Ra\textsuperscript{\textregistered}ised on Radio

\textit{In Quest of}

\textbf{The Lone Ranger \ \bullet \ \textit{Jack Benny}}
\textbf{Amos \textquotesingle n\textquotesingle Andy \ \bullet \ \textit{The Shadow}}
\textbf{Mary Noble \ \bullet \ \textit{The Great Gildersleeve}}
\textbf{Fibber McGee and Molly \ \bullet \ \textit{Bill Stern}}
\textbf{Our Miss Brooks \ \bullet \ \textit{Henry Aldrich}}
\textbf{The Quiz Kids \ \bullet \ \textit{Mr. First Nighter}}
\textbf{Fred Allen \ \bullet \ \textit{Vic and Sade}}
\textbf{The Cisco Kid \ \bullet \ \textit{Jack Armstrong}}
\textbf{Arthur Godfrey \ \bullet \ \textit{Bob and Ray}}
\textbf{The Barbour Family \ \bullet \ \textit{Henry Morgan}}
\textbf{Joe Friday \ \bullet \ \textit{and Other}}
\textbf{Lost Heroes from Radio\textquotesingle s Heyday}

\textit{Gerald Nachman}
If Buster Keaton was, in James Agee's words, "the most silent of the silent comics," then surely Jack Benny was the quietest of all the radio comics. Benny was at his funniest at his most serious, doing as little as possible for a laugh. Only George Burns, his crony and comic Boswell, rivaled him as a straight man, but Burns was never meant to be funny, whereas Benny evoked laughs as jokes flew at him from every direction.

There was a further, even subtler difference. Burns was a traditional straight man, but Benny, a kind of anticomic, was a comedian in the guise of a straight man. Benny lasted longer than almost anyone else in radio because he was so mild-mannered, the Clark Kent of comics. Often the less Benny reacted, the funnier he was, for beneath the silence he was a seething pot of humiliation, exasperation, and buried anger that from time to time burbled to the surface in his ineffectual yelp, "Now cut that out!" Benny was revered because he was artless, daring to do the minimum in a medium that most comedians felt demanded maximum noise and speed; he was the comic personification of less is more, an extension of his blasé vaudeville persona.

George Burns once said of Benny, "No one was better suited for radio than Jack. Radio consisted of sound and silence. That was it. While the rest of us were trying to figure out ways of using sound, Jack was smart enough to figure out how to use the silence. No one ever got more out of nothing than he did." In Burns's words, "Jack Benny changed radio. He did something no comedian had ever done before—he eliminated most of the jokes."

Jokes seemed to him too obvious a device. Milt Josefson, the long-time Benny writer, said the only way to get a joke past Benny was to cloak it as a character trait. One of his writers once noted, "Jack said the word 'joke' as though he were afraid the gods of comedy were going to wash out his mouth with soap." During his elder-statesman period, Benny once remarked that many radio comics became victims of their jokes. "The joke is the simplest method of drawing laughs and most comedians—in fact, almost all—use it too often. Because of its simplicity and repetition, the gag tends to dull the audience. The constant use of this method is the cause of so many failures among comedians who start their careers with great promise and then suddenly flop."

Ernst Lubitsch, who directed Benny in the movie To Be or Not to Be, once told him: "You think you are a comedian. You are not a comedian. You are not even a clown. You are fooling the public for thirty years. You are fooling even yourself. A clown—he is a performer what is doing funny things. A comedian—he is a performer what is saying funny things. But you, Jack, you are an actor playing the part of a comedian and this you are doing very well. But do not worry, I keep your secret to myself."

Although he came out of vaudeville (as a teenage violinist in an act called Salisbury and Benny, and good enough to attract an offer to tour with the Marx Brothers), young Benny Kuebsky had a modern sensibility and a staid midwestern manner, the first of a new species of comedian whose laughs derived from situation and characterization. He appealed to high-, low-, and middlebrows, because he didn't attempt to appeal to anyone. He played a nonentity, a long-suffering guy who, it was once said, practiced the fine art of self-humiliation. When Benny first began, he cast himself as a womanizer and drinker, but he decidedly was far too timid and genteel-sounding for that.

Benny was the most human of comedians, the least self-consciously "funny" funny man. His humor came out of familiar characters' relationships with him. Because the audience knew the characters, lines that weren't necessarily funny per se became laughs in the context of Benny's persona. In George Burns's words: "Jack said his best lines took five years to write, because that's how long it took for the audience to really get to know the character."

Analyzing his character's universality, Benny said: "I take on the frailties of all men. They accept my character as they would a character in a play. They accept what you do on the stage, because they're educated to accept the character." He added, "I always play up to my audi-
ence. We feel we represent the audience. In us, they see themselves." For
Josefsberg, Benny had more audience identification than any other
entertainer.

Jack Benny was a middle-aged, middle-American, middle-class
Everyman, a droll, unhurried comedian. As opposed to most comedi-
ans of that era, or even this one, he labored to maintain a certain deco-
rum. He hated to be caught in the act of being funny: "When your
audience sees you working for a laugh, they're all tired out when you
get to the laugh. For that reason, we try to make our show as off-hand
as possible. Our motto is: Be nonchalant!" In vaudeville, Benny had
used his face sparingly, rarely mugging, and this helped him become a
hit on radio so effortlessly. Shrewdly, he used silences to compel an
audience to pay attention.

