

*A Palm Beach Illustrated exclusive, George Burns talks with editor Judy DiEdwardo about the past, present and future of the world's most beloved nonagenarian.*



*Photos by Alan Becker*

# Ninety something

**J**UNE 4, 1958. I WAS NINE DAYS OLD WHEN the Burns and Allen Show aired for the 299th, and last, time — in its day, television history's longest running sitcom.

I never saw them on the tube, though, as a young college student, I spent semester-long chunks of Saturday afternoons playing hooky at Manhattan's Museum of Broadcasting, watching archival footage of America's most cherished duo. Alone in the well-worn, felt-lined viewing cube, I pretended to be propped in front of the family Philco, giggling at the hottest show of the day, imagining I had been born sooner — much sooner.

What I loved most about George was Gracie: the feisty, auburn-turned-blonde, Irish-American actress; her starched-white apron, witty retorts and sweet, melodic voice; his real-life wife and irrepressible sidekick. Gracie played dumb. We knew it was part of the act.

What I loved most about Gracie was George: her cigar-puffing straight man; his dead pan "Can you believe she said that?" rhetorical gawk at the camera; his ineffable charm; his obvious adoration of this beautiful woman at his side.

But on July 23, 1993, time stood still: I sat knee-to-knee with George Burns himself — deliciously shrouded by thoughtful, studied puffs from his three dollar El Producto. Portraits of a bygone era dotted the walls around me: Jack Benny and Mary Livingston, Milton Berle, Al Jolson, George Jessel, The Marx Brothers, The Ritz Brothers, W.C. Fields, Jimmy Durante, Carol Channing, Bobby Darin, Eddie Cantor, Danny Kaye and, most of all, Gracie. Her radiant face was everywhere.

And as the day grew old on that splendid L.A. morning, past and present dawned as one. He, the last of the vaudevillians, crooned a forgotten song and I knew, I would imagine no more.



**B**orn Nathan Birnbaum On January 20, 1896 on Riverside Street in New York's Lower East Side, the inimitable George Burns has enjoyed a career that spans nearly a century, earning him lifetime achievement awards from virtually every entertainment medium.

The ninth of 12 children, his career began at age seven when singing for pennies with the PeeWee Quartet to help support the family after the death of his father. Since that time, his 90-year career has spanned every medium — from vaudeville, radio and television to motion pictures and the recording industry. He has authored nine books, chronicling his life as a comedian, husband, father, grandfather and friend. Today, at age 97, he talks about the passion that has made him America's most beloved entertainer.

Local audiences will get a rare glimpse of this unparalleled performer when he debuts on Tuesday, November 23 at the Kravis Center for the Performing Arts.

**PBI** What is the secret to your success?

**BURNS** For 40 years, my act consisted of one joke. And then she died. Her real name was Grace Ethel Cecile Rosalie Allen. But for those 40 years, audiences in small and big-time vaudeville houses and movie theatres and at home listening on their radios or watching television knew her — and loved her — simply as Gracie. She was on a first-name basis with America.

**PBI** In 1940, Gracie ran for president on the Surprise Party Ticket against Franklin Roosevelt and received a phenomenal 50,000 votes. Who did you vote for?

**BURNS** Gracie, of course!

**PBI** Gracie nicknamed you 'Nattie,' from your real name, Nathaniel. Where did 'Googie,' your pet name for her come from?

**BURNS** One night, she woke up in the middle of the night with jitters about the following day's performance. She asked me to say something to make her laugh. So I said, "Googie, googie, googie." She laughed.

**PBI** Why did you change your first and last name?

**BURNS** I began calling myself George because of my older brother, Isadore, who everybody called Izzy. He hated the name and changed it to George. I loved my brother and thought if the name George was good enough for him, it was good enough for me. My last name came from the Burns Brothers coal company, from which I stole coal as a kid. I took the name so that if I ever forgot how to spell it, all I had to do was look at one of their trucks.

