

*The*

# JIMMY DURANTE

*Story*

BY TERRY BAKER

Success is as unpredictable as Chicago weather. Seldom do we find it where we are looking. It is only when we least expect it that we tend to be blessed with our good fortunes. Jimmy Durante had no desire to be a comedian, but luckily for us, he became one.

Jimmy came into this world on February 10, 1893 in his parents' New York apartment. He was the fourth and last child born to Rosa and Bartolomeo Durante. Both Jimmy's parents had come over from Italy in the 1880's and were determined to make a good life for their family in the United States.

Bartolomeo had studied the barber trade back in Italy and saved enough money in the states to buy his own shop. There, the three Durante boys (Jimmy, Michael and Albert) would assist their father by lathering the faces of his customers. Jimmy's father planned to make him an apprentice but neither he nor his brothers were to follow in their father's footsteps.

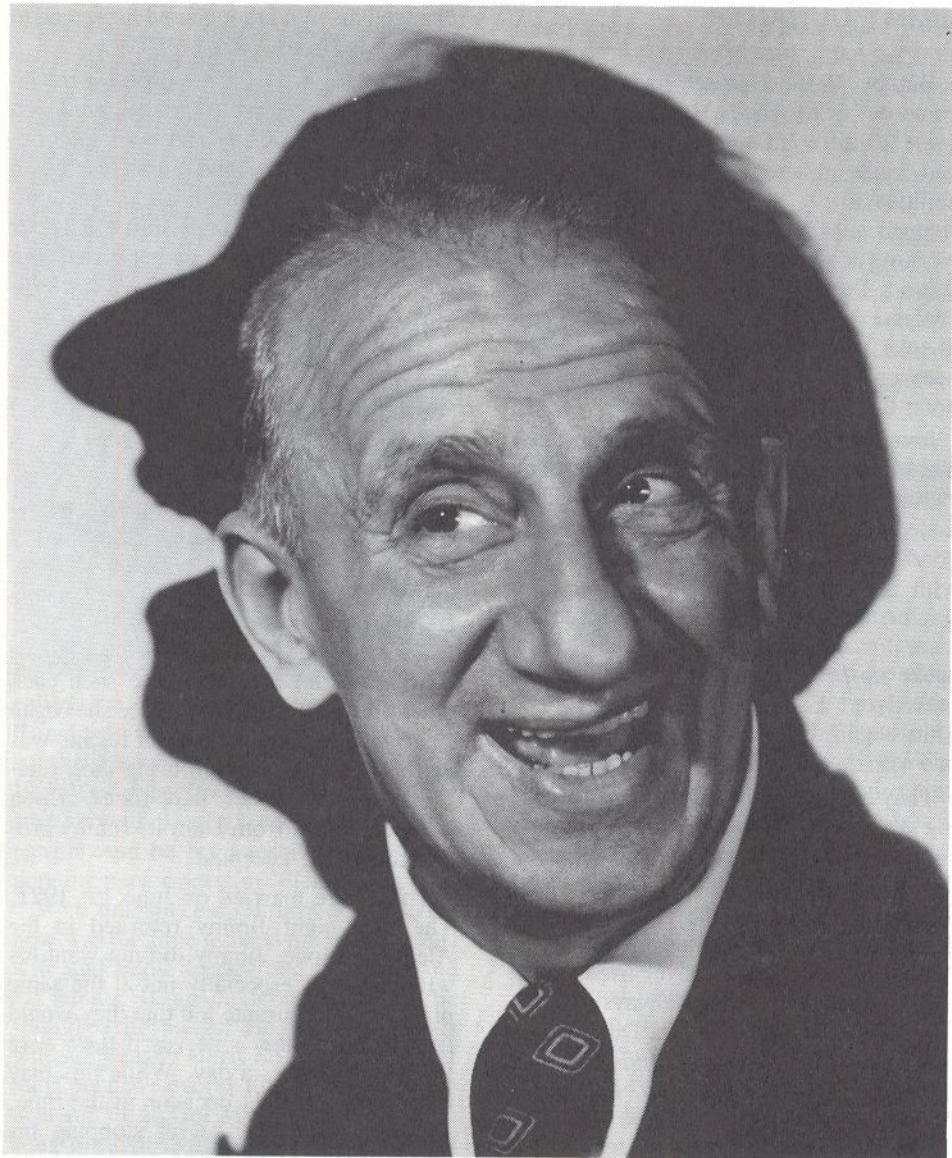
Money was usually tight at the Durante home and, at the age of ten, Jimmy took a job selling newspapers in an effort to help the family's finances. Jimmy dropped out of school at the start of eighth grade to take on more odd jobs with one stipulation from his parents. They wanted him to take piano lessons. Jimmy thought this was fine as he had aspirations of becoming a piano player. But instead of studying ragtime (which he loved), his parents ordered him to study classical music. He obeyed his folks' wishes but also got the chance to play more modern tunes, performing once a week in neighborhood dance halls for 75 cents a night.

