

FACT SHEET

TITLE: JACKIE GLEASON – GENIUS AT WORK
[TV-G] [CC] [Mono]

LENGTH: 1/60

NOLA CODE: JGGO

CATEGORY: Comedy

OFFERED: Premium Service 17 offer, November 2005

RELEASE DATE: March 1, 2006

CONTRACT TERMS: Unlimited use through March 31, 2009

PROGRAM SUPPLIER: Clear Cut Inc.

PROGRAM DESCRIPTION: In the golden era of television, Jackie Gleason was king. Families gathered around the television on Saturday evenings to see which of his characters would be entertaining them on *The Jackie Gleason Show* – beloved playboy Reggie Van Gleason; Rudy the Repairman; working-class dreamer Ralph Kramden; lovable Fenwick Babbit; or loudmouth Charlie Bratton. The one-hour special, JACKIE GLEASON – GENIUS AT WORK, features a collection of Gleason’s most memorable characters and skits from his long-running network television series, insightful commentary from host Jeff Garlin (from HBO’s *Curb Your Enthusiasm*) and a special appearance by wife Marilyn Gleason.

PROMOTIONAL MATERIALS: Use the above program description for guide listing. A press kit, including fact sheet, press release, biography and interview will be posted to PBS Connect and APTonline.org. Color photos will be available via email and on APTonline.org.

JACKIE GLEASON – GENIUS AT WORK / 2

FACT SHEET

COPYRIGHT: © 2006 MPI Media Group

PRODUCTION CREDITS: Producer/Director: Gregory Hall
Co-Producer / Writer: Jeff Forrester
Executive Producer: Malik Ali
Associate Producer: Barbara Hall

BROADCAST HISTORY: U.S. Television Premiere

RELATED MERCHANDISE: Individual viewer purchase: Related DVDs are available in retail outlets nationwide.

Pledge:
Program DVD (with additional material); related DVD boxed set: "The Honeymooners" (colorized); related DVD: "The Very Best of the Honeymooners"; related CD: "And Awaaay We Go! with Jackie Gleason."

VIEWER INQUIRIES: American Public Television
Viewer Services
55 Summer Street, 4th Floor
Boston, MA 02110
617-338-4455 ext. 202

WEB SITE: <http://www.museum.tv/archives/etv/G/htmlG/gleasonjack/gleasonjack.htm>

COMMUNICATIONS CONTACT: Kerry Taylor
(617) 338-4455, ext. 121
kerry_taylor@APTonline.org

###

CONTACT: Kerry Taylor
(617) 338-4455, ext. 121
kerry_taylor@APTonline.org

PRESS RELEASE

Career of Legendary Funnyman Portrayed in APT's JACKIE GLEASON – GENIUS AT WORK

Get ready to laugh and remember Jackie Gleason's enduring and versatile comedy in the new public television special highlighting his famous characters. **JACKIE GLEASON – GENIUS AT WORK**, a one-hour special from APT Premium Service, features a collection of humorous clips and skits from Gleason's long-running television program, *The Jackie Gleason Show*. With informative commentary from Gleason's wife Marilyn and family friend Jeff Garlin, the comedic star of HBO's *Curb Your Enthusiasm*, the program concentrates on Gleason's enormous talent to not only create a wealth of humorous characters, but also to adeptly portray them live on a weekly television show. Presented by American Public Television, this amusing and timeless program begins airing on public television stations nationwide on March 1, 2006 (check local listings).

Based on his belief that it took different characters to produce different types of comedy, Gleason developed a handful of larger-than-life comic portraits to exaggerate personality types and deliver an array of humorous concepts. Beloved playboy Reggie Van Gleason, for instance, was the perfect wealthy socialite with an appetite for booze, women and money – but of course had an aversion to work. Hell-raiser Rudy the Repairman always created more problems than he solved and lovable Fenwick Babbit caused a never-ending series of misfortunes due to his own naiveté. Gleason's most popular character, working-class dreamer Ralph Kramden, constantly sought to get rich quick, only to fail repeatedly and remain trapped in the lower middle class.

– more –

All the sketches in this program illustrate Gleason's genius and versatility as an entertainer. Not only did he find humorous material and develop the characters, but he also portrayed them with an effortless grace. Without skipping a beat, Gleason jumped from pantomiming the unlucky, mute Poor Soul character to playing the annoyingly loud and verbose Charlie Bratton. He tapped and moved with the ease of a trained dancer during his variety numbers with The June Taylor Dancers, and then became the clumsiest of fools as Rudy the Repairman. And yet, Gleason even went beyond conceiving the ideas and acting the lead roles. "Jackie, who'd been called the P. T. Barnum of the small screen, was the show – he supervised and approved everything and everyone that went on the stage," says host Jeff Garlin.

