legend. After hours one night when some of Al Capone's triggermen were taunting Durante about his nose, comedian Jack Duffy lightened the mood by addressing him as "Schnozzola." So Schnozzola he became, first to the show business crowd and then to the rest of the world.

Durante continued to land jobs in joints like Club Pizzazz that had very little and Club Paradisio whose smoky atmosphere made it seem like the other place. When prohibition rolled in, Jim opened Club Durant, a speakeasy that did standing room only business until it closed in 1925.

By that time the team of Clayton, Jackson, and Durante had become a hot ticket. Lou Clayton, a hoofer with a pliable face not unlike Frank Fontaine's, encouraged Durante to promote his most obvious feature by making that nose the starting point of their routines. He would comment on Durante's small feet, Jimmy would say, "That's because nothing grows in the shade," Clayton would come back with "And what about your fingernails? Do you file your nails?" Jimmy would answer, "No



I just throw them away," and the parade of hoary gags would commence.

For awhile during the Roaring Twenties the trio became the rage of New York. Having an editor of *Variety* laud them affectionately in print as the Three Sawdust Bums helped business as did Damon Runyon's assertion that "I doubt if a greater cafe combination ever lived."

By 1927 "dem bums" were commanding \$3,000 a week at night spots and garnering \$5,500 weekly when they reached the vaudevillian's Valhalla, the Palace. There they showcased the highlight of their act, a burlesque routine called "Wood" which, like the classic immortalized by Abbott and Costello as "Mustard," involved snowballing. While Jimmy described lumber's importance in our way of life, his partners filled the stage with wooden items from canoes to a privy. When they brought out *that* house, it brought down the house.

By the time they took their show on the road their fame had preceded them. Audiences expected, and Jimmy delivered, novelty songs that he wrote and that only he

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could put over: "I Can Do Without Broadway, But Can Broadway do Without Me?," "I Ups to Him and He Ups to Me," "Who Will Be With You When I'm Far Away?," and "A Disa and a Datta."

Flo Ziegfeld, knowing a good act when he saw one, hired the team for *Show Girl*, a musical that was fail-safe with Ruby Keeler in the lead and music composed by George Gershwin. Jimmy's recitation of the repetitious poem, "I Got a One-Room House," delighted both theatergoers and critics alike. Durante mined that concept for decades; years later on radio and TV he would regale audiences with tales of travails in stores going between floors for merchandise or trips at home up and down ladders to go to the telephone or the door.

Following a successful appearance in *The New Yorkers*, a Cole Porter musical, an offer for a movie contract was extended by Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer—but only to Durante. By the early 1930s the act had clearly become one of a star and two sidekicks. Though reluctant to split up the team, Jimmy left for Hollywood, but, in a typical gesture that marked his innate generous nature, took his pals along and pledged to give them part of his earnings.

New Adventures of Get Rich Wallingford and *The Cuban Love Song*, Durante's first two pictures, made little impression and did nothing for his career except to get his face before a national audience. MGM executive Irving Thalberg attempted to capitalize on Durante's most recognizable feature by churning out publicity that the studio had insured his nose with Lloyd's of London for a million dollars.

Durante fared better in three Buster Keaton films. His vivacity seemed to make Keaton's acting sluggish by comparison as if Buster was not yet comfortable with talkies. Perhaps the best of the three was *Speak*

Easy (1932) in which Durante's outfit of striped suit, checked vest, and polka dot tie spoke louder than he did.

The Phantom President (1932) is now regarded as a curiosity because it marked one of George M. Cohan's rare screen appearances. Durante's most notable contribution in his role of political advisor is the quotable aphorism, "A Depression is a hole, a hole is nothin', and why should I waste my time talkin' about nothin'?"

Fame of more lasting nature came in *Palooka* (1934). Ostensibly the lyrics he warbled as Jolting Joe's manager Knobby Walsh served as a warning against the boxer signing his name to anything, but for most versions of what became his theme song he rarely got beyond the "Ink-a-dink-a-dink-a-dink-a-doo" stage.

