

## Jack Benny, 1894-1974: He Won Hearts Mostly by Making Fun of Himself

He started as a serious musician, before he discovered he could make people laugh. *Transcript of radio broadcast:*  
10 October 2009

VOICE ONE:

I'm Sarah Long.

VOICE TWO:

And I'm Steve Ember with the VOA Special English program PEOPLE IN AMERICA. Today, we tell the story of Jack Benny. He was one of America's best-loved funny men during the twentieth century.

(MUSIC)

VOICE ONE:



Jack Benny

Jack Benny was one of the most famous names in show business for more than fifty years. He started as a serious musician, before he discovered he could make people laugh.

Jack Benny became famous nationwide in the nineteen thirties as a result of his weekly radio program. His programs were among the most popular on American radio, and later on television.

Jack Benny won the hearts of Americans by making fun of himself. He was known not as someone who said funny things, but as someone who said things in a funny way.

VOICE TWO:

Jack Benny was born in Chicago, Illinois, on February fourteenth, eighteen ninety-four. His parents, Meyer and Emma Kubelsky, were religious Jews. They had moved to the United States from eastern Europe. They named their first child Benjamin.

Benjamin Kubelsky and his family lived in Waukeegan, Illinois. Benjamin was a quiet boy. For much of the time, his parents were busy working in his father's store. As a child, Benjamin, or Benny as his friends called him, learned to play

the violin. Benny was such a good violin player that, for a time, he wanted to become a musician.

VOICE ONE:

While in school, Benny got a job as a violin player with the Barrison Theater, the local vaudeville house. Vaudeville was the most popular form of show business in the United States in the early nineteen hundreds. Vaudeville shows presented short plays, singers, comedians who made people laugh and other acts.

Benny worked at the Barrison Theater -- sometimes during school hours. He left high school before completing his studies. The piano player for the theater was a former vaudeville performer named Cora Salisbury. For a short time, she and Benny formed their own performing act. Later, he and another piano player had their own act.

At first, Benny changed his name to Ben K. Benny. However, that name was similar to another actor who played a violin. So, he chose the name Jack Benny.

(MUSIC)

VOICE TWO:

The United States entered World War One in nineteen seventeen. Benny joined the Navy and reported to the Great Lakes Naval Station. He continued using his violin to perform for sailors at the naval station. In one show, he was chosen more for his funny jokes than for his skill with the violin. That experience made him believe that his future job was as a comedian, not in music.

VOICE ONE:

After leaving the Navy, Benny returned to vaudeville. His performances won him considerable popularity during the nineteen twenties. He traveled across the country with other well-known performers, including the Marx Brothers.

In Nineteen Twenty-Seven, Benny married Sadie Marks, a sales girl from the May Company store in Los Angeles. Missus Benny soon became part of the traveling show. She used the name Mary Livingstone.

Jack Benny appeared in a few Hollywood films, but then left California and moved to New York. He had a leading part in the Broadway show, "Vanities."

VOICE TWO:

Benny made his first appearance on radio in Nineteen Thirty-Two. He was invited to appear on a radio show presented by newspaper reporter Ed Sullivan. Benny opened with this announcement:

"Ladies and gentlemen, this is Jack Benny talking. There will be a short break while you say, who cares?"

However, many listeners did care. Within a short period, Benny had his own radio show. It continued for twenty-three years.

ANNOUNCER: "The Jack Benny Program, starring Jack Benny, with Mary Livingstone, Phil Harris, Rochester, Dennis Day, and yours truly, Don Wilson ... "

(MUSIC)

VOICE ONE:

Jack Benny developed a show business personality that had all the qualities people dislike. He was known for being so stingy he refused to spend any of his money, unless forced to do so. He always was concerned about money. For example, he would put on a jeweler's glass to examine the diamond on a wealthy woman he had just met.

In another example, a robber points a gun at Benny.

(JACK BENNY PROGRAM)

ROBBER: "This is a stick-up."

BENNY: "Mister, put down that gun."

ROBBER: "Shut up. I said this is a stick-up. Now, come on. Your money or your life."

(LAUGHTER)

ROBBER: "Look, bud. I said, your money or your life!"

