

Listening In: How Sweet It Is!

by Don Jensen

Jackie Gleason. For millions of people around the world, the name conjurs up images of his most popular character, Ralph Kramden. For years, audiences laughed to the antics of the frustrated, beleaguered bus driver, his long-suffering wife Trixie and sewer-cleaner friend Ed Norton. The program was, of course, "The Honeymooners," and through television syndication Jackie Gleason has remained a household name for generations, despite his passing last July at the age of 71.

Offstage, Jackie Gleason the actor lived a life that his character, Ralph, could only dream of. He existed in a constant state of overdrive, hellbent down the fast lane of life. The stories are

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legend—Johnnie Walker by the fifth, lobster by the platterful, brash, swaggering days and nights of carousing, chorus girls, and champagne. And all true, as Gleason freely admitted.

There was, of course, a very private side to this public persona, one that included a near-lifelong love affair with radio. This was the quiet, introspective—he liked to think of it as scholarly—Gleason. He guarded his solitude, especially in his later years, but never lost his zest for living. As always, he had to be a part of anything that was exciting, and world band radio fitted that need perfectly. It was the window on the world that let the actor look out on life by listening in.

Gleason had installed an elaborate listening post on the second floor of his home some years back. Later, it was reportedly destroyed by fire, but the estangement with radio was never complete. Back in the fall of '85, the actor came back to world band radio.

Mike Spivak of Mike's Electronics in Fort Lauderdale remembers the day "The Great One" bounced into his store.

"Jackie Gleason!" said Spivak. "No pal," replied Gleason, "It's Red Buttons."

Attired in a natty golf hat and accompanied by his wife, Marilyn, Gleason told Spivak he wanted to see some world band radios. "I showed him some, but he shook his head." "Show me a real set," he said, holding his hands a couple of

feet apart to demonstrate the size of the receiver he had in mind.

"He was looking for a real Neanderthal, one of those old fashioned tube monsters," Spivak said. "Like a Hammarlund?" I asked. "Yeah, that's it," he answered. "I told him that those days were long gone!"

Spivak showed Gleason an ICOM IC-R71 receiver, told him how it worked, and left him alone to play with it. Twenty minutes later, the electronics dealer returned to Gleason's side.

"When can you deliver two of these?" the beaming comic asked. Gleason always bought his receivers in pairs. He always had to have a backup just in case—and it never did—one went out on him. Early in 1986, he added a pair of ICOM IC-R7000 VHF/UHF scanning receivers, along with a set of Sony ICF-2010 portables. In fact, a lot of expensive radio gear found its way into Gleason's fourteen-room Lauderdale, Florida, estate—as the world band and 16-element scanner antennas on the roof at 3425 Willowood attested.

There, in his 20-by-20 foot library—stacked floor to ceiling with bookshelves—was where Gleason would sit, quietly chain-smoking cigarettes and tuning in the world with his battery of radios. Angie Cannon, the *Miami Herald* reporter who managed a lengthy interview with the celebrity not long before his death, describes his monitoring activities.



Courtesy CBS

The Great One hosts a program in 1979

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"Gleason spent hours in his library at his shortwave radio set, just listening to the constant traffic of voices drifting through the air. A news broadcast from Moscow . . . a documentary from Spain. Day after day, he manned those machines, just listening."

Spivak agrees. "He listened to everything. He gave me his private number and asked me to call and let him know if anything interesting was on the air. So I'd do that—give him frequencies I'd heard about from some of the guys down here."

The salesman recalls Gleason as a warm and considerate person, not at all technically inclined. But, like many world band listeners, he was an "intelligent and a very precise man." "He'd call up, saying, 'This is Jackie,' or sometimes, even, 'Hello. This is The Great One!' And he'd have questions, especially about his 'R71's." But Gleason was a quick study and mastered their operation without much trouble. A short time later, he ordered the pair of ICOM IC-R7000 radios.

"They were among the first in this country," Spivak says. "I suggested he send an autographed photo to the guy I knew on the order desk at ICOM America in Bellevue, Washington, as a sweetener to speed up delivery. "He did, too," chuckles the dealer, "although the guy still thinks to this day that I forged the name on that picture."

An accurate time standard is important to

anyone who monitors the world radio bands. And so it was to the precise Gleason, who kept a Seiko quartz clock on his desk, next to his receivers.

One day he asked Spivak to order him a time piece suitable for traveling. "I got him a Sony cube clock radio with AM and FM." But Gleason had little tolerance for equipment that didn't work the way it was supposed to. Spivak got the call: "Take this thing back, pal. It runs four seconds slow!"

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On those occasions when he could be cornered by reporters, he was cordial, but not particularly revealing. The answers to questions about past successes came as if by rote, often ended with the same, tired nonenthusiasm. That is until the conversation shifted to the subject that was, to him, always interesting—his world band radios.

"He brightened just discussing it," said reporter Cannon. His usual low-key voice would rise with enthusiasm, sounding, again, like Ralph Kramden on a roll: "You can pick up the *whole world!*"

And so you can. How sweet it is!