

# GEORGE BURNS

## THE FIRST 100 YEARS

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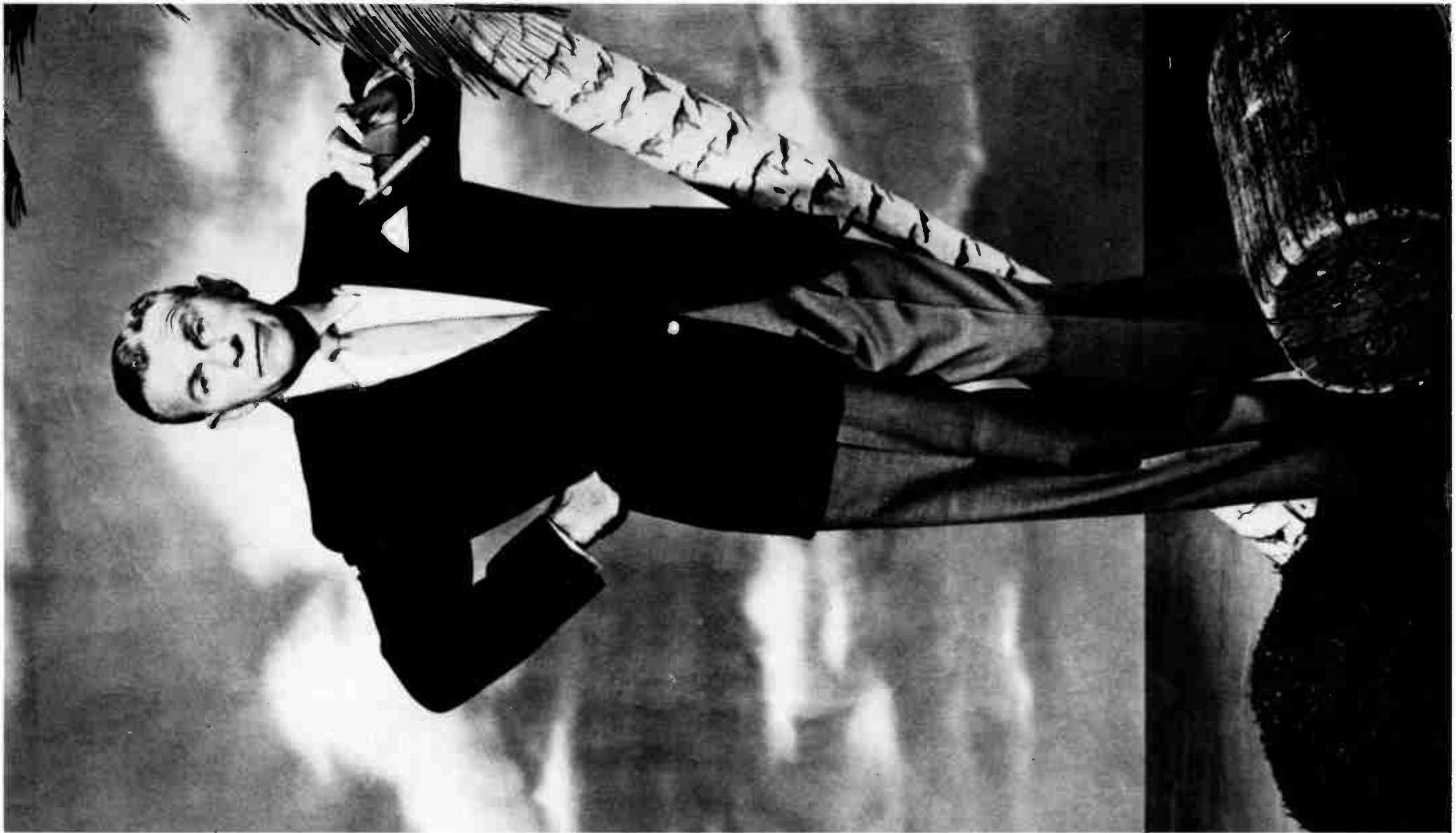
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# George Burns



F o r e w o r d

**T**he story of George Burns' life is the story of the 20th Century. As we researched material for this special publication, we were astounded by the innumerable historical and cultural events that have occurred during his lifetime. For example, the year George was born, 1896, was the same year Thomas Edison encouraged the chief engineer for the Detroit Edison Company, Henry Ford, to continue with his construction of a gasoline engine to be utilized in personal transportation. "Electric cars must be kept near power stations," Edison told Ford, "The storage battery is too heavy. Steam cars have to have a boiler and fire. You have the thing. Keep at it." From the automobile to the airplane, to space flight and man's landing on the moon, George Burns has seen it all.

Eighteen different presidents have been elected during his lifetime (and he may see a nineteenth this year if the Republicans have their way).

George's career began on the stage in 1903, and until recently that is where he plied his trade for over ninety years. Beginning in vaudeville, he attained success, along with his partner and wife Gracie Allen, in radio, the movies, and television. He has entertained kings, queens, princes and princesses, presidents and prime ministers. He gave Ann-Margret her first big break, for which a generation of young men, not to mention Elvis Presley, are eternally grateful.

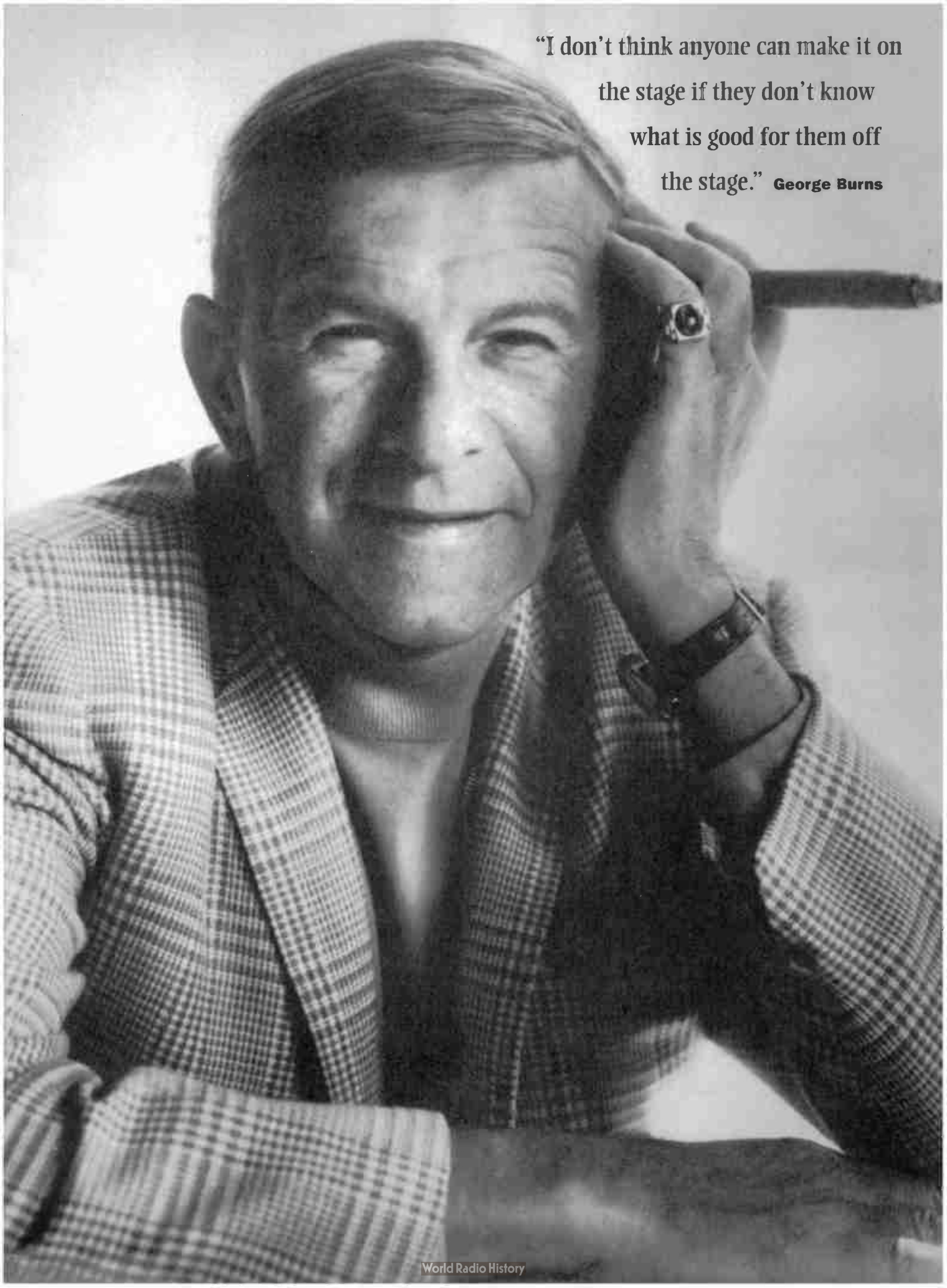
His influence can be seen on television today (*Seinfeld* owes more than a casual nod to *The George Burns & Gracie Allen Show*).

Now, as George Burns celebrates his 100th birthday, we take a loving look back at the life and career of America's most beloved entertainer.

The Editors

# The First 100 Years



A black and white portrait of George Burns. He is shown from the chest up, wearing a checkered blazer over a light-colored turtleneck sweater. He has a slight smile and is looking towards the camera. His right hand is raised to his forehead, with a ring on his ring finger. The background is a plain, light color.

“I don’t think anyone can make it on  
the stage if they don’t know  
what is good for them off  
the stage.” **George Burns**

# Happy Birthday George!

## THE FIRST 100 YEARS

# 1896-1996

## Life Before Gracie

George Burns life began as  
Nathan Birnbaum in New  
York on January 20, 1896.

George Burns entered the world as Nathan Birnbaum on January 20, 1896, one of Louis and Dorothy Birnbaum's twelve children living in a small apartment on New York's Lower East Side. Grover Cleveland was the president of the United States, and later that year the first public exhibition of motion pictures projected on a screen took place.

Nathan's parents were both immigrants who had met and married in Eastern Europe. Like many living there at the time under mostly dreadful conditions, they dreamed of a better life awaiting them in America. Finally, Louis made the journey across the Atlantic on his own, leaving Dorothy and their two young children behind. Upon arriving in New York, he found work at a sweatshop where he pressed pants for a grueling twelve hours a day. After saving enough ▶

"The Girl I Left Behind Me" was a long running Broadway play at the turn of the century. After completing a Broadway run, plays like this went on tour around the country.

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► money he sent for his wife and children, and the Birnbaums took up permanent residence in the states. Eventually they settled into a four room apartment on the third floor of a tenement house at 259 Rivington Street where young Nathan grew up.

Nathan's first foray into show business was at the age of seven. He and three friends would go to a candy store after school where the owner paid them each five cents a day mixing the syrup that he put in his ice cream sodas. Stirring the syrup for a couple of hours got to be pretty boring. So to pass the time the boys started singing songs, and pretty soon they were harmonizing with each other. Nathan sang tenor.

One day they noticed that a small group of people had stopped at the top of the basement stairs to the candy store to listen to the boys sing. Not only did the people applaud, they threw down pennies as well. In fact, the group made twice as much singing as they did stirring syrup. "It was the day I fell in love with show business," George Burns would recall several decades later.

The boys decided to call themselves the Peewee Quartet and were soon singing in back yards, saloons, on ferry boats, and at amateur nights. "Our mailman, Harry Farley, taught us harmony," George remembered, "He always wanted to be in show business, poor Harry, but he never made it."

George recalled that not everyone was fond of the Quartet: "We were thrown out of a lot of saloons and took quite a few facefuls of dishwater. I remember that we were singing on a ferry boat, and we found this guy necking with his girl. We stood in front of him and sang songs like 'Always Think of Mother and She'll Always Think of You.' He didn't want to hear harmony, he wanted to make love to his girl. He grabbed us and threw us overboard. But you couldn't drown in the East River in those days because it was full of garbage. All you had to do was to find a pile of garbage and you were saved. You had to be in love with show business to survive."

The Peewee Quartet came to an end after two years, but Nathan Birnbaum had been bitten—and infected—by the show business bug.

And show business in the early part of the 20th century was vaudeville.

And making it in vaudeville meant playing the Palace Theatre in New York.

Nathan tried many different acts, and many different names over the years, hoping that each would be the one that would lead him to the Palace. He was the entire "Company" of an act called "Mac Fry and Company." He was Glide of "Goldie, Fields and Glide"; Williams of "Brown and Williams;" Links of "Burns and Links." As George later recalled, "The only qualification for a name was that I had to be able to



300 NIGHTS IN NEW YORK

THE GREAT SUCCESS

# THE GIRL I LEFT BEHIND ME -

DIRECTION BY  
GUSTAVE FROHMAN

BY BELASCO & FYLES



"SHE IS DEAD"

Metropolitan  
N.Y.



“The Birnbaums dreamed of a better life awaiting them across the ocean in America.”

---



Lew Fields and Joe  
Weber were two  
popular satirists  
on the music-hall  
circuit. They  
amused audiences  
for over 30 years.



spell it.”