BENNY: "I'm thinking it over."

(LAUGHTER / MUSIC)

VOICE TWO:

On his shows, Jack Benny often spoke of his appearance, especially his baby blue eyes. As he grew older, he always claimed to be thirty-nine years old.

Benny was known as a comedian with great timing. He seemed to know the perfect time to tell a joke and when to remain silent. The way he looked at other actors and his use of body movements were world famous. He also was skilled at using his violin to make people laugh.

VOICE ONE:

Jack Benny was one of the first comedians who was willing to let other people share some of the laughs. He rarely made jokes that hurt other people. Instead, he would let the other actors on the show tell jokes about him.

Many of the actors in Benny's show became almost as famous as he was. They would criticize Benny's refusal to replace his ancient automobile. They made fun of the pay telephone that he added to his house.

This is a telephone discussion between Benny and his trusted employee, Rochester.

BENNY: "Hello ..."

ROCHESTER: "Hello, Mister Benny. This is Rochester ..."

(APPLAUSE)

BENNY: "Rochester, I'm in the middle of the program."

ROCHESTER: "I know, boss, but this is very important. The man from the life insurance company was here about that policy you're taking out and he asked me a lot of questions."

BENNY: "Well, I hope you answered them right."

ROCHESTER: "Oh, I did. When he asked me your height, I said five-foot-ten."

BENNY: "Uh, huh."

ROCHESTER: "Your weight, one-hundred-sixty-four."

BENNY: "Uh, huh."

ROCHESTER: "Your age, thirty-nine."

BENNY: "Uh, huh."

ROCHESTER: "We had quite a roundtable discussion on that one."

(LAUGHTER)

BENNY: "Wait a minute, Rochester. Why should there be any question about my age?"

ROCHESTER: "Oh, it wasn't a question. It was the answer we had trouble with."

(LAUGHTER)

VOICE TWO:

Jack Benny said: "The show itself is the important thing. As long as people think the show is funny, it does not matter who tells the jokes." He also made fun of the paid announcements broadcast during his radio show that were designed to sell products. They often provided some of the funniest moments in the show.

Most performers never would make fun of the businesses that helped pay for the show.

VOICE ONE:

Over the years, Jack Benny did well financially. In nineteen forty-eight, he moved his show from the National Broadcasting Company to the Columbia Broadcasting System. As part of the agreement, CBS paid more than two million dollars to a company in which Benny had a controlling interest.

Much later, the Music Corporation of America bought Benny's production company. Benny received almost three million dollars in MCA stock shares.

In real life, he was the opposite of the person he played in his show. He was known to be very giving and someone people liked having as their employer. He also could play the violin very well.

VOICE TWO:

Jack Benny entered the new medium of television in nineteen fifty. Five years later, he dropped his radio program to spend more time developing his television show. At first, his appearances on television were rare. By nineteen sixty, the Benny show was a weekly television program. It continued until nineteen sixty-five.

Benny appeared in about twenty films during his life. A few became popular. But most were not. In nineteen sixty-three, Benny returned to Broadway for the first time since nineteen thirty-one. He performed to large crowds.

VOICE ONE:

Jack Benny received many awards during his lifetime. The publication "Motion Picture Daily" voted him the country's best radio comedian four times. In nineteen fifty-seven, he won a special award from the Academy of Television Arts and Sciences for the best continuing performance. He also won the Academy's television award for the best comedy series in nineteen fifty-nine.

Perhaps the one honor that pleased him most was that his hometown of Waukeegan named a school for him. This was a special honor for a man who had never finished high school.

VOICE TWO:

Jack Benny continued to perform and to do a few television specials after his weekly series ended. He died of cancer on December twenty-sixth, nineteen seventy-four. His friend, comedian Bob Hope, spoke at the funeral about the loss felt by Benny's friends and fans. He said: "Jack Benny was stingy to the end. He gave us only eighty years."

(MUSIC)

VOICE ONE:

This Special English program was written by and produced by George Grow. I'm Sarah Long.

VOICE TWO:

And I'm Steve Ember. Join us again next week for another PEOPLE IN AMERICA program on the Voice of America.