Benny originally had planned to make his living as a musician and
segued into comedy through a violin act called, variously, "Ben K.
Benny: Fiddle Funology," "Jack Benny: Fun with a Fiddle," and "Jack
Benny: Aristocrat of Humor." He didn't converse on stage full-time
until a navy show in 1917, when the writer gave him a line, which he
embroidered; by the end of the run he had the main comedy part. "That
was the first time I realized I could do comedy." One of his first laughs
was, "I know all you sailors complain about the food. Well, you've got
no right to complain. The enlisted men get the same food as the officers
get... only their's is cooked."

From then on, as with Henny Youngman, his fiddle became a prop,
and he was first introduced on radio not as a vaudeville comic but as a
"popular master of ceremonies." He wasn't a huge vaudeville star, too
understated for most audiences—the very thing that would make him
so ideal for radio. He was heavily influenced by stage comic Frank
Fay's easy, conversational, fadeaway style.

Like many performers, Benny tried to ignore radio at first, consider-
ing it a fad, but a chance encounter with Ed Sullivan in 1932 changed
his mind. At the time, Sullivan did an interview show with news, sports,
and guests, sort of a Broadway column of the air twenty years before he
stumbled into TV, and he asked Benny to appear on it. Based on that
appearance, Canada Dry gave him a show, billing him "the Canada Dry
comedian." Benny was intrigued by radio, yet wary. "I don't know any-
thing about radio," he had told Sullivan, who said, "Nobody does"

(Sullivan's own success was stunning evidence of that), an accurate sum-
mation of the anything-goes quality of the medium in the early 1930s.

Many comics were mke-shy, with good reason. As Burns once told
Benny, half jokingly: "Jack, there's absolutely nothing to worry about.
Nothing at all. Just forget about the fact that more people are going to
hear you on the radio than heard you during your entire career in
vaudeville and that if they don't like you, your career is probably over."
Instinctive genius or not, Benny later recalled that "radio was not the
soft touch my agent had promised. Those were kind of nervous days
for me."

Although he was a nervous man personally, a nail-biter and a pace-
ner, Benny's career never seemed in doubt; even on stage he exuded serenity.
At the time he plunged, or perhaps waded, into radio, he was starring
in Earl Carroll's Vanities for fifteen hundred dollars a week, but got out
of his contract. Burns claimed Benny never felt he needed radio, as
other vaudevillians did, but Benny said, "I gave it all up just to get into
radio. I could see [vaudeville] was nothing—radio was the thing. I
knew you had to get into it, the same as I knew I had to get into televi-
sion." When he surpassed Eddie Cantor in popularity in 1937, he
established radio's supremacy over vaudeville, became a fixture for fif-
teen years, and finally a national treasure.

Many comics viewed radio as an easy gig, a sort of one-year stand
or open-mike vaudeville, but Benny took the long view and adapted
himself to it. Radio, he intuited, was different, and he approached its
unique dynamics with respect. Harry Conn, then the highest paid com-
edy writer in the business, developed the lasting Benny format that used
the show's regular cast as believable larger-than-life characters in an
ongoing show-within-a-show, a kind of sitcom vérité. Conn advanced the
comedy-cum-variety show format by turning it into a neatly dis-
guised situation comedy.

On his debut in 1934, Benny had been flat, tentative, and awkward,
delivering an unfunny monologue without benefit of an audience,
and the jokes deservedly landed with a thud, a far cry from the suave,
polished Jack Benny of only a few years hence. When Canada Dry
dropped him, Chevrolet quickly picked him up and he again began
razzing the sponsor. Columnist Heywood Broun wrote, "In days to
come, a grateful people [should] erect a statue to Jack Benny, with the
simple inscription: ‘In memory of the first man to take the curse off radio commercials.’ ”

Such high-level attention instantly elevated Benny above the common rabble of radio comics. General Foods jumped on board with a dessert that hadn’t been selling and pitched the product by changing the name of the show to The Jell-O Program, which ran at 7 P.M. every Sunday night for twenty-one years. Benny owned that half-hour; CBS promised him 7 P.M. as long as he wanted it, and he now had a free hand. “I warned them I wouldn’t make ridiculous claims about Jell-O. I intended to make fun of it and predicted I would sell a lot of Jell-O.” To make sure, he opened with, “Jell-O, everybody!” General Foods, which took it all with a brave smile, once measured that sponsor identification for Jack Benny and Jell-O was 91 percent, a mark never topped in radio. When an insurance company that planned to use him in its ads found he was liked by 97 percent of the public, Benny asked, “What did I do to that 3 percent?”

Benny sensed that he didn’t need to do that much on radio to get his laughs. By the late 1940s, his radio character was so well established that many of his reactions didn’t require even audible responses. The critic Tom Shales called him “a living caricature of preening ego” that satirized us all. “He was the joke and we were the joke.” Everyone knew at any given time precisely what Benny was thinking, creating a built-in laugh by using straight lines that writers built upon over time. Sight-deprived listeners could imagine Jack’s nonplussed look, his anguish and confusion, whenever he was pushed too far—he was always being pushed too far—by a clueless Dennis Day, a pestly Mel Blanc, a nasty Frank Nelson (with his bitchy, “Oo-oo-oo, would I!”), a sassy Rochester, a garrulous Don Wilson, a snippy Mary Livingstone, or a loudmouthed Phil Harris.