He worked with many animals including seals and dogs (he was Maurice of “Maurice Valente and His Wonder Dog”). Nathan was known as Willie Saks for awhile. He was “Friend” in the act known as “Ruby Delmar and Friend.” He became Eddie Delight when the real Eddie left show business and gave Nat, as he was now known, his unused business cards. Another reason for changing his name was to fool theater managers who hadn’t liked him under his old names.



Minnie Madern Fiske was a very popular classic stage actress at the turn of the century.

All of the acts had one thing in common though, they weren’t very good. “I was lousy,” Burns said, “But I was lucky to have vaudeville. As bad as I was, there were theatres that were even worse, where I could play and work on my acts.” It was a tough time for Nat Birnbaum, but he refused to give up his dream.

During one of his stage incarnations, Nat adopted the stage name of George Burns. His older brother Isadore had been nicknamed Izzy by his family and friends, a name he hated. So, he took to calling himself George. Nat liked the name George and figured if it was good enough for his older brother, it was good enough for him. The Burns came from Burns Brothers Coal Company.

Shortly after adopting his new name, George Burns teamed up with Billy Lorraine, calling themselves, quite appropriately, Burns and Lorraine-Two Broadway Thieves. The two performers impersonated famous Broadway personalities like George M. Cohan, Eddie Cantor, and Al Jolson, along with telling jokes. Lorraine was the straight man as George had yet to find his permanent niche in show business. The act was a moderate success, but after about a year the duo decided to go their separate ways. George had decided he wanted to work with a woman as a straight man because most of the jokes he was doing were about dating and relationships.

One of Burns and Lorraine’s last shows was in Union City in 1922. Nat Birnbaum’s ticket to playing the Palace Theater, and finally making it in show business, was sitting in the audience that night, his next partner Gracie Allen.♠

# George & Gracie

“First of all you’ve  
got to have talent.  
And then you’ve  
got to marry her  
like I did.” *George Burns*

**T**hey built their entire career around the question, “How’s your brother?” George would ask; Gracie would answer. When they were playing vaudeville, George would ask the question, and, as Gracie began to answer, he would walk off stage, come back carrying a rug and lie down while she did all the talking. As George often acknowledged, Gracie did all the work.

When they first met, in 1922, that wasn’t the way it was supposed to work out. The two met at Wiennig and Sherbers restaurant on 45th Street in New York. She was a delicate, little wisp of a girl weighing about ninety pounds, and requiring a Cinderella size 4 1/2 shoe. She had black Colleen hair, one green eye, one blue eye, and a heavy Irish brogue. Her father had been in show business and Grace Allen had started





**Gracie and George run through a routine for an episode of their hit radio show in the late 30s.**



performing at age three, dancing an Irish jig. Later she appeared with her sisters as part of a singing and dancing act, the Four Colleens.

When she met George, who was then going by his given name Nathan Birnbaum, Gracie, at the ripe old age of 18, was ready to retire from show business and was planning a career as a secretary. She and her sisters had been touring in the dramatic Irish act, Larry Reilly & Company. Her sister Bessie left the act to get married. Her sister Hazel left to help with a dancing school back in their home town, San Francisco.

Gracie stayed on until the duo was supposed to open in Hoboken, New Jersey. Then Gracie saw the marquee. It read, "Larry Reilly" with no company whatsoever. "Nattie," she said (she always called him Nattie, and he called her Googie), "I didn't get any billing before, but no billing I couldn't stand."

George had split up with his last partner, Billy Lorraine and their Broadway-star impersonation act called "Burns and Lorraine—Two Broadway Thieves." He wanted to do a talking act and he wanted a female partner. He stole jokes from "College Humor" and "Wiz Bang" magazines for

George & Gracie





World Radio History

George Burns • The First 100 Years





**Gracie makes  
like William Tell  
to a skeptical  
George in the  
1937 comedy  
*College Holiday*.**

material. The woman was to be the straight man.

That was okay with Gracie and they rehearsed the act that way. They opened at the Hill Street Theater in Newark for five dollars a day. That first night they went out on stage together and started to perform., Gracie got bigger laughs with the straight lines than George got with his toppers. He quickly rewrote the act.

It was after that first show in Hoboken that another historic pairing took place. George met Jack Benny who was dating Gracie's friend Mary Kelly. George, Gracie and Jack would be life long friends.

Illogical logic was what George called the kind of material he began developing for Gracie. Dumb Dora routines were commonplace in vaudeville, but the women usually played "dumb," with Gracie it was more like a philosophy of life. She just saw things a twist differently then the rest of us. While the other comediennes wore middy blouses and pleated skirts, Gracie was always beautifully dressed. She came across as very lady like, but, well, dizzy. In fact, they developed an act they eventually called "Dizzy." It ended with this dialogue:

"You're dizzy," George would say.

"I'm glad I'm dizzy," Gracie would reply.

"I'm glad you're glad you're dizzy."

"And I'm glad you're glad that I'm glad I'm dizzy."

It was the act that gained them recognition. People walked out of the theater repeating the line.



**In the late 30s author S.S. Van Dine wrote an entry in his Philo Vance detective series called *The Gracie Allen Murder Case*. Paramount filmed it in 1939.**

At about the same time, George was beginning to see that Gracie made him feel more than dizzy. She made him positively lovesick. George did not reveal his feeling toward her for almost a year. She was planning to marry Benny Ryan, a handsome vaudeville star. She almost married Ryan in 1925, but, just in time, George got a sixteen-week booking on the Orpheum circuit for Burns and Allen. When they returned to New York, Benny Ryan was on tour, and George pressed his case with Gracie.

Finally, on Christmas Eve she relented, and said yes to him. They married in January of 1926 and for their honeymoon they broke in their new act, "Lamb Chops", which was an immediate hit. They signed a five year contract with the Keith-Orpheum circuit. As part of the deal they played the Palace Theatre on Broadway in 1928. George considered it the proof that they were bonafide stars.

But just as their star was ascending, vaudeville was declining. Killed by radio and movies.

"What are you looking for?" George asked.

"The audience," Gracie replied  
George pointed to the camera.  
"The audience is right there."

In 1929 George and Gracie were offered their first film work. They made a short film for Paramount at the Astoria studios in Queens. They were to receive \$1,800 for nine minutes work. Their skit was as follows: Gracie walks into the set and starts looking under the couch, in a cigar box.

"What are you looking for?" George asked.

"The audience," she replied  
George pointed to the camera. "The audience is right there," he explained. "We're supposed to talk for nine minutes. If we can

**Gracie ran for president in 1940 on the Surprise Party ticket as part of a promotion for the Burns and Allen radio program. One of the planks of her platform was practical apparel for women. Here she models a lettuce gown, surmounted with bodice of artichokes, and accented with cranberry jewelry. Practical? You bet! The gown was eaten when it went out of style.**







do that, we get paid eighteen hundred dollars. Can you talk for nine minutes?"

"Ask me how my brother is."

"Gracie, how's your brother?"

She talked about her brother. George looked at his watch every few minutes. At the end of nine minutes

she was in the middle of a joke. He stopped her. "That's nine minutes," he said. "You can't finish that story." George looked in the camera and said. "Ladies and gentlemen, we just made eighteen hundred dollars. Say good night, Gracie."

In the next two years they did fourteen short

George and Gracie rehearse for their radio show.

# George & Gracie





films. They made their first full-length film, *The Big Broadcast*, in 1932. In the movies, George and Gracie usually played themselves or characters almost identical to their usual vaudeville shtick: she played the ditz and he was the straight man. They made 12 features together; Gracie also appeared in three movies on her own. George later said in "Gracie: A Love Story" that "...Gracie found making movies to be very boring. There just wasn't enough to do...The thing Gracie liked best about making pictures was that it enabled her to work with movie stars. She was in awe of movie stars. It never occurred to her that if she wanted to see a real movie star all she had to do was look in the mirror."

In *The Big Broadcast*, George played a radio

station owner, which he played straight until Gracie came along as the new receptionist. This musical-comedy spoof of the radio industry starred Bing Crosby.

Their next picture was *International House*, for Paramount in 1933, in which Burns and Allen had the first two reels to themselves playing a doctor and his nurse/receptionist. In this comedy they shared the screen with W.C. Fields who played an inventor.

They were back on the sidelines in the feature *College Humor* (Paramount, 1933). Fun on campus was the theme for that comedy starring Bing Crosby and Jack Oakie. But they were part of the plot in *Six of a Kind* (Paramount, 1934). George and Gracie are on a cross-country motor trip with Charlie Ruggles and



George, actress Dixie Lee and co-star Joe Morrison listen to one of Gracie's illogical logical explanations in 1935's *Love in Bloom*. That same year they co-starred with George Barbier (center), Betty Furness and Andrew Tombes in *Here Comes Cookie*.



## George & Gracie



**George tries a little sleight of hand on his two children, daughter Sandra and son Ronnie. Ronnie later starred in his parents television show.**

**Gracie gets hypnotized, if that's possible, in an episode of her TV show.**







# George & Gracie

Mary Boland when they encounter W.C. Fields as the sheriff of a one-horse town. Unfortunately, the characters George and Gracie played were so annoying and unsympathetic that it didn't serve the duo well.

They had a happier experience in *We're Not Dressing* (Paramount, 1934). George and Gracie played anthropologists in the picture about a screwball debutante tamed by a sailor when they're cast away on a deserted isle. The picture co-starred Bing Crosby, Carole Lombard, Ethel Merman.

Three studio throw aways followed: *Many Happy Returns* (Paramount, 1934); *Love In Bloom* (Paramount, 1935), and *Here Comes Cookie* (Paramount, 1935), in which Gracie's millionaire father wanted her to pretend that the family had lost all its money so that a Spanish fortune hunter would lose interest in Gracie's sister. In it Gracie sings the song "Lookie, Lookie, Lookie, Here Comes Cookie" that became a popular hit.

George and Gracie were well featured in three revue movies: *The Big Broadcast of 1936*, in which they starred with Jack Oakie and Ethel Merman; *The Big Broadcast of 1937*, alongside Jack Benny, Martha Raye, Benny Goodman and his Orchestra, and Leopold Stokowski in a variety show that was a satire of the radio industry, and *College Holiday*, in which they played opposite their good friend Jack Benny in a plot



**Gracie found a new husband, William Post, Jr. in the MGM comedy *Mr. & Mrs. North*, released in 1941.**

that involved saving a hotel by putting together a variety show.

Their most memorable film appearance came when Paramount loaned

them out to RKO to do *Damsel in Distress* in 1937. George and Gracie danced with Fred Astaire in this movie made while Astaire was taking a break from his partner Ginger Rogers. Astaire is teamed with Joan Fontaine in the George Gershwin scored musical that included hits such as "A Foggy Day in London Town" and "Nice Work if You Can Get It." George and Gracie had been so nervous about dancing with Fred Astaire that they borrowed the "whisk broom" dance from some old vaudeville associates and practiced it until they had it down pat. They then taught the dance to Astaire and the three of them performed admirably together on screen.

*College Swing* (Paramount, 1938) came next. Gracie inherits a college after becoming the first female family member to pass through the school in 200 years. Reviewers said Gracie was the best thing about this film musical, which also featured Martha Raye, Bob Hope, Betty Grable and Jackie Coogan.

In *Honolulu* (MGM, 1939), Eleanor Powell and Robert Young co-star with George and Gracie. In this story Eleanor tap dances her way into a Hawaiian plantation after switching places with its real owner. It was during the filming of this movie that Gracie







learned the hula, a dance she regaled party guests with for years to come. It was also George and Gracie's last film together.

With George's full encouragement, Gracie went on to appear in three more motion pictures on her own. There was only one actress who could have played the title role in *The Gracie Allen Murder Case* (Paramount, 1939). The story was based on the mystery novel of the same name by mystery writer S.S. Van Dine. Gracie helped veteran film sleuth, Philo Vance, solve a case. She appeared in another comedy-mystery, *Mr. and Mrs. North*, for MGM in 1941, and made a guest appearance in *Two Girls and a Sailor*, also for MGM in 1944, which was her last feature film. She appeared only to play her "One-Finger Concerto."

**Atomic Scientist: Do you know anything about radioactivity?**

**Gracie: Of course, my husband and I have been in it for years.**

**We started with Guy Lombardo.**

It was radio more than either film or television, or vaudeville, that was the mainstay of Burns & Allen's career. They appeared on radio for the first time in England in 1929. In the states they first appeared on Eddie Cantor's show. Cantor asked Gracie to appear with him without George. Next, both George and Gracie appeared on Rudy Vallee's Fleischmann's Yeast Hour. Their first long gig was on Guy Lombardo's WABC show for General Cigar. They stayed there about a year.

Then General Cigar offered them their own show.