Durante's regular jobs ranged from coal wagon driver (which lasted all of three days) to hardware store stockboy and finally window washer, where his brother Michael worked. While Jimmy took pride in doing these jobs well, none of them brought the enjoyment he received when playing the piano. But he soon would get his chance to play the piano full time.

During the spring of 1910, Michael lost his job due to illness and Jimmy was also discharged. It was during a visit to their family doctor that Jimmy learned of a job opening for a piano player down at a Coney Island beer hall called Diamond Tony's. Durante went out and got that job playing for \$25 a week plus tips.

He earned every penny he made. The job called for him to work every night of the week, from eight in the evening to six the next morning. The only breaks he got were when another musician wanted to use the piano to try out a new song. Jimmy never complained about the amount of hours he worked. He just loved having the opportunity to play and it was this non-stop pace that caused him to develop his remarkable level of endurance that he relied on throughout his career.

Tin Pan Alley, as it was known, did not boast the highest class of clientele around. Most customers that came into Diamond Tony's were either gangsters, gamblers or other assorted individuals of ill repute. On several occasions, Jimmy's family asked him to quit that job but he wouldn't hear of it. The money was just too good and he was well-liked by all the patrons of the club. Besides, he was sensible enough to avoid any trouble that might arise.



The following summer found Jimmy playing at Kerry Walsh's, right across the street from Diamond Tony's. There he met up with a singing waiter by the name of Eddie Cantor. The two worked well together and became good friends.

Cantor had plans to go onto the vaudeville stage after his stint here and wanted Durante to join him. Jimmy, however, had no desire to leave his trusted piano. Eddie

stressed to Jimmy the fact that he wasn't going to accomplish anything just tickling the ivories. He was the first to encourage Jimmy to talk to the audience while playing. Since Durante was well liked, it made sense to let his own personality come through while performing. Jimmy wouldn't agree to this just yet because in his words, "I'd be afraid people would laugh at me."

## JIMMY DURANTE

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But by 1915, Durante had started to come out of his shell. He had worked in some 20 different clubs by this time and had built up enough confidence in his abilities to try new things. Jimmy first stepped out from behind the piano while working at a cabaret in Harlem called the Alamo. Durante conducted piano-playing contests, balloon dances and even began to joke with the audience during dance numbers (although the owner frowned upon that last item).

It was also at the Alamo that Jimmy first met singer Eddie Jackson. Jackson and his vaudeville partner Eddie Murray auditioned their act for Jimmy but it just wasn't good enough. In 1917, Jackson returned with a new partner, blues singer Dot Taylor. Durante liked them and hired the team for the club. Jackson and Taylor broke up soon afterward and while Dot moved on, Eddie stayed at the Alamo. Thus began the friendship between these two men that would last until their deaths.

They had some great times while working at the Alamo. Eddie always let Jimmy pick out the songs because he had a special knack for choosing the right ones and playing them at just the right tempo to bring out the best in whomever was working with him. Durante never tried to upstage his partners and was always quick to share any glory that was due. Durante and Jackson would have many fond memories of their years at the Alamo. Especially Jimmy who was to meet his first wife there.

