

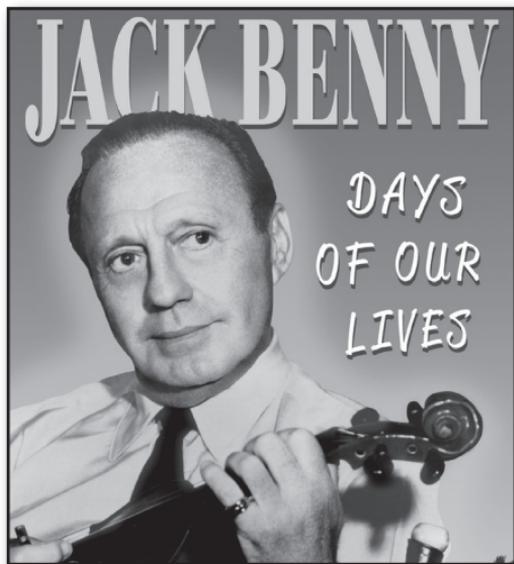
THE JACK BENNY PROGRAM

Days of Our Lives

Program Guide by Ivan G. Shreve, Jr.

For confectionery manufacturers, and florists, Valentine's Day is truly a most anticipated event. Since nothing says "I love you" more than a box of candy or a bouquet of flowers, the aforementioned merchants are positively giddy at the thought of that annual financial windfall as cash registers dutifully ring up purchases during the "celebration of love." However, February 14th enjoys an entirely different affiliation for old-time radio fans. It was on that date in 1894 that Meyer and Emma Kubelsky welcomed their son Benjamin into the world. Benjamin would later change his name to "Jack Benny" and become one of America's most beloved comedians.

For nearly thirty years, Jack Benny was a Sunday night institution—first on radio, and then TV. He's revered as one of the greatest radio comedians of all time (many might fervently argue he was *the* greatest). He made his debut over the ether with a March 19, 1932 appearance on newspaper columnist Ed Sullivan's program.



("Ladies and gentlemen, this is Jack Benny talking. There will be a slight pause while you say, 'Who cares?") Listeners could sense, right from this moment, that they were being introduced to a performer with a fresh perspective on comedy. Benny's success did not happen overnight, however. His first series for Canada Dry (which premiered on May 2, 1932) was initially quite similar to other such shows on the air at that time -- strains of familiar vaudeville jokes separated by musical selections.

Jack's hiring of writer Harry Cohn was the first step toward transitioning the series into what his "nemesis" Fred Allen would later describe as "a *One Man's Family* in slapstick." The custom at the time was for a comedian to employ "stooges" to play the straight men. This allowed the star to get big laughs by ridiculing the supporting players. Cohn (and later Bill Morrow and Ed Beloin) tinkered with the formula by making *Benny* the straight man, allowing him to earn even *bigger* laughs as the stooges made him the butt of the jokes. Though his supporting cast changed over the years, the core members of Benny's "gang" included gal Friday Mary Livingstone (his real-life wife), announcer Don Wilson, bandleader Phil Harris, chief-cook-and-bottle-washer Eddie "Rochester" Anderson, and tenor vocalist Dennis Day. This character-based approach to the comedy kept it fresh.

There would be no shortage of human foibles for Jack's gang to lampoon during each memorable broadcast. He embodied such unattractive attributes as vanity, avarice, cowardice, and more. For many fans, it was hard to determine where the fictional Benny stopped and the real man began. Some might be surprised to learn that, contrary to his tight-fisted character, Jack Benny was considered one of the most financially generous entertainers in show business.

In spite of the personal failings of his on-air persona, listeners were encouraged to see the comedian as an "Everyman." Indeed, it was easy to sympathize with him whenever he encountered a clerk or salesman (usually played by Frank Nelson) who seemed to revel in making his life miserable. With a forlorn expression and four fingers placed softly to his cheek, Jack made audiences forget that he was the same man who short changed his employees and became enraged at the pettiest of disturbances.

