

World's Worst Irish Tenor contest brings out wannabees

By Robert Hughes Perrizo

Who will be the next Benny Jensen in St. Paul's World's Worst Irish Tenor Contest? That's the question when the call for entries for the 35th annual competition squeals out in high C.

The contest, predicated on the premise that everybody wants to be Irish — and sing, badly — in March each year, got its start in 1970 as a shennigan by a group of roundtable rowdies at Gallivan's restaurant a couple of weeks before St. Patrick's Day. Curmudgeon columnist Bill Farmer of the St. Paul Pioneer Press had complained that he had been duped by the city when he arrived for a job interview with the paper from Kansas on that date six years earlier.

"Everybody was singing, dancing and kissing in the streets," he said, "and nobody told me that's what happens to people in St. Paul on St. Patrick's Day." Impressed with what he saw of the happy populace, Farmer took the job offer over lunch at the St. Paul Hotel and was promptly sent by cab to the airport by his recruiters, who didn't want to miss out on the fun at hand.

"When I returned for work two weeks later," Farmer recalled, "the town was deader than a doornail. I vowed to get back on those Irishmen for deceiving me." Turning to his roundtable companions. Farmer, then a popular humor columnist for the newspaper, asked what he could to return the prank.

"Why not start an Irish tenor contest," suggested gadfly Glen Olson, the P.R. man from Amer-



Sean T. Kelly, front right, sang "Take Me Out to the Ballgame" backwards for the Worst Irish Tenor contest in the 1980s. Glen Olson, front left, and Bill Farmer, back left, emceed the event. Tom Hectal provided the accompaniment on his trumpet.

ican Bank.

"I'll do you one better than that," Farmer said, "Let's make it the 'World's Worst Irish Tenor Contest!' " and he asked for the names of some local Irish song birds who would take the bait. Two North Central Airlines pilots — Ray "Mismatched Shoes" Kelly and Jeremiah Farrell — were suggested, along with a motley list of equally overbearing reverlers.

"What will really agitate the Irish, though, is to include some Scandinavians in the contest," Olson chuckled.

"I know a great candidate," another tablemate chipped in. "There's this Swede Benny Jensen up in Hayward, Wiscon-

sin, that's the worst singer I've ever heard. He hits high notes that sound like pig squeals, and clears out entire bars when he starts up. I think he's a mail sorter up there."

"Perfect," said Farmer, who was now jotting down the names of potential contestants. "Somebody contact this Jensen character and make sure he shows up. This will rattle some Irish cages."

No sooner had the column announcing the contest hit the street than the phone started ringing off the hook in the columnist's office. It seemed everybody in St. Paul — skiers, snowmobilers, fishermen and vacationers — had heard Benny

Jensen perform at one time or another in Hayward.

"This is really getting BIG," Farmer schemed, as he ordered a huge banner printed up welcoming "Benny Jensen, World's Worst Irish Tenor." "But let's get him in here early so I can audition him."

The grand audition was set up at the Ramada Inn near 3M on Interstate 94 on the way into St. Paul from Wisconsin. It was picked (1) because the place was easy to spot for Benny (who had never been to St. Paul), and (2) because they had a piano player there to entertain early dinner guests at the motel. The large, presumptuous sign welcoming Benny on the mar-

quee also couldn't be mistaken. The chubby, cherubic character arrived at 6 p.m. on the dot. He was wearing a green bow tie and the plastic boater hat with "Hayward Muskie Days" on it that he was to wear for just about 30 years at the contest.

Farmer couldn't contain his excitement — or curiosity — at seeing the great man for the first time. "Could you sing us a song now before we go downtown for the contest, Benny," he asked. "We have a piano player for you here."

"Yeah," Benny chirped, "but get me a gin and water wash first. I've got to gargle first. Does the piano man know 'Your Cheatin' Heart?'"

It was a good thing the audition was held. A sound check was certainly necessary, because he had never used a microphone before. His first notes of song virtually destroyed the sound system with feedyback, eliminating the Ramada dinner crowd just like he did in the bars up in Hayward.

"Perfect!" Farmer gushed. "Let's get him downtown before he loses his edge."

The rest is history. Benny played to a packed house of fans who kept yelling "Benny, Benny, Benny" whenever he broke out into one of his four-song repertoire which included "Jambalaya," "Release Me," "Popeye the Sailor Man" as well as "Cheatin' Heart."

KSTP-TV sent a mini-cam out to catch the act for the 10 o'clock news and the rest is history. Benny's singing received network attention and the contest was an overnight sensation.

Thus, before "Reality TV" and "American Idol," the World's Worst Irish Tenor Contest was.

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