Benny’s reaction was often internal: He was always swallowing his enormous pride, wrestling with his conscience, or trying to cope with the insanity and inanity that swirled about him. He perfected the use of the interior monologue, which took us deep into his fevered psyche as we heard him fretting and pondering and plotting. Everything and everyone irritated him. The world was out to get him, bug him, mock him, make his life miserable, or get a rise out of him, as if there were a worldwide conspiracy to spoil his day.

Discussing the interior monologue, Benny said, “Many comedians open with a monologue. I also did monologues—but in a different way. You might hear my footsteps, clicking along a sidewalk . . . and you’d hear me talking to myself, thinking out loud, often spoken as I was returning home.” Heard over his clicking shoes on the sidewalk, a typical Benny monologue would unspool as he ruminated in a cheery inner voice: “Gee, the neighborhood sure looks nice . . . I love those weeping willows on Claudette Colbert’s front lawn . . . And, gosh, how nice W. C. Fields’ swimming pool looks. What a clever idea, having marbles in the bottom. No, they’re not marbles, they’re olives . . .”

Although it took years for him to assemble just the right cast, his fully developed subsidiary characters became as crucial as the star. The program was all about Jack’s pals, his “gang,” and his supposed world. He used the real stuff of his own showbiz life to concoct a fantasy radio life. It was almost like visiting his home, where many shows were set. Benny’s unique show-within-a-show idea, largely abandoned when he went on TV, prefigured Garry Shandling’s avant-garde It’s Garry Shandling’s Show on 1980s TV. Shandling freely acknowledges he stole the idea from the Burns and Allen TV show, but in fact it was first done by Benny, and Burns swiped it from him. There were faint traces of Benny and Burns in Jerry Seinfeld’s TV show, where Jerry played himself, a comedian, and bookended the plot with snippets from his stand-up monologue.

The Benny program created such a feeling of credibility that listeners liked to believe it was all true. To his chronic annoyance, many people truly thought Jack was cheap, drove a Maxwell, kept his money in a vault, and refused to give his servant a day off. Some wrote in to protest his unfair hiring practices, and one man even offered to buy his antique car. Larry Gelbart, the comedy writer, has written: “So complete was [Jack Benny’s] achievement, so convincingly had he painted himself as a giant of pettiness . . . that the world paid him the ultimate compliment of accepting the artist as his own creation. It was tantamount to believing that both of Picasso’s eyes were set on the same side of his face.”

Benny’s show took listeners inside Hollywood and, with its casual references to Los Angeles landmarks, made it all both familiar and exciting, especially the way movie stars would casually drop by Jack’s
house for a visit. The Benny show seemed even more authentic because of all the in Hollywood jokes—references to Mulholland Drive (a local lovers’ lane), and kidding references to the May Company, Sportsman's Lodge, the Brown Derby, the La Brea Tar Pits, and Forest Lawn that made listeners in Duluth and Poughkeepsie intensely curious about Los Angeles. For L.A. tourists, it was thrilling simply to lay eyes on the May Company and discover that it really existed.

Radio, a far more informal setting than theater or vaudeville, was ideal for shows where people gathered, hung out, and, as on Benny's show, discussed putting the show together—a somewhat Pirandello-esque notion. In *Sunday Nights at Seven*, a book by Benny’s daughter, Joan, with excerpts from her father’s unfinished memoirs, he tells how he discovered the key to the show’s intimacy: “Our audience totaled 30 million, but it really consisted of small family groups. I felt that now I understood the medium. I would play to those family groups and get them to know me and my family (the cast) as real people with real problems. Exaggerated people, yes, but fundamentally honest and true to life.”

Fred Allen, Benny’s longtime make-believe archenemy, was in fact his greatest admirer, and once wrote of him, “Practically all comedy shows on radio owe their structure to Benny’s conceptions. He was the first to realize that the listener is not in a theater with a thousand other people. When they tune in to Benny, it’s like tuning in to somebody else’s house. Benny was also the first comedian to realize you could get big laughs by ridiculing yourself instead of your stooges.” Benny once told Gisele MacKenzie (his onetime post-TV stage partner and rumored girl friend), “I give all the jokes to others, honey, but it’s still ‘The Jack Benny Show.’” Another similarity to *Seinfeld* is that Jerry, like Jack, played a comedian who was the least “funny” person on the show.

Benny’s age, vanity, and penny-pincher jokes became so refined over time that eventually they weren’t even jokes. The merest reference to money in Benny’s presence was sufficiently funny to draw laughs, the result of a career-long setup of what Benny called “acceptance”—a form of audience affection as important to a comic as great jokes, giving punchlines a built-in cushion. Benny created a goodwill reservoir that came from a lifetime rapport with his audience. Nobody could make an audience feel as relaxed as he could. Other comics might prod, bully, or coax people into laughing, but Benny pretended he didn’t care one way or the other and just happened to be strolling by when we joined him.

