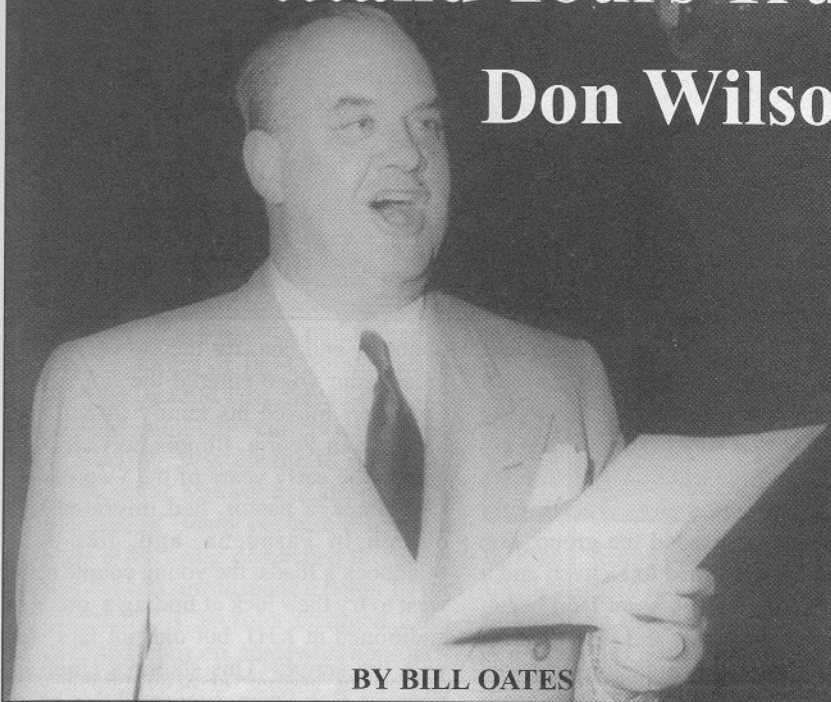


# “...and Yours Truly, Don Wilson”



BY BILL OATES

*The Jack Benny Show* made its mark in broadcasting by employing a group of actors who augmented the program's star to create one of radio's best ensembles. From Jack to his sound effects men, everyone contributed to make this comedy show eternally popular and forever endearing. Even though Mary Livingstone became the first "permanent" cast member, announcer Don Wilson remained with the program the longest. He often received awards for his speaking abilities, but his path to radio came because of his singing voice.

Born in Lincoln, Nebraska, on September 1, 1900, Don moved with his family to Denver two years later. Little has been recorded of Donald Harlow Wilson's early

years, but after high school, he entered the University of Colorado in 1919. He excelled on the undefeated freshman football team that scored 68 points against its opponents' 0 in 1920. He graduated in 1923, the same year that he first appeared on Denver's KFEL.

Don started working as a salesman, but the more promising career move came when he joined a singing trio. Their fame made promoters from the Western states' Piggy Wiggly supermarket chain dub him and his cronies "The Piggly Wiggly Trio." Jack Benny must not have known this tidbit of Wilson trivia, for as much as he joked about Don's girth, this knowledge probably would have been referred to on the show more than once. Bing Crosby and Rudy Vallee needed not to be threatened by Don's crooning abilities, but, at the time, the supermarket chain did allow the three

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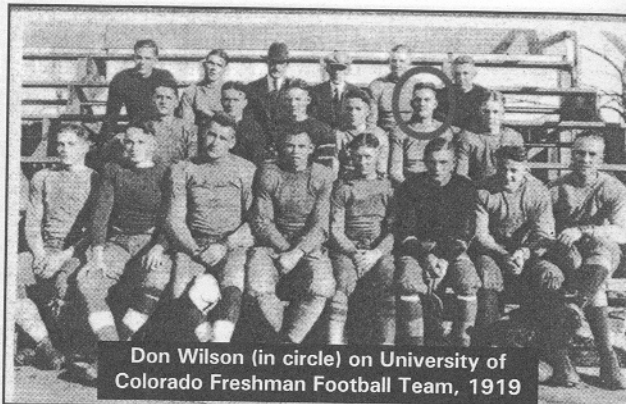
to advance their careers and travel to California as its representatives.