In 1933 they happened upon a great publicity stunt: the search for Gracie's missing brother. They were trying to publicize the fact that their radio show was moving to a different time. On January 4, 1933, Gracie popped up on the Eddie Cantor show and announced she was searching for her lost brother. Later she was on Jack Benny's show looking for the brother. Then they went over to Rudy Vallee's show on NBC, but he had been ordered not to give air play to the CBS program's publicity stunt. Rudy Vallee let them do their bit anyway and the control room cut him off, the network went dead for four seconds. That created even more publicity for George, Gracie and her lost brother. The stunt continued on the "Guy Lombardo Show," "Mystery in Paris," "The Tydol Show," soap operas and dramas. Gracie was photographed at the top of the Empire State Building, the Statue of Liberty, and Coney Island looking for her brother. They received 350,000 letters and their ratings soared. The search for her missing brother made the show one of the most popular on the air.

In the midst of the success of their radio show, George and Gracie decided it was time to start a family. Unable to have children of their own, they adopted two children from the Cradle, a Catholic foundling home in Evanston, Illinois. The first child they adopted was a five week old girl, Sandra Jean Burns. A year later they adopted a two month old boy, Ronald Jon Burns. They moved the

# George & Gracie

**Many fans forget that Gracie was an accomplished singer, and George a musician.**

show from New York to Hollywood when the children were still babies. They built a home on Maple Drive in Beverly Hills where George still lives today.

The radio show enjoyed ongoing popularity and featured orchestra leaders such as Guy Lombardo, Paul Whiteman, Ray Noble, Artie Shaw, and Meredith Wilson. Guest stars included such luminaries as Clark Gable, Eddie Cantor, Jolson, Charles Laughton and Elsa Lanchester, Rita Hayworth, Betty Grable, Lana Turner, Veronica Lake, Hedy Lamarr, Dorothy Lamour, Marlene Dietrich, Lucille Ball, Charles Boyer, Shirley Temple, Bea Lillie, Cary Grant, Ronald Reagan, Frank Sinatra and, of course, Jack Benny.

In the early 1940s the ratings started to slip so George decided to change the format. He determined that the problem was that they were getting too old to continue with the flirtation act they had been doing for their entire career. He decided it was time to let the audience know that he and Gracie were really married and that they had kids. So that's precisely what George did. At the beginning of one broadcast, George announced that they were long married with children. Their characters instantly transformed and the ratings immediately began to improve. They remained among the top shows until they quit radio for TV in 1950.

**“Even big politicians don't know what to do. Gracie doesn't know either. But neither do you, so, vote for Gracie to win the presidential race.”** Gracie's campaign song, 1940

Gracie was always agreeable to doing publicity for the show. After the search for her

missing brother ended, she performed three other memorable publicity stunts to promote the show: Gracie's art exhibition, Gracie's concert tour and Gracie's campaign for president.

In 1938 when surrealist art was the rage, Gracie claimed to have painted 10 paintings to be shown at a prestigious gallery in New York. The pictures which had names like “Man with Mike Fright Moons Over Manicurist,” “Dogs Gather on Street Corner to Watch Man-Fight,” and “Toothless Mouth Munching on Tuneless Melody.” The show was a tremendous success. It was covered by radio and newspaper reporters. “Look” magazine ran one of the paintings on the cover. The opening-night party was a major New York social event. After closing in New York, the art show toured fifty cities for over six months.

Gracie's concert tour involved actual performing. Orchestra leader Paul Whiteman's arranger had written “The Concerto for Index Finger,” featuring a piano solo by Gracie. In the “One Finger Concerto” she played the scale with her index finger and hit the wrong final note. Paul Whiteman would then play that note correctly, and the entire orchestra would play until it was time again for Gracie's solo. Then she'd make the same mistake again. The concerto ended when Gracie got the note right and the whole orchestra stood up and cheered. With this act Gracie made it to Carnegie Hall in New York and the Palladium in London.

Gracie's presidential campaign began in 1940. She ran against FDR and Wendell Willkie as a candidate of the Surprise Party. The joke started on the radio show, and when it caught on they extended it and Gracie began making unannounced appearances on other radio shows.







**Gracie in an early publicity still for CBS-TV's "The George Burns and Gracie Allen Show."**

When Ken Murray asked her which party she was affiliated with. "Same old party," she told him, "George Burns." Then Union Pacific Railway offered a campaign train for Gracie and whistle-stop tour. The train stopped at 34 cities and towns on the way to Omaha, the city that had agreed to host her nominating convention. More than 250,000 fans turned out to meet the train along the way. On election day she received several thousand write in votes.

**George:** Gracie, what do you think of television?

**Gracie:** I think it's wonderful—I hardly ever watch radio anymore.

On October 12, 1950 their theme song "Love Nest" played and George and Gracie premiered "The Burns and Allen Show" It began with George speaking directly to the audience: "Hello, everybody, I'm George Burns, better known as Gracie Allen's husband...I've been a straight man for so many years that from habit I repeat everything. I went fishing with a fellow the other day and he fell overboard. He yelled 'Help! Help!' so I said 'Help? Help?' and while I was waiting for him to get his laugh, he drowned."

The show was innovative in that George and Gracie played themselves, although we rarely saw them work on their TV show. We saw them mostly in their suburban home. It was a typical home except you could see where most of the exterior brick had been cut away to allow us entry to their living room. Only George could step outside the brick and speak directly to the viewing audience as a narrator. It was an idea he borrowed from Thornton Wilder's play "Our Town."

The cast consisted of George and Gracie and the Mortons, Harry and Blanche. Harry was played by three actors during the eight year run of the show. First by Hal March, then Fred Clark. Larry Keating was the third Harry Morton and he played it the longest. Bea Benedaret played Blanche. Bill Goodman and later Harry Von Zell played the announcer. Their son Ronnie joined the cast later in the run. Their director was Fred de Cordova, who later directed Johnny Carson's "Tonight Show" for many years.

Carnation shared the sponsorship with B.F. Goodrich and for two years the show was shot live every other week from the Mansfield Theater in New York, and then moved to Los Angeles where it was filmed.

The plots all played off Gracie's screwball take on life and centered not around their careers but their home and neighbors. It was an extension of the question fans of Burns and Allen might have been asking themselves for years—what in the world is it like to live with a woman like that?

For Gracie, television was very difficult. She had always suffered from mike fright on radio. Now the television cameras blinking its red light at her, signaling that the audience was watching her live, was completely unnerving. Eventually, she made them cover up the light so she wouldn't know when it was on.

At first they were on air only every other week, but when they began filming the show, it played once a week. The schedule was grueling for Gracie who not only had to learn her lines, but everyone else's as well. Her dialogue was so convoluted that she couldn't simply memorize it. Her answers didn't necessarily follow from the question asked, so she had to know what was said before her line in order to respond appropriately, or inappropriately, as Gracie would have it.

The show was very successful, but Gracie was eager to retire. Every year their option would be picked up for the next year, George dreaded telling her. Finally, before their eighth and last season, he asked her if she was really serious about retirement, and she said yes.

Hollywood columnist and Burns and Allen friend Louella Parsons announced Gracie's retirement. Her last episode aired June 11, 1958, and the show—with the rest of the cast intact—went on for another year, but without Gracie it failed. When she retired she spent time with her family and grandchildren something she'd never really had a chance to do before. Gracie never performed again in any media. In 1961, Gracie had a heart attack and from then on recurring angina. On August 27, 1964, Gracie suffered a fatal heart attack at home with George by her side. Only after her death did anyone learn that she had retired on her doctor's

orders.

In "Gracie, A Love Story," George remembers the night she died. The doctor asked if he wanted to see her. "Of course I did. I wanted to talk to her for just a few more minutes. I wanted to stand next to her on stage and hear the laughter of the audience. I wanted to see her smile and hear that birdlike voice and that unmistakable cackling laugh. I wanted her to look up at me with her trusting eyes...And I wanted to ask her just once more, "Gracie, how's your brother?"

George Jessel read the eulogy at her funeral. "The act is over, the bow music has faded, the billing will have to be changed—the next stage manager will have to be told 'George N. Burns, in one alone.' So be it. The passing of this sweet girl who never seemed to grow older is again something that cannot be challenged. The hope of mankind must be in the faith that the play is never over—when the curtain falls, it rises again..."

### Gracie's Illogical Logic

Gracie's relations:

"Guess what George, my sister had a brand new baby."

"Boy or girl?"

"I don't know, but I can't wait to find out if I'm an aunt or an uncle."

\*

"George, my father fell down the stairs with three quarts of liquor.

"Did he spill it?"

"No, silly, he kept his mouth closed."

\*

"George, my brother the window washer lost his job.

"Your brother the window washer lost his job?"

"That's right. He was working on the twentieth floor, and when he got through he stepped back to admire his work..."

"And that's how he lost his job."

\*

Gracie on marriage:

"It's the duty of every woman to go out and

spend more than she can afford so that her husband will go out and earn more than he's able to."

\*

BLANCHE: Wait till you hear this! I just got a phone call from Lucille Vanderlip and she told me Margie Bates got a beautiful diamond bracelet from her husband.

GRACIE: I can't believe it.

BLANCHE: Why not?

GRACIE: If Lucille's husband gave another woman a diamond bracelet, you'd think she'd be the last one to mention it.

\*

Just Gracie:

George encounters Gracie examining his socks...

GEORGE: Gracie, what are you doing?

GRACIE: I'm seeing if they've got holes in them.

GEORGE: But then you turn them inside out and do the same thing.

GRACIE: I wanted to see if the hole goes all the way through.

GEORGE: Well, I just thought I'd ask.

GRACIE: If you don't ask, you don't learn.

\*

GEORGE: She worked out a system where we wouldn't have to pay any tax. If you owe the government five thousand dollars, you make out your return for ten thousand. The government owes you five, and you owe them five, so you're even.

\*

GRACIE: Blanche, I heard some gossip about you from a woman.

BLANCHE: Oh—what was it?

GRACIE: I don't remember—I forgot it the minute I told it to her.

\*

GRACIE: I think there's so much good in the worst of us, and so many of the worst of us get the best of us, that the rest of us aren't even worth talking about. ♦



George & Gracie



**G e o r g e**

**On**

**TV**

**“The George Burns and Gracie Allen Show” was George’s first foray into television. He has remained an active participant ever since, including playing himself in the 1978 TV movie The Comedy Company, and making his dramatic television debut in the 1982 telefilm Two of a Kind. Let’s take a look back...**

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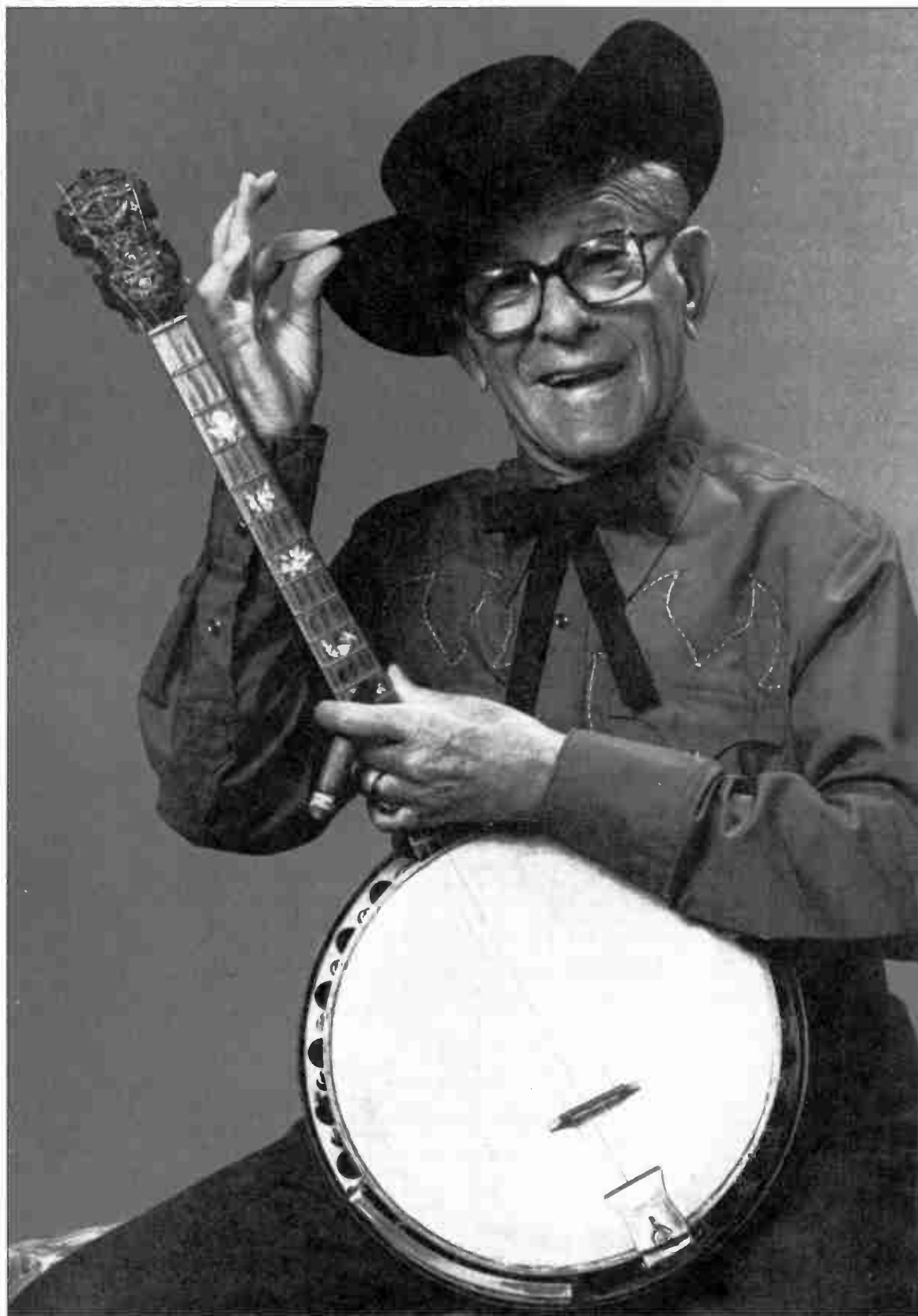
# George ON TV

With wife Gracie retired, "The George Burns and Gracie Allen Show" evolved into "The George Burns Show" and moved from CBS to NBC where it aired at 9:00 on Tuesday nights for one season. Most of the Burns and Allen regulars also moved, including Bea Benaderet (pictured below), who became George's secretary on the show. Though Gracie did not appear on the show, she was constantly referred to by Benaderet's character Blanche Morton.





