

# “Hollywood Goes to Harlem”

**Eddie Anderson,  
the African-American  
Film Star  
Created by Radio**

*Kathy Fuller-Seeley*

*Just four months after  
the Atlanta, Georgia  
premiere of the film  
Gone with the Wind,  
which Academy Award-  
nominated, African-American*

*actress Hattie McDaniel  
was barred from attend-  
ing because of her race,  
a quite different scenario  
played out in New York  
City.*

In April 1940, the first elaborate premiere of a Hollywood studio-produced film was held in Harlem, the cultural capital of Black America. Paramount Studios sponsored two simultaneous world premieres of *Buck Benny Rides Again*, a movie which, in every way but actual billing, co-starred American network radio's premiere comedy star, Jack Benny, and his radio valet and butler, Eddie “Rochester” Anderson. One gala was held at the studio's flagship theatre, the Paramount, in midtown Manhattan. With the California-based Benny and members of his radio cast making rare personal appearances on stage during the film's run, the show broke all previous box office records. In a most unusual move





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for an industry which limited roles for African-American performers to tiny, often uncredited parts as servants, Paramount also aggressively promoted the film's surprise, break-out co-star, African-American actor Anderson.

Paramount's publicity department released a barrage of pub-

licity in New York and in major African-American newspapers across the nation, touting "Hollywood goes to Harlem!" as the studio sponsored a separate premiere of Buck Benny Rides Again (Sandrich, 1940) on the night before, on April 23, 1940, at the Loew's Victoria Theater, a 2,400 seat picture palace lo-

cated on 125th Street in Harlem, adjacent to the Apollo Theater. Eddie "Rochester" Anderson was given the "hail the conquering hero" treatment in Harlem—an estimated 150,000 people lined the streets as Anderson and major political, social and entertainment dignitaries of Black America paraded to the theatre. Jack Benny, his radio cast members, film director Mark Sandrich and Benny's radio comic nemesis Fred Allen, all appeared on stage at the Victoria to praise Anderson, and blow-by-blow coverage of the premiere was carried on a local black-oriented radio station. After the show, Anderson was honoured with receptions at the Savoy Ballroom and the Theresa Hotel. The event was extensively covered in breathless detail by the nation's black press.

Anderson's role in the Buck Benny film as Jack's valet "Rochester" carried over from radio, in a witty and "hip" display of inter-media storytelling and crossover fame. Anderson's performance stole the movie, as it gave "Rochester" far more screen time than black actors had found in any previous Hollywood film that had not been a black cast feature. Buck Benny featured Rochester's droll retorts to Jack's (whom Rochester cheekily called 'Boss') egotistical vanities, croaked out in his distinctive, raspy voice. The film and the role positioned Anderson as one of the most prominent African-American performers of the era, despite—and because of—mainstream white racial attitudes of the day. It took star status in a rival medium (as co-star with a white comedian) for a black actor to achieve prominence in American film.

Buck Benny was among the highest grossing movies of the year at the American box office in 1940. Throughout the nation, movie theatres billed the film on marquees as co-starring Benny and "Rochester." In many theatres, especially African-American

theatres in the South, but also in white and black neighbourhood movie houses elsewhere across the nation, the marquee billing put "Rochester's" name first above the title. The film's box office success led to recognition of Anderson and Benny as spokesmen for civil rights and integration. The two were named to the Schomburg Center Honor Roll for Race Relations for their public efforts to foster interracial understanding. This moment before World War II further raised the consciousness of a young generation of African-Americans to fight for civil rights, in an interlude before racist white backlash coalesced to further limit black entertainers in American popular media. Anderson's success caused him to be hailed in black newspapers as being a harbinger of a "new day" in interracial amity and new possibilities for black artistic, social, and economic achievement.

Eddie Anderson's radio-fuelled movie stardom complicates the shameful Hollywood story of racism, racial attitudes and restrictive limits on representations of African-Americans in film and popular entertainment media in the late 1930s and World War II era. A middle-aged dancer, singer, and comic who'd forged a regional career in West Coast vaudeville and mostly un-credited servant roles in Hollywood films, Anderson rocketed to stardom due to his role on Jack Benny's Jell-O program, one of the top-rated comedy-variety programs on radio in the 1930s. It took the "inter-media" mixture of the two rival entertainment forms of film and broadcasting, along with the input of a coalition of decision makers (NBC, sponsor Jell-O, show creator and star Benny, Paramount director Mark Sandrich) to create this interstitial space to foster Anderson's fame.

Anderson's "Rochester" role in his first years on Jack Benny's radio program (1937-1938) had contained heavy doses of min-

strel stereotypes—stealing, dice-playing, superstitions—but from the beginning, the denigratory characteristics were counterbalanced by the valet's quick wit and irreverence for Benny's authority, accentuated by his inimitable voice and the wonderful timing of his pert retorts and disgruntled, disbelieving "Come now!" This spark of intelligence and individual personality that Benny and his writers gave Anderson to work with, which he so embellished with his performance, made him an immediate sensation on Benny's show. Eddie Anderson (who

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had been appearing in tiny, often uncredited bit parts in Hollywood films and in black nightclubs on the West Coast circuits for twenty years) now quickly became so identified with the "Rochester" character in the radio public's mind that he adopted it as his stage name.

