

JACK BENNY

Planes, Trains and Automobiles

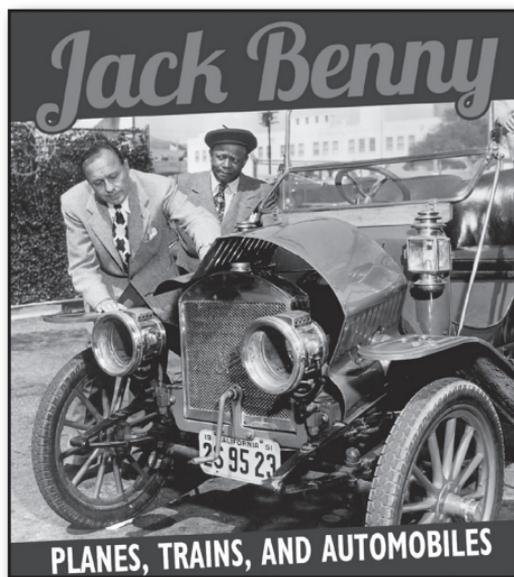
Program Guide by Elizabeth McLeod

Jack Benny was radio's man on the move -- always heading out somewhere. If he was in Hollywood, he was planning to visit New York. When he was in New York, he was on the way to Hollywood (with plenty of stops along the way). Whether by train or by plane, on the sea or on the road, Jack managed to wring plenty of comedy out of the prosaic business of transportation -- and he did so in his own inimitable style.

That style grew out of Jack's peerless radio persona, without question the most clearly and specifically defined of any comic on the air. It was a persona honed and refined through a careful process of character construction over the span of his radio career. When it reached the height of its development, it allowed

Jack Benny the rare privilege of being able to secure laughs without actually *doing* anything -- it was sufficient merely for him to *be* the "Jack Benny" character in a given situation in order for the gags to work. It was the most reflexive comic characterization ever developed, and Jack and his writers exulted in finding new ways to creatively exploit that persona.

The building blocks of that persona fell into place during Jack's early days as a stage entertainer, when he moved



from a straight musical act into a mixture of music and monologue. Playing camp shows during the First World War, he discovered that he earned a greater audience reaction by portraying himself as a comically poor violinist than he did when displaying his actual talent on the instrument. This proved to be the key to his developing style as a performer. After the war, he made a study of comedian Frank Fay (below), who had become the most famous master-of-ceremonies ever to appear in vaudeville. How had Fay done it? By intentionally personifying all of the traits that audiences had come to hate about emcees...and then amplifying them to the point of parody. While Jack avoided the more repellent aspects of Fay's stage persona -- especially his taste for mercilessly cruel insult comedy -- he found that Fay's conceit and overweening vanity could be adapted for his own use. Evidence of the Fay influence on Jack's emerging comic style can be seen in early Benny film appearances, but the full emergence of the Benny persona awaited radio.

Jack entered radio in 1932, carrying over his suave-yet-conceited master-of-ceremonies self from his stage act. In the very first broadcast of his own series, a minor joke at the expense of bandleader George Olsen pointed towards things to come. During that broadcast, Jack directed a few "stingy" jokes in the direction of the musician -- one of them revolving around Olsen's supposed ownership of an elderly Saxon automobile. It was just a simple drop-in gag that wasn't followed up, but the idea of a "cheap" characterization had promise -- not for Olsen, but for Jack himself. Gradually, over the course of the mid-1930s, Jack acquired a reputation for being a tightwad. As this aspect of his characterization developed, the comedian and his writers looked around for ways to point it up.



Frank Fay



Jack Benny

In 1937, they began developing the idea that Jack Benny was so stingy that he -- like George Olsen five years before -- would drive an old, discontinued car. But it wasn't a Saxon -- when the joke was switched around to fit Jack, the vehicle became a Maxwell. Not a Moon, or a Kissel, or a Marmon. A Maxwell.

Before Benny, the Maxwell was never considered an intrinsically funny car -- the make had been one of the most popular in the United States in the 1910s. Even though the brand had disappeared when the Maxwell company became the nucleus of the

Chrysler Corporation, it had only been twelve years since the last Maxwell was built. There were still a few left on the road in 1937 -- not pampered antiques, but dowdy old beaters -- the sort of car your middle-aged maiden aunt might drive. To own a Maxwell in 1937 was like owning a Saturn in 2017. You were passé, a moldy prune, a back number, and not at all hep to the jive. A Maxwell was thus a perfectly fitting choice for a vehicle owned by a character who was in no way as impressive as he liked to think he was (and a bit of a tightwad besides). Of *course* Jack Benny would own a Maxwell...and would fiercely resist any suggestion that there was anything wrong with such a car.



Jack Benny, Eddie "Rochester" Anderson, and comedienne Eve Arden are seen here with the infamous Maxwell.