On the Benny show, the nuts ran the asylum while Benny, as their helpless administrator, tried to retain control. He was unable to get from one end of the show to the other without being humiliated by his underlings—not to mention Frank Nelson’s gallery of snide clerks, waiters, and floorwalkers (Benny: “Excuse me, are you the ticket agent?” Nelson: “Well, what do you think I am in this cage—a canary?”). His proper British next-door neighbors, the Ronald Colmans, were especially appalled by Benny’s vulgar displays of vanity, stinginess, status-seeking, and general gaucherie and gall. Everyone Benny encountered each week—violin teachers, bums, mechanics, bank guards, railroad announcers, even parrots—were dedicated to getting the star’s goat. Benny’s irritated responses were funnier because he wasn’t a fictional character but was meant to be portraying himself.

The cast ridiculed Benny to his face. He was a star, as he kept reminding them, but one clearly without honor on his own show or even in his own house. Benny not only was making fun of himself but, in effect, ridiculing the entire celebrity ethos. Even guests humiliated their host each week, but so politely that Benny was never quite sure if they meant it; his ego was too big to grasp such a possibility. He tried ignoring the raspy wisecracks of his man Friday, the rascally Rochester.

Benny wore well because he surrounded himself with a gifted comic support system, each one amusing in his/her own way and three of whom—Phil Harris, Dennis Day, Mel Blanc—wound up with their own shows. Day, a versatile, underrated comic and mimic, starred five years on *A Day in the Life of Dennis Day*. Harris linked up with his wife, Alice Faye, on a show that lasted six years. Blanc’s solo attempt, on which he played a fix-it shop owner, died after a season. Josefson noted that Benny was “absolutely devoid of jealousy” of fellow comics and a great booster of young comics, from Danny Kaye to Johnny Carson. Only a secure performer would let lesser comics get all the laughs.

To some, it was curious that Mary Livingstone played Benny’s sarcastic girl friend when everyone knew they were married—perhaps a
shrewd artistic decision by Benny, sensing that Mary could zing him more efficiently if they weren’t married on the show (she often zinged him privately as well). At first, she was cast as yet another of radio’s giggling man-crazy lamaebrains, which changed when Dennis Day arrived and cornered the dimwit jokes. Day’s character was inspired largely by his high-pitched, daffy-sounding voice—a perfect example, Benny insisted, of how all the best radio characters developed out of the actor’s voice. “I made sure the characters I gave them all fit their speaking voices.”

Indeed, Phil Harris’s roguish bandleader grew out of Harris’s brash sound. The character’s randy life-style and rude manner were a new concept, according to Benny: “With all his coarseness, there was a quality of sophistication about the Phil Harris character that made him different not only from every other character on our program—but from every other character on radio. When we began featuring him, we shocked a lot of people. He was wild. He lived for pleasure. He did not believe in sin. He was completely immoral. The character was so written and so well played that you knew Phil Harris was probably the greatest fornicator of all time. When he made his first speech, usually a simple ‘Hiya, Jackson,’ he somehow got across the idea that he had come to the studio right after having experienced a most satisfying orgasm.”

Benny added: “Harris radiated vitality, joie de vivre, and a sheer gusto in animal pleasures that made him unique. His voice went with the braggadocio. Everybody knows at least one person who is in some way like Phil Harris.” In a typical Harris gag, Jack asks him why he’s gazing so sadly at the ocean and Phil sighs, “What a shame. All that chaser going to waste.” The sleazy Harris character was the only one on the show whom Benny treated as an inferior.

Mary Livingstone was an uneasy fit, an untrained performer who did the show for a lark at first; but her character grew so familiar that she couldn’t quit. “Mary seemed almost completely devoid of any desire to be a performer, much less a star,” claimed Josefsberg. “She had no definable function on the series.” To give her something to do, they would have her read funny letters from her sister Babe or recite inane poems. Originally, she played the seventeen-year-old president of the Jack Benny Fan Club of Plainfield, New Jersey, but she was thrust into a major role when an actress missed a dress rehearsal. To her credit, however, Mary could impart a nice note of disdain to her delivery that deflated whatever was left of Jack’s ego.

Over time, her early mike fright grew phobic and finally, when tape was introduced, she insisted on reading lines from home, which were then spliced into the final transcription. Now and then she fainted after shows. Veteran Benny writer George Balzer recalls, “I’d say Mary disliked performing every week, but not enough to give it up. You can faint on call, you know. I always felt Jack wasn’t as concerned as he might have been.” Balzer smiles knowingly. “It was a good attention-getter, let’s say...she was a tough gal.” Livingstone, no company favorite, was something of a snob, who treated the cast more like hired hands than colleagues. At home, she wore the pants. The Bennys’ matchbooks were engraved MARY LIVINGSTONE, although outside the house she preferred to be known as Mrs. Jack Benny. After her death, Burns is reported to have said, “I often wondered if Jack knew Mary had very little talent,” but Josefsberg noted simply, “Jack was happy if Mary was happy.”

Dennis Day was a mere “kid” when he joined the show in his early twenties, a timid Irish choirboy named Owen P. (Eugene) McNulty whom Benny supposedly hired for his naïveté. Called in by Benny over the intercom to audition, Day piped, “Yes, please,” which cracked Benny up and was just the quality he wanted in a fresh-faced singer to replace army-bound Kenny Baker, who in turn had replaced tenor Frank Parker; Benny always insisted the show’s singer be a tenor—there were six in all.