Don did not hold much hope in achieving fame from singing, but while in San Francisco in May of 1927, the group made its debut on radio station KFRC. Of course, The Bay Area, as the hub of West Coast broadcasting, was the equivalent of New York and Chicago in these early days of radio, and dozens of famous voices got their start in radio there.

Don Lee owned KFRC at the time, and three years later the trio transferred to his KHJ station in Los Angeles. When Piggly Wiggly no longer needed the group, one of the members returned to Denver, and a duet continued. At this point Don began doing announcing jobs, and when his remaining partner left, introducing programs and commentating became Wilson's occupation for life. His timing could not have been better, because new staff announcers were needed in the late 1920s and early 1930s, and many network shows would soon be coming his way.

Several car dealerships owned many early radio stations, and Don Lee's Cadillacs were part of the automobile-radio connection. The good news was that, with his newfound fortune, Wilson wanted this particular luxury car. The bad news is that, when he could not get a good deal on one, he bought a new Packard instead. Infuriated, Lee fired his announcer. Fortunately for Wilson, Earl C. Anthony owned the Packard outlet and KFI, two of Lee's main competitors. And, as a result, the young man from Denver moved to what would become a very important network affiliate in 1929.

Don soon became the station's chief an-



Don Wilson (in circle) on University of Colorado Freshman Football Team, 1919

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nouncer, and, shortly thereafter, another great radio voice entered the field. Ken Carpenter moved his family (a wife and baby) from Peoria, Illinois, to California during the early years of the Depression. His father, a pastor, had migrated to a church in Pasadena, and, like John Steinbeck's Joads, the young couple came west to try their luck at finding a job. Ken auditioned at KHJ, but did not fare well with the script. This station's chief announcer, Bob Swan, suggested that he try KFI. After the young man arrived, Wilson let Carpenter do occasional station breaks, until he became a full-time voice. From this chance connection, the two became lifelong friends and were often substituted for each other. The prime example came when Don moved east for NBC network chores, and Ken became KFI's chief announcer.

Whether or not Don appreciated moving from southern California to New York, he certainly found new career advancements. The first started when he began broadcasting, appropriately enough, college football games in 1933. Although he had achieved success on the West Coast, when paired with the legendary sportscaster Graham MacNamee, the rookie approached the assignment with trepidation. Don had heard that his new partner was tough to work with, but he soon found out

that McNamee was not only friendly to the younger announcer, but he also taught Wilson a few things about calling a game. Eventually, McNamee, Wilson, and Ted Husing became known as the top national sports broadcasters of the early 1930s. Of course, because of his move to New York, Don Wilson eventually landed his biggest role when he became Jack Benny's announcer.

Jack Benny moved around in his early days on radio. From 1932 to 1934, the show had numerous time slots, networks, sponsors, orchestra leaders, and announcers. In the spring of 1934, Benny began working for General Tire. Because of contractual obligations, the current announcer, Alois Havrilla, was unable to make the shift. General Motors had dropped its sponsorship of Benny because it felt that comedic advertising demeaned the product and concert music made a better fit for the company. Chevrolet changed from sponsoring Benny on, somewhat appropriately, April 1, 1934, to "serious" music with Victor Young the following week. Havrilla had been established as an integral part of many of the Benny skits, and the next announcer would have to follow suit.

Jack liked Don, who was still announcing football at \$250 per game, in Wilson's estimation, "because I laughed in all of the right places. Jack hired me as the straight commercial man, but after the fourth week, the guys started working me into the script." Radio shows received a thirteen-week trial, and Don was likewise initially signed for this time period. He continued laughing "in the right places" for Jack on radio and television for 31 years.