**PBI** What is your favorite joke?

**BURNS** In school one day, the teacher asked three boys to stand up and tell the class what their fathers did for a living. The first boy stood up and said, "My father is a plumber." The second boy stood up and said, "My father is an engineer." Then the third boy stood up and said, "My father is dead." "I'm very sorry," the teacher said. "What did he do before he died?" The kid said, "He went, Oooowwww!" I tell jokes about dying because death is a part of life. It doesn't do any good to worry about it.

**PBI** Many people don't know that you are dyslexic. Why was this an asset when you moved from radio to television in 1950?

**BURNS** We were on radio for 19 years and television for eight years. Unlike radio where we could read from scripts, television required the lines be memorized. But I was memorizing my lines for radio. Going to television was a breeze.

**PBI** I've read that Gracie never told you her birthdate. Is that true?

**BURNS** Yes. When she died in 1964, the newspapers said she was born in 1906 and that she was 58 years old. But no one knew the day of her birth. She told me that her birth certificate was destroyed in the great earthquake of 1906.

**PBI** Did you believe her?

**BURNS** Well, Gracie was a great comedienne! One thing you have to understand about me is that I lie a lot. But when I talk about Gracie, I don't lie. I don't have to. The truth is unbelievable enough!

**PBI** You write in *Gracie: A Love Story* that you were a lousy lover. True?

**BURNS** I was. Fortunately, Gracie married me for laughs — not sex. When we had sex, she laughed. In our marriage, I suspect in every marriage, the real important things were things like, "Is the soup hot enough?" or "Would you like to see a movie tonight?" Those were the important things. Marriage isn't about sex. Marriage is about what happens when you get out of bed.

**PBI** Tell me about the day you and Gracie were married.

**BURNS** We were married on January 7, 1926 in Cleveland by the justice of the peace. We asked Jack (Benny) to give her away. Jack said he would never give anything away. Besides, he was playing a date in California. Instead, my brother, Izzy, and his wife came in from Akron to do the honors. Our cab waited outside for us while the ceremony was performed. The entire wedding cost us 20 cents on the meter.

**PBI** You were married to Gracie for 38 years. What made it so exceptional?

**BURNS** Gracie was my partner, my best friend, my wife, my lover and a mother to our two children. Our relationship was simple. We had a good marriage. We knew it was good because we never read anything bad about it in the papers.

**PBI** Do you have any regrets about your life with Gracie?

**BURNS** Any what? Regrets? Good God, no. If it weren't for her, you wouldn't be interviewing me today. She made me what I am today.

**PBI** You write of Gracie's death and the painful moment in your life when you kissed her goodbye for the last time:

"...I wanted to stand next to her on stage and hear the laughter of the audience. I wanted to see her smile. I wanted her to look up at me with those trusting eyes. For the first time in 40 years, I was alone. So I did the only thing there was to do: I leaned over and I kissed her on the lips and whispered, 'I love you Googie.' Then I gave her back her pictures and left the room."

Explain what you meant about giving her pictures back?

**BURNS** In order to get into vaudeville, each entertainer had to provide glossy pictures of themselves to display in the theatre's lobby. When your act was over, they gave you back your pictures. It's an entertainment expression.

**PBI** I understand that you visit Gracie at Forest Lawn Cemetery once a month to keep her updated on what you're doing. What kinds of things do you talk about?

**BURNS** When I visit her tomorrow — as I do on Saturdays — I'll be sure to tell her that we talked and that I finally met someone shorter than me! As you get older, you get shorter. Look at me, I used to be six foot nine!

**PBI** When did you start smoking cigars? What's your favorite brand?

**BURNS** I started smoking them when I was 14. At that time, the cigar was bigger than me. I thought it made me look like I was successful. I have always smoked cheap ones — El Productos. They stay lit longer than the good ones. And when you're on the stage and your cigar goes out, the audience goes out.

**PBI** You have obviously taken life and age in stride. Has it been difficult?

**BURNS** Everything has a price. With old age it's losing so many of the people who mean the most to you. At the Hillcrest Country Club, I always had lunch at the same table — the roundtable, we called it. Besides myself, there was Jack Benny, Al Jolson, George Jessel, the Marx Brothers, Lou Holtz and Danny Kaye — each one trying to be the funniest. They're all gone. I'm the only one left. I guess that makes me the funniest.

