

## Jack Benny's Intermedia Juggling Act: Integrating Radio and Film in the 1930s

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Jack Benny's top-rated NBC network radio program, emanating from Hollywood from 1935, drew listeners into the popular culture of film, thoroughly intertwining the two rival media forms. Like a funhouse mirror reflection of the *Lux Radio Theater* radio show (as analyzed by Michele Hilmes), the Jell-o program accentuated listeners' fascination with Hollywood. While the Benny show's premise concerned the performance of a radio broadcast, characters and situations centered on the world of movies. Film themes sung during the program, punning references to current movie titles, nearly 50 parodies of hit movies, and references to the Benny cast members' work in motion pictures filled the Jell-o program. The show aspired to be more connected to Hollywood than to other radio shows broadcasting on the NBC network. The Jell-o program occasionally featured appearances by Hollywood actors, directors and producers, but very rarely discussed any radio programs or radio celebrities other than Fred Allen (also employed by the Young and Rubicam agency). A number of Benny radio programs take place at the Paramount studio, where radio listeners hear him fret about his meager dressing room, lose battles with directors, producers and costars, and make disastrous attempts at film acting. The Benny radio characters' dialogue was suffused with the geography of Hollywood streets and Los Angeles neighborhoods, mentions of stars who resided near Jack's Beverly Hills home, and jokes about restaurants and nightclubs habituated by celebrities. Jokes about Jack's vanity and stinginess often involved motion pictures, too, as he insisted on viewing his films over and over, and dodged Mary's insults about attending Dish Night giveaways.

Not only was the content of Jack Benny's radio program in the 1930s intertwined with motion pictures – but so was his star image. Benny gained the greatest success on screen in a series of late 1930s radio-flavored films costarring his Jell-o show colleague Eddie “Rochester” Anderson. This integration of radio and film, as well as black and white, led to unprecedented -- but also problematic -- success. Benny's film comedies with Anderson (*Man About Town*, *Buck Benny Rides Again*, *Love Thy Neighbor*) were top money-earners for Paramount. In both arenas, the characters' comic routines not only meshed media forms but also featured far greater interaction between black and white characters than was typical of either Hollywood or network radio at the time.

White and black critics and the public responded strongly to the comic pair. Many praised the high quality of the humor and Rochester's witty put-downs of the Boss made him a sensation. Benny and Anderson were honored with Schomburg Center awards in 1940 for their race relations efforts. Nevertheless, the comics' close familiarity and master and servant relationship, in this time of Jim Crow segregation, also created an undercurrent of tension and critical reaction. Some conservative white Southerners objected angrily to NBC at suggestions of racial equality, while African-American newspaper critics and the NAACP took the Jello radio program to task for Rochester's all-too-frequent boozing, dice-rolling, and razor-wielding.

This paper combines textual analysis of the Benny radio shows and films, and reviews of the programs, with an examination of how the program, and the two comics' star personae were constructed by their advertising agency, network and studios. It will

illuminate the complex ways in which the separation and integration of film and radio programs, film and radio stars, were debated and understood in American culture of the 1930s and early 1940s.

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