

Introduction

Jack Benny's most famous radio gag was first performed on March 28, 1948:

Jack is walking down a neighborhood street at night. We hear him softly humming and his shoes contentedly tapping down the sidewalk. (He's carrying Ronald Colman's Oscar statuette, which he has borrowed to take home to show to Rochester, but that's another story. . . .)

Suddenly, a menacing male voice leaps out of the quiet, growling at Jack, "Hey buddy . . . this is a stick up! . . . Your money . . . or your life!"

Silence. All we hear is seconds of silence . . . and the nervous tittering of the studio audience. Silence, or "dead air" was a risky proposition in commercial network radio broadcasting. It may have given listeners the impression that someone was thinking, but it often left listeners falling into a void of ether nothingness and loosened the grip of the advertisers over their attention.

Breaking into the tense stillness, the robber repeats his demand, "Didn't you hear me?! I said . . . Your money . . . or . . . your life!"

Again the silence, stretching, stretching, but this time accompanied by the growing laughter of the studio audience, chortling at the absurdity of Benny's continuing delay, each second compounding the hilarious suspense. . . .

"I'm thinking it over!" Benny finally cries.

The studio audience exploded into roars of laughter, releasing a pent-up emotional response of relief and disbelief that swept across the auditorium. Their reaction was shared by millions of radio listeners in homes across the nation. Their beloved, fallible "Fall Guy" had faced a dire situation and responded in a hilarious, typically self-centered way. But this wasn't simply a joke, and not quite a full comic routine; it was an exchange distilling an essential aspect of a continuing character, a moment that drew on more than fifteen years of

writers' and performer labor as well as fifteen years of audience familiarity with Jack's infamously parsimonious character.

The "Your Money or Your Life" gag, so long in the making, was subsequently replayed by critics, fans and Benny himself for the rest of his radio and television career, and since then in every article discussing his lasting legacy in American entertainment. The genius of Jack Benny's humor is that it rarely stemmed from jokes with standard set ups and punch lines. It stemmed from character, embedded in a narrative, in countless stories of a foolish man's humiliation, enriched by the actors' voices, tone, and timing, with radio comedy's richness captivating the ears and imaginations of its listeners.

. . .

Radio was the most powerful and pervasive mass medium in United States from the late 1920s to the early 1950s, as its simple and inexpensive technological reach and its intense consolidation through commercial networks (NBC Red and Blue, CBS, Mutual) amplified the live messages of its most prominent speakers broadcast to an audience of unprecedented size. Thirty million or more Americans, gathered in small groups around receiving sets in their living rooms, stores, workplaces, and cars, simultaneously became a national audience. The charismatic political leaders, demagogues, crooners, and comics heard over the radio in this era had a tremendous impact on popular culture. Comedians were network radio's most popular performers, and Jack Benny was the most successful of them all. His voice was as familiar to listeners as President Franklin Roosevelt's. Jack Benny, in twenty-three years of weekly radio broadcasts, indelibly shaped American humor, and became one of the most influential entertainers of the twentieth century.

Born on Valentine's Day, February 14, 1894, in Chicago, Benjamin Kubelsky was the eldest child of Eastern European Jewish immigrant Meyer Kubelsky and his wife Sara. Benny Kubelsky was raised in the gritty northern Illinois manufacturing town of Waukegan, where Meyer was a moderately successful saloon operator and then haberdasher. Benny and his younger sister Florence had comfortable childhoods, merging their small Jewish community with a diverse array of assimilated and ethnic cousins and schoolmates. He wanted to title his autobiography "I Always Had Shoes."¹ From an early age, his parents hoped he would become a renowned concert violinist; Benny Kubelsky was a reluctant student of either textbooks or rigorous music

lessons, however, and by age sixteen he abandoned school and took a job playing fiddle in the pit orchestra of Waukegan's Barrison Theater. Eventually he formed a duet with a local matronly pianist Cora Salisbury and started touring small-time Midwestern vaudeville, then partnered with young piano player Lyman Woods. World War I intervened, and Benny Kubelsky was drafted into the Navy. At the Great Lakes Training Center he took the comic stage role of a disorderly orderly in a camp production, and he found he enjoyed making people laugh. In the 1920s, he embarked on a vaudeville career, playing the violin much less and joking more often. Kubelsky encountered difficulty with his stage name, as his real name sounded too much like famous violinist Jan Kubelik. So he tried the moniker "Ben K. Benny," but the more well-known violinist-comic-bandleader Ben Bernie objected. Thus Benny Kubelsky styled himself "Jack Benny."²