The year was 1918 when Maude Jeanne Olson first set foot in the Alamo. The attractive lady from Toledo with the soprano voice had come to the club looking for a job. She walked into the Alamo and into Jimmy's life.

Jimmy was hesitant to hire her at first. Jeanne had a fine voice, but he felt that a soprano didn't fit in with the club's atmosphere. Jeanne's talent and charm

changed his mind though and he agreed to put her in the show.

Working side by side every day brought them closer together. They truly enjoyed each other's company and their relationship grew slowly and steadily. When Jeanne entered the hospital due to abdominal pains late in 1920, Jimmy was at her bedside daily, encouraging her throughout her recovery.

Jimmy had also been spending long hours at his mother's bedside. Mrs. Durante had been ill for quite some time and the recent death of her son Michael had made her condition worse. On New Year's Day, 1921, she passed away.

After Jeanne recovered from her hospital stay, she decided to take a vacation and visit her family, now living in Detroit. During that time apart, the two began corresponding on a far more personal level. It was a true case of absence making the heart grow fonder. They had seen each other practically every day since she began singing at the club. This brief respite was just what they needed to bring their feelings for each other into focus. Upon Jeanne's return from Detroit, Jimmy proposed and she accepted.

They were married on June 19, 1921. The next night Jimmy returned to the Alamo — alone. Jimmy did not want his wife to work, especially not at the same place he did. Durante felt that they would destroy each other's nerves if they were together 24 hours a day. While this may have been the right decision at the time, Jimmy would later regret stopping his wife's career as he did.

Although her career had ended, Jeanne tried to push Jimmy's forward. She encouraged him to ask for a raise, which he got, upping his weekly take to \$57 a week. Then in October of 1921, Jimmy left the Alamo, also under Jeanne's urging. Jeanne knew that Jimmy was a great talent and wanted him to go as far in this business as he could. Within a few months Durante found steady work at a Broadway cafe





called the Nightingale. Performing on Broadway was far different from the speakeasys where he had been appearing. Jimmy even had to wear a tuxedo. While a bit nervous, Jimmy's talent won over the patrons and he became one of the more popular performers on "The Avenue".

With this success, Jimmy decided that now was the time to heed the words of his wife and Eddie Cantor and try to expand his talents. It was his conclusion that he should write songs. He became friends with songwriter Chris Smith and together they penned several tunes including the near-hit "I've Got My Habits On." That song brought Durante a royalty check of \$1,500 which was the largest sum of money he had seen up to that time.

In the fall of 1922 Jimmy was approached with an interesting business proposition. Frank Nolan was a waiter at the Nightingale and also owned a club of his own. He had desires to open another one and thought Jimmy would be a great partner. Durante was intrigued by the idea but his wife was not. The Durantes had just bought their first home and Jeanne was

afraid that Jimmy would lose what money they had saved up. Jimmy didn't want to touch that money either and as luck would have it, he didn't have to.

Word of this potential business venture had gotten around town and a prominent liquor operator who thought highly of Jimmy, offered him a \$700 loan. Reluctantly Jimmy accepted. Durante informed Nolan that he would go into this deal under two conditions. First, Eddie Jackson and his new singing partner Harry Harris would join them in the business. Secondly, Jimmy was to be paid \$75 a week no matter how business was and they would close the place the first week he couldn't be paid. All parties agreed to this arrangement and "The Club Durant" (the "e" was missing from the donated sign) opened in the fall of 1923.

Club Durant had been open for just a few months when a popular soft-shoe dancer named Lou Clayton walked into the club. It turned into the best day of Jimmy's life. Durante had never heard of Clayton but was quite impressed with his talent. The two chatted throughout the evening and around closing time, Jimmy asked Lou if he wanted to join the business. Harry Harris just wasn't working out as a partner and the others wanted him out. Lou agreed to buy in, provided that he was to be the club's president and also the treasurer. This suited Jimmy fine as he only wanted to perform. Through the years, Lou would become Jimmy's best friend, confidant and business advisor and most of his future success was due to Clayton's influence.

Clayton's presence at the club was felt immediately. Lou was strong willed, aggressive and had a great head for business. Clayton's strong appearance discouraged any troublemaker from getting out of hand. Lou was just what the club needed to turn the corner. The first week alone all four partners were able to take home close to \$900.