Insightful commentary from his wife Marilyn also provides a personal perspective to Gleason's work. Audiences will learn that Gleason refrained from over-rehearsing because he loved a touch of spontaneity, he treasured his on-screen chemistry with famous co-actor Art Carney, and he loved – more than any other character – playing the role of Reggie Van Gleason.

JACKIE GLEASON – GENIUS AT WORK is produced by TH Entertainment, LLC for MPI Media Group in association with American Public Television. The program is written and co-produced by Jeff Forrester, produced and directed by Gregory Hall and executive produced by Malik Ali. APT's Premium Service distributes the program to public television stations nationwide.

About American Public Television

For 44 years, American Public Television (APT) has been a prime source of programming for the nation's public television stations. APT distributes more than 10,000 hours of programming including *JFK: Breaking the News*, *Simply Ming*, *Globe Trekker*, *Rick Steves' Europe*, *Julia and Jacques Cooking at Home*, *Battlefield Britain*, *Jungle*, *America's Test Kitchen*, *Lidia's Italian Table* and classic movies. APT is known for identifying innovative programs and developing creative distribution techniques for producers. In four decades, it has established a tradition of providing public television stations nationwide with program choices that enable them to strengthen and customize their schedules. Press should contact Donna Hardwick at 617-338-4455 ext. 129 or via email to Donna_Hardwick@APTonline.org. For more information about APT's programs and services visit APTonline.org.

###

BIOGRAPHY

JACKIE GLEASON

Jackie Gleason must be counted among Milton Berle, Sid Caesar and Red Skelton in the small group of creative comedy-variety stars who dominated, and to some degree invented, early television. Perhaps more than any of the others he explored the limits of broad physical gesture and loud verbal bombast in the contextual frame of the small screen. His highly stylized and adroitly choreographed blustering, prancing, smirking and double-taking led Gilbert Seldes to describe Gleason as “.. a heavy man with the traditional belief of heavy men in their own lightness and grace.” Whether burning a finger, stubbing a toe or getting caught in a lie, Gleason’s work in the 1950s constitutes a vital contribution to the invention of television comedy.

Born in a poor section of Brooklyn and abandoned by an alcoholic father, he dropped out of school at an early age and supported himself as a pool hustler, professional boxer and carnival barker before establishing himself as “Jumpin’ Jack” Gleason, a nightclub comic and vaudeville emcee known for his spirited exchanges with hecklers. Following a brief, unsuccessful stint in Hollywood as a Warner Brothers contract player, Gleason’s career reached an apparent plateau. He worked as a stand-up comic and a master of ceremonies in venues ranging from middle-level nightspots to seamy dives in the New York area.

In 1949, at age 33, he was handed the title role in a TV adaptation of *The Life of Riley*, a popular radio series about a culturally displaced Brooklyn factory worker who follows his job to a new life in a Southern California suburb. The plodding, moralistic narrative structure of the sitcom, however, obscured Gleason’s verbal rancor and physical comedy. The series was not renewed.

Gleason was once again called on as a substitute when Jerry Lester, the host of DuMont’s *Cavalcade of Stars*, suddenly quit the show in 1950. This time it turned out to be the break of his career. The live-from-New York, comedy-variety format played directly to Gleason’s strengths, allowing him to wisecrack as emcee, to engage in off-the-cuff chats with guests and to move in and out of short sketch material that emphasized physical humor rather than narrative resolution. The show became DuMont’s biggest success.

It was on *Cavalcade* that Gleason originated most of the sketch characters he would play for the rest of his career: the absurdly ostentatious millionaire Reginald Van Gleason, III; The Poor Soul, a pathetic street character played in pantomime; the hapless, bumbling Bachelor; and, his greatest creation, Ralph Kramden, a bus driver tortured by a life that will not support his ego. All were to some degree autobiographical fantasies, personal visions of despair and grandeur culled from his poverty-stricken Brooklyn childhood, meditations on who the comedian could, would or might have been. It was on the DuMont show that Gleason created his persona of The Great One; he also began his life-long association with Art Carney, a *Cavalcade* regular.

Impressed by Gleason’s performance on the screen and in the ratings, William Paley personally wooed the star away, offering him five times his DuMont salary and the far greater market coverage of CBS. *The Jackie Gleason Show* debuted in 1952, quickly propelling the comedian into national stardom. By 1954, Gleason was second only to Lucille Ball in the ratings. Taking advantage of this success, he secured rights that allowed him to thoroughly dominate every aspect of production, from casting to set design to script approval.

Glitz was Gleason's watchword. The June Taylor Dancers opened each show with a high-stepping chorus-line dance number that always included at least one overhead kaleidoscope shot of the Busby Berkely variety. A troupe of personally auditioned beauties, known as The Glea Girls, escorted the star around the stage and brought him "coffee" (he always sipped it as if were something stronger) and lit his cigarettes on camera. Unable to read music, Gleason composed his own musical theme, "Melancholy Serenade," which he hummed out for a professional songwriter. (Gleason also produced several gold albums of romantic music this way in an LP series titled "For Lovers Only.") The show ended each week with an unprecedented but justifiable personal credit: "Entire Production Supervised by Jackie Gleason."