Day, the most faithful Benny retainer among the radio gang, remained with Benny thirty-five years, never aging beyond the naif stage (he was Benny’s Gracie Allen), as in this typical exchange: “Dennis, aren’t you going in swimming?”... “No, the last time I went in swimming a big crowd gathered around me and pointed at me and laughed at me”... “Well, maybe you had a hole in your bathing suit...” “Ooohhhhhhh, bathing suit!”

Everyone razzed Jack except announcer Don Wilson, who was alone in respecting the employer-employee relationship. Explaining why he
had chosen Wilson, Benny said, “He had a warm voice, he could read a commercial with laughter in his throat, and he proved a great foil to play against.” Wilson was Benny’s whipping boy, whom he attacked with fat jokes, but Wilson took his revenge by sneaking commercials past Benny on the show—or the show-within-the-show, or maybe the show-to-be (it got confusing if you thought about it)—while Jack stood by stewing.

The integrated commercials, of which Benny’s were among the first and most clever, forced you to listen because they weren’t walled off from the show. Benny first tried the noninterrupting commercial as a running gag at the start of the 1946 season, when the Sportsmen Quartet first spoke and then sang the Lucky Strike slogan, “LS/MFT” (“Lucky Strike Means Fine Tobacco”), sneaking it into the show whenever possible, to Benny’s continued annoyance.

Another canny, appealing innovation was the show’s series of ongoing self-references, as when Dennis kept trying to sing a song even though Jack tried to prevent it, until, driven nuts by his shenanigans, Benny gave in. Such routines became as ritualized as a Japanese tea ceremony.

When Eddie Anderson joined the show in 1937, his Rochester was very much of a racist shuck-and-jive stereotype—he drank gin, chased women, shot craps, and even carried a razor. But never did he bow and scrape, and something in his voice bespoke a mock wide-eyed innocence. (On one notable show, Rochester accidentally struck Benny while helping him train for a boxing match with Fred Allen, provoking letters from outraged Southerners, who, recalled Benny, “took it as an attack on the white race” by an uppity Negro. Benny, a self-proclaimed “political innocent,” was stunned.)

Years later, the Rochester character came to embarrass Benny, who admitted he had been “a traditional Negro dialect stereotype. He had a molasses drawl and he yassub-bossed me all over the place. He was such a dawdling, lazy, superstitious stereotype even the original Uncle Tom would have despised him.” In a 1938 show, Rochester retains tinges of a minstrel black, immersed in racist dialogue during a trip west as he tries to get off the train in Santa Fe, mistaking it for 125th Street in New York:

---

Rochester: I thought I was back in Harlem.
Benny: Harlem? I told you before, all those people at the station were Indians.
Rochester: Indians? Well, just the same, I saw a papoose eatin' a pork chop.
Benny: Well, what of it? He can be an Indian and still eat a pork chop.
Rochester: I know, but he had it between two slices of watermelon.

Benny asks if his pants are pressed. Rochester says he forgot, adding, “Gee, I’m lazy. Don’t I remind you of Stepin Fetchit?”

Even though Rochester was caught in a stereotype, something in his character played against it, as when Benny refers to the fact that Rochester totes a razor. “Yeah,” he says, “but it’s only a Gillette and I’m all out of blades.” Also, Rochester was written and acted as an equal, more Benny’s pal than his valet. “We just played Roch as a normal funny guy,” reflected George Balzer. “I was not aware of his being apprehensive” about the role. Prior to Anderson’s Rochester, Benny Rubin attempted a Pullman porter that really amused Benny, but writer Bill Morrow wisely objected, warning, “Jack, the studio audience will not laugh at a white man playing a Negro.”

World War II sensitized Benny, and after 1945 Rochester gave up watermelon, gin, and razors. He still stepped lively, though, all the while laughing up his sleeve at his boss’s feeble delusions of dignity. Rochester eventually was promoted to butler, a sort of black Jeeves, whose full name was Rochester Van Jones. Originally he’d been hired for a one-shot appearance as a porter called Syracuse, but Benny felt he could get more comic mileage out of “Rah-chester,” which to his ear had a funnier sound. Rochester’s cheeky character was quickly established during an early meeting aboard a Chicago-bound train:

Jack: Hey, porter, porter!
Rochester: Yessub.
Jack: What time do we get to Albuquerque?
Rochester: What?
Jack: Albuquerque.
Rochester: I dunno. Do we stop there?
Jack: Certainly we stop there.
Rochester: My, my! Albuquerque? (laughs) What they won't think of next! I better go up and tell the engineer.

Neither Benny's use of Rochester nor Eddie Anderson's high-pitched gravel-voiced portrayal of the character ever received the abuse heaped on Freeman Gosden and Charles Correll's Amos 'n' Andy as a demeaning depiction of blacks—which is ironic because, while Rochester worked as a servant for a white man, Amos and Andy, albeit simpler souls, were homeowners and businessmen. But Rochester was openly, loudly, and gleefully rude, a servant who plainly did not know his place. Benny was "boss" in name only.

