

# JACK CARSON: MR. RELIABLE

BY CLAIR SCHULZ

There is a limboland between the mountaintop where the screen legends reside and the plain which is home to the character actors. Perpetually stuck in the middle are those performers who were frequently cast as second leads such as Preston Foster, Dan Duryea, Evelyn Keyes, Van Heflin, Claire Trevor, Marjorie Reynolds, Eddie Albert, and Diana Lynn.

Perched high on a ledge somewhere within sight of the peak sits Jack Carson all alone muttering to himself, "So near and yet so far."

No one could have predicted that John Elmer Carson born October 27, 1910 in a small town in Manitoba, Canada would have even reached those heights. His family moved to Milwaukee when he was still a child and he attended St. John's Military Academy in Delafield from 1923 to 1928.

At Carleton College Jack excelled in football and swimming and he dabbled in a few dramatic productions, but because he seemed more interested in pulling pranks than in pulling grades he was politely told after his sophomore year not to return for the fall 1930 semester.

He sold insurance for a year until an acquaintance named Dave Willock suggested that they get an act together and go on the stage. Just as the fabled team of McGee and Nitney that Fibber always bragged about, Willock and Carson hit the vaudeville circuit with an assortment of quaint



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sayings, snappy jokes, softshoe dances, and bouncy songs.

By 1935 vaudeville was dying and, as Jack freely admitted, "We helped kill it." When the act split up, Carson became master of ceremonies at a theatre in Kansas City, but he never forgot his friend even after he left the stage for Hollywood in 1936.

The standard joke of self-deprecating comedians, "I started at the bottom — and stayed there," is only half-true in Jack's case.

He did begin with just bit parts like filling Henry Fonda's car with gas in *You Only Live Once* and standing in Humphrey Bogart's shadow in *Stand-In*.

Producers at RKO liked what they saw

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of him so they put him in seven of their best features in 1938 alone. In *Law of the Underworld* Carson was noticeable as a henchman of Chester Morris and he drew more attention as a droll criminal named Red Jenks who gets bumped off by *The Saint in New York*. His vaudeville training served him in good stead aiding Joe Penner in two slapstick farces, *Go Chase Yourself* and *Mr.*



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**"STRAWBERRY BLONDE" (1941) Jack Carson and Rita Hayworth**

*Doodle Kicks Off*. He acted as the right hand man to Ginger Rogers in *Vivacious Lady*, *Having a Wonderful Time*, and *Carefree*, though he was usually left out at the end and soon became known as the bouncer left out cold by the right hand of the other man. Somebody had to be the brash suitor of the sweetheart who took it on the jaw from the hero at the fade-out and Jack obligingly kept sticking his chin out time after time.

Even though he occasionally found himself in notable films like *Destry Rides Again* and *Mr. Smith Goes to Washington* and had moved up in the credits, more often than not Carson was stuck in B pictures supporting the likes of Jed Prouty, Stu Erwin, and Bob Burns. Of the ten movies in which he appeared in 1940 all are forgotten or forgettable except *Love Thy Neighbor* featuring Burns and Allen and *Lucky Partners*, which might be regarded as his breakthrough film because, through he loses Ginger once more, he grabbed third-billing behind her and Ronald Colman.

Perhaps it was the uneven nature of the

projects he did bouncing between RKO, Paramount, Universal, and Fox that convinced Carson to sign a contract with Warner Brothers. At least by regularly appearing with the major actors of that studio audiences would say, "That's the same guy who kissed Ann Sheridan and took a shot at Edward G. Robinson instead of "Who's that guy?"

Right away in *Strawberry Blonde* he made an impression as the genial villain who steals Rita Hayworth away from James Cagney who in turn romances Olivia De Havilland. But even when Jack's character wins he loses for it turns out that Rita is a shrew and Olivia a darling so Cagney gets the last laugh after all.

Playing a comedic heel became his customary role as he provided some of the sparks that came between Myrna Loy and William Powell in *Love Crazy* and between Cagney and Bette Davis in *The Bride Came C.O.D.* In the service comedy *Navy Blues* he was on the receiving end of soap, eggs, and a pail of water tossed by Jack Oakie. As Joe Ferguson, a gridiron hero and former beau of the wife of a university pro-

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fessor in *The Male Animal*, he threatened to disrupt the marriage of Henry Fonda and Olivia De Havilland. Carson's beefy frame and his expert delivery of fatuous remarks enabled him to give an impeccable performance in this adaptation of James Thurber's play and earned him best acting honors from the National Board of Review of Motion Pictures.

That Carson was a versatile actor who could still play it straight was proven when he assisted Robinson in *Larceny, Inc.* and befriended Errol Flynn in *Gentleman Jim*. But the most fortuitous pairing with any Warner player came when he squared off against Dennis Morgan for Ann Sheridan's hand in *Wings for the Eagle*.

The camaraderie between Morgan and Carson became apparent when the two sang and danced their way through "Tip-toe Through the Tulips" and "Am I Blue?" in *The Hard Way*. During the filming the two ex-Milwaukeeans cemented a friendship that lasted long after the cameras stopped rolling. Once a week Carson, his wife (singer Kay St. Germain), Morgan,

Marie Wilson, and old pal Dave Willock put on a vaudeville show at an army camp near Los Angeles. Jack gave generously of his time to entertain the troops during the war and eagerly accepted parts in the patriotic movies *Thank Your Lucky Stars* and *Hollywood Canteen*.

Dennis, Jack, and Ann were reteamed in *Shine On Harvest Moon*, although it was Jack as a hammy magician named Georgetti and Marie Wilson as his dotty assistant who stole the film. Just Carson's wild-eyed expressions and the manipulation of his mustachioed lip was enough to send audiences into paroxysms of laughter.

