

IS CARSON UP TO PAAR?

By JACK RYAN

IN 1951, BILL BRENNAN, a salesman for a Los Angeles radio station, pitched his hardest sell to his bosses.

"I want you to hear this spot announcer we've got—Johnny Carson. He put together a comedy show and wants to audition it."

The reception was doubtful. "The young guy with the pushed-up nose who says, 'This is your friendly radio station' every hour on the hour? He's funny?"

Brennan persisted. He eventually herded the executives into a broadcasting studio where Carson, aided by a bored piano player, ran through a half-hour program called "Carson's Cellar." The executives were impressed enough to give him a local show on Sunday in an afternoon slot they hadn't been able to fill anyway.

It was toe-hold enough, though, for the puckish sophisticate from Iowa and Nebraska, and 11 years later Carson has moved to the forefront of show business by taking over television's "Tonight" show. In doing so, he has replaced Jack Paar who in his tenure as host became all things to all insomniacs—fearless crusader, vindictive cry-baby, naïve boy-next-door, sneering teller of smutty stories.

The question now is—can Carson equal Paar? The consensus is yes in entertainment, no in establishing the love-hate relationships Paar had with his audiences.

Carson's coworkers tab him "aloof," "moody," "hard to know," but a professional who, before a camera, can bring out the warmth and interests of guests that he cannot always bring out in himself. His work, they say, will be urbane, witty, provocative—but you'll never tune in just to see the star standing before the camera, emotionally naked, weeping, damning his private demons.

Carson himself is thoroughly self-contained when he says: "Jack was a master interviewer, which is what the 'Tonight' show needed. But his personal vendettas eventually got tiresome, embarrassing."

"I believe controversy, if it is sincere, can be stimulating on a program. But I won't introduce it for sensation's sake or for my own prejudices. If it comes up—fine. Let it come, blow over, and forget it."

YOU GET AN IDEA of Carson's personality as he discusses his career, which he does without the usual show-business fantasies and hokum. "I went to Los Angeles after doing my own show in Omaha," he recalls, "and I promised if I did not have a Coast program after a year, I'd quit. I didn't wait around to be 'discovered,' though—I don't believe in that 'Art will out' business. I worked hard, but I also was lucky enough to have a good friend in Bill Brennan and to be in the right place at the right time. Friends and luck, they make the breaks for you."

Without demeaning his own talents, Carson returns to "luck" often in reminiscing. He was a gag writer and

quiz-show host, for example, when Red Skelton injured himself during a rehearsal. As luck would have it, Carson got the substitute call (he did a lot of subbing at this time—including some for a rising comedian named Jack Paar) and scored heavily enough to land two national shows of his own.

Luck seemingly ran out in 1957. "All the shows folded," he says. "I had a contract, but money isn't important to me." And he returns to the one theme that seems to stir him: "I wanted my own show."

He put together a night-club act, but shortly afterward an emcee spot opened on the New York program, "Who Do You Trust?" Since Carson was at loose ends, he won the job. "Things just worked out," he says casually. The unexpected job lasted five years, during which Carson never missed an appearance, even while appearing on Broadway in "Tunnel of Love."

Johnny shrugs off the prized "Tonight" role with equal nonchalance. "My contract with 'Who Do You Trust?' ran out in September, so it just worked out well for everybody."



*Insomniacs may find
Johnny witty but
"impersonal" after Jack's
tears and boyish deviltry*

JOHNNY got his start doing fairs and club meetings—he always had new audiences because his father, an employee of a power utility and now stationed in Columbus, Nebr., moved the family often. Next came magic and banter in Navy shows while he was an ensign during World War II. Then, bypassing magic, he did zany radio announcing in Lincoln and Omaha while he attended the University of Nebraska and performed the rare feat of preparing a serious thesis on "How to Write Comedy."

Carson married his high-school sweetheart while in college, but they separated upon his move to New York. She cares for their three boys, Chris, 12, Ricky, 10½, and Cory, 9, in a fashionable suburb while Johnny lives in a cluttered apartment facing the East River.

He sees his sons each weekend. "Usually we go to my boat," he says. "We have a lot of fun but don't plan anything. Maybe that's why we have fun."

Jack Paar's daughter Randy—indeed, his whole off-camera life—was shared with his audiences, but that will not be the case with Carson. He grants interviews only on the condition "you don't get too personal."

As for his reaction to the challenge of replacing Paar, Johnny again shrugs. "I have my own ways. I'll do a whole new show. One thing I won't be is an imitator. I couldn't even if I wanted to."

Carson will be a strange nightcap for Paar fans, but if Johnny worries about the future—which he adamantly denies—he can gain solace by recalling Paar's own challenge. Jack was a replacement for popular Steve Allen, and experts claimed he could never match Allen's wit and versatility. He never did.

He simply went on to stardom on his own gifts. Carson will probably do the same—and chalk it up to "luck."



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