**"Live From Studio 8H-100 Years of America's Popular Music" aired in the spring of 1981. Featured with George were Eydie Gorme (left), composer-conductor Jack Elliott (top), and Steve Lawrence.**

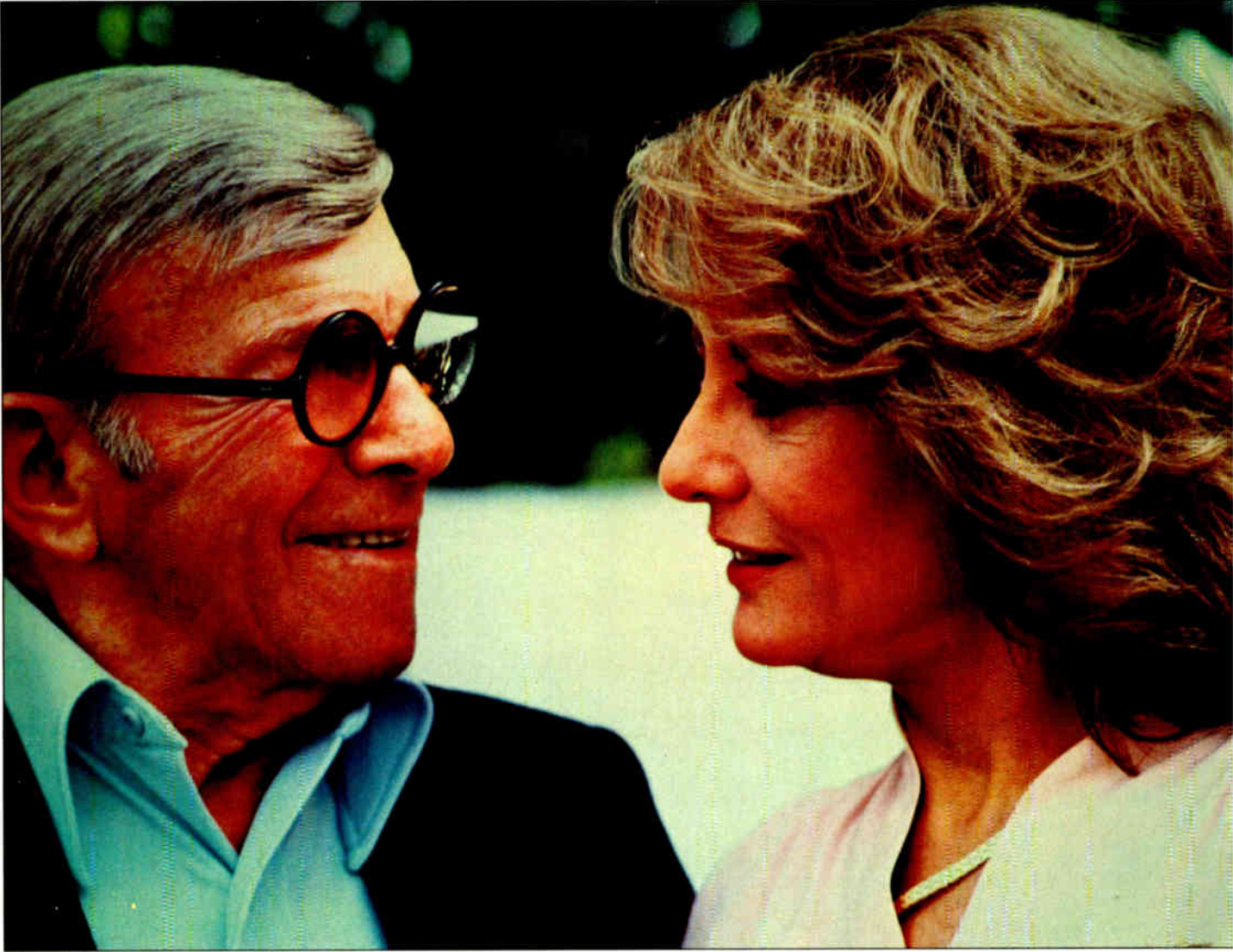


**George caught "Country Fever" in 1980 when he headlined his first country music special, "George Burns in Nashville???" on NBC-TV. The show was taped at the Grand Ole Opry in Nashville.**





# George ON TV



**George sat down for a face-to-face chat with Barbara Walters in the late 70s.**

**"The Hollywood Palace" was ABC-TV's attempt to create a must-see variety hour on Saturday nights, a la "The Ed Sullivan Show" on Sunday nights in the mid-60s. A different star hosted the show each week. Here George does a little soft shoe with Mary Costa.**







**George led the cheers for a late 70s variety special, assisted by 1976 Olympic decathlon champion Bruce Jenner and former Miss America Phyllis George.**



**Two of America's finest singers. Well, okay, one of America's finest singers, Gladys Knight, and her friend George Burns got together for a variety special in the late 70s.**



# George ON TV



**Over the years George made the rounds of nearly all the prominent talk shows including "The Merv Griffin Show."**





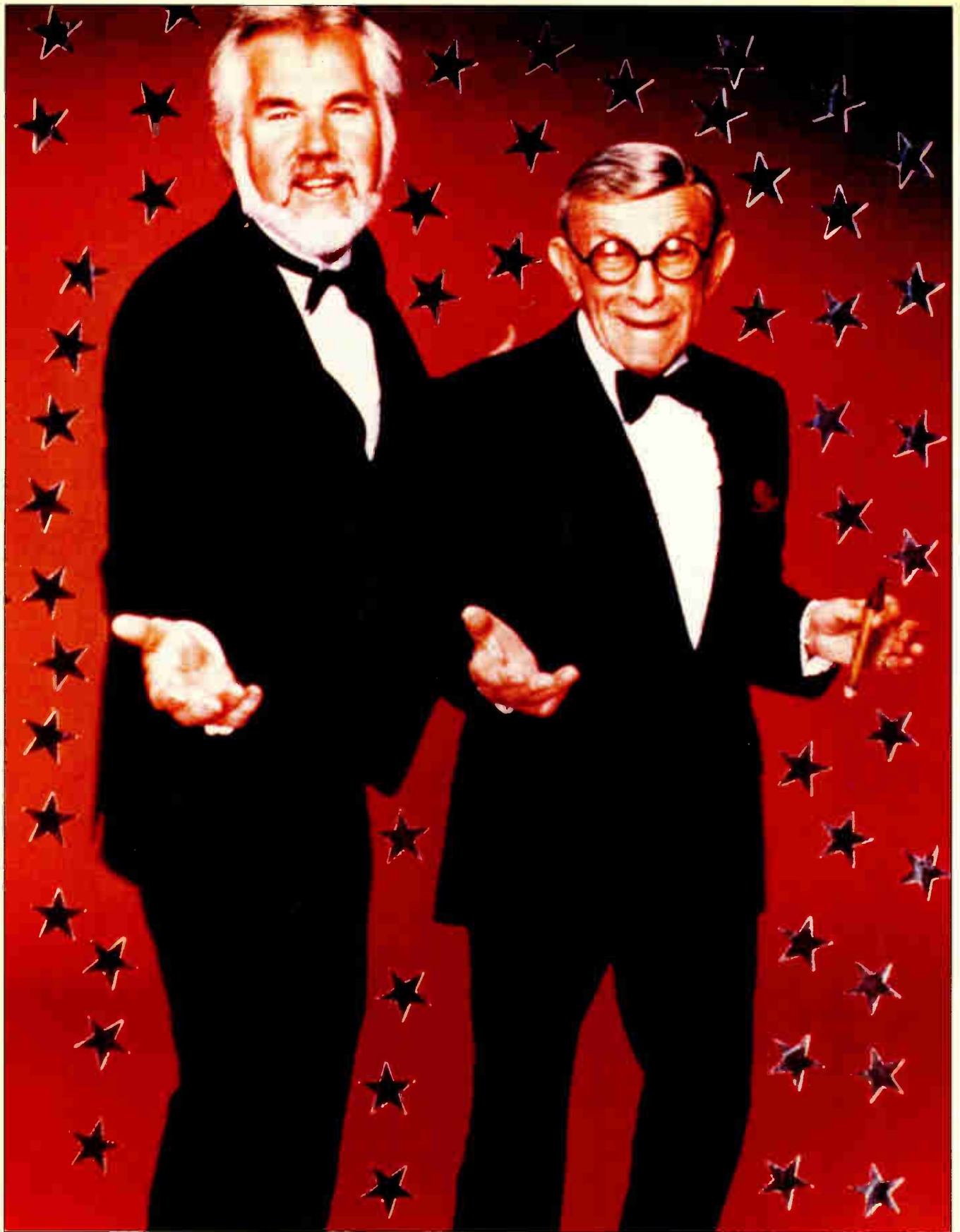
**America's two favorite comedians back-to-back in 1983. NBC-TV aired both a Bob Hope special and "George Burns Celebrates 80 Years in Show Business" on the night of September 19, 1983.**




**Balloons, noisemakers, confetti, a three-tiered cake, and, of course, the ever-present cigar, were all part of the setting for the CBS-TV special celebrating George's 90th birthday in 1986. Five years later George dusted off his ol' straw hat and CBS recycled the confetti for his 95th birthday special.**







**Bitten by the country music bug in the early 80s, George teamed up with singer Kenny Rogers for a network special.**

A photograph of George Burns, an older man with glasses, wearing a black tuxedo and a red bow tie. He is smiling and holding a wrapped gift with a large red bow. He is surrounded by four young women, all smiling. Two women are standing behind him, and two are seated in front of him. They are all dressed in festive, holiday-themed attire. The background is a vibrant, abstract pattern of red, blue, and green shapes, suggesting a Christmas theme. The overall mood is cheerful and celebratory.

It's not hard to imagine why George is smiling, surrounded as he is by a bevy of beautiful elves for a network Christmas special.



# “Jack Benny, My Dearest and Closest Friend”

There are a lot of legendary friendships in the history of show business—Humphrey Bogart and Spencer Tracy, Bob Hope and Bing Crosby, Dean Martin and Frank Sinatra, to name a few. But perhaps the best known friendship, and one of the funniest, was the off stage pairing of pals George Burns and Jack Benny.

Perhaps the funniest duo that *never* had their own radio or television show was the comedy team of Burns and Benny. Friends from their days in vaudeville together, George Burns and Jack Benny were each other's best friend (not including their wives of course). George was probably the only person who could literally make Jack fall on the floor laughing—in a restaurant, a men's room, or on the street, anywhere in public.

George was arguably the greatest straight man who ever walked a stage, but when it came to his conversations with Jack, George invariably delivered the punch line. And Jack knew funny. For most of his life comedians sought to break that classic deadpan look of his into a smile. Most usually failed. But it was George Burns who only had to look at Jack a certain way to make the perpetual thirty-nine year old miser erupt in laughter.

Gracie Allen and Jack Benny were already friends when George first met Jack. In George's book “Gracie, A Love Story,” he tells of a little routine Jack and Gracie would do. Jack would say, “I hope I live up to your expectations, Gracie.” She'd respond, “Oh, Jack, I'm sure you will, on account of I'm not expecting very much.” George owed a lot to Jack though. When Gracie Allen couldn't decide whether to go on the vaudeville circuit with George or marry her

then-boyfriend Benny Ryan, Jack told her to do the circuit, pointing out, “You can always get married when you come back.” And she did, but not to Benny Ryan.

And it was Jack who inadvertently helped launch the film career of Burns and Allen. Jack had invited George and Gracie to a party given by Arthur Lyons, Jack's manager and one of New York's top theatrical agents in 1929. Lyons had booked Fred Allen for a Warner Brothers short to be filmed the very next morning, but Allen had cancelled due to illness. The shoot could not be postponed, so Lyons asked Jack if he knew of anyone who could replace the ailing star. Before Jack could answer, George said, “How about Burns and Allen?” Lyons explained that the pair had to be at the studio in Brooklyn at nine o'clock in the morning adding, “You've got to do nine minutes, and you'll get eighteen hundred dollars. Do you think you can do it?”