Maybe because Rochester was a hipper, lippier, contemporary black character, the racial issue never really arose for Benny, whose sniping manservant enjoyed equal status, perfectly embodying the line that no man is a hero to his valet. In any case, the two always seemed at home with each other, observed one critic, who further speculated that Rochester functioned as a kind of surrogate Mammy for Benny. Rochester's steady barrage of wisecracks was revolutionary for a black servant on the air—not duplicated until Robert Guillaume's TV show Benson in the 1980s—although there may have been an unconscious unstated servitude in the fact that of all the cast regulars, only Eddie Anderson, who stayed with Benny twenty-one years, used a fictitious name on the show; in films, he was always billed as Eddie ("Rochester") Anderson.

Benny diffused any latent criticism by his unbegot private attitude and actions. He went out of his way not only to protect Anderson but to promote his career; he liked to boast that Anderson was the highest paid black performer in radio. When Anderson first joined the show in 1937 (prior to which his biggest role was Noah in Marc Connelly's Green Pastures on Broadway) and the cast, crew, and musicians went east, a New York hotel manager tried to get radio's leading black actor to move to another hotel after a couple from the South objected. Benny's producer and brother-in-law, Hilliard Marks, assured the manager Anderson would be glad to find new quarters. Next morning, Marks and the rest of the company, some forty-four people, accompanied Anderson out of the hotel.

Jack Benny was not a man to toy with. He was then earning nearly $400,000 a year, an enormous salary in radio—or anywhere—in 1937, plus whatever he made in movies, of which there were more than people are aware—such as Love Thy Neighbor (with Fred Allen, based on their "feud"), a 1929 version of Singin' in the Rain, and the movie nobody saw but everyone remembers because Benny razzed it ever after, The Horn Blows at Midnight. George Burns once said it wasn't such a bad movie, but Benny convinced everyone it was, mining comic gold even out of a box office flop. Like most radio comics, he was unable to translate his radio persona into screen terms. Buck Benny Rides Again, based on his parody cowpoke, is really a Jack Benny show on film. Perhaps because he was the least physical of comics, he met a fast dead end in movies, especially when he played a character. Only one film really survives, To Be or Not to Be. Benny was too typecast as himself.

Jack Benny was suave by comedian standards of the 1930s and 1940s; in fact, he was almost effete. Benny often remarked on his famous stage and TV sashay, once telling an interviewer: "People are always taking advantage of me, and I've always thought it's because there's a tiny bit of effeminacy in me. I don't mean I'm a pansy, but the vanity and the pouting and the sulking in the character I play—it's like a woman." Benny discussed his swishy walk on the Tonight show when Johnny Carson would refer to Jack's saunter or his delicate stance, one palm laid primly alongside his cheek, eyes rolling in a manner that now looks decidedly poof. He had also played Charley's Aunt on film, and on TV often reverted to drag scenes, à la Berle. Benny once noted that Bob Hope had the same sashay but cupped his hands, while his own hands dangled demurely. Steve Allen, commenting on Benny's TV persona, said that his "pretend conceited swagger seemed to say, 'Here I am, folks—eat me up!' He walks like a headwaiter bringing someone to a good table."

Mainly, the Benny character seemed neuter, although his vanity—about his age, fame, blue eyes, and thin skin—might now be read as feminine or gay, as might the eternally thirty-nine jokes, which began when he was fifty-five and worked because he looked younger than his
made him not really gentle, either. To a woman who asked why most comedians were Jewish or Irish, he said, "Madam, have you ever met a funny Lutheran?"

Benny’s appeal was universal. One of his very few detractors was the popular radio comic Phil Baker, who plainly didn’t get it. “Jack never does anything but stand there, touch his face, stare and say, ‘Well . . . ’,” complained Baker. Burns’s response: “Phil thought anyone could say, ‘Well.’ The sad truth is no one could, except Jack, and get a laugh. The audience pushed Jack. The audience made ‘Well’ a hit. Jack had this tremendous talent, but he looked like he didn’t. He always looked so amazed when an audience laughed at him. His expression would indicate a perpetual question: ‘Why are you laughing at me?’ When Louella Parsons said Benny would even be funny reading the phone book, he read it on the air—to steady laughs.

Steve Allen once described the nuts and bolts of the nebulous business called “timing” that Benny was invariably lauded for: “A split-second delay here, a rushed word there, can make a joke misfire. Benny never missed. Sure-footed as a cat, he walked his confident way through a monologue or a sketch, feeling with the delicate sensibility of the true craftsman just what was the best possible moment to speak, what was the most advantageous time to remain silent, regarding the [studio] audience with a large, baleful eye.”

Benny also used his famous gaze as a timing device to control a routine’s rhythm and prevent other actors from stopping a laugh by speaking too soon. After Benny felt he’d milked a laugh enough, Don Wilson related, he turned away from the audience and faced the person who had the next line—the actor’s cue to speak. Noted Burns, “There was no hurry with Jack; he played all the waits.”

After an unbroken twenty-three-year run on radio, where he was king—in Josefberg’s phrase, “one of the few constants we could rely on in a rapidly changing world”—Benny reluctantly left radio for CBS-TV in 1954, having worked on both for three seasons. His last regular Sunday radio show, episode 1,838, was broadcast May 22, 1955, but the show continued in reruns until 1958.

