



JACK BENNY AT 4



HE PLAY-ACTS AT 6

Jack Benny: Being Funny is Serious Business

Jack Benny (*front cover*) recently was named the "greatest radio personality" of the past 25 years in a *Radio Daily* poll of U. S. and Canadian radio editors. For 18 of those 25 years his comedy radio show has been in the top brackets of the radio ratings; currently it has held the No. 1 spot for more than three straight months. Yet Benny admits: "I haven't cracked a gag on the air for weeks."

Why, then, his popularity? The answer—according to other comics and radio producers—lies in the fact that while Benny may have his rivals as a comedian, he is the best *organizer* of comic material in the business.

His is the rare ability to smoothly direct the talent of both his writers and performers—to put established characters in just the right situations to titillate his audience. As for himself, he has established a character who can be funny without telling jokes because at his most serious his failings show up most humorously. "I am a pompous straight man," he explains. "Everyone else on the show bounces their gags off me. Audiences love it because *I'm* the star of the show and yet *I'm* always wrong, always outwitted and beaten down. It's funny for the same reason a kid throwing a snowball at a politician's high hat is funny."

There is another angle to the Benny brand of humor. "Habit is one of the biggest elements in com-

Wide World



JACK BENNY AND HARRY TRUMAN SERENADE D.C. PRESS CLUB.

edy," he says. "They laugh at me and the other characters on the show because they know us, and when a situation comes along they have a pretty good idea ahead of time how we'll act in it. For instance, on one show a stickup man pulls a gun on me and says: 'Your money or your life.' I don't answer for a long time, and the audience, knowing what a fantastically tight guy I am, starts laughing even before I explain to the crook that 'I'm thinking it over.'"



BENNY WIFE MARY LIVINGSTONE, DAUGHTER JOAN APPEAR MASKED WITH FIDLER (TOP) AND UNMASKED ON FIDLER'S "MYSTERY FAMILY" CONTEST.

How Laughs Are Developed

Lest that sound easy, the habit-laughs on his show are the result of years of searching trial and error. According to Benny: "The best characters and situations come along by accident. Something you try on the show goes over big, so you try it a few more times. It gets funnier each time and then it's a standard part of the show. My reputation as a penny-pincher started with a couple of gags on one show and snowballed that way. Rochester showed up as a fresh Pullman porter on one program and stayed. Same with my feud with Fred Allen."

Both Benny and his *Jack Benny Show* (CBS, Sunday, 7 p. m. EST—Sponsor: Lucky Strike) have been a long time in the process of mellowing into solid, steady humor. And before radio there were long years in vaudeville, years during which he was shaping himself into the Jack Benny of today. "Vaudeville was a great thing," he says, with nostalgia. "You could be a total flop in one town, change your act for the next town, and go on changing it from town to town till you were good. Today, there's no place for a young performer to develop through his flops. He has to be good from the start."

Benny started in vaudeville as a straight violin player. When his fiddling didn't lay them in the aisles, he began cracking jokes between tunes. The jokes went over better than the fiddling and began to take up more and more of his act. By the time he was ready for top billing, he was a gag artist who used a violin only for a swift, funny finish. Later, in radio (though he's had some film hits like *Charlie's Aunt* and *George Washington Slept Here*, he still considers himself first and foremost a radio personality) he slowly dropped the gags for a well-developed, truly humorous character.

Benny doesn't miss the gags at all, but sometimes he does miss that violin and brings it on a show. "I wish I'd kept up my practice," he says, wistfully. "Playing a violin would be a nice hobby."