

OF THE STARS

WASHINGTON DATELINE

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Jack Benny Remembered



JACK BENNY MAKES A POINT DURING RECENT INTERVIEW AT WASHINGTON'S MAYFLOWER HOTEL WITH OUR WHITE HOUSE CORRESPONDENT TRUDE B. FELDMAN. THE EXCLUSIVE INTERVIEW WAS ONE OF THE LAST BENNY GRANTED PRIOR TO HIS DEATH ON DECEMBER 26.

JACK BENNY, believe it or not, didn't really care about money. And his "stingy" image was strictly for show.

"Actually," he said in a recent interview, "Mary and I are big spenders. And the more I make, the more I can give away. I do give away a lot of money to various charities and organizations. But if people think I'm stingy, it's much funnier."

If you left high school prior to graduation, the Clark County School District invites you back to class - free, and often with pay if you qualify for benefits under the G.I. Bill. 451-1040.

Benny and Mary Livingston had been married for 47 years. "And he never gave me a bad moment," the former Sadie Marks said.

Although Jack Benny would have been 81 in February, his complexion was of a much younger man, his walk was springy like a man enjoying the prime of life and it was hard not to visualize him as age 39. His waist was trim and his blue eyes always sparkled.

Benny had been in show business more than 50 years. He was an institution on radio before the days of television. He loved his work and often worked for love. He played many benefit performances for charitable causes. He enjoyed giving pleasure to others and said he was happiest when he brought people laughter.

During our interview, Benny mused: "What does one get out of life? The satisfaction of making people laugh is, for me, a wonderful feeling. To me, it is fun and keeps me feeling young and healthful. Each year I find it a bit easier to make people laugh." And then he liked to "quote" Mark Twain: "Age is strictly a case of mind over matter. If you don't mind, it doesn't matter...."

Recently, Benny's great love was the violin, which he took seriously. He practiced every day. He hoped to become a "fine" violinist. In recent years, he had appeared with over 60 symphony orchestras and raised nearly \$4.5 million for the musicians fund and their charities. He recently gave numerous concerts in Israel.

"I love to do concerts more than anything else," he told this writer. "Concert audiences are the greatest. Concerts are the finest background a person could have."

The engrossing comedian began playing the violin at age six when his father brought home a violin which cost \$50. In recent years, Benny played a rare Stradivarius more than three centuries old worth \$40,000.

"I played the violin when I was a young chap, but gave it up," he related. "But if I liked the violin then as much as I do now, I probably would never have become a comedian."

"Not until 17 years ago did I pick up the violin again for serious practice. Now I practice religiously. Before I played my first

concert, I practiced for eight months."

That concert was in Carnegie Hall and Benny was 63. "That'll give you an idea of the kind of guts I have," he quipped.

Jack Benny was born Benjamin Kubelsky in Waukeegan, Illinois on February 14, 1894, son of Polish-Jewish immigrants. His father was a peddler-turned haberdasher. His mother died at a young age. He achieved fame in radio as the top comic in the country in the early 1930's. Between 1933 and the beginning of World War II, he made two dozen movies, and broadcasted his highly popular Sunday radio show. With the advent of television, he began a television show in 1949 and won eight Emmy awards.

During the war, he went all over the world to entertain troops. With his radio troupe -- Rochester and Don Wilson and others -- he toured service camps and hospitals. While in the Nation's capital, he visited the Vietnam wounded at Walter Reed Hospital.

Till the end, Benny had said he didn't plan to retire. "But I'd like to cut my performances to about one half of what I'm now doing," he said, "and perhaps travel less. Yet, I like to keep busy."

He pointed out that if he were in a different business -- "Say, like selling neckties or the like, then I'd have retired already. But I love the work I'm doing."

Benny described himself as a "shy and simple fellow -- not a 24-hour-a-day comedian; not a laugh machine, not a tightwad. ...In fact, for a comedian, I'm surprisingly normal. I've only been married once and I've never visited a psychiatrist, and a guy can't be more normal than that...."

What advice did he have for young people today?

"If I could live my life over," Benny replied, "I would have gotten a better education. I regret that I didn't have more schooling. Unfortunately, I hated school when I was a kid. I have wished many times, I had a better education. I wish I had cared more about my studies during school days."

Benny quit school in the 9th grade and took a job -- playing violin -- for \$8 per week. By 1925, he was earning \$750 a week doing his comedy routine.

Nonetheless, it's a measure of Benny's success that there is a junior high school named after him in Waukeegan. "It's hard to describe the feeling I get when I go back to visit that school," he told me. "But it's such a grand feeling. You see, it touches me to the point that I wish I could instill in the children how important their education is while they're in school....so they don't have the regrets later as I do...."

Benny had the reputation among his friends of being a great audience for other comedians. Danny Kaye said he'd rather play Benny's living room than any theatre. "I like other comedians," Benny said. "Most of them are good. Don Rickles is one of the funniest. George Burns and Bob Hope are my two closest friends as well as favorite comedians."

The late comic said that though most of his audiences were good ones, he cited London and Australia as the two best. "In those places you don't have to even finish a joke -- they laugh and scream before you come to the punch line."

He liked his Texaco commercials because they brought back his kiddie audiences -- kids aged five to fifteen.

Five year ago, Benny presented his collection of show business memorabilia to the University of California at Los Angeles. The collection included 900 radio scripts, and electrical transcriptions; 296 television scripts and several hundred photographs.

Famed violinist Isaac Stern said Benny had respect for music and the artist. "He also had a gentle, radiant warmth about him, and was a lovely human being as well as a super entertainer...."

President Ford said: "Benny's service to his country, his charitable works and his genuine enjoyment of the humor of others are accolades that he wore with modesty, grace and charm. If laughter is the music of the soul, Jack and his violin and his good humor have made life better for all men."

And Herbert Schlosser, President, National Broadcasting Company, summed up: "Jack Benny represented a brilliant era of entertainment. It's hard to imagine a world without him...."

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