Rochester critiqued Benny's every order and decision, with an informality of interracial interaction unusual in radio or film depictions of the day. The radio show writers gave Rochester all the punchlines in his interactions with Benny. His lively bump-tiousness raised his character above other, more stereotypical black servants in American popular media. Rochester could appeal to a wide variety of listeners, as Mel Ely suggests of Amos n Andy. He always remained a loyal ser-

vant and had to follow Benny's orders, so he was palatable to those listeners most resistant to social change. Yet, in a small way, Rochester spoke truth to power, and he was portrayed by an actual African-American actor, so he gained sympathy and affection among many black listeners.

Paramount had sought to translate Jack Benny's radio popularity into film success for several years, but it was the creative ideas of young director Mark Sandrich (who had created the Astaire/Rogers musical films in his previous job at RKO) that finally made Jack Benny a film box office star. During the production of his first Benny-featured movie, *Man About Town* (1939) Sandrich cast Benny's supporting radio players in small supporting roles. Warming to their huge popularity on-air and their jovial informality on the set, Sandrich began to incorporate the radio performers further into the on-screen action. The director was especially impressed by the lively "eccentric" dancing, comic acting ability, and unique voice of Anderson, and he increasingly expanded Anderson's small role to showcase the strong comic chemistry between Jack and Rochester. By the time filming was completed, Benny and Anderson had found themselves co-starred in an interracial buddy movie. *Man About Town's* June 1939 premiere in Benny's hometown, Waukegan, Illinois, drew 100,000 spectators to see the radio/film stars in person, watch the parades and experience being in the audiences of radio broadcasts. Their applause for Anderson was louder than for any performer beside Benny. Film reviewers across the nation unanimously praised Anderson for "stealing the film" from the top comic in radio. While high-brow cinema critics, like the *New York Times's* Bosley Crowther, disdainfully commented that these popular radio-inflected movies were un-cinematic, no more than filmed radio broadcasts, the radio fans



among the movie-going public delighted in watching the popular characters interact on screen.

The enormous box office success of Eddie Anderson’s co-starred films with Jack Benny (three of them in little over a year, , the third being *Love Thy Neighbor* (Sandrich, 1940), also featuring Fred Allen) fuelled reports in the black press that prejudiced racial attitudes could be softening in the white South. Rochester was hopefully opening a wedge to destroy the old myth that racist Southern whites refused to watch black performers, the myth to which Hollywood film and radio producers so stubbornly clung. The Pittsburgh Courier lauded Anderson as a “goodwill ambassador” bringing a message of respectability and equality to whites in Hollywood and across the nation (331).

In 1940, Eddie Anderson was perfectly positioned, through an unusual American stardom that merged radio and film, to represent that optimistic hope that the hurtful past representations of blacks in the mass media could finally be put aside. An editorial in The Los Angeles-based African American newspaper, The California Eagle argued that Anderson’s stardom pointed to new hopes for interracial tolerance and black cultural and social achievement:

*...two years ago American became conscious of a new thought in Negro comedy. It was really a revolution, [emphasis mine] for Jack Benny’s impudent butler-valet-chauffeur; “Rochester Van Jones” said all the things which a fifty year tradition of the stage proclaimed that American audiences will not accept from a black man. Time and again, “Rochester” outwitted his employer, and the nation’s radio audiences rocked with mirth. Finally, “Rochester” appeared with “Mistah Benny” in a*

*motion picture – a picture in which he consumed just as footage as the star. The nation’s movie audiences rocked with mirth. So, it may well be that “Rochester” has given colored entertainers a new day and a new dignity on screen and radio. (8).*

Eddie Anderson’s cross-media and cross-racial stardom was very real in the U.S. popular media between 1940 and 1943. Unfortunately, a series of unforeseen events, and the growing political and social racial strife in the nation during the war, curtailed Anderson’s film career. Paramount director Sandrich tired of the Benny-Anderson series, while Benny was lured to Warner Bros and 20<sup>th</sup> Century Fox studios to appear in adaptations of recent Broadway comic plays. MGM attempted to build Anderson into a more prominent star, featuring him in its all-star black cast dramatic-musical production of *Cabin in the Sky* (Minnelli) with Lena Horne. *Cabin* was released in Summer 1943, just as race riots erupted in Detroit and other manufacturing and military base cities over labor strife. Timid film exhibitors did not promote Anderson’s film or his stardom for fear of sparking violence in their theatres. Racist white backlash against blacks gaining footholds of integration and prominence in American public life began spreading across the South, and Anderson’s subsequent appearance in Brewster’s *Millions* (Dwan 1945) caused the film to be banned in Memphis for its portrayal of pleasant interracial interactions. Film producers no longer were willing to take a chance on him. Anderson remained a major supporting character on the Jack Benny radio show in the postwar period and on Benny’s subsequent television program, and he remained beloved by white audiences. However, by war’s end, a new generation of vocal African-American media critics increasingly called the entertainment

media to task for their narrow depictions of African-American characters as servants and buffoons, Aunt Jemimas and Uncle Toms. Despite his popularity, the black press considered Eddie Anderson a symbol of outmoded representations, and it reduced coverage of him to a minimum in the latter half of the 1940s. Health problems dogged Anderson in the 1950s, and he ceased making the personal appearance tours to black theatre and nightclubs which had cemented his stardom in the African-American community. Although he remained the highest paid black performer on radio and television through the late 1950s, and a key member of the Jack Benny ensemble, the bright hopes of Eddie Anderson’s 1940 stardom were eclipsed.

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