One of Clayton's first major decisions was to get Jimmy out from behind the piano and out onto the stage. Lou felt

## JIMMY DURANTE

Durante's talent was too good to waste. Another piano player was hired and Jimmy went on stage to sing and tell jokes with Clayton and Jackson. Some routines were improvised, but all went over big. "The Three Sawdust Bums," as they were known, quickly became one of the hottest acts in town.

About this time, Clayton tagged Durante with the moniker "Schnozzola" for his rather large nose. All of us are familiar with Jimmy's large honker but I did not mention it until now because it really had not played a role in his career as yet. The nose had brought Jimmy nothing but problems while he was growing up. Other children teased Durante constantly about his appearance and it affected him deeply. As he grew older Jimmy slowly became more comfortable about his looks but he never would be happy with them. It's ironic that something that caused Jimmy so much

distress in his youth would help bring much laughter into the world in later years. When Durante stepped onto the stage with Clayton and Jackson, his nose stepped into the forefront as well. Somehow the good natured "Schnozz" jokes told by his two best friends didn't bother Jimmy in the least. Durante grew accustomed to these jokes over the years but, because of his own childhood memories, vowed never to make fun of anyone else's shortcomings.

The Club Durant was packing them in every night of the week. Jimmy was now making \$2,000 a week and he and Jeanne were able to pay off the house they had purchased. The trio would have stayed at the club longer but in the fall of 1925, Jimmy mistakenly served an alcoholic beverage (remember this was still prohibition) to a federal agent and the Club Durant was promptly closed.

Clayton, Jackson and Durante stayed together and moved on to even bigger things. They purchased another club but



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after a year, the strain of running the place while still performing became too great. They sold out and began booking themselves into other clubs, playing before packed houses wherever they went. By 1928 the boys got their chance to appear on Broadway at the Palace Theater when Fanny Brice became ill and could not perform. Clayton told the Palace management that their price was \$5,500 a week. When the theater balked, Lou made a deal with them. If the boys didn't break the house record, the Palace owned them nothing but if they did, the theater would meet his price. The trio broke the record, got their money and were held over three weeks.

By 1929 they were starring in Florenz Ziegfeld's road production of "Show Girl". The show returned to New York, winning rave reviews and played until the stock market crashed in October. From there it was more club work, bookings at the Palace and even their first film. Paramount Pictures offered the boys \$50,000 for four weeks work on the picture "Roadhouse Nights". For awhile the trio was working 18 hours a day. But that kind of pace could not continue. As the depression grew worse the search for work got tougher and in May of 1931 the trio made their last professional appearance. Hollywood came knocking on the door, but it was only Durante they wanted.

M-G-M offered Jimmy a five year contract that would include at least two pictures a year. Jimmy's wife loved the idea. She saw this as the opportunity to return to a regular life away from New York City. For years she had watched Jimmy work seven days a week till all hours of the morning. Now, perhaps she would have some time with him. Durante was not as enthusiastic as his wife. He felt he would be betraying his friends by breaking up the act. Lou and Eddie felt differently. They saw this as a great opportunity for Jimmy and they weren't going to let him pass it up. Jimmy finally relented under the condition that the two would join



him in California. Clayton would handle his business affairs, Eddie would work backstage and they would all split his salary.

It turned out that Hollywood would never learn how to best use Durante's talents. After a successful debut in his first M-G-M film, "Get-Rich-Quick Wallingford", Jimmy appeared in a long line of second-rate pictures. In many cases Jimmy would appear for just a few minutes, telling jokes or performing a musical number. Some of these performances were memorable though, such as in the 1934 film "Palooka" where he first performed what was to become his theme song, "Inka Dinka Doo."

Durante's contract did not include a limit on the amount of films he would appear in, so producers who needed to liven up a picture could use Jimmy at will. His reviews were always favorable but without quality roles to play, his movie career faltered.