During the 1945-46 season of the show, Jack's writers decided to capitalize on the Benny character's general unpleasantness to boost the show's listenership. (While still popular, Benny often found himself neck-and-neck with Bob Hope.) They launched the "I Can't Stand Jack Benny Because" contest, enlisting Peter Lorre, Goodman Ace, and Fred Allen as judges. The prizes totaled \$10,000 in Victory bonds (with \$2,500 set aside for the winner). The champion of that competition, Carroll P. Craig, Sr., perfectly summed up the nature of the comedian's churlishness and charm:

*He fills the air with boasts and brags
And obsolete obnoxious gags
The way he plays his violin
Is music's most obnoxious sin*

*His cowardice alone, indeed,
Is matched by his obnoxious greed
In all the things that he portrays
He shows up my own obnoxious ways*

During the Golden Age of Radio, it was not unusual for the top comedy shows to broadcast 39 episodes a season, only taking a 13-week break in the summer. Therefore, Jack Benny would regularly have to do a show on (or near) his natal anniversary. His writers used this as an opportunity to create hilarious hijinks for that week's broadcast. One of the most memorable of the "birthday celebrations" was originally heard on February 13, 1949 (and is included in this collection).

It's a special birth anniversary for Jack, as he's *finally* supposed to be turning the big 4-0 the following day. He seems surprisingly at peace for a man who's about to discover that "life begins at forty" until he receives a telegram from his sister Florence informing him that he's *still* only 39! Jack then phones home to speak with Rochester:

JACK: I don't know what to do...I thought tomorrow was going to be my 40th birthday...but I just got a wire from my sister and she says I'm going to be 39...

ROCHESTER: Well, don't argue with her, Boss—grab it!

JACK: Rochester, I've got to be honest with myself—now I want you to look at my birth certificate and tell me the date on it...

ROCHESTER: Your birth certificate?

JACK: Yeah...do you know where it is?

ROCHESTER: It's right here on the desk...

JACK: What's my birth certificate doing on the desk?

ROCHESTER: You got it out the other day when you applied for your old age pension!

JACK: Oh, I just did that for a gag...

ROCHESTER: Well, they must be laughing—your first check came today!

Asked what appears in the "date of birth" space on the certificate, Rochester asserts: "A hole...we *erased* once too often." And through this loophole, Jack is allowed to maintain the fiction that he's 39.

Another memorable "birthday broadcast" was heard on February 13, 1955 (with a script that was heavily recycled from a previous February 15, 1948 show).



Jack Benny, Mary Livingstone, and
Dennis Day

All of Jack's friends—Don, Dennis, Charlie Bagby (the orchestra's piano player), and the Beverly Hills Beavers—are planning their own separate surprise celebrations. Mary manages to combine everyone's effort into one party at one location: Jack's house. Rochester manages to get his boss out of the house so the preparations can take place but Benny, despondent that no one remembered his birthday, decides to take in a marathon showing of *The Horn Blows at Midnight* ...and misses his own shindig!

Another yearly tradition on *The Jack Benny Program* was to follow along with Jack as he does his Christmas shopping. His penny-pinching and fickle ways would eventually drive the store clerk (usually played by Mel Blanc) to the brink of insanity. The December 18, 1949 show (included in this set) is one of the series' funniest Yuletide outings. It features Mel as a department store employee and Elliott Lewis in one of his patented "mooley" roles ("Duhhh, can I help youse, huh?"). The broadcast also introduces actor Sam Hearn (below) in a recurring role as a man who hailed from Calabasas, California, and who always greeted Jack enthusiastically with "Hiya, Rube!" (Hearn had previously played a character named "Schlepperman" on Benny's broadcasts in the 1930s.) In addition to the birthday and Christmas delights, this collection brings you a number of episodes about other holidays, including Easter, Halloween, Thanksgiving, Christmas, and New Years. Furthermore, included here are other kinds of special events. For example, an October 15, 1950 broadcast finds Jack dreaming about being married to Mary. They've been married for 22 years, with Mary still working at the May Company because Jack's radio career never quite took off. The couple also have a daughter named Joan. That's quite a coincidence, since the Bennys had a daughter by that name in real-life. On this broadcast, the real Joanie plays the fictional one (who is dating a young man named "Eugene Patrick McNulty"). This script would later be recycled for a February 7, 1954 telecast of Jack's television series, with Joan reprising her role. (Though Joan would later make appearances as an actress on such TV series as *The Joey Bishop Show*, she's probably better known as the woman who mouthed her mother's lines on the radio broadcasts after Mary decided to pre-record her lines in advance.)