George responded, “For eighteen hundred dollars Gracie and I can not only do nine minutes, but we can drink a glass of water at the same time.” The next morning Warner Brothers-Vitaphone filmed *Burns and Allen in Lambchops*, the first of the pair's movie shorts.

George envied Jack Benny because Jack really enjoyed the little things in life—like butter with his bread. In his book “The Third Time Around,” George related the story of a lunch he had with





Jack Benny and George Burns reunited for the television special "Everything You Always Wanted to Know About Jack Benny, But Were Afraid to Ask" in the early 70s.

**“Jack and  
I were  
different.  
He would let  
his hair  
down. I just  
took mine  
off.”**

Jack one day at the world famous Brown Derby restaurant. Jack couldn't decide whether or not to put butter on his bread. It seems his wife Mary had put him on a diet. Responding to this news, George said, "Then eat it without butter." Jack answered, "But I love butter. Bread is nothing without butter." "So put butter on it," George told him. After going back and forth like this for a few minutes, Jack finally had butter with his bread. When the waiter brought the check, George told him to give it to Jack. "Why should I pay the check?" Jack asked. George answered, "Because if you don't, I'll tell Mary you had butter." This same routine was played out over a lunch of ham and eggs, with Jack ultimately ordering the meal that wasn't part of his diet, and again paying the check to buy George's silence.

Practical jokes were also a part of the Burns and Benny repertoire.

One time the two friends were at the fights. George ordered a Coke and asked Jack to pass it down. Jack passed it down, but of course no one claimed it because no one had ordered it. As Jack watched it coming back towards him, he realized what was going on, and doubled up in laughter.

Another time they were at a party with about thirty other people. George happened to look across the room and saw Jack taking a cigarette and a match out of a box on the mantelpiece. George held up his hands, and called out to the room, "Quiet, everybody! Jack Benny is now going to do his famous match bit!" Everyone turned to look at Jack who stood dumbfounded by the fireplace, a match in one hand, a cigarette in the other. Several seconds passed and then Jack finally put the cigarette in his mouth and lit it. George said, "Jack, that's much better. I notice you've got a new finish!"

The cigarette flew out of Jack's mouth and he fell on the floor laughing.

Once when George was playing a theater in Chicago, and Jack was playing in Milwaukee, George received a telegram from Jack which read:







**Jack Benny (center) smiles warmly as he and pals Bing Crosby (left) and George Burns recreate an old vaudeville routine for "The Jack Benny Show" in 1963.**



“He was my best audience. He laughed at everything I said. That might be one reason why he was my best friend.”

“Am arriving Chicago 10:30 Sunday morning. Meet me at the railroad station.” George wired back: “Looking forward to seeing you. What time are you arriving, I’d like to meet you.” Upon receiving George’s telegram, Jack wired back: “Am arriving Sunday morning at 10:30.” George responded: “If you don’t want to tell me what time you’re coming in, I’ll see you at the hotel.”

Now Jack was getting a little bothered. He sent one more telegram: “Stop fooling around. I’m arriving 10:30 Sunday morning. Meet me at the station.” George, of course, responded: “How could I meet you. Didn’t get your last wire.”

Shortly after that George was deluged with telegrams from all of his friends, including Al Jolson, Eddie Cantor, George Jessel, and Sophie Tucker. Each one read: “Jack Benny is arriving 10:30 Sunday morning. Meet him at the station.” George pinned the telegrams all over the wall of his hotel room and waited. When Jack arrived at the station George was nowhere to be found. So he went to George’s hotel, walked to his room, and as George opened the door, Jack asked, “Why didn’t you meet me?” While he ushered Jack into the room, George answered, “I didn’t know what time you were coming in.”

Jack looked up and saw all the telegrams pinned to

the wall, and fell on the bed laughing.

George and Jack used to frequent Chasen’s restaurant in Beverly Hills. One night while they were dining there with their wives Gracie and Mary, Jack said, “Let’s get Dave Chasen to pick up the check tonight.” “How do we do that, Jack?” George asked. “We’re probably his best customers,” Jack answered, “so after dinner I’ll call him over and tell him, ‘Dave, if George Burns pays this check, I’m never coming in here again.’ Then you say, ‘And if Jack pays this check, I won’t come in here again.’ You know Dave, he’ll say, ‘Fellas, stop fighting,’ and he’ll pick it up.” George said, “Jack, it’s a great idea. It can’t miss.”

Finally when dinner was over Jack called Dave Chasen over to the table and told him, “If George Burns gets this check, I’m not coming in here again.” Jack then looked over at George who smiled at Jack, took a long puff on his cigar, smiled at Dave Chasen, and said nothing. Needless to say, Jack fell to the floor laughing.

Another night the two friends were at the Friars Club. George noticed that Jack had a small piece of white string on his tuxedo jacket. George took the string off Jack’s jacket and put it on his own, saying, “I’m sorry, Jack, but I left my piece of white string at

Continued on page 88

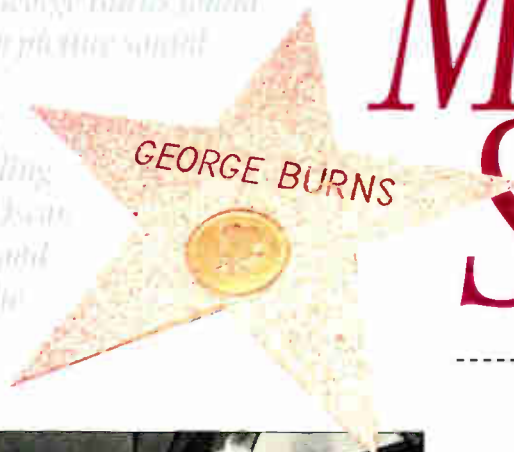


**Ann-Margret got her first big break onstage opening for George Burns at the Sahara in Las Vegas in December of 1960. Her first major television appearance was on "The Jack Benny Show" two months later.**

# GEORGE BURNS

Movie stars are not usually bestowed in the age of 100. But in 1997, George Burns found himself back on a national picture screen, stays for the first time in 30 years. The success of *The Sunshine Boys*, including a Best Supporting Actor Oscar, opened the door to the second coming of George Burns, the movie star.

# MOVIE STAR



Ex-vaudevillians Al Lewis (George Burns) and Willie Clark (Walter Matthau) re-create one of their famous routines for a television special in *The Sunshine Boys*. George won the Oscar for Best Supporting Actor.

Richard Benjamin, right, tries to talk a former vaudevillian, played by George Burns, into reuniting with his former partner for a television special in *The Sunshine Boys*.



**t** here's a great story told among

actors about George Burns first rehearsal reading of the script for *The Sunshine Boys* with co-star Walter Matthau. Writer Neil Simon, director Herb Ross, Matthau and George were sitting around a table. As the others flipped through the pages of the script, George sat with his closed in front of him on top of the table. As his first lines were coming up, George still had not



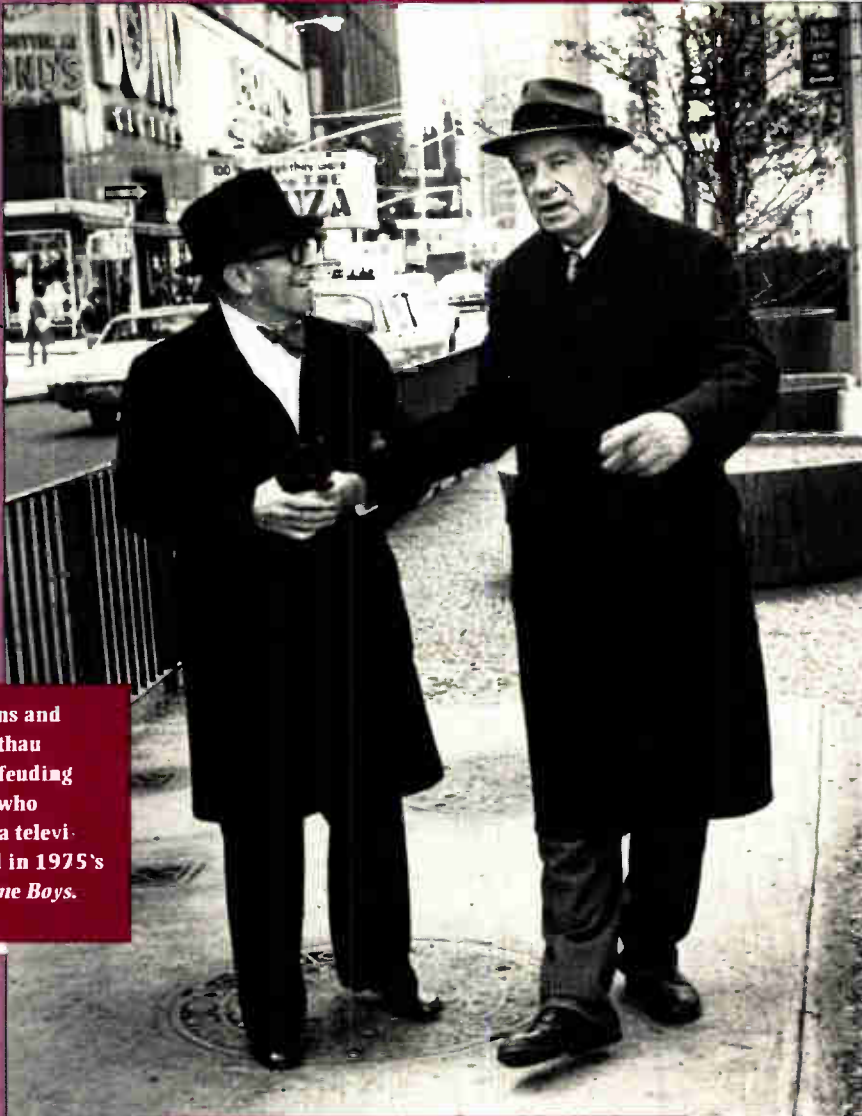
opened his script. Walter Matthau was getting a little concerned, and leaned over to remind George that his lines were coming up.

George did not respond. Finally, it was time for his lines and George knew them all by heart. Not only his, but everybody's...the whole script. Now this story may or may not be true, but as George himself might say, it is true that it's a great story.

*The Sunshine Boys* is the story of two former vaudeville comedians Al Lewis (Burns), and Willie Clark (Matthau), who are reunited for a television special. The problem is that the pair can't stand each other and it's questionable whether they'll be able to keep their tempers in check in order to do

the show.

Ironically, Jack Benny had first signed to play the part of Al Lewis in mid-1974, and George was given a copy of the script that August regarding the part of Willie Clark. The potential teaming of these two former vaudeville stars, and best friends, had Hollywood buzzing. But two days after receiving the script, George was in the hospital having emergency open-heart surgery, and shortly



George Burns and Walter Matthau played two feuding comedians who reunite for a television special in 1975's *The Sunshine Boys*.



George Burns • The First 100 Years

thereafter the part of Wille Clark went to Walter Matthau.

Then Jack Benny died. As George recalled two years later, "This was one of the low points of my life. My best friend was gone, career-wise I wasn't in great demand, and I wasn't getting any younger."

George's recovery from the surgery was remarkable considering his age, but hardly surprising considering his incredible personal fortitude. Nothing much was going on with his career, no dates in Las Vegas or anywhere else had been booked as a result of the emergency surgery, but it wasn't long before he was back at the office every day to meet with his manager and writers.

Meanwhile, Neil Simon and Herb Ross had been unable to find any-

George and Brooke Shields in a publicity still from *Just You and Me, Kid*.

George Burns' last film role, prior to 1975, was in the 1939 musical comedy *Honolulu*, also starring Robert Young.





**"Maybe you don't believe the six days to create the world. Actually I thought about it for five days and did the whole job in one. I'm really best under pressure."**

A CARL REINER FILM  
**"Oh, God!"**  
*...is it funny!*



A JERRY WEINTRAUB PRODUCTION  
 GEORGE BURNS - JOHN DENVER - "OH, GOD!"  
 TERI GARR - DONALD PLEASANCE  
 Based on the Novel by AVERY CORMAN - Screenplay by LARRY GELBART  
 Produced by JERRY WEINTRAUB - Directed by CARL REINER

THEATRE

George Burns' film comeback continued in 1977's *Oh, God!* The movie's ad campaign relied on the star's long established stage persona.

Ex-vaudevillian cronies Keye Luke, Leon Ames, Carl Ballantine, and Ray Bolger are George Burns' poker-playing pals in the off-beat comedy, *Just You and Me, Kid*.



George celebrated his 81st birthday on the set of *Oh, God!* with co-star John Denver (center), and director Carl Reiner.

one to replace Jack Benny in the movie. Finally realizing there was no one else to play the part of Al Lewis, they sent the script to George's manager Irving Fein, who had also managed Benny for twenty-six years. Though George had reservations about playing what he referred to as "Jack's part," Fein convinced him that "nothing would make Jack happier than to have you do that part."