Jack Benny’s TV career, which began with a forty-five-minute special in the fall of 1950, was successful, but it never equaled the radio
version artistically or viscerally, as Benny himself conceded: “It seems so long ago, and I don’t just mean long ago in years but also in spirit. It was a time when Americans were emotionally involved with their radio personalities. Television has never made this kind of direct emotional impact on us.” He went on, “In radio, people loved me in a different way. They could see on radio all my pauses. I came at them gently—quietly, through their ears. I suggested subtle images to them, picture jokes. Now [in TV] I became something else—too much.”

It wasn’t that Benny was bad on TV, he just wasn’t as purely or as quintessentially Jack Benny. His movie parodies tended to rely on costumes, often with Benny in a dress or some other outlandish, un-Bennyesque getup; he had a latent zany streak that he indulged on TV. Whenever Benny appeared in a make-believe guise—as Buck Benny, say—he was never as funny, but audiences by then laughed because it was Benny, in the way that when Uncle Jack puts a lamp shade on his head, everyone howls—not because it’s that funny, but because it’s lovable old Uncle Jack.

It just wasn’t as funny to see his famous buried vault (a hollow-sounding radio vault was funnier than a 3-D version with crocodiles and quicksand added), his tortured violin teacher rolling his eyes, or the choking Maxwell spewing smoke. On TV, the ancient Maxwell looked less like a rattletrap than an antique auto. All suffered by comparison to their imagined radio counterparts, along with little visual disappointments in the cast, like the fact that boyish Dennis Day was a middle-aged man with thinning hair or that Don Wilson wasn’t as mirthfully Falstaffian as he’d been painted on radio, or that Mary sounded cuter than she looked.

TV broke up that old radio gang of his: Dennis Day, Mary Livingstone, and Phil Harris appeared less often on the TV show. Also, busy guest stars could no longer breathe in and read their lines. Apart from costume fittings, makeup, and light cues, they had to memorize dialogue and blocking. Sets tended to dictate, scale down, and alter halloved, tried-and-true radio bits.

Benny tiptoed into television, doing two shows the first year, gradually escalating to thirteen shows, until by 1954 he was on TV every other week while still doing thirty-nine radio shows a year. Not until 1960 did he begin a weekly TV show. In 1964, for the first time since his first show thirty-two years earlier, Jack Benny was dropped by a sponsor, beaten in the ratings by rival Bonanza, and returned to NBC. Curious about Bonanza, Benny watched the first half hour of the western and was so hooked that he missed the first twenty minutes of his own show. “I knew I was through,” he conceded. Yet though he had much less impact on TV than he had had in radio, Benny wound up surviving all the major comedians on the tube except Lucille Ball.

While Benny exerted ultimate authority over each of his radio shows, their crafting was a fairly democratic process in which the unusually agreeable star was only allowed one vote during debates with his longtime staff of four regular writers (Josefsberg, Balzer, John Tackaberry, and Sam Perrin), who met at Benny’s home at 1002 North Roxbury Drive to lay out each week’s offering.

Bill Morrow, his head writer for years, once commented on how relaxed the whole process was: “We put down no set ideas to cramp us. We went places, enjoyed ourselves, and incidentally wrote something about it. Our good times were reflected in our shows. Our audience, in fancy, traveled with us and had good times with us.” Benny paid his writers many times scale, was never afraid to admit he was wrong (almost unheard of among major stars), apologized on the few occasions he blew up, and was once so racked with guilt that he told Josefsberg he’d underpaid him for material he had trotted out at private events for years. During a threatened writers’ strike, the star promised to walk out with his gammen.

Josefsberg finally left Benny after twelve years because of creative conflicts with other writers, not with Benny, with whom he remained close. In writers’ battles, Benny always acted as mediator, but the pressures of TV and Benny’s age caused more squabbles toward the end. He protected his writers from guest-star temperament. When Groucho Marx handed back a script he disliked, Benny said, “Well, then, we won’t use him.” Most actors grow misty discussing his generosity; Elliott Lewis once recalled the time he got a check from Benny double or triple his fee, with a note enclosed from Benny, reading, “The enclosed is because I never would have dreamed you could have gotten that big a laugh on the line.” Said Lewis, “He was always like that.”
George Balzer, one of two surviving writers from the longtime radio foursome, lives in the same modest Van Nuys home he bought when he wrote for Benny during their twenty-five years together, longer than any other Benny writer. (Josefsberg once said that for comedy writers in TV, two years was a career and three a miracle.) Balzer stayed with Benny because it provided the best comedy climate in radio. “The chemistry on that show was a kind that comes when you feel secure. How can anyone write with a dagger hanging over them, with the star yelling at you and picking on you?”

By the time Balzer arrived, the show’s format was firmly in place, although he recalls, “We really had no format. We could do anything.” Balzer outlines their usual weekly routine: “When we’d finish the show on Sunday we didn’t know what we were going to do the next week. Monday was a day off. On Tuesday, we split into two teams and began calling each other for ideas. We’d set on a possible idea and then call Jack and ask what he thought of it. Often he’d say, ‘Well, it sounds okay, why don’t you go ahead and write it?’ Wednesday morning at 10 a.m., we’d start to work in earnest, usually writing either by my pool or Sam’s. When we’d finish we’d call the other team and tell them what our segment was. I’d ask what they had.”