Sam Hearn

A few of the broadcasts presented here feature Jack and his cast engaging in restful and relaxing recreation. Jack hosts a day at the beach in a

May 8, 1955 installment, and an October 11, 1953 outing finds the gang at the golf course hitting practice balls. Everyone boards a yacht for a jaunt to Catalina in the November 6, 1949 show.

Rounding out the selections on *Days of Our Lives* are visits by Dennis' domineering mother (played by old-time radio veteran Verna Felton) and Jack's exasperated violin teacher Professor Andre LeBlanc (Mel Blanc). Jack buys a new suit as he prepares to leave on a personal appearance tour, and many of the show's classic "train station" gags are revisited. Benny takes two Army Air Base cadets to meet his friend Barbara Stanwyck (below). One of them is Peter Lind Hayes, a familiar TV face in the 1950s, who also starred in the 1953 cult classic *The 5,000 Fingers of Dr. T...* and the other is William T. Orr, who later became the head of Warner Brothers Television, overseeing such small screen hits as *77 Sunset Strip* and *Maverick*.

"He gave a long-lasting Valentine's Day gift of laughter to the world," writer Milt Josefsberg observed in his book *The Jack Benny Show*. The reason why Jack Benny and his "quintessential American radio comedy show" (to borrow the words of author-historian John Dunning) remain so beloved is that they function as a funhouse mirror, magnifying our imperfections and helping us to cope with them with laughter.

The following broadcasts of The Jack Benny Program star Jack Benny, with Mary Livingstone, Phil Harris, Bob Crosby, Dennis Day, Eddie "Rochester" Anderson, The Sportsmen Quartet, and announcer Don Wilson. These episodes were written by Bill Morrow, Ed Beloin, Sam Perrin, George Balzer, Milt Josefsberg, John Tackaberry, Al Gordon, and Hal Goodman. Sponsors included Jell-O, Grape-Nuts, and Lucky Strike.

CD 1A: Halloween Celebration - November 2, 1941

Jack and the gang engage in some Trick-or-Treat mischief. They wind up at Basil Rathbone's place to continue their deviltry. Dennis sings "I Know Why and So Do You." With Ed Beloin, Dix Davis, and Elliott Lewis.

CD 1B: Jack Takes Two Cadets to Barbara Stanwyck's House - October 11, 1942

From Santa Ana Army Air Base, California.



Barbara Stanwyck

Jack, Mary, and Rochester toil in the kitchen, making “Mother Benny’s Old-Fashioned Homemade Chili Sauce.” Later, Jack takes two visiting Santa Ana cadets over to guest star Barbara Stanwyck’s house. Phil sings “I Got a Gal in Kalamazoo.” With Peter Lind Hayes, Bill Orr, Frank Nelson, Ed Beloin, and Harry Von Zell.

CD 2A: Dennis’ Mother Visits - December 12, 1943

It’s distressing enough for Jack that Mary is missing the broadcast due to a bout of laryngitis...but the return of Fred Allen to radio has him agitated as well. His blood pressure finally reaches a peak with the arrival of Dennis’ mother, who is demanding that Jack give her son a raise. Dennis sings “How Sweet You Are.” With Verna Felton, John Brown, Mel Blanc, and Butterfly McQueen.

CD 2B: Jack’s Birthday Is Tomorrow - February 13, 1949

The studio audience sings “Happy Birthday” to Jack as he approaches a most special day. He’s turning forty! Dennis sings “A Bluebird Singing in My Heart (The La La La La Song).” With Mel Blanc, Sara Berner, and Bea Benaderet.

CD 3A: Jack Has a Music Lesson - February 27, 1949

Professor LeBlanc has arrived at Jack’s house to give him a violin lesson. Unfortunately for the long-suffering instructor, Jack is distracted by a number of interruptions from his cast, friends, and special guest star Claude Rains (below)! Dennis performs “Forever and Ever.” With Mel Blanc, Frank Nelson, and Artie Auerbach.

CD 3B: Jack Rides In A Yacht - November 6, 1949

A yacht salesman talks Jack into taking a no-obligation trip to Catalina, and the whole cast comes along. Dennis sings “Younger Than Springtime.” With Joseph Kearns, Artie Auerbach, and Frank Nelson.