George read, and loved the script, saying, "The character of Al Lewis fit me like a glove. Al Lewis was supposed to be born in New York, he was a vaudevillian, he was old, and he was Jewish. Well, I was born in New York, I was a vaudevillian, I was old...but how they found out I was

Jewish I'll never know. They must have seen me in the locker room at Hillcrest (Country Club)."

*The Sunshine Boys* was a smash with both critics and fans, and was one of the top ten grossing films of 1975. To top things off George was nominated for Best Supporting Actor and walked





Famed caricaturist Hirschfeld captures the enlivened spirits of Lee Strasberg, George Burns and Art Carney in Warner Brothers 1979 release *Going in Style*.



First time bank robbers Lee Starsberg, George Burns and Art Carney surprise bank guard William Pabst in *Going in Style*(above). Later they live it up in Las Vegas with their ill-gotten gains. (right).



off with the Academy Award on Oscar night, saying, "This is all so exciting. I've decided to keep making one movie every thirty-six years."

But the film's success launched George on a twilight acting career.

1977 was a blockbuster year at the box office. Films like *Star Wars*, *Close Encounters of the Third Kind*, *Saturday Night Fever* and *Smokey and the Bandit* were pulling in fans, and dollars, in record numbers. It was also the year that George Burns played what can only be considered the ultimate role, that of the Creator, in Carl Reiner's very funny and successful *Oh, God!*

The movie tells the story of a supermarket clerk (played with a goofy charm by singer John Denver) who is chosen by God to be his spokesman on Earth. His message is a simple one: Be a little nicer to each other. Denver's character is the only one who can see God, who favors tennis shoes and a golf cap as his earthly attire.

The film was compared favorably to Frank Capra's *Mr. Deeds Goes to Town* and *Mr. Smith Goes to Washington*. Larry Gelbart's script was also



George played, what else, a former vaudevillian who helps out a troubled young runaway (Brooke Shields, right) in 1979's *Just You and Me, Kid*.

nominated for Best Screenplay Based on Material from Another Medium. George figured he had been picked to play God because he was the closest to His age, at least since Moses was no longer around.

George next did a cameo as the mayor of Pepperland in the musical *Sgt. Pepper's Lonely Hearts Club Band* released in 1978. The forgettable film starred the Bee Gees and Peter Frampton, and laid an egg at the box office. As George wrote in his third book, *The Third Time Around*, "I have no idea what this picture cost Robert Stigwood, the producer, but I hope his mother and father





are very rich. And if they were rich, they're not anymore."

George worked with some of the top rock musical talent of the time, including Aerosmith and Earth, Wind and Fire, "a group whose name sounded like a weather report," he quipped.

That same year he also did a cameo in director Stanley Donen's *Movie Movie*, an affectionate spoof of 1930s pictures featuring two movies in one. It starred George C. Scott, Eli Wallach and Red Buttons.

Next up was 1979's *Just You and Me, Kid*, a misstep to put it mildly.

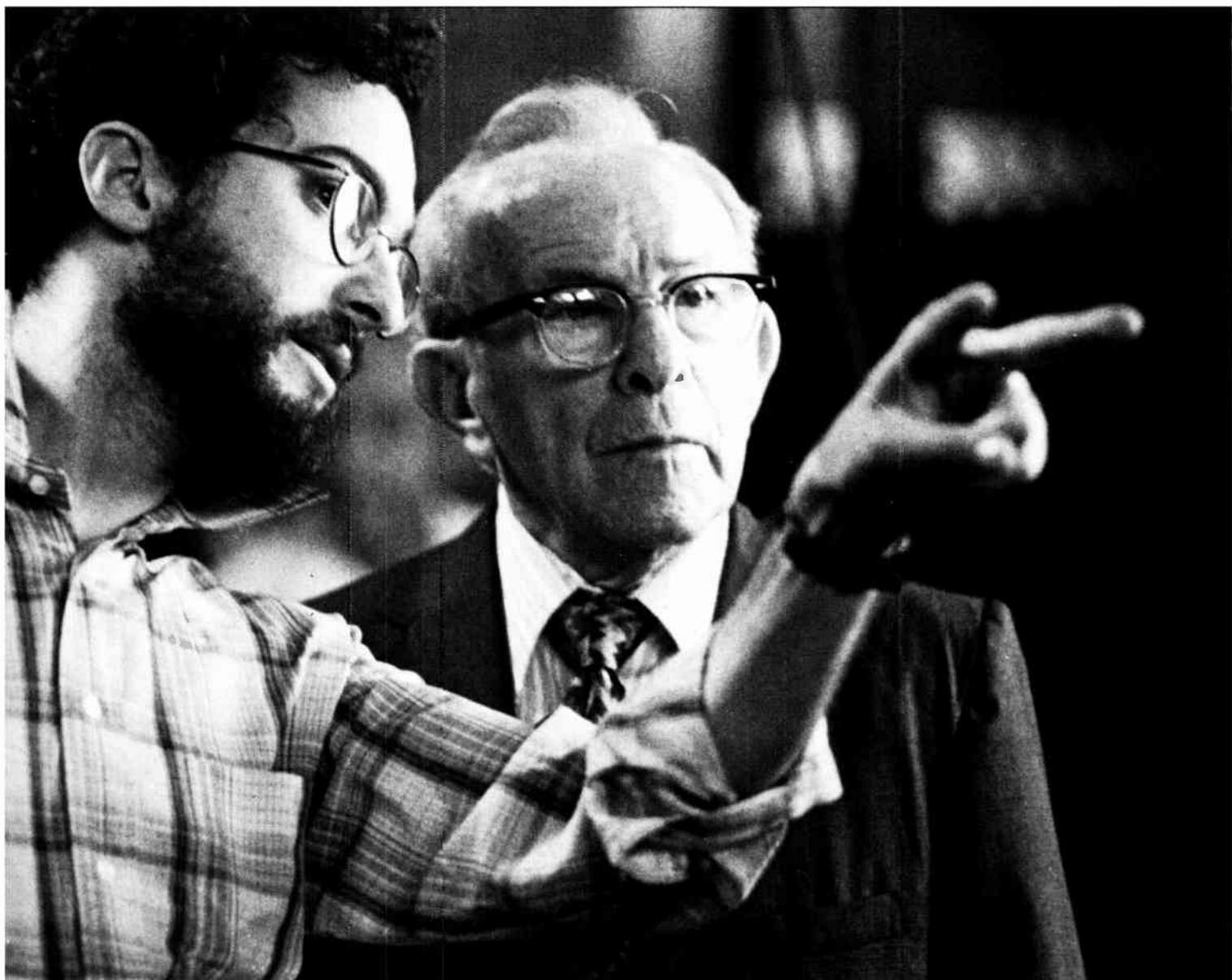
The thought of playing another ex-vaudevillian was of course very appealing to George. After all, ex-vaudevillian was what he knew best. But pairing him with then-fourteen year old actress Brooke Shields as a runaway teenager was a miscalculation. Her inability to keep up with George's rhythm was irritating rather than ingratiating. What was fun was to see George in the company of actors Ray Bolger, Leon Ames, Keye Luke, and Carl Ballantine. But those moments were too few to save the picture. Nevertheless, George felt at the time that he had done his best work on the film, say-



No, you're not seeing double. George had a dual role in the final *God* film, *Oh, God! You Devil*, playing both the Almighty and His evil counterpart.

**“I don't believe anybody should retire, no matter what his or her age is!”**

George takes his cues from director Martin Brest on the set of *Going in Style* during filming in New York. Brest also wrote the screenplay.



ing, "It's the best thing I've ever done. And I'll let you in on a little secret; I'm going to say the same thing about my next picture."

1979 also saw the release of *Going in Style*. George starred with Art Carney and Lee Strasberg as an elderly trio of first-time bank robbers. The blend of humor and drama was handled deftly by all three actors. George said of his role, "It was a challenge for me because I had to play an old man. It took time for the makeup man to put on wrinkles."

George, as God, returned to the silver screen in 1980's *Oh, God!*

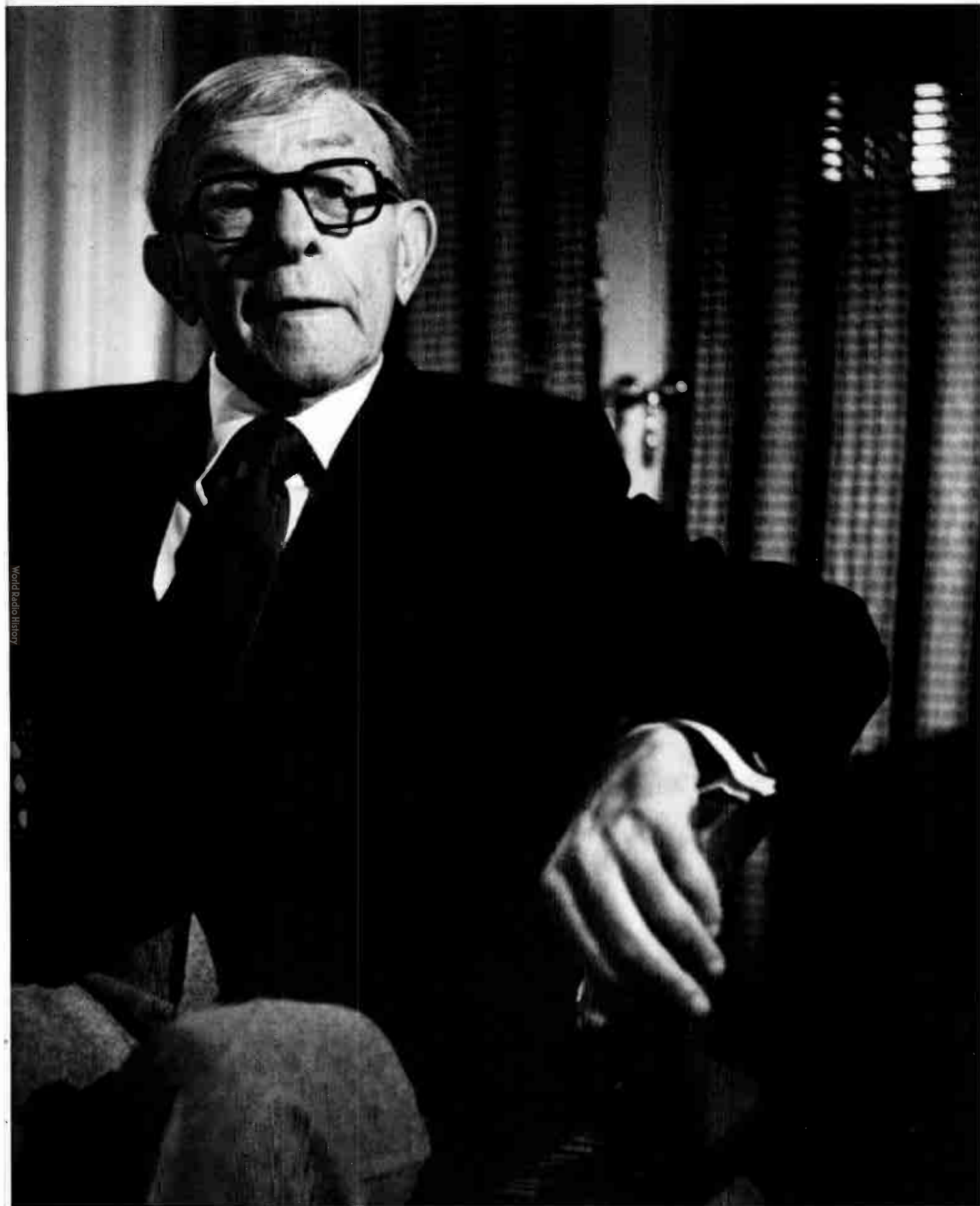
*Book II*. This time around God chooses a little girl (played by young actress Louanne) to come up with a slogan to revive interest in Him (apparently John Denver didn't fulfill his duties). During filming George said, "Now I'm sure some of you are wondering why God would come down a second time. Well, there's a very good reason. The first time He came down He made \$65 million. Who knows, if the box office holds up, I might come down another seven or eight times."

George did descend to Earth one more time in 1984's *Oh, God! You Devil*. Again playing the Almighty, the twist here is that George also gets to play the devil.

The story involves a young musician (Ted Wass) who has traded his

The Big Guy, God that is, returns to Earth to spread the word in *Oh, God! Book II*.





World Radio History



im o v l e s



*“I’m sure some of you are wondering why God would come down a second time. There’s a very good reason. The first time He came down He made the studio \$65 million.”*

---

**Who needs matches? The devil you say.**



God (George Burns) practices a little divine intervention as he tries to save the soul of a rock superstar (Ted Wass) in *Oh, God! You Devil*.