To appreciate Don Wilson's radio career, one needs to look first at all that he did on programs other than the Jack Benny show. Before he signed with General Tire, Don announced *Music by Gershwin* in 1934. He spent time on *The Kraft Music Hall* prior



to Roger Krupp and then old friend Ken Carpenter. Also in the 1930s, he announced on the *Tim and Irene* show, the *Joe E. Brown Show*, *The Aldrich Family*, and *The Packard Hour*; to name a few. Perhaps one of the more obscure Wilson appearances came in 1934, when he voiced Lal Taask in the second episode of *Tarzan and the Diamond of Asher*. Coincidentally, among other famous names in the cast of this popular series are longtime Benny nemesis Frank Nelson, Gale Gordon, and Hanley Stafford.

In the 1940s Don continued to perform on radio shows different from his usual role as Jack Benny's verbal sparring partner. Perhaps one of his most important and selfless stints came when the Armed Forces Radio Service tapped him to be the first regular announcer on its famed *Command Performance* program. Of course, when he moved on to another AFRS show, *Mail Call*, Ken Carpenter took his place. Both of these men, like so many in the entertainment industry, freely gave of their time to the war effort in addition to their regu-

lar jobs. Wilson returned to AFRS to add new material when the network edited out the "soap" from *Lux Radio Theatre* and renamed it *Hollywood Radio Theatre*. He also visited the segregated Armed Forces program *Jubilee*. In addition to the aforementioned parts, Don also did the announcing chores on *The Baby Snooks Show* (during the late 1940s), *The Ginny Simms Show* (ca. 1945), *Glamour Manor* (June 1946), *Tommy Riggs and Betty Lou* (1946), and *The Alan Young Show* (1949).

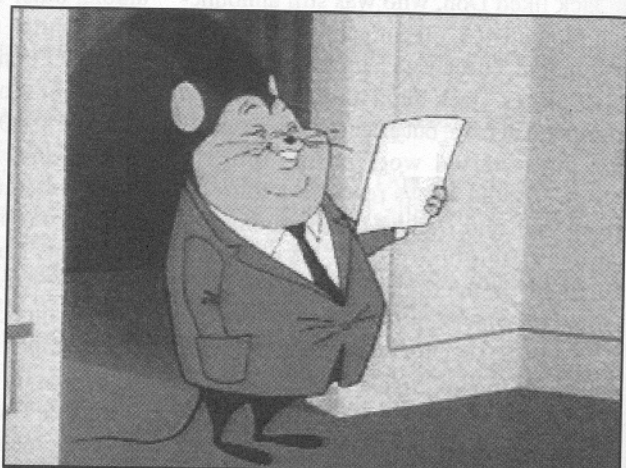
Don Wilson also figured in a number of motion pictures. The Vitaphone division of Warner Brothers signed Milton Cross, Jimmy Wallington, Gabriel Heatter, H.V. Kaltenborn, Paul Douglas, Don Wilson, and a few others to narrate a series of shorts entitled *Our Own United States* (1936). More often than not, he played the part of some sort of announcer in films like *Million Dollar Legs* (1932), *Broadway Melody of 1936*, *Meet the Missus* (1937), *Radio City Revels* (1937), *Two Girls on Broadway* (1940), *Footlight Serenade* (1942), *DuBarry Was a Lady* (1943), *Dick Tracy* (1945) and *The Kid from Brooklyn* (1946).

In addition to the aforementioned cinema parts, Don Wilson played in several other films. Twice he appeared in WLS *National Barn Dance*-inspired movies: *Village Barn Dance* (1940) and *The Roundup* (1941) with Lulu Belle Wiseman. In the latter he played a character named "Slim." He also appeared as Houston in *Dangerous Blondes* (1941), uncredited in *Cinderella Jones* (1946), Fats in *The Chase* (1946), Mr. Chubby in *Sailor Beware* (1951), and Mr. Kettering in *Niagara* (1953). When Disney pro-

ductions created the Academy Award-winning animation short "Ferdinand the Bull" in 1938, Don narrated this endearing tale.