Each team wrote half the show. “By Wednesday night we’d have four pages of a script. Thursday evening, if we had any real issues to resolve, we’d call Jack and then give it to the script girl, who made six copies. Friday, we’d meet at Jack’s house, go into the library, and Jack would read it to himself. If it was a good script, he’d say, ‘Okay, let’s go from the top.’”

By 3 p.m. Friday, the script would be finished and on Saturday morning the cast met for a cold reading, then the writers and Benny would break for lunch at the Brown Derby. If Benny was outvoted on a joke by the writers four-to-one, recalls Balzer, smiling, someone might say, “Well, Jack, the four of us could be wrong.” If Jack felt strongly about something we never forced him.” Benny was confident enough to allow himself the luxury of a joke not everyone might get if it broke him up, rather than spell it out and ruin it. “If we have to lay it out for them, I’d rather not do it,” he would say. “If we can’t devote fifteen seconds in a half-hour program for our own amusement, we’re in the wrong business.” His popularity gave him the leeway to be audacious, as on the show on which he spoke only one line: At the very end, a tour bus he’s riding passes his house and the guide says, “We are now passing the home of Jack Benny,” whereupon Benny spoke his one line: “Stop the bus, driver, here’s where I get off.”

On Sunday, the cast and writers would meet again in the studio and run through the script at the mikes for timing purposes, after which the show was frozen. “When we said, ‘There it is,’ nobody—nobody—touched that script. That was it.” Benny himself never changed a line without consulting the writers.

When Benny went to TV, he took Balzer and Perrin with him, and Josefsberg and Tackaberry remained behind, rewriting old shows—or, in Balzer’s tactful phrase, “refreshening” them. “They weren’t real happy about it.”

Balzer goes on, “After he died, a lot of people would say to me, ‘What’s it like not writing for Jack?’ and I’d say I never stopped writing for Jack. Not a week goes by that I don’t think of a situation that would be right for the show. The other day, I imagined that the cast goes out for a bite and on the way back they realize Jack is missing. They turn around and he’s down on his hands and knees, and he says, ‘I lost a quarter,’ and Dennis says, ‘Oh, boy, look what I found—a dime!’ And Jack says, ‘Well, give it to me—and you can owe me the fifteen cents.’ . . . And the next day Dennis gives it to him.” Balzer rarely listened to rival comedy shows. “I had no other favorites. The Jack Benny show was my life.”

The Benny show was built in large part on running gags, several of which ran twenty years. Balzer, who came up with two classics that enjoyed extremely long runs (Mel Blanc’s “Sy/Sue/Sue/Sew” bit and his railroad announcer’s “Anaheim, Azusa, and Cuc. . . . amonga” line, now commemorated by a seven-foot bronze statue of Jack Benny in Rancho Cucamonga), explains: “Running gags cannot just be started. You gotta look at a script and say, ‘Hey, on page four we just wrote a line that could be a running gag.’ Many twenty-year running gags began as one-timers, like Sheldon Leonard’s shady racetrack tout who popped up every few shows to give Benny odds and tips on everything (“Hey, Bud, take the Super Chief—it’s got a good rail position . . . it’s a
sleeper"), or the annoying racetrack announcer, or Jack’s wise-ass parrot (typical of his purist comic mind, Benny had a strict rule that the parrot could only repeat words actually heard during the show).

Benny was regarded by his peers as mainly a great comedy editor who knew instinctively what lines to rewrite or cut, when a setup was unclear to listeners, and how to punch up a line with a word, a sound effect, or one of his famed Pinteresque comic pauses. He had a rare sensitivity to comic nuances. Balzer maintains, “Every line has a rhythm. If you have one word too many or too few, it’s not funny—de-da de-da de-da de-dum. For instance [referring to the famous your-money-or-your-life? gag], ‘If Jack says, ‘I’m thinking, I’m thinking,’ it isn’t as funny as ‘I’m thinking it over.’ It is the key word. So you have to go out there and get the laugh—and be careful you don’t pass it up on the way.”

The legendary Pause Heard ‘Round the World—when that famed holdup man demanded, “Your money or your life?”—was in fact a standard six-second laugh, not two or ten minutes, as often reported. George Balzer agrees. “The reason it got so much PR is that [critic] John Crosby liked it so much he made it the theme of several columns” he wrote about the Benny show, using the line as an ideal example of the show’s wit. “[Crosby] said it was the biggest laugh the show ever got.” Benny could give examples of several jokes that drew much longer laughs, but as the “Your-money-or-your-life?” legend grew, so did the length of the laugh. It may seem longer in retrospect because the joke, which first aired on March 28, 1948, was repeated in other forms and became almost a running gag itself.

There is also a wonderful legend of how the line was hatched: Nobody could come up with a punch line to the holdup man’s question. Josefsberg suggested a few that Tackaberry shot down, whereupon Josefsberg sniped, in the manner of comedy writers the world over, “Dammit, if you don’t like my lines, throw out a couple of your own. Don’t just lay there on your fat butt daydreaming.” To which Tackaberry muttered, “I’m thinking it over.”