*“If God actually came down to talk to one good man, it could have been John Denver. I don’t think the picture would have worked if I had come down and talked to Milton Berle.”*

soul to the devil for success as the world’s top rock star. Realizing his mistake, he prays for divine intervention. George as God, and George as the devil share the screen in some of the film’s funniest moments.

The twilight movie career ended with the release of 1988’s *18 Again*.

The film tells the tale of an eighty-one year old grandfather (played by ninety-two year old George Burns), who magically switches into the body of his eighteen year old grandson (actor Charlie Schlatter). Though this was one of many body-switching comedies produced at the time, Schlatter’s young George Burns





**God (George Burns) and Tracy Richards (Louanne), a young girl who has volunteered to help spread the word, take to the streets like bats out of Heaven, in this scene from *Oh, God! Book II*.**



Impersonation was quite funny, nearly making up for the genuine article's lack of screen time.

All in all, a pretty impressive body of

work on its own. When you take into account George's earlier work with wife Gracie Allen, you have a film career any actor would be proud of. ♦



**George shows he's still got the moves on the set of *Oh, God! You Devil*.**



**When you're a celebrity the stature of George Burns, cameras seem to be flashing everywhere you go. Here's a look back at some of the events, and personalities George encountered...**

George returned to Las Vegas in 1986 for a 90th birthday party thrown for him at Caesar's Palace. Cleopatra plants a wet one on the surprised birthday boy.



# On The Town!

After Gracie retired George worked for awhile with Carol Channing in an act appropriately titled "The George Burns and Carol Channing Show." Here the two stars pose for their engagement at the Dunes Hotel in Las Vegas where they headlined in "The Beautiful Arabian Room." The Four Preps opened the show.





Fred Astaire and George enjoy a few moments together at a soiree.

The two stars had performed the whisk broom dance together in 1937's *Damsel in Distress*.



Connie Stevens, George's co star in the 1964 sitcom "Wendy and Me," catches up with her former leading man at a 1980s party.



Cary Grant catches up with George at a celebrity get-together.





George delights(?) the crowd with his singing at a promotional event for his film *The Sunshine Boys*. Dancing in the chorus is his co-star Walter Matthau.



George is the man of the hour as he is roasted by pals Edward G. Robinson (left), Jack Benny, Pat Boone, George Jessel, and Della Reese.

George has always been a popular speaker at charity events and fund raisers.





"Young women, martinis, prunes and exercise" are the keys to a long life, George tells actress Rhonda Shear as they wait backstage at a taping in 1983.





George shared a banquet table with California Governor Ronald Reagan and his wife Nancy in October, 1971.

George gets a hot tip from TV's Mr. Ed before heading to the racetrack.







George Burns • The First 100 Years





George, as usual, is accompanied by a pair of lovely ladies at the unveiling of his star on Hollywood's Walk of Fame.





# George

**When you've experienced life for 100 years you develop some interesting philosophies. Here are some of George's:**



“It doesn't hurt to listen—you get it for free. I learned this a thousand years ago.”



“The whole idea is to grow old and not use makeup.”

# Looks at Life



“You have to have something to make you want to get out of bed in the morning. Look at it this way, when you wake up in the morning, get up. And when you get up, do something. The most important thing is to have a point, a direction you’re headed. If kids had that, it would help them over any rough spots in life. If you can get a kid to fall in love with something, his lifestyle will go in that direction. It doesn’t have to be anything fancy, just something.”



"I don't think anyone can make it on the stage if they don't know what is good for them off the stage. You've got to know what's good for you to do, and you've got to be able to do it when you get up there. I've known a lot of people who had great talent on the stage, but didn't know what to do with it, so they never made it big."

"I've always found that you can have a great show with great writers and great actors, but if one guy doesn't do his job, and pull up the curtain, *nobody* goes on! Everybody's job is important—each person is part and parcel of a show."

On Why He Always Smokes a Cigar During His Act: "It's because I never knew what to do with my right hand. But who knows if it's true. I lie a lot."

"When a comedian works too hard, the

audience has to work hard to follow him, and when an audience strains like that it gets indigestion. Give them a bad stomach and they don't tune in on you again."

"There's nothing wrong with going out with young girls. I figure some of their youth may rub off on me, and some of what I've got might rub off on them—that is, if it doesn't drop off before I meet them."

"I'll tell you something, there isn't a thing I can't do now that I didn't do when I was twenty-one, which gives you an idea of how pathetic I was when I was twenty-one."

"Walking can be awfully dull if you do nothing but just walk. So enjoy the beauty around you. Look at the birds! Look at the flowers! Look at the trees! And if a pretty girl passes, look at her legs! If you're wor-

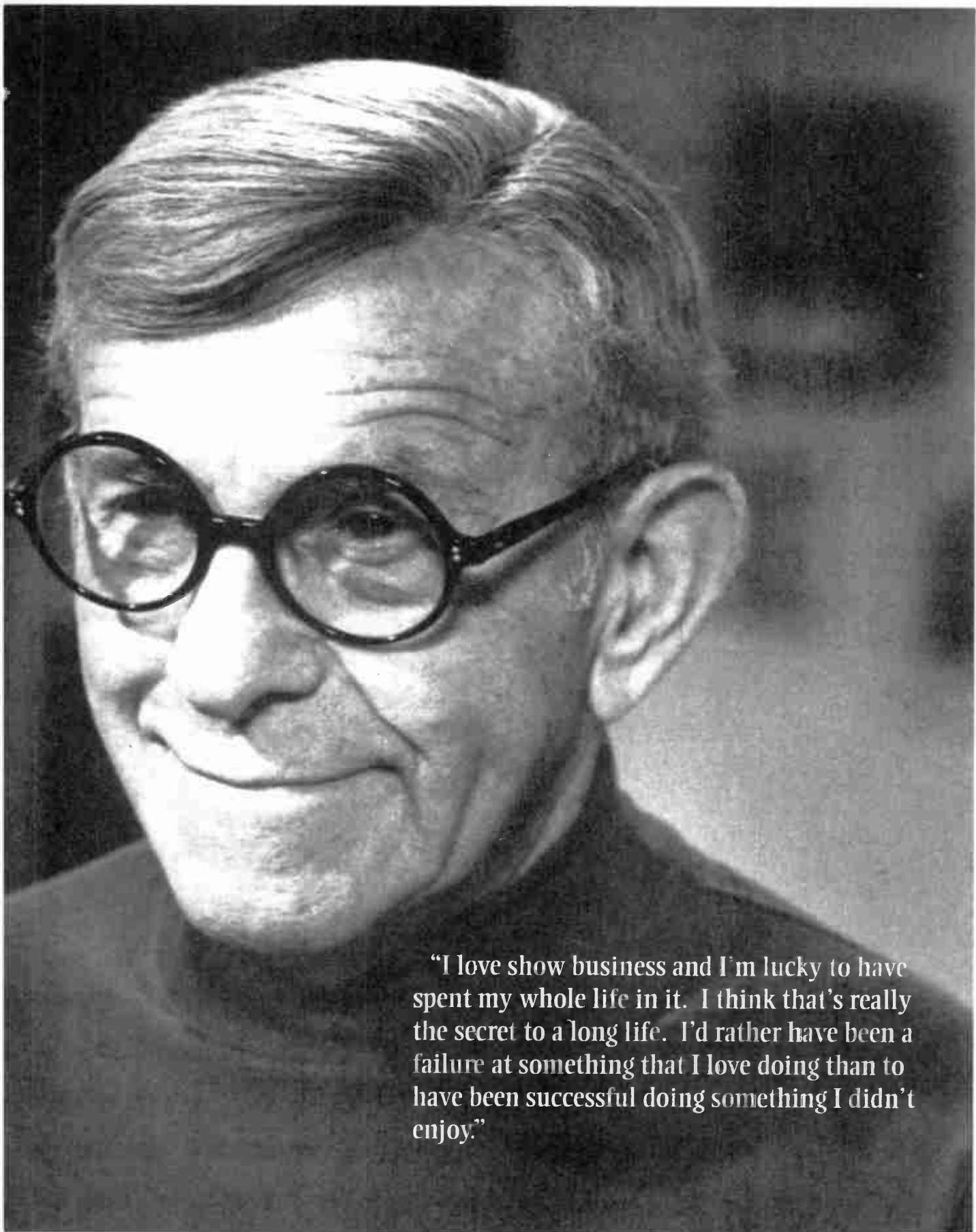
ried about cheating on your wife, look at only one leg!"

"I came to the conclusion that there's one thing that makes sex so popular—you don't have to get dressed for it."

"I've never understood all this talk about the generation gap. I never knew what that meant. I guess it was the way I was brought up. There were fifteen of us crowded into three rooms, My grandmother, my mother and father, and seven sisters and five brothers, all different ages. And we got along just fine. There was no gap, we didn't have room for one."

"I've never lied about my age. If you're going to lie, lie about something important; like telling your wife there's no other woman; or telling the other woman you don't have a wife."

On Dating Women: "I have to date young ones. There are none my age. I start with a song, end with a song, and nothing happens in between."



“I love show business and I’m lucky to have spent my whole life in it. I think that’s really the secret to a long life. I’d rather have been a failure at something that I love doing than to have been successful doing something I didn’t enjoy.”



**Four of the greatest names from vaudeville and radio got together on television. From left: George Jessel, Eddle Cantor, Jack Benny, and George Burns.**

home. You don't mind if I borrow yours, do you?" George kept the string on his jacket all night, and everytime Jack would look at him, George would point to the string proudly. Naturally, Jack would burst out laughing.

The next morning George sent the string back to Jack in a gift wrapped box with a thank you note.

As easy as George could make Jack laugh, Jack just couldn't make George laugh, and he tried.

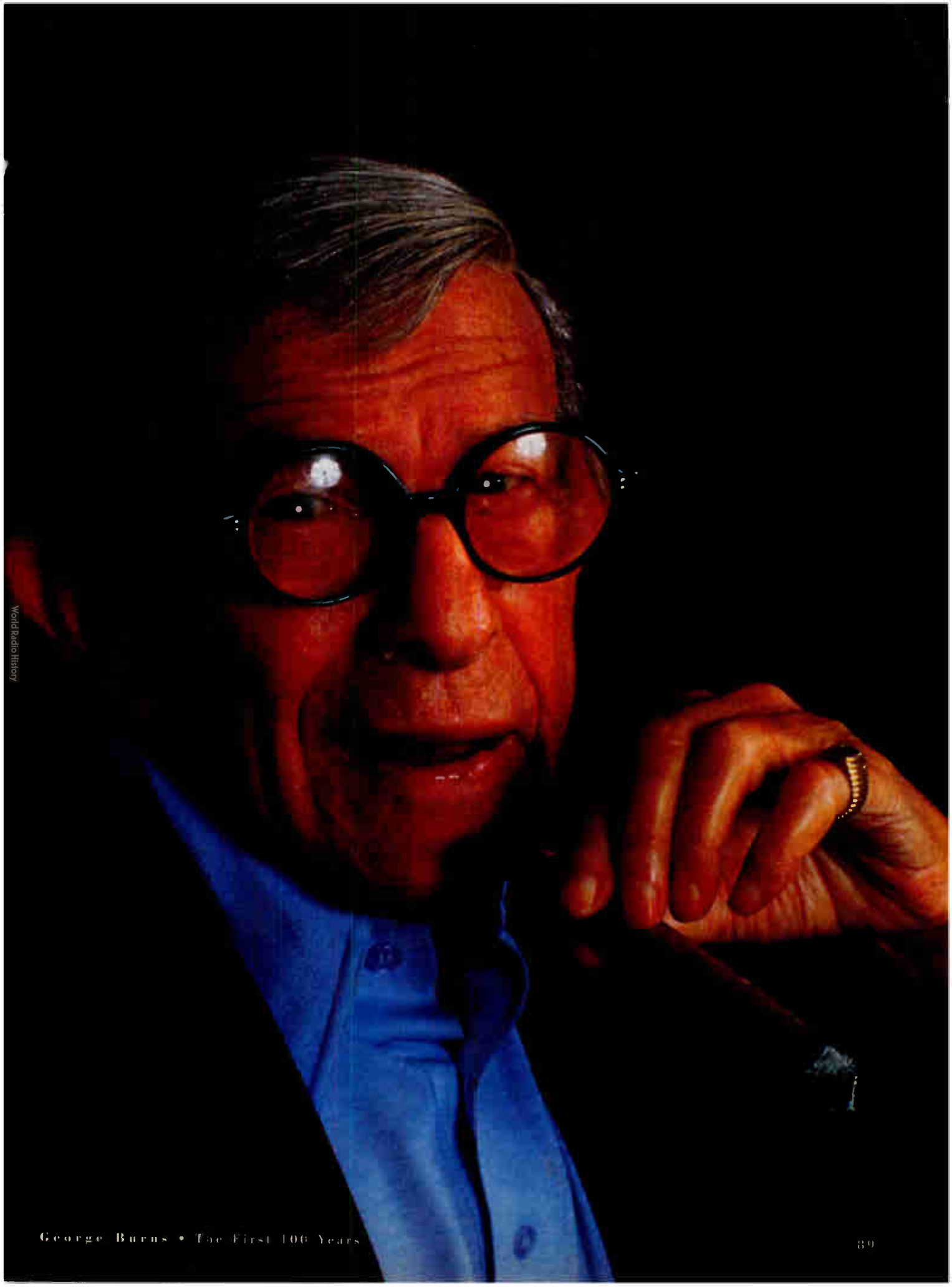
George and Gracie were appearing at the Palladium Theatre in London in 1949. Jack decided he would fly to London to surprise them. While they were entertaining guests in their hotel room, George got a call from the overseas operator, who

was infact actress Jane Wyman calling from another room. The operator informed George that Jack Benny was calling from America. George took the call, talking to Jack for several minutes when Jack asked him to hold for a minute.