As we will learn in subsequent chapters, Jack Benny became a moderately successful vaudeville solo comic performer in the 1920s, developing a style of breezy, informal, urban, but assimilated Anglo-type humor that drew from the suave "master of ceremonies" role model of star Frank Fay—but with self-deprecating tones that were all his own. In 1927 he married Sadye Marks, a twenty-one-year-old nonperformer he had met through the wife of a friend also playing the western vaudeville circuit. Soon Sadye was taking the occasional role of the flighty young flapper with whom Jack bantered in his stage routines. Benny appeared at the famed Palace Theater in New York, as the master of ceremonies in MGM's first talkie film *The Hollywood Revue of 1929*, and on Broadway in the risqué show Earl Carroll's *Vanities*. In the crunch of the Depression in 1932, with vaudeville and Broadway revues fading and film roles unsatisfactory, Jack Benny decided to try his hand at radio comedy.

Jack Benny's radio show, as it developed over the years on the air between 1932 and 1955, commercially sponsored most famously by Jell-O gelatin mix and Lucky Strike cigarettes, was a half-hour weekly comedy variety program that featured a group of quirky comic characters, led by Jack, who put on a radio program. Jack engaged in repartee around the microphones with the bandleader, singer, and announcer, and with chief-heckler/companion Mary Livingstone (Sadye Marks, who soon adopted this professional name as her own). The cast eventually coalesced around key regulars—announcer Don Wilson who joined in 1934, bandleader Phil Harris (1936), and singers Kenny Baker (1937) and Dennis Day (1939). When not fulfilling their purported duties, they joined Jack in studio adventures (enacting movie parodies and murder mysteries and kidding the sponsor's product). Other times their



When a business man competes with himself

In a way, the sponsor of a radio program is competing with himself.

For he is presenting entertainment which is in direct competition with his commercial message for the listener's attention and interest.

In Young & Rubicam shows, we have endeavored to solve this problem by making the commercial as interesting as the entertainment.

How successful we have been may be judged

from the fact that Young & Rubicam commercials frequently win from studio audiences applause as great as the applause for the entertainment itself.

This, we think you will agree, is an achievement. But even more important to our clients is the fact that these same commercials have helped achieve some of the most spectacular and sustained sales increases in advertising history.

Young & Rubicam, Inc., ADVERTISING

NEW YORK • CHICAGO • DETROIT • SAN FRANCISCO • HOLLYWOOD • MONTREAL • TORONTO

101

FIGURE 1. The ad agency for Jack Benny's program during the Jell-O years, Young & Rubicam, touted to business leaders in ads like this the show's outstanding ability to integrate commercials with comedy, winning both high ratings and increased product sales. Benny and cast members Mary Livingstone, Phil Harris, Dennis Day, Eddie Anderson, and Don Wilson are shown in mid-broadcast. *Fortune*, April 1939. Author's collection.

adventures occurred at Benny's house (staffed beginning in 1938 by Eddie Anderson portraying Rochester, Jack's impertinent valet) or out on the streets of Hollywood. The show's narrative world in the post-World War II years included additions such as infuriating department store floorwalker Mr. Nelson, hapless violin teacher Professor Le Blanc, long-suffering movie star neighbors Ronald and Benita Colman, the race track tout, Benny's underground money vault, and Jack's ancient, wheezing Maxwell jalopy.

The centerpiece of the comedy was vain, miserly "Fall Guy" Jack, whom his cast and his world constantly conspired to insult and frustrate. Jack Benny's radio character suffered all the indignities of the powerless patriarch in modern society—fractious workplace family, battles with obnoxious sales clerks, guff from his butler, and the withering disrespect of his sponsor, every woman he met, and Hollywood society. As the years rolled by, Jack's ever-more-absurd schemes to avoid spending money collapsed like his dignity, week after week, as his inflated ego was punctured by fate, abetted by his unruly radio cast.

Jack Benny was a comic genius, an absolute master of comic timing, an innovative creator, a dedicated craftsman, and a meticulous program producer. A canny entrepreneur, Benny became one of the pioneering "showrunner" producer/writer/performers in broadcasting history. His modern style of radio humor did much to spawn a wide variety of comedy formats and genres popular today. In vaudeville, he helped pioneer a kind of standup comedy that did not rely on props, costumes, gags, or circus-like physical slapstick. In radio, Benny and his writers pioneered the character-focused situation comedy, the genre that's remained at the heart of television's broadcast schedule. His informal monologues and easy repartee with comic assistant "stooges" were direct ancestors of the late night television talk show.