One of the most unusual appearances for Don Wilson, as well as Jack, Mary and Rochester, came when Robert McKimson developed a cartoon parody of Jack's television show. Warner Brothers' animation division frequently burlesqued famous movie and television stars, as well as specific films and television shows. Jack had been lampooned as early as 1939, when he became a caveman in *Daffy and the Dinosaur*. In 1956, McKimson made "The Honey Mousers" as a tribute to Jackie Gleason and his *Honeymooners* company. However, when the animator returned to use rodents in "The Mouse That Jack Built" in 1959, the real cast of the Jack Benny show agreed to voice themselves.

In addition, and already on Warner Brothers' payroll, Mel Blanc provided the sound of the Maxwell automobile. Even though they were at the pinnacle of stardom, Jack and Mary agreed to the novel idea and demanded only a print of the cartoon as payment. Typically, Don appeared as the announcer who attempted to interrupt the story with a commercial announce-



**The Mouse That Jack Built (1959)**  
Don Wilson provided the voice of the rodent announcer





*The Jack Benny Program (1938)*

Phil Harris; writers Bill Morrow and Ed Beloin; Don Wilson; Jack Benny; Mary Livingstone; unidentified producer; Artie Auerbach; Dennis Day

ment. Another unusual moment in the cartoon occurs at the end, when live-action Jack faces the camera and utters "Gosh, what a crazy dream."

With many of Don Wilson's moments not on the Jack Benny show out of the way, one can now concentrate on the part that put him on top of the media world. As has already been stated, Wilson entered the early days of network radio as a rising staff announcer. Because most programs emanated from New York or Chicago, he would eventually have to move away from his western roots if he wished to ascend the announcing ladder. When the General Tire job with Benny came on April 6, 1934, the opportunity, at first, seemed to be but another network assignment, but over the next several years his professional life changed dramatically.

During the first season with General, Jack Benny's show continued to evolve into what would become the best in ensemble

comedy. After the initial show focused on "Frank Parker's Music Store," Don was more formally introduced the following week. For the joke writer's sake, Wilson claimed to be from Springfield, Minnesota. This introduced a running gag on towns named Springfield. After the first number by new bandleader Don Bestor, the plot moved to the maestro's house for a game of bridge. Throughout these shows, even though Jack had warned against it, the announcer continued to interrupt the script to herald General's "blowout tires."

One noteworthy program in the series came on August 3, 1934, when Jack and company were supposedly returning from California, where Jack had just finished appearing in *Transatlantic Merry-Go-Round*. Bestor took the announcer's job, because he really stayed in New York. Benny and Wilson acted as if they were running late on the eastbound train. The program is important, because cast members play differ-

ent roles and pretend to be part of the show's production, both of which emerge as Benny show trademarks. Another import Benny character appears for the first time in the guise of fellow train traveler, Irving C. Schlepperman (Sam Hearn). Although a classic radio show was evolving, the sponsorship would end eight weeks later.

After General Tire's 26 weeks, General Foods' Jell-O took over the Jack Benny show on October 14, 1934. Jack even shared a positive note from president William O'Neill on the last General Tire show, when he offered best wishes for Jack and his new sponsor. The change was relatively seamless, except that Jack would now move from NBC Red to NBC Blue, in Jack's words, to "the earliest I've ever been on." Although his show was three hours earlier than he had been on for General, he would own Sunday nights at 7:00 for the remainder of his tenure on radio.