As George held the phone, there was a knock at his door. Gracie opened the door and found Jack standing there grinning from ear to ear. George, still holding the phone, turned, and seeing Jack in the doorway calmly said, "Okay, you tricked me. As soon as I'm done with this phone call, I'll start laughing."

By now you should know how Jack Benny responded. ♦







# THE GEORGE BURNS

George and his writers go over the Trivia of a Lifetime Challenge.

**1896 to 1996 is a long time, 100 years to be exact. A lot of trivia can happen in that time. Let's see how many of these George Burns related trivia questions you can answer. The answers are on page 92. No peeking.**

**1. Nineteen presidents have served their country during George's lifetime. Name them. (Thought this was going to be easy, didn't you?)**

**2. What was George Burns' real name?**

**3. What was the dream of every vaudeville performer?**

**4. Who was George's last stage partner before Gracie?**

**5. What was the name of the first routine Burns & Allen performed that brought them acclaim?**

**6. What was the name of the dance Burns & Allen performed with Fred Astaire in *Damsels in Distress*?**

**7. What was the**

**title of the last feature film to star Burns & Allen?**

**8. Gracie made three movies without George. Name them.**

**9. How many years did the Burns & Allen radio program run?**

**10. Who was George's best friend (other than Gracie)?**

**11. What were the names of the characters played by George and Gracie in their television show?**

**12. Bea Benaderet had to turn down a role in another sitcom because she was contractually obligated to "The Burns & Allen Show." What role was it, and in what show?**

**13. Who was the**

# TRIVIA OF A LIFETIME CHALLENGE

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"Hey, I think I know the answer to number two!"

**original announcer for "The Burns & Allen Show?"**

**14. George worked for awhile with another partner after Gracie retired. Who was it?**

**15. Name the other two TV series George starred in after "The Burns & Allen Show."**

**16. George returned to the silver screen in 1975. Name the last film he had worked in prior to 1975, and name the film and character that marked his return.**

**17. Who did George replace in *The Sunshine Boys*?**

**18. George received a**

**Grammy nomination in 1980. In what category was he nominated?**

**19. How many books has George written? Name them.**

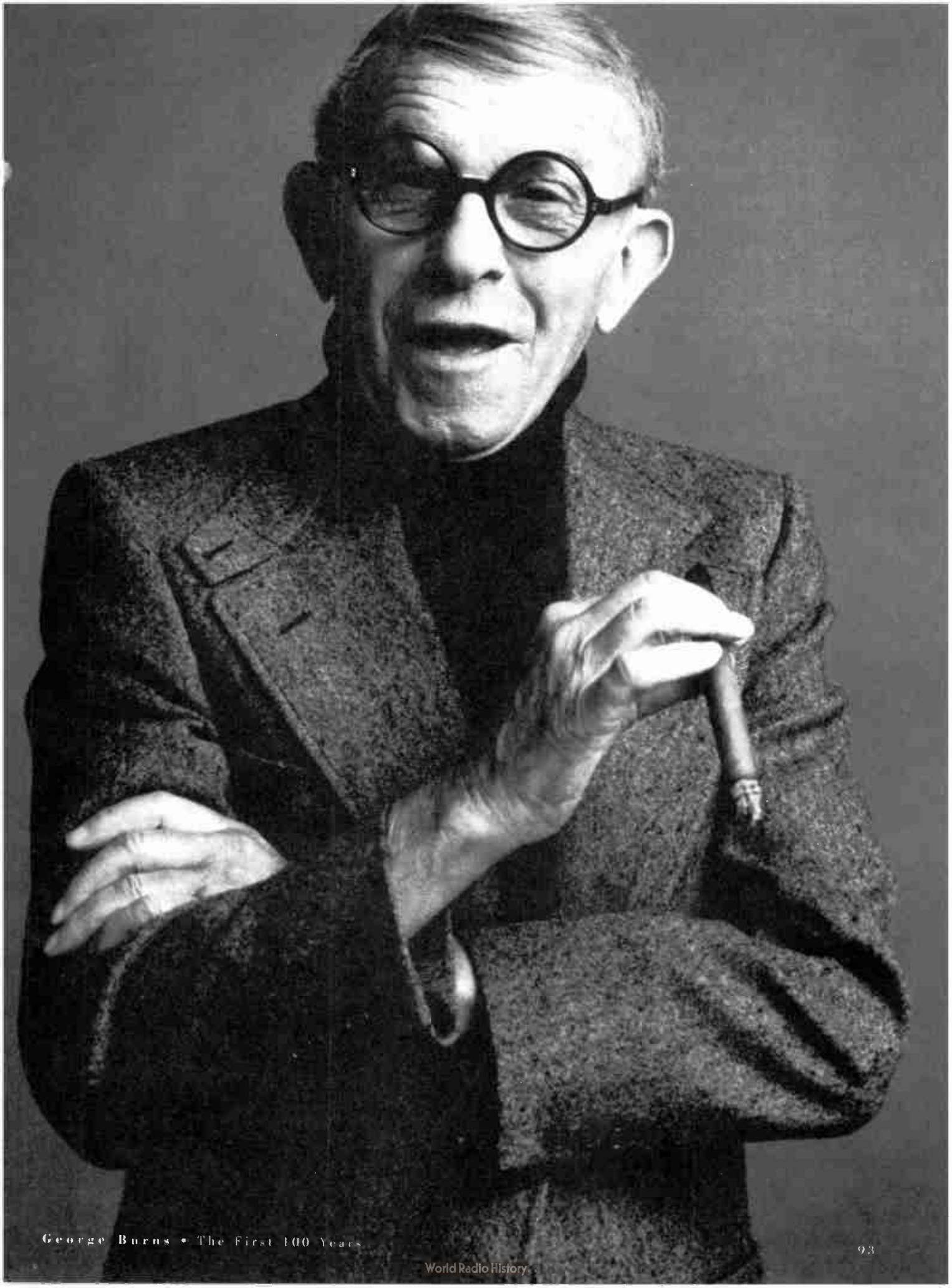
**20. George was scheduled to perform at what world famous venue on his 100th birthday?**



# Trivia Challenge Answers

**Okay, you've taken the challenge (without peeking), now let's see how you did.**

- 1. Grover Cleveland, William McKinley, Theodore Roosevelt, William Taft, Woodrow Wilson, Warren Harding, Calvin Coolidge, Herbert Hoover, Franklin Roosevelt, Harry Truman, Dwight Eisenhower, John Kennedy, Lyndon Johnson, Richard Nixon, Gerald Ford, Jimmy Carter, Ronald Reagan, George Bush, Bill Clinton.**
- 2. Nathan Birnbaum.**
- 3. To play the Palace Theatre in New York.**
- 4. Billy Lorraine.**
- 5. Dizzy.**
- 6. The Whisk Broom.**
- 7. Honolulu.**
- 8. *The Gracie Allen Murder Case, Mr. & Mrs. North, Two Girls and a Sailor.***
- 9. 17.**
- 10. Jack Benny.**
- 11. George Burns and Gracie Allen (a trick question).**
- 12. Ethel Mertz, "I Love Lucy."**
- 13. Bill Goodwin.**
- 14. Carol Channing.**
- 15. "The George Burns Show," "Wendy and Me."**
- 16. *Honolulu, The Sunshine Boys, Al Lewis.***
- 17. Jack Benny**
- 18. Best Country Vocal-Male.**
- 19. Seven books—*I Love Her, That's Why; Living It Up; The Third Time Around; How to Live to Be 100-Or More; Dr. Burns' Prescription for Happiness; Dear George; Gracie, A Love Story.***
- 20. The Palladium in London.**



# THE GEORGE BURNS FILMOGRAPHY

## The Burns and Allen Short Subjects:

*Burns and Allen in Lambchops*, Warner Brothers, 1929  
*Fit to Be Tied*, Paramount, 1930  
*Pulling a Bone*, Paramount, 1930  
*The Antique Shop*, Paramount, 1931  
*Once Over, Light*, Paramount, 1931  
*One Hundred Percent Service*, Paramount, 1931  
*Oh My Operation*, Paramount, 1932  
*The Babbling Book*, Paramount, 1932  
*Hollywood on Parade #2*, Paramount, 1932  
*Let's Dance*, Paramount, 1933  
*Walking the Baby*, Paramount, 1933  
*Hollywood on Parade #12*, Paramount, 1933  
*Hollywood Grows Up*, Columbia, 1954  
*Hollywood Fathers*, Columbia, 1954

## The Burns and Allen Features:

*The Big Broadcast*, Paramount, 1932  
*International House*, Paramount, 1933  
*College Humor*, Paramount, 1933  
*Six of a Kind*, Paramount, 1934  
*We're Not Dressing*, Paramount, 1934  
*Many Happy Returns*, Paramount, 1934  
*Love in Bloom*, Paramount, 1935  
*Here Comes Cookie*, Paramount,

1935

*The Big Broadcast of 1936*, Paramount, 1935  
*The Big Broadcast of 1937*, Paramount, 1936  
*College Holiday*, Paramount, 1936  
*A Damsel in Distress*, RKO, 1937  
*College Swing*, Paramount, 1938  
*Honolulu*, MGM, 1939

Gracie Allen appeared in the following films without George Burns:

*The Gracie Allen Murder Case*,



Walter Matthau and George In *The Sunshine Boys*.





**George and Brook Shields In *Just You and Me, Kid*.**

Paramount, 1939

*Mr. and Mrs. North*, MGM, 1941

*Two Girls and a Sailor*, MGM,  
1944

**George Burns appeared in the following films:**

*The Sunshine Boys*, MGM, 1975

*Oh, God!*, Warner Brothers, 1977

*Sgt. Pepper's Lonely Hearts Club*

*Band*, 1978

*Movie, Movie*, 1978

*Just You and Me, Kid*, Columbia,  
1979

*Going in Style*, Warner Brothers,  
1979

*Oh, God! Book II*, Warner  
Brothers, 1980

*Oh, God! You Devil*, Warner  
Brothers, 1984

*18 Again*, 1988



**George and Lee Strasberg In *Going In Style*.**

# NOMINATIONS, AWARDS, AND OTHER ACCOLADES

George Burns and Gracie Allen were nominated for the following major show business awards during their careers:

## EMMY AWARDS

**1951:** “The Burns & Allen Show” was nominated for Best Comedy Show. The Emmy went to “The Red Skelton Show.”

**1952:** “The Burns & Allen Show” was nominated for Best Situation Comedy. The Emmy went to “I Love Lucy.”

**1953:** “The Burns & Allen Show” was nominated for Best Situation Comedy. The Emmy went to “I Love Lucy.” Bea Benaderet was nominated for Best Supporting Actress in a Series for her role of Blanche Morton in “The Burns & Allen Show.” Vivian Vance (“I Love Lucy”) took home the Emmy.

**1954:** “The Burns & Allen Show” was nominated for Best Situation Comedy Series. The Emmy went to “Make Room for Daddy.” Gracie was nominated for Best Actress in a Regular Series. Loretta Young (“The Loretta Young Show”) took the award. Bea Benaderet was again nominated for her role of Blanche Morton, this time watching the Emmy go to Audrey Meadows (“The Jackie Gleason Show”).

**1955:** Gracie was nominated in two categories—Best Actress in a Continuing Performance, and Best Comedienne. Lucille Ball

(“I Love Lucy”) took the former award, while Nanette Fabray (“Caesar’s Hour”) captured the latter.

**1956:** Gracie was nominated for Best Actress in a Situation Comedy. Nanette Fabray (“Caesar’s Hour”) took home the Emmy.

**1957:** Gracie was again nominated for Best Actress. Dinah Shore (“The Dinah Shore Chevy Show”) took the award.

**1958:** Gracie was nominated for the sixth and last time in the Best Actress category. This time Jane Wyatt (“Father Knows Best”) captured the Emmy.

**1978:** George was nominated in the Best Special, Comedy-Variety or Music category for his show “The George Burns One Man Show.” Bette Midler took the Emmy for her special “Ol’ Red Hair is Back.”

## GRAMMY AWARDS

**1980:** George was nominated for Best Country Vocal-Male (solo performance) for his recording of “I Wish I Was Eighteen Again.” The Grammy went to George Jones for “He Stopped Loving Her Today.”

## ACADEMY AWARDS

**1975:** George was nominated for Best Supporting Actor for his performance in *The Sunshine Boys*. He won! ♦