Riding high, the comedian paid little attention to the relationship between his sudden rise in fortune and the medium that had facilitated it. The Gleason style was utterly suited to 1950s comedy-variety: the vaudeville trappings, including a live audience; the emphasis on slapstick, constant close-ups, blackout segues, splintered segments and so on. But ever the *arriviste*, the star remained extremely defensive about his talents and status, yearning to prove himself in "higher" forms, especially the movies.

Attempting to make time for new ventures, he came up with a radical format for retaining his CBS Saturday night hour in the 1955-56 season. Gleason repackaged the most popular feature of his show, *The Honeymooners*, into a 30-minute sitcom, while the second half of the hour was contracted to the Dorsey Brothers for a big-band musical program. The best of the old Ralph Kramden sketch material was reworked into the thirty-nine *Honeymooners* episodes that have run in continuous syndication ever since.

Unfortunately that season marked the end of Gleason's most creative period. He would continue to hold down a prime-time slot (with some gaps) until 1970, but he never created any new noteworthy characters or elaborated further on the style he had developed. Casting about for a fresh format in which he could demonstrate versatility, he hosted a game show (*You're in the Picture*, 1961), conducted a one-on-one talk show (*The Jackie Gleason Show*, 1961) and returned to comedy-variety, promising (but not delivering) an innovative social satire approach (*Jackie Gleason's American Scene Magazine*, 1962-66). The results were all critically disappointing, though the last of the three did prove that he could still deliver a Top 20 audience with a comedy-variety format.

In 1964 the Saturday night hour with relaunched as *The Jackie Gleason Show*, a reprise of the familiar comedy-variety form of a dozen years earlier. Gleason finally did achieve some popular success in the movies playing a southern sheriff in the three *Smokey and the Bandit* films made between 1977 and 1983. He died in 1987.

###

INTERVIEW

MARILYN GLEASON

Marilyn (Taylor) Gleason first met Jackie Gleason as a member of her sister's dance troupe, The June Taylor Dancers, who were featured on Jackie's Cavalcade of Stars. They married in 1975 and remained together until his death in 1987. APT recently interviewed Marilyn about her late husband's career and the new public television special, JACKIE GLEASON: GENIUS AT WORK.

Jackie was very involved with every aspect of his TV shows including the choreography of the musical numbers, which was unheard of on live TV at the time. What was it like working with Jackie?

It was very interesting and loads of fun because it was inspiring. He would get marvelous ideas and say, "Well I don't know why we can't do that. Come on, let's get together and figure out a way that we can do it." He was always climbing a staircase looking for something a little above, beyond and better. It's interesting working with someone like that because you become inspired and you want to tail right along and be just as forceful and as involved as he would be.

Would you say he was a perfectionist?

Oh definitely, anything worth doing is worth doing well, otherwise, don't bother.

What do you think Jackie would have seen as the highlights of his career?

He loved Broadway shows. He did quite a few of them in the '30s and '40s. But, he adored television because every week it was opening night of a new show and that was what he loved to do.

A few years ago you donated Jackie's book collection to the University of Miami. Could you please describe his lifelong love of learning?

The library was three walls of a 16x16 room. Seventy-five percent of his library was on psychic phenomenon, the occult; he was always interested in that.

He loved everything new; he could tire easily of the same routine, of doing the same thing over and over. That's why when he did his character sketches, each week it would be a new sketch, a new dialogue, a new story, and that is what fed him – he loved that.

What was Jackie's favorite character?

His favorite was (the wealthy) Reggie Van Gleason III. He loved doing that character because it was outrageous. He could go in many directions and extremities with that character. You could go many places with Ralph Kramden (the eternally frustrated bus driver), but the human part of Ralph kept him from being a caricature. And most of Jackie's sketch characters were caricatures or exaggerations.

JACKIE GLEASON – GENIUS AT WORK is a look at the many characters Jackie played over the years. What do you think it was about some of Jackie's characters that people really took to, while others fell by the wayside?

It's like a parent with many children. You love all children the same and you raise them and put every effort into every single one of them. Some of them are smarter than others and some have more ambition than others. With the characters that Jackie and the writers invented in the '50s, some had more definition, more places to go – for instance, Ralph Kramden (an eternally frustrated bus driver), or the Poor Soul (a pathetic street character played in pantomime). And, Fenwick Babbit (a timid, mild-mannered character) was actually similar to the Poor Soul – but he spoke. They were both very loving and thoughtful of other people. The audience loved what the Poor Soul did because they were able to piece it together in pantomime, and if you make the audience work a little bit to piece the things together, I think they appreciate it more.

###