Few programs from the first Jell-O season exist; however, the premiere, "The Jack Benny Grocery Store," is among them. Listening to these early shows can be quite a challenge, for, as daughter Joan Benny noted, the transcription disks were often played at home as one might play any other recording. Consequently, many are fragmented and badly scratched. Nonetheless, this particular program opens as it had during the previous season, with an orchestra number by Bestor (these shows contained far more music than did their successors). After Jack proudly greets the audience for the first time with his trademark "Jell-O again," and he talks a few moments with Wilson, Don is warned again about not interrupting the story with commercials. Mary then enters with a joke that Jack attempts to recycle on cast members but fails because they do not co-operate on the road to the punch line. Frank Parker and Don Bestor enter formally. At the first oppor-

tunity, on the cue "jealous," Don Wilson is reminded of Jell-O's six delicious flavors. Don had to be quick with his commercials, because they appear out of nowhere in the script. Jack's response to Don's insertion is "Same old trouble, thank heaven." After another band number, The Three Chicken sisters from New Orleans (a joke on The Three Boswells) "sing" a hillbilly number. A Parker solo precedes the skit of the evening. Another Bestor song, and then back to the skit. The bandleader assumes a part when he enters the "store," and then the announcer does the same as the Swedish-accented Olsen. Perhaps one noteworthy fluff of this initial offering of the Jell-O series comes at the very beginning, when the chorus heralds the now famous letters of the product. Unfortunately, one male in the group failed to pause on the hyphen and his "O" comes out ahead of the rest.

The following week continues with part two of the grocery store skit. Don chimes in on an Italian customer who identifies himself as "Angelo" and inserts the commercial, "And Jell-O..." At the end of the show *Radio Star* magazine editor Curtis Mitchell recognizes the cast (Jack, Mary, Don, Frank, and Don Bestor) and writer Harry Conn, while noting Jack's courage for persevering to keep his quality comedy on the air and gives the comedian the Radio Stars Award for Distinguished Service (first time for a comedy.) After all, comedy had not yet become a staple on network radio.

Orchestra leader Johnny Green and singer Kenny Baker joined the cast of the Jack Benny program during the second season for Jell-O. More importantly for all of the crew, the show began originating from California. Jack's move came about because he was being offered more and more motion picture roles. Transcontinental broadcasting had become a reality, and



***The Jack Benny Program* on the air (1940s)  
Jack, Mary, Phil, Dennis, Rochester, Don**

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Jack essentially set the pace for many more shows to move west. Again, copies of the program during this season come few and far between, but one show that exists in its entirety exemplifies the tenor of the day. The April 5, 1936 "Clown Hall Tonight" episode starts with a Green number and Don's reading of a letter from a satisfied Jell-O customer. Jack and Don swap thoughts about spring, before Mary comes in with one of her poems. Two songs precede the sketch that has Jack playing Fred Allen, Mary mimicking Portland Hoffa, and Don doing the announcing with a Jell-O slant. The earmarks of classic Jack Benny shows were starting to appear.

During the third year for Jell-O, another remarkable cast member joined the Benny show. Phil Harris was introduced on the first program of the 1936-37 season. Don opens by introducing an orchestra number, which he interrupts by asking the listeners to give "six delicious cheers" for the show that has returned for another season. Jack and Don continue with their usual opening talk, this time about summer. Jack then asks the audience to give Don a big hand, just before the announcer is referred to as "Fit as a bass fiddle." Don had been on Jack's summer replacement, *Tim and Irene*.

Phil is introduced, but his wild character would not yet emerge for a few weeks. Later, when Jack, Don, Phil, and Rochester traveled, they are often pictured together, whether coming off a train or attending a social event.

As the Benny Show gained momentum to become the number one program on the

radio dial, so did Don Wilson's fortunes. The *New York Telegram* monitored the best of the best in his class, and after running near the top of the list several times, the editors' poll picked Don as the number one announcer (along with Bill Stern in sports and Lowell Thomas in news) in 1939. The same year he was picked for that spot by *Radio Guide*. In 1940, 1941, and 1942, *Radio Guide* and *Motion Picture Daily* continued Don's string of achievements. And for years thereafter, Donald Harlow Wilson received numerous recognitions for his achievements in radio, and later television. Conversely, fluffs made by the celebrated announcer were played to the hilt by the star of the show. Two classic mistakes stand out as the epitome of a wonderful but tongue-tied announcer. Of course, Jack's quick wit made the most of them. The first that comes to mind is when Don attempted to adjust to the latest Lucky Strike catch phrase: "Be Happy – Go Lucky." Don uttered, "Be Lucky – Go Happy." Off script, Jack asked if that was what Don said, to which the announcer responded, "Yes, Jack, I said, 'Be Lucky – Go Happy.'" After the two realized what had happened, they enjoyed the moment by laughing at the juxtaposed words. As a result, the next

week heard Don away from opening the show, while he practiced the correct lines over and over.