His flexible features were spotlighted in his next film (the first one to give him top billing), *Make Your Own Bed*, in which he played an inept detective helping and hindering Jane Wyman and also in *The Doughgirls* when he never seemed quite certain as to whether he was married, single, on foot, or on horseback. When Carson was stumbling around in a fog of uncertainty his perplexed face seemed to be saying, "Will somebody tell me what's going on around here?"

In 1945 he took a break from lightweight fare when he assumed the part of Wally, a brassy, repulsive realtor who is of dubious aid to Joan Crawford in *Mildred Pierce*. As Carson demonstrated often later in his career, he could be an oily creep if the part called for it.

It was in the postwar pictures with Morgan that Jack reached the peak of his popularity. In *Once More Tomor-*



"MILDRED PIERCE" (1945) Jack Carson and Joan Crawford

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**"A STAR IS BORN" (1954) James Mason and Jack Carson**

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row he played a butcher who stood up to some bigwigs and got a girl at the end. The *Two Guys from Milwaukee* were Dennis as a prince and Jack as a cabbie, but Carson made most of the mirth and had one reviewer raving that he could "put more muscular energy into a comedy role and edge it with a finer degree of mental lassitude than any six screen comedians we can think of ... the boy's very, very funny."

*The Time, The Place, and the Girl* featuring the duo was in theatres shortly thereafter and *Two Guys From Texas* in 1948, but neither was as amusing as *Milwaukee* or *It's a Great Feeling* (1949) in which the pair, playing themselves, engage in some double crossing a la Hope and Crosby as they each try to win a movie part for and the affections of waitress Doris Day. (Jack and Doris played virtually the same roles in another 1949 effort, *My Dream is Yours*).

Because most of the episodes have been lost many people today are unaware that during the 1940s Carson had his own radio program. After doing some work on *The Signal Carnival* with veterans like Hal Peary and Jane Morgan, he was the headliner on a CBS program supported by

Arthur Treacher, Dale Evans and Willock. During the 1947-48 season he switched over to NBC to host *The Sealtest Village Store*.

*The Village Store* featured good-natured kidding between Carson, Eve Arden, Willock, and bald-pated band leader Frank De Vol usually followed by a skit parodying specific films or stock characters often seen in pictures like cowboys, pirates, and gangsters. The laughs frequently came from confusion over complicated names like Flooglefleagle and a steady stream of corny gags such as "Who are you, k-nave?" "Who wants to k-now?" Carson aptly described the program when he said, in response to one of Dave's inanities, "That's not funny, but it's silly." Silly or not, it is still a joy to hear Eve and Jack show off their talents at mimicry and toss dialects and foreign accents back and forth.

When television replaced radio as the public's medium of choice, Carson was there as well sharing hosting duties on *The Four-Star Revue* with Danny Thomas, Ed Wynn, and Jimmy Durante from 1950 to 1952. For the next decade he appeared on dramatic shows of merit such as *Ford The-*





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atre, *U.S. Steel Hour*, *Playhouse 90*, *Studio One*, *Lux Video Theatre*, and *Screen Directors' Playhouse* as well as popular shows like *Bonanza*, *Thriller*, *Zane Grey Theatre*, *The World of Disney*, *Alfred Hitchcock Presents*, and in a seriocomic episode of *The Twilight Zone* as a used car salesman who suddenly can't help telling "The Whole Truth."

Though his work on TV and radio kept him busy, he still found time to appear in films. *The Good Humor Man* (1950) is one of his more memorable roles as he dodged policemen and crooks for about eighty minutes while managing to take a pummeling with fists, flour, soot, water, and pies. The movie was derivative of and inferior to Red Skelton's *The Fuller Brush Man* and is perhaps most noteworthy for teaming Carson with Lola Albright who would become his third wife in 1952.

Jack again took it on the lam in *The Groom Wore Spurs*, but at least as a phony cowboy star the humor centered around what he did and not on the damage done to him, and old screenmate Ginger Rogers

added to the merriment by acting as his lawyer. He ambled about amusingly as another cowpoke, this one full of arrogance and bluster, who gave Rosemary Clooney all the headaches she could handle in *Red Garters*.

In the mid-fifties his parts in movies diminished and were almost exclusively dramatic. Carson was in top form as a cynical press agent in *A Star is Born*, and he demonstrated a forceful presence playing the loudmouthed neighbor in *The Bottom of the Bottle*, conniving sheriff in *The Tattered Dress*, obnoxious heir in *Cat on a Hot Tin Roof*, loyal mechanic in *The Tarnished Angels*, and corrupt politician in *King of the Roaring '20s*. Even when he assumed a lighter role like the loutish captain sent into space at the end of *Rally Round the Flag, Boys!* his shady characters usually got their just desserts.

It seems that Jack Carson, however, never got what was coming to him. He died too soon, of cancer that struck him down at the age of 52 while he was rehearsing to appear in a production of *Critic's Choice*, a fitting title for a finale because Carson was the critic's choice, the director's choice, and the people's choice to be the dependable role-player who stirred the plot. He could fill the screen with those massive shoulders and that broad grin and be convincing whether he was acting obstreperous or treacherous.

Jack Carson could act circles around comedians and clown better than most actors. Awarding him the title of "Hollywood's all-around Mr. Reliable" may not seem like much of a consolation prize to Jack sitting up there on that aery perch unless some of those heavenly bodies shine brightly and some just glimmer but they are all stars. ■

(NOTE— Tune in to TWTD July 19 for a four-hour salute to Jack Carson.)