**“Life goes on.  
You've got nothing  
to say about that.  
When the guy knocks  
on your door,  
you have to go.  
When he knocks on  
mine, I'm not going  
to answer it.”**

**PBI** How do you cope with having lost your best friends?

**BURNS** Life goes on. You've got nothing to say about that. When the guy knocks on your door, you have to go. When he knocks on mine, I'm not going to answer it.

**PBI** You have already written nine books. When do you find the time?

**BURNS** I don't write books; I talk them. I sit down with a couple of writers and my secretary Jack Langdon takes it down and reads it back. If it's funny, we put it in. If it isn't funny, we say that Jack Langdon wrote it.

**PBI** What's your favorite television sitcom?

**BURNS** *The Golden Girls*. I especially like Betty White. The other girls are good, too.

**PBI** How did you land the role of God?

**BURNS** Well, it actually began with *The Sunshine Boys* and the role of Joe Smith. Jack Benny was to have played it but about a month after they started filming, he was diagnosed with stomach cancer. He died a few weeks later. I heard about people dying to get a role, but Jack, he didn't have to die. He already had the role! Maybe it's not nice to make jokes about his death. But he was, after all, my very best friend. Knowing him as I did, he wanted me to make money, not cry. So Jack's manager, Irving Fein, suggested I audition for the part. It had been 35 years since I had made a movie! They needed someone from New York, which I was. They needed someone from vaudeville, which I was. They needed somebody old, which I am. How they found out I was Jewish, I'll never know!

**PBI** You won the Academy Award that year.

**BURNS** Yes. From there, I was asked to do the God series.

**PBI** Do you have any plans for another movie?

**BURNS** I was asked to do another God movie but I turned them down. Actually, I've thought about a different script to the series called, "God Takes a Holiday." That's when God comes to earth and heaven goes into mass chaos and the people on earth don't know he's God. That would be fun.

**PBI** What is the essence of George Burns? What is your inspiration for getting up everyday?

**"I love what I'm doing. That's what gets me out of bed each morning. And at my age, you need to love your life and what you're doing."**

**BURNS** I love what I'm doing. That's what gets me out of bed each morning. And at my age, you need to love your life and what you're doing.

**PBI** You maintain a fairly rigorous schedule, performing around the country at least twice a month. What is your average day like?

**BURNS** I get up at 8 a.m. and I'm in the office by 10 where there is always something to do or write. I leave at noon and go to the club where I have a cup of soup and then play bridge with my friends until about 3. Then I go home, take a little nap, get up, have a couple of martinis and then eat dinner. I'm usually in bed by 8 or so.

**PBI** Whose idea was it to book you at the London Palladium in 1996 for your 100th birthday?

**BURNS** Actually, it was a joke that was started here in the office. The Palladium heard about it and sent us a contract. I'm also going to play Caesar's Palace. I'll play there first and then go to London.

**PBI** Do you feel some pressure to make the bookings?

**BURNS** Yes. I hope the Palladium is still there! No, I don't feel pressure or nervousness. To feel that, you have to have talent. Gracie was the one with the talent. Not me.

**PBI** What is the secret to staying young — like you?

**BURNS** Fall in love with what you do for a living and don't retire. You don't enjoy anything when you retire. Look at me. I play bridge. I love playing bridge because it takes me away from work. But if I had all day to play bridge, I wouldn't like it anymore. It wouldn't be fun.

**PBI** How do you want to be remembered?

**BURNS** You mean on my tombstone?

**PBI** Yes.

**BURNS** I want to be standing there reading it. That's how I want to be remembered.

**PBI** Are you ever going to give back your pictures?

**BURNS** No, no. And I'm taking my music with me! Maybe there's vaudeville up there. If there is, I would like to start all over again.

**PBI** With Gracie and the gang?

**BURNS** Yes. Of course. That would be great!♦