On January 8, 1950, perhaps one of the most famous Benny moments and longest laughs happened as an even greater fluff stopped the show. What happened frequently in later Jack Benny programs was that Jack would make some inane comment, and Don, the show's character of at least token intellectualism, would correct his boss. On this particular show, Don validated his knowledge by saying, "I heard it on Dreer Pooson." (This reference was to the famed investigative reporter Drew Pearson.) The initial response by the audience and Jack was as expected: laughter at Don's expense, but the payoff came later in the show. Jack's constant nemesis, Frank Nelson, was about to enter as a doorman at a hotel. Jack asked, "Are you the doorman?" The script had been hastily revised by Jack's writers, and Nelson wheeled around as he usually did and delivered the line, "Who do you think I am, Dreer Pooson?" To which Jack completely lost it, slid down the microphone stand in uncontrollable laughter and crawled to one side of the stage and then back to the microphone be-

fore he returned to finish the show.

As for Don's character beating Jack in arguments, sometimes getting The Boss to admit that he was wrong had little to do with making the facts right. Two such examples emerge as classic Bennyisms, when Jack proclaimed to a navy audience that Stephen Decatur shouted, "Full speed ahead and damn (of course, Jack didn't say "damn" on the air) the torpedoes!" instead of Admiral David Farragut. Don had to prove Benny wrong, but not before the entire cast was queried as to the quote's origin. To settle the dispute, Mary eventually explained that Jack must be right, because he was the one who was there when it was said.

On another occasion, Don had to convince Jack on a Thanksgiving show that the pilgrims landed on Plymouth Rock, not Cape Cod. A lengthy debate ensued until the next week, when Jack admitted his mistake. Don accepted the apology, and Jack responded that his announcer had, in the words of Rudyard Kipling, "suffered the slings and arrows of outrageous fortune." Of course, Wilson countered that these were Shakespeare's words. Another feud ensued until Jack admitted that he was

wrong again. To make amends, he simply announced that there was only one thing left to do: call Don up and fire him.

Jack's affection for his cast members is evident in the way he showcased their talents. Don Wilson received many mentions about his speaking abilities, but several other



Don, Mary, Jack, Dennis





*The Jack Benny TV Program (1960s)*  
Don, Jack, Rochester

moments, too numerous to detail here, exemplify Jack's use of his announcer's on-air character as the focal point of the show. Special dates in Don's broadcasting career came when he celebrated his 16th and 17th anniversaries on radio in 1939 and 1940, as well as his numerous anniversary celebrations on the Benny show. Wilson's 25th became the subject of the story line on October 30, 1949. On January 10, 1954, Jack honored Don by presenting "The Don Wilson Story" to herald the announcer's 30th year in radio and 20th with Benny. In true Jack Benny fashion, the tribute was lovingly fraught with weight jokes, food jokes, and problems with getting sponsors' messages across. Bob Crosby (and Dennis Day in an old man's voice) and Bea Benadaret played Don's doting parents, but before all of the regulars could take parts in Don's life, the show ended with Jack objecting to Don's taking credit for bringing the show up after it had been down.

Two particular sets of shows underline

the cheap character of boss Benny, when Don becomes the target of Jack's thrifty ways. The first came as a series in early 1949, when Jack was negotiating Don's contract. Locked up and without food, Don suffers for three weeks, as other cast members plead with Jack to relent and free Wilson. Of even longer lasting impact on plotlines were the annual Christmas shopping trips. The intention was to get Don just the right present but at a deflated price. Poor Mel Blanc suffered over the years as the sales clerk who had to endure Jack's stinginess, as the miserly customer had to choose between shoelaces, wallets, cufflinks, a gopher trap, and paints for Don. Although many listeners believed Jack Benny to be a cheapskate because of his radio and television

character, years after Don left the Benny show, he could not dispel Jack's on-air frugality enough. The announcer was quick to mention how generous Jack was to all of his employees. He added that, when the boss changed networks in 1949, he made sure that all of the cast members could make the move.