Claude Rains

CD 4A: Mary Buys Jack A Pencil Sharpener - December 18, 1949

Jack and Mary go Christmas shopping. Sam Hearn, who was a regular on the Benny show in the 1930s (as “Schlepperman”) makes his first appearance as Jack’s friend from Calabasas (“Hiya, rube!”). Dennis performs “I Must Have Done Something Wonderful.” With Jerry Hausner, Joseph Kearns, Mel Blanc, Gerald Mohr, Blanche Stewart, Veola Vonn, Earle Ross, and Elliott Lewis.

CD 4B: Jack Dreams He Is Married To Mary - October 15, 1950

When Mary asks Jack to hurry over to her place right away, he convinces himself that she's going to accept his long-standing marriage proposal. He later dreams he's married to Mary, and their real-life daughter Joan (right) appears as their child! Dennis sings "Goodnight, Irene." With Doris Singleton, Joseph Kearns, Mel Blanc, and Blanche Stewart.



Jack and Joan Benny

CD 5A: New Year's Eve Date With A French Girl - December 30, 1951

Jack invites the gang over for a pre-New Year's get-together, but he schedules it for early in the afternoon. He's got a New Year's Eve date with actress H el ene Fran oise, who was the guest on his television show two weeks earlier. Dennis performs "While You're Young." With Frank Nelson, Mel Blanc, Herb Vigran, and Elliott Lewis.

CD 5B: Jack Tries To Sell His House - October 11, 1953

Jack is putting his house up for sale—can he really get the \$100,000 asking price? He's got an interested buyer, but an incident at the golf course threatens to scotch the deal. Dennis sings "Granada." With Will Wright, Lois Corbett (Mrs. Don Wilson), Mel Blanc, and Frank Nelson.

CD 6A: Thanksgiving Dinner - November 29, 1953

Jack and Rochester, preparing Thanksgiving dinner, conduct an inventory of available foodstuffs in Benny's pantry. The inventory reveals that Jack has forgotten to buy a turkey, so he and Mary make a trip to the grocery store to purchase one. Dennis performs "Ebb Tide." With Mel Blanc, Harry Shearer, and Artie Auerbach.

CD 6B: Jack Goes to Dallas - June 6, 1954

Jack prepares for a trip to Dallas to kick off a personal appearance tour. The gang follows him to the airport for a proper send-off. Dennis sings "An Irishman Will Steal Your Heart Away." With Bea Benaderet, Shirley Mitchell, Artie Auerbach, Mel Blanc, Sam Hearn, Veola Vonn, and Frank Nelson.

CD 7A: Jack Buys A New Suit - May 30, 1954

Jack wakes up very early in the morning and decides to take a solitary walk. Mary then takes him shopping for a new suit. The Sportsmen sing "When the

Red Red Robin Comes Bob-Bob-Bobbin' Along." With Hy Averback, Charlie Bagby, Mel Blanc, Sheldon Leonard, Joseph Kearns, and Frank Nelson.



Stuffy Singer



Verna Felton

CD 7B: Surprise Party for Jack - February 13, 1955

It's Jack's birthday again, and everybody (including The Beverly Hills Beavers) is preparing for a surprise party. But Jack is convinced that everyone's forgotten! Dennis performs "I Need You Now." With Harry Shearer, Steve Wooton, Jimmy Baird, Doris Singleton, Charlie Bagby, Mel Blanc, Verna Felton, Lois Corbett (Mrs. Don Wilson), and Gloria Wood.

CD 8A: Easter Stroll - April 10, 1955

Jack and Mary stroll down Wilshire Boulevard, greeting friends and singing "Happy Easter." Dennis performs "Easter Parade." With Stuffy Singer (above), June Crosby (Mrs. Bob Crosby), Mel Blanc, Arthur Q. Bryan, Artie Auerbach, Frank Nelson, and Sheldon Leonard.

CD 8B: A Day at the Beach - May 8, 1955

Jack invites the Beverly Hills Beavers to join him and his cast on a picnic at the beach. Dennis sings "Torna a Surriento." With Shirley Mitchell, Lois Corbett, Artie Auerbach, Tiger Fafara, Harry Shearer, Stuffy Singer, Verna Felton (above), and Mel Blanc.



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