Durante continued to enjoy his greatest triumphs before a live audience. As the star of the Broadway hit *Strike Me Pink*, he wowed the critics with his boundless energy and infectious way of belting out a song.

The writer who suggested that "a herd of elephants could not crash through a show more passionately" turned out to be prophetic for Durante's next (and biggest) stage success came as Brainey Bowers in Billy Rose's *Jumbo*. In addition to the obvious proboscis humor, the show focused on the interplay between Bowers and the titular animal, climaxed by a scene in which the elephant would hold a hoof over Durante, a feat even virile Frank Buck confessed he would not do even once, much less 233 times as Jimmy did.

In the fall of 1936 Durante joined Ethel Merman and Bob Hope as the stars of the Porter musical *Red, Hot and Blue!* During the third act he stole the scene from his co-stars (no mean feat considering their ebullient personalities) when as a con man acting as his own lawyer he did an "ups to him and he ups to me" routine by jumping

in and out of the witness stand to cross-examine himself.

Two other musical comedies, *Stars in Your Eyes* and *Keep Off the Grass*, failed to produce long runs and Durante's screen career had regressed to the point where he had accepted work at republic to provide feeble comic relief in Gene Autry's *Melody Ranch*. When Jeanne died in early 1943, it seemed just another in a series of "catastostrokes" designed to break his spirit.

But within weeks of his wife's death the Cyrano of clowns was back on top, packing them in at the Copacabana with an act that is still mentioned in the same reverential terms reserved for legendary nightclub engagements of Frank Sinatra and Joe E. Lewis. A two-week booking grew into a three-month smash which in turn blossomed into a new contract with MGM and, more importantly, an offer to bring his act to radio.

And that is actually what Durante did: he brought his cabaret act to the airwaves. When announcer Howard Petrie said, "And here he is, ladies and gentlemen, the one and only... Jimmy Durante! In person!" it was like a Las Vegas emcee beckoning to the star in the wings. Amid applause Durante approached the mike singing "Chitabee," "You've Got to Start Off Each day With a Song," or one of his other ditties before being interrupted or halting the proceedings himself with a raspy order to

"Stop the music!"

After some banter with Petrie or Garry Moore and a commercial, Durante would bring on a guest star who would sometimes join him in parodies of songs or numbers especially written for the occasion. Frequently there would be an opportunity for the guest, be it Dorothy Lamour or Van Johnson, to accent a joke by impersonating the Schnozz and appropriating his fa-

mous "I got a million of 'em" line, which would provoke the expected "Everyone wants to get into the act" or "I'm surrounded by assassins" response from Durante.

On *The Jimmy Durante Show* music served not only as a bridge linking the sections of the program but it also acted as a magic carpet that would carry Jimmy and friends on jour-

neys to different parts of the country, voyages to exotic islands, or just on a whimsical quest to find the lady from 29 Palms.

After the final commercial, Durante returned once more with a few bars of "Who Will Be With You When I'm Far Away?" before bidding Mrs. Calabash good night and exiting with a flourish.

People "loved that kind of carryings on" because "it gets around, it gets around" that, even if *The Jimmy Durante Show* may not have been the funniest program on the air it was a great deal of fun because of its unpredictability. No one, Durante included, knew what would come out of his mouth.



Jimmy Durante and Garry Moore

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The sesquipedalian writers purposely placed polysyllables into Jimmy's speeches because they knew he would wring them out of shape without any help from them. And twist them he did in declarations like "You are equivocly and indubiably kiskkernen and your precocious ratio in non

compos mentis dentis" or "The exubiance of this unxious occasion and the quintessence of your celestrial radiance premediates my bountiful soul with palipitation of grandiocious jocanunity." He even gamely struggled with shorter words that were not surrounded by jawbreakers. After four attempts at trying to ask valet

Arthur Treacher for a certain kind of pipe, the closest he could get to it was "mashearscham."