The Maxwell gag caught on strong with Benny listeners in 1937 -- and the operation and maintenance of this sorry vehicle provided plenty of work for a new addition to the "Benny Gang" that year. Eddie Anderson's put-upon "Rochester," grumbled and fussed behind the wheel as Jack sat imperiously in the back seat. In 1940, the Maxwell made it to the big screen when Jack's picture *Buck Benny Rides Again* featured a tired-looking 1923 Maxwell as the star's choice of transportation. And although Jack posed throughout his career in fancier Maxwells, it was this dingy, shopworn specimen that was most often associated with him. In 1942, Jack even "donated his Maxwell" to a wartime scrap-collection publicity campaign. But the gag was too good to kill, and the Maxwell escaped the junk heap. In 1947, the vehicle acquired its signature sputtering, puttering sound effect -- courtesy of a sputtering, puttering Mel Blanc, who took on the role after a sound-effects record failed to function on cue.

The Maxwell was Jack's favorite form of local transportation, but when he had a long haul ahead, he favored the railroads. Train travel was in its Golden Age in the 1930s and 1940s, with sleek, streamlined Pullman sleepers offering comfortable accommodations for coast-to-coast passengers. In every town and city across the nation, the local railroad station was a bustling hub of activity. Jack and his gang had plenty of experience making that cross-country run, and something always seemed to happen when they took to the rails. In the spring of 1937, a chance encounter with a witty and self-aware railroad station redcap brought Rochester into the Benny orbit. By year's end, he'd become a series regular, beginning an association with Jack that would span the better part of forty years.

It was after the war when Jack's trips down to the depot took on a surreal edge. In January of 1945, Benny and the gang headed out on yet another trip East, but when they arrived at the station odd things began to happen. Jack encountered an inscrutable, vaguely sinister figure who would have been more at home at a racetrack than a railroad station...and who tried to convince him to take the El Capitan instead of the Santa Fe Chief. Originally portrayed by dialectician Benny Rubin, this "Tout" character appeared again and again over the rest of the program's run, always offering Jack unwanted advice on whatever choice was at hand. When Sheldon Leonard (below) took over the role, the "Tout" took on even greater prominence.

Another important debut on that 1945 broadcast was a throwaway bit that became one of the program's greatest running gags. The vocal talents of Mel Blanc (below) would once again be brought to bear -- this time as an officious track announcer. Using one of those slightly abrasive, nasal voices that he did so well, he'd bark into the public address system, "Train leaving on track five for ANAHEIM -- AZUSA -- AND CUC-AMONGA!" The announcement was in part just a bit of atmosphere, designed to create the impression of a busy terminal. But it was also an inside joke for Benny fans listening in Southern California, who knew that the area's geographic layout meant those three towns couldn't possibly be located along the same line.



Sheldon Leonard



Mel Blanc

But it was that distinct pause between "Cuc" and "amonga" that caught the attention of the general audience. Of course, railroad announcers were expected (and required) to dist-inct-ly e-nun-ci-ate their syllables to ensure that the announcements penetrated the general background noise of the depot. But Blanc exaggerated the words just enough to be ridiculous. And for whatever reason, listeners (and Benny himself) thought it was funny. From then on, whenever Jack and company found themselves in a railroad station, that same announcement was bound to crackle over the loudspeakers -- and every time Blanc delivered the line, he stretched the pause between "Cuc" and "amonga" just a little bit longer.

Cucamonga, California, or more formally Rancho Cucamonga, was a sleepy suburb about thirty miles east of Los Angeles. It was known to Californians for its vineyards and citrus groves...and not known at all to just about anyone else. But the repeated invocation of its name by Mel Blanc on one of the nation's most popular comedy programs made the community a household name from coast to coast. To this day, a statue of Jack stands in the lobby of a Cucamonga community theatre as a tribute to that bit of publicity.

Air travel became an important component of American life during Jack's years on radio. He didn't travel by plane quite as often as he did by car or by train, but he did have his occasional brushes with aviation. Benny's trips to the airport in his program's later years were strongly influenced by his railroad station experiences -- suggesting that he somehow carried his own bubble of surrealism with him wherever he went. Jack also, as you might expect, turned out to be a rather nervous air passenger, and seemed always able to find some way to annoy the pilot during the flight. It was only in the occasional aviation-themed sketch where Jack could confidently stride forth as a courageous hero of the skies.

As a naval veteran, you'd expect Jack to spend a lot of time on the high seas, but most of his nautical adventures took place in his imagination. Whenever an ocean-going comedy sketch appeared in the script, you knew to expect the appearance of a bold Captain Benny. But in the backstage-set situation comedy episodes, you'd be more likely to find Jack getting seasick over the side than to see him cleaving forth at the bow.

All of these routines from Jack's radio show carried over into his days on television. The Maxwell, looking much the same as it had in the movies, appeared often during the run of Jack's weekly TV show. And even after that series ended, it remained a memorable enough prop to figure into a hilarious advertising campaign for Texaco in which Jack was urged to try buying more than one gallon of gasoline at a time. "Fill it up, Jack!" cried the ads, as the Maxwell pattered cheerfully up to the pumps. Anyone who watched television in the late sixties and early seventies remembers these spots -- especially the one in which Dennis Day, fresh-faced as ever, popped up as the uniformed Texaco attendant. Likewise, "Anaheim, Azusa, and Cuc-amonga" remained a familiar enough reference to promote knowing laughs on Jack's latter-day TV specials.