Jimmy was quite relieved when M-G-M early-released him from his contract. Now

## JIMMY DURANTE

he could get back on stage where he felt more comfortable. In November 1935, he went back to New York and got a role in the hit play "Jumbo." The following year, Jimmy made his first European tour and played to packed houses. Returning to the states, he took on more stage work. Things seemed to be going quite well but he was about to enter into the worst few years of his life.

Jimmy and his crew returned to California late in 1937 and found there was little work for him beyond an occasional film role. The Durante money began to dry up and Jimmy became more depressed. An auto accident involving Lou Clayton only made matters worse. Jimmy took out several personal loans to help cover Lou's medical expenses. Upon his recovery, Lou tried to get Jimmy back to work but his desire wasn't there. Jimmy was content to spend more time at home with Jeanne. He turned down the few offers that came up.

Lou finally convinced Jimmy to appear at a Hollywood night club during New Year's week, 1941. One evening Jimmy received word from New York that his father had suffered a heart attack. The next morning Jimmy flew back East and was able to speak to his father just before he passed away.

Durante's financial situation continued to worsen and as a goodwill gesture, M-G-M head L.B. Mayer offered Jimmy

the chance to appear in a vaudeville tour back East. Jimmy accepted and tracked down Eddie Jackson (who had gone out on his own in 1933) and former drummer Jack Roth. The tour was a successful one but upon its completion, tragedy struck the Durante family again, twice. Jimmy's wife was hospitalized in April of 1942 for internal bleeding and in the summer of that year his only sister Lilian died.

The bad times were not yet over for Jimmy. Jeanne's health grew worse daily and Jimmy refused to leave her for any length of time. Lou Clayton was able to rustle up a few bookings but they were mostly out East and Jimmy refused to take them. Clayton continued his efforts, though and in February of '43, put together a very good deal for Durante. The "Camel Caravan" offered Jimmy \$5,000 to come to New York and make two guest appearances on their radio program. At the same time, Jimmy was to appear nightly at the Copacabana night club for another \$6,000. When Lou phoned with the news, Jimmy once again declined. This time however, Jeanne intervened, urging him to make the trip. Jeanne knew how despondent Jimmy was and how much they needed the money with her ever-mounting medical bills. Reluctantly, Durante made the trip. The trip started out well as his first radio appearance proved quite successful. Jimmy called Jeanne after that first performance and she, too, thought he was very good. This was to be the last time Jimmy would hear her voice. She died the following morning.

Jeanne was gone now and Jimmy would have to get on with his life. Clayton convinced him that the best way to deal with his grief was to get right back to work. That meant returning to New York and fulfilling his engagement at the Copa. Although deeply depressed, Jimmy performed brilliantly and remained there for 14 weeks. Durante was able to forget his troubles while on stage and this proved to be great therapy for him. His success also proved, contrary to what some people

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thought, he was by no means washed-up as a performer. Hollywood came calling once again and Jimmy signed another five year deal with M-G-M. This contract called for just one picture a year which left Durante time to pursue other interests, such as radio.

Jimmy had tried his hand at radio twice before. In 1933 he had hosted the "Chase & Sanborn Coffee Hour" for 26 weeks. Then in 1936, NBC adapted the hit Broadway play "Jumbo" into a limited run series and gave Durante the chance to reprise his stage role. Beyond that, Jimmy's radio experience was limited to an occasional guest appearance on variety programs. While his experience was slim, he was still well known throughout the radio audience which would be a key factor in the job opportunity he was about to receive.

In the spring of '43, Camel Cigarettes was looking for a Thursday night summer replacement for Abbott and Costello. They decided upon a young comedian named Garry Moore. It was thought that they would have several weeks to put this new show together. They had just two. Lou Costello became seriously ill and Bud Abbott refused to go on without him. Moore's show would have to go on immediately but since he was relatively unknown, the sponsor wanted to team him with a name that would help attract an audience. That's where Jimmy came in. The two men had met during a previous "Camel Caravan" appearance and were intrigued by the thought of working together. They agreed to become partners and within weeks, became one of the top comedy duos on the air.