Some of the most amusing lines on the program turned out to be the speeches following the malapropisms. If Lucille Ball would suggest that "I'm sure you'll take it back," Durante would counter with "Take it back, nothing. I had a hard enough time getting rid of it." After Treacher reminded him that "Those are the words of Patrick Henry," Jimmy would respond with a wish: "I hope he had them insured. I mangled them up quite badly."

The good-natured spirit with which Durante joined in the wisecracks about his nose and his fracturing of the language

endeared him to audiences and his peers. When frequent guest Victor Moore would toss out the groaner "With your voice you could put Perry in a coma," Jimmy would counteract possible criticism with self-depreciating lines such as "Dialogue like this could bring back silent radio" that immediately made us laugh along with the old troopers who were giving it their all with a

wink in their eye.

Just a few months after *The Jimmy Durante Show* left the air in May 1950 Durante turned his attention to television as he became one of the rotating hosts of *The Four Star Revue*. In 1952 he received an Emmy as TV's best comedian and by 1954 he had earned his own program.

The Jimmy Durante Show took viewers into the



Club Durant. On these live and lively shows Durante would perform his "hot cha" numbers with Eddie Jackson and a chorus line of cuties called (what else?) The Durante Girls. At the end of the program when he walked through a series of spotlights after bidding Mrs. Calabash good night, he was strolling into video immortality for perhaps no other image in television history is as heart-warming and enduring as that one.

Over the years Durante remained rather evasive about the identity of Mrs. Calabash and let rivulets of rumors flow on around him. Actually Mrs. Calabash, like Jimmy's imaginary friend Umbriago, was just a gimmick created to keep listeners tuning

in right to the end of the program.

By the late 1950s Durante had reduced his schedule to doing guest appearances and working in nightclubs. In 1960, as if to prove there was still plenty of life in him, he married a thirty-nine-year old woman he had dated for sixteen years and became a father not long afterwards when the couple adopted a baby girl.

With renewed vigor he returned to the movie sets to take a featured role in the film version of *Jumbo* (1961). His bit as Smiler Grogan in *It's a Mad Mad Mad Mad World* (1963) triggered the action in the comic-laden funfest when he literally kicked the bucket.

When hosting the *Hollywood Palace* or appearing with veteran comedienne Eve Arden and Kaye Ballard on *The Mothers-In-Law*, the Schnozz was still very much in his element, but when teamed with the Lennon Sisters in a 1969 ABC series and placed in skits as a wigged and bejeweled Elvis lookalike, the effect was, as Jimmy might say, "mortifrying."

Durante fans have a chance to erase the memory of that embarrassment when *Frosty the Snowman*, the animated program Jimmy narrated and which first aired in 1971, returns to recreate its charm every December. Durante could imbue a song with more fervor and sincerity than perhaps any other performer in show business. Scoffers may doubt whether Jimmy Durante was a singer at all, but when he promised that Frosty would be back this time next year or when he told the young at heart that fairy tales can come true or that as time goes by the world will always welcome lovers, we believed.

Less than a year after he finished work on *Frosty* Jimmy suffered a stroke that



turned his rasp into a whisper. He spent the remaining years of his life in a wheelchair. Although he appeared in public a number of times (most notably at a fete for his 83rd birthday at which he valiantly tried to utter the words of "Inka Dinka Doo") his friends knew that his condition would continue to worsen. He tipped his fedora in life's spotlight one final time on January 29, 1980.

Durante was, in the words of one of his songs, a little bit this and a little bit that: ragtime pianist, comedian, radio, TV, stage, and motion picture performer, and one of the most beloved people in the entertainment industry. Often imitated, never duplicated for when they made him, that nose broke the mold. He may have had a million of 'em, but the world has had only one Jimmy Durante. ■

NOTE-- Tune in TWTD March 3 to hear a 1948 Jimmy Durante radio show with his guest Victor Moore.