As for commercial hallmarks, certainly Don and the Sportsmen quartet ranks with the best of the ongoing gags on the Benny show. A real quartet before their network radio fame, the four came on board to revolutionize the singing commercial. Usually, singers praised the product and the star of the show praised them. When Don introduced the Sportsmen, they often exasperated the boss, while delighting the audience with their novel lyrics. As part of the plot line, Jack encouraged them at first, eventually fired them, and then rehired the group.

They were so successful at selling Lucky Strikes that they moved over to television

and delighted the studio and home audiences with singing and dancing in commercials, like the "Digga, Digga Do" number in a 1953 cannibal skit.

When television arrived, *The Jack Benny Program* moved lock, stock and barrel to the new medium in 1950. The early TV shows emulated the radio program very closely, especially because they ran concurrently until 1955.

On TV, Don stood by Jack's side in front of the curtain as he had done since 1934. Additionally, this is also where Don's acting abilities became more evident. The announcer's character became a close confidant of Jack's in many stories, probably because Mary appeared less and less. He frequently came by the fictional Benny home to help move the plot along. When Humphrey Bogart guest starred in 1953, Don and Bob Crosby played policemen under "Detective" Benny.

Eventually, the show became more like the filmed situation comedies of the later 1950s. Don even obtained a rotund television son, appropriately named Harlow. (In reality, Don was married four times. He married his last wife, radio actress Lois Corbett, in 1950. Numerous times, she played his spouse on both the radio and television shows.) Whether the announcer was in front of the act curtain or on the set, he and Jack appeared much like the rotund Oliver Hardy and smaller Stan Laurel. And, as Don graced the set with his infectious laugh and good-natured personality, he set the pattern for announcer-sidekicks to come, the most popular of whom was Ed McMahon to Johnny Carson.

With Jack Benny's help, Don Wilson broke the mold of the very proper network staff announcer and perfected the integrated commercial. Others tried to emulate the Benny show, but few even came close. Over the years Don would sing (for example, "When It Comes To Love, You

Catch Me Quick" with Jack, Mary, and Phil on January 3, 1940), become the focus of the show (the aforementioned series and programs like "Don's Commercial" and "Don's Play" in April 1942), offer the voice of reason and intellectualism when nuttiness and illogic usually ruled, and blend into the nonsense of the day while expertly increasing the sales of a gelatin dessert, a breakfast cereal (Grape Nuts and Grape Nut Flakes from 1942-1944), and cigarettes.

Don Wilson kept busy after the Benny years, even hosting his own show on television and radio from his home in Palm Springs, California. One of his pet projects came when he, Dennis Day, Gordon MacRae, Harry James, and others toured in "The Big Broadcast of 1944" revue in the 1970s. After his death as a result of a stroke at age 81, his ashes were spread over the desert near his beloved Palm Springs.

When old time radio listeners recall popular shows, the Jack Benny program ranks high on the list of favorites. Because Don was the announcer for the longest time, it is hard to imagine this great comedy without the immortal opening proclamation: "The Jello-O (or Lucky Strike) program starring Jack Benny, with Mary Livingstone, Dennis Day, Phil Harris, Rochester, and yours truly, Don Wilson." Once these words begin, the listener can sit back and relax with the knowledge that he or she will be entertained at the highest level from this opening phrase until the final notes.

And, in addition to great comedy, the commercials as delivered by Don Wilson entertain as much as the rest of the show. ■

*NOTE-- Don Wilson may be heard on almost every Jack Benny broadcast scheduled for Those Were The Days during February 2004, the 25th anniversary of Jack Benny Month. See pages 34-35 for details.*