The program was a vast contrast of styles. Moore was twenty-two years younger than Jimmy and possessed a sophisticated brand of humor, similar to Fred Allen. Durante on the other hand, relied on his boyish exuberance and his ability to destroy the English language for most of his laughs. By all logic their pairing shouldn't have worked, but it did.



**GARRY MOORE AND JIMMY DURANTE**

The show clicked for several reasons, not least of which were the performers themselves. Durante and Moore truly liked each other, not only as entertainers but as individuals as well. They enjoyed doing the show together and that trait was evident throughout their broadcasts.

The quality of their program was always first rate. Moore and a host of writers worked hard to produce a script that was worth performing. Durante himself would spend hours studying and revising the finished product, sometimes working right up to air time. The result was a unique blend of humor that appealed to a wide range of listeners.

The program followed the same format as all other variety shows. Moore started with the opening monologue, then introduced Jimmy who came out singing his theme, "Ya Gotta Start Out Each Day With A Song." The two then exchanged some banter and discussed the latest



## JIMMY DURANTE

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exploits of Durante's friend "Umbriago." The writers always made sure to include several big words for Jimmy to stumble over. Durante could mangle the language with the best of them. On one such occasion the writers outsmarted themselves. The script called for Jimmy to say the word "nostalgic". The writers presumed that he would pronounce the word as "neuralgic" so they decided to give Jimmy a hand and wrote "neuralgic" in the script. But when Durante came to that word in the script, he pronounced it "nostalgic" and blew the laugh.

Once the boys finished their opening bit, vocalist Georgia Gibbs would perform a number with the help of Roy Bargy and his orchestra. Then it was time to bring out a guest star, who after exchanging pleasantries would aid Durante and Moore in their weekly comedy sketch. With that, the show was almost complete except for Durante's famous closing remark: "Good-night, Mrs. Calabash, wherever you are." Jimmy never disclosed what this meant but Lou Clayton believed that it was his way of saying goodbye to Jeanne in a private manner that only they would know about.

Durante and Moore did an admirable job filling in for Abbott and Costello. The show's sponsor was so pleased with their efforts that they were offered a chance to return in the fall. The boys returned to the air in October, 1943 over CBS on Friday nights. Although never one of the top rated shows, it did build up a loyal following during its four year run. In 1947, Moore decided to leave the show to pursue other interests. The two men parted on friendly terms and remained good friends.

Jimmy continued the radio show himself. To take Moore's place, Durante used more guests and also hired a regular supporting cast that included Peggy Lee, Arthur Treacher and Victor Moore. The Durante show for Rexall moved to NBC and remained moderately successful until 1950 when Jimmy left radio for good.

Television was the next logical step for him. Lou Clayton knew that Jimmy would be perfect for this new medium and wanted to make sure his pal got a fair deal. Even after being diagnosed as having terminal cancer, Lou continued to negotiate with network executives and reached a ten-year agreement that set Jimmy up financially for the rest of his life. Unfortunately, Lou never got to see Jimmy perform on television as he died a few months before Durante's debut.

Jimmy's first appearance was in October of 1950 as one of the rotating hosts on NBC's "All Star Revue." He remained there for three years, then moved on to the "Colgate Comedy Hour". Finally he hosted his own show from 1954-57. Audiences loved Jimmy here too, just as Clayton had predicted. Durante even won an Emmy for Best Comedian in 1952.

After his own show left the air, Jimmy began to slow down. He still made an occasional film or television appearance but now, in his mid-sixties, he decided to relax and enjoy the time he had left. He remarried in 1960 and became a father when they adopted a baby girl. Jimmy remained in good health until suffering several strokes in the mid-seventies. He died on January 29, 1980, just shy of his 87th birthday.

Anyone who met Durante couldn't help but like him. Here is a man who would literally give someone the shirt off his back if asked. He was always concerned about the other person and that caring rubbed off on those around him. A case in point: when Durante fell seriously ill in late 1947, Bob Hope, Red Skelton, Al Jolsen and Frank Morgan filled in on Jimmy's radio show free of charge as a gesture of love and friendship to the man they respected so much.

When Jimmy recovered from his illness he stated that "he only wanted to live long enough to do a little good in this world to pay back what I owe." He certainly accomplished that.