Fill it up, Jack.

Here we have an advanced Texaco Sky Chief that keeps harmful deposits from building upon engine valves—better than any other leading gasoline. Yet one man saving millions of motorists insists on buying only one gallon at a time. So we've out to get him to fill up. Had it not going to be easy.

After all, you don't get a man like Jack Benny to change the habits of a lifetime overnight. If you see Jack Benny please tell him to go to the nearest Texaco station and fill up with Sky Chief—the gasoline that can drive down the cost of driving and save you money. It's one man's aim and more people love their car to the man who wears the Texaco star.

Here are Jack Benny's reasons for buying only 1 gallon.

Now you know what we're up against. **TEXACO**

It found its way into plenty of Warner Brothers cartoons as well, leading kiddie-show and Saturday-morning habitués right into the 1990s with memories of the reference (even if they never quite understood exactly why it was funny, or what it was supposed to mean).

Perhaps another comic could have gotten long-lasting laughs with such material, but it's doubtful. So much of what made *The Jack Benny Program* funny depended on the Benny persona itself. It's hard to imagine, for example, Red Skelton getting big yuks decade after decade from driving an Essex...or Bob Hope boarding a train to, perhaps, "Pasadena, El Segundo, and San Ber---nadino." That was the real magic of the program, and that was Jack Benny's greatest gift as a performer. No matter where he was going or how he got there, Jack lived at the very epicenter of a world of self-referential comedy that no other performer could ever match.

**General Foods Corporation
and
The American Tobacco Company
present
JACK BENNY
with**

**Mary Livingstone, Phil Harris, Eddie "Rochester" Anderson, Dennis Day,
and Don Wilson**

**Written by
Bill Morrow & Ed Beloin
John Tackaberry, George Balzer, Sam Perrin, and Milt Josefsberg**

**Music conducted by
Mahlon Merrick**

**Produced by
Hilliard Marks**



Eddie "Rochester" Anderson and Jack Benny

**CD 1A: Jack Tries to Trade in the Maxwell -
10/20/40**

Is it time for a new car? Jack's got his eye on a Packard.

CD 1B: Returning to Hollywood - 10/19/41

Jack and the gang board a train back home after a sojourn in New York.

CD 2A: Dive Bomber - 10/26/41

Jack takes on the role of a daredevil Navy aviator in this week's sketch.

CD 2B: Jack Rounds Up the Gang in the Maxwell - 10/04/42

Jack picks up the cast for the first show of the new Grape Nuts series.

CD 3A: Liberty Ship - 12/06/42

Jack and the gang take to the high seas!

CD 3B: The Sixty-Four Dollar Question - 01/10/43

Jack's on a mission to New York...to collect some money from Phil Baker!

CD 4A: Parachute Jump - 05/23/43

While at Gardner Field in Taft, California, Jack is inspired to become a paratrooper.

CD 4B: Infantry - 05/14/44

On a visit to Camp Adair (near Corvallis, Oregon) Jack and the gang hit the road the hard way...taking a twenty mile hike with the infantry!

CD 5A: Leaving for Chicago on the Train - 05/05/46

Jack and company board the train for trips to Chicago and New York...after a visit to the vault, of course.

CD 5B: To the Train Station for Chicago - 05/04/47

Once again, Jack prepares to ride the rails to the Windy City.

CD 6A: Easter Parade - 04/17/49

Mary and Jack take a stroll down Wilshire Blvd. for the Beverly Hills Easter Parade.

CD 6B: Jack Returns on the Train to Los Angeles and Plays Cards - 02/19/50

Jack and Mary play a little Gin Rummy to pass the time while riding home on the Super Chief.



Mary Livingstone, Jack Benny, Phil Harris,
Don Wilson, and Eddie "Rochester"
Anderson aboard a train in 1944.

CD 7A: Jack Tries to Buy a Car - 02/24/52

Will Jack finally replace his old Maxwell with a new automobile?

CD 7B: Off to New York City - 03/01/53

The gang heads to the railroad station for a trip to the Big Apple, where Jack is scheduled to appear at a dinner for Bob Hope.

CD 8A: I Flew to Mars - 05/17/53

Jack goes to the library and immerses himself in a science fiction adventure story.

CD 8B: A Friend at Union Station - 05/15/55

Jack and the gang go to Union Station to meet old pal Stub Wilbur.

Elizabeth McLeod is a journalist, author, and broadcast historian. She received the 2005 Ray Stanich Award for excellence in broadcasting history research from the Friends Of Old Time Radio.

If you enjoyed this CD set, we recommend *Jack Benny: Tough Luck!*, available now at www.RadioSpirits.com.



Radio  **Spirits**®

www.RadioSpirits.com
PO Box 1315, Little Falls, NJ 07424

Audio programs ©©2017 Trust “C” under Will of Jack Benny, under license from Trust “C” under Will of Jack Benny. All Rights Reserved.
Manufactured under exclusive license by Radio Spirits.

Program Guide © 2017 Elizabeth McLeod and RSPT LLC.
All Rights Reserved.