Benny skillfully leveraged vaudeville and broadcasting stardom across media forms into film and advertising prominence, and he innovated the "intermedia" integration of those rival industries into his radio show. He overcame difficult challenges thrown up by his sponsors to gain greater creative control of his program. His humorous commercials sardonically skewered American cultural foibles, slyly broke down listeners' reluctance to purchase his sponsors' products, and made his audiences actually enjoy listening to the advertising.

Benny and his writers utilized what radio historian Susan Douglas calls "linguistic slapstick," incorporating layers of aural humor into the program to engage listeners' imaginations.³ The Benny show created a narrative space of

disordered gender roles, a world turned upside down where sharp-tongued women brashly wounded the inflated egos of middle-class men like Benny who were “unmanly,” cuckolded by their murderous wives in satirical sketches, disdained by Hollywood movie stars, and sneered at by supercilious department store clerks. Family audiences on Sunday evenings found that radio’s invisibility, the laughter shared with studio audiences, and the familiar characters of the sitcom format made even Benny’s most envelope-edge-pushing situations of gender blurring, racial integration, or racial stereotyping more acceptable fare when they might otherwise have been too controversial to depict visually. The socially conscious humor of Benny’s radio program intrinsically drew on what radio historian Michele Hilmes terms the “disruptions caused by a disembodied medium in an insistent embodied (raced, classed, gendered) world.”⁴

A caveat: Jack Benny, his writers, and the cast created their humor more than half a century ago, a time when cultural norms accepted vast amounts of racism, sexism, homophobia, and xenophobia. Benny’s radio humor was a product of its time and place and will be subject to critical examination throughout this study. But at the same time, Benny and his writers, despite all their failings and omissions, could also sometimes show a flexible acceptance of social and cultural difference, creating a space to disrupt these widely held attitudes toward race and gender, taking the side of the marginalized against traditional patriarchal culture.

Jack Benny guided his radio program through challenges and successes throughout the 1930s, through wartime malaise and postwar triumph of rejuvenated appeal. In this time he also appeared in a number of films and in 1940 was an unexpected box office star when teamed with his radio comic foil, Eddie Anderson. Benny also weathered the personal crisis of a widely publicized scandal over supposed jewelry smuggling that could have ended his career. During wartime, Benny embarked on summer adventures with USO tours to military camps near the front lines in Africa, Europe, and in the Pacific. But soon after revitalizing his radio show in 1946, television loomed on the horizon, and Benny struggled with sponsors, the limits of the new media, and exacting newspaper critics, in the process of adapting his aural humor to the visual, which he finally began in October 1950. Benny remained the top comedian in radio through 1955, by which time network audiences had completely dwindled. Well established in television by that point, Jack Benny continued his highly rated TV comedy show for a total of fifteen years, until it was cancelled in 1965. Benny spent his seventh decade

busy with regular television specials, frequent performances in Las Vegas and Lake Tahoe, and with giving scores of charity symphony concerts to benefit musical organizations around the nation. Benny worked right up until his death from pancreatic cancer on December 25, 1974, and TV specials and newspaper headlines mourned the loss of a national treasure.

This is not meant to be a full biography of Jack Benny, but rather a multifaceted examination of his radio career, his greatest achievement. I use close analysis of the entertainment industry trade press, primary research sources, and original scripts and program broadcasts to explore the impacts of performer, media industry, texts, and audiences on each other, which created the cultural meaning of Benny's radio program for midcentury America. It persists as classic comedy to entertain us today. I hope that this book encourages you to listen to the wealth of available Benny radio recordings. To that end, I have created a companion website (www.jackbennyradio.com) containing audio clips, original scripts, memorabilia, and further information on internet sources that explore Benny's humor. Jack Benny's radio comedy remains fresh today; its light-hearted, self-reflexive impertinence and sense of camaraderie invites us all to become part of Benny's gang.

CONSTRUCTING COMEDY ON THE RADIO

As were Jack Benny's earliest Canada Dry radio performances in May 1932, comedy over the airwaves could be produced as if it was just vaudeville with the lights turned off. Removing the physical comedy and visual cues to the audience, however, created major challenges for performers steeped in theatrical traditions, like Ed Wynn and Eddie Cantor, who had been dependent on creating reactions with their outlandish costumes and punching up their jokes with mugging and facial expressions, body movements, use of props, pratfalls, and other kinds of physical shtick.⁵

The radio comedian's primary tool was his voice. "Rough or smooth, high or low, a good radio voice must have personality, with all the intangibles and seeming contradictions the word implies," *New York Times* radio critic John Hutchens once commented. "At its best, it is really distinctive to the point where you would recognize it if you had not heard it for months or even years."⁶ The comic's voice needed to be clear and understandable as it passed through technologically limited microphones, out into the ether, and back in through tinny radio speakers, and to be heard over the static or reception