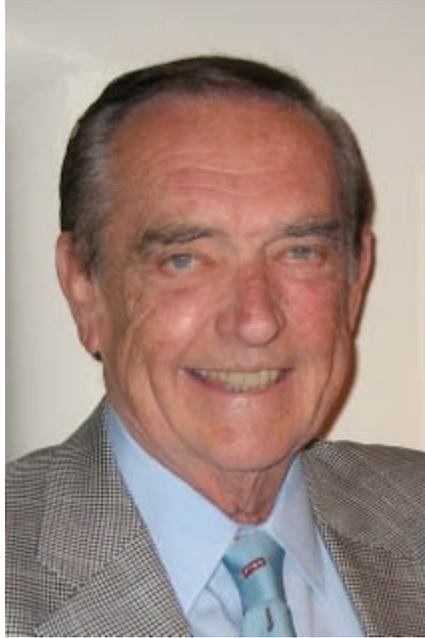


**This interview with
BOB BOOKER
was conducted by the Library of Congress on
July 17, 2015**



Bob Booker

LOC: What was your first exposure to JFK impersonator Vaughn Meader?

BB: We saw him for the very first time on “Arthur Godfrey’s Talent Show.” I have a recording of it, of that particular performance. It’s not much of a performance. At the end of his five to six minutes, he did about 30 to 45 seconds answering in the voice of Kennedy at a press conference. And Earle [Doud] and I were already working on the album and we were going to use Dick Shawn but when we heard Meader, we changed our minds.

We hired him within three to four days. He was working in a small club in the Village for eight bucks a night, something like that. We went down to see him in the Village and saw him and then we asked who his manager was. He said Buddy Allen, and the next day, we locked down the deal.

LOC: You were already writing the album?

BB: Yes, for about a month or so. I was a DJ previously in Miami and New York. I was very aware of the success of comedy albums--Mort Sahl, Nichols and May, Bob Newhart, Shelley Berman, Lenny Bruce....

Earle and I were always looking for something to do. We wrote for Bob and Ray, I wrote a piece for “Playboy.” One day, I saw the “Kennedy Coloring Book,” and I said, “You know what would be a good idea is to do a Kennedy album.” I knew it would sell; I knew I had the contacts at the record companies.

We were just about finished when we brought in Naomi [Brossart]—“Jackie”—and did a demo of what we had written with Earle and I playing the other parts.

LOC: How did you cast Naomi Brossart to play Jackie Kennedy?

BB: We held open auditions. A friend of mine had a copy of “A Tour of the White House” and he lent it to me. And we would put that on the projector and the actresses would watch it for about 10 minutes or so and then we asked them to audition.

Naomi was the last one to audition—and she completely nailed it! (You know that voice sounds like Marilyn Monroe.) Naomi was just so good, just instantly. I didn’t know anything about her. The only background I knew was that she was a dancer at the Copacabana. I have no idea where she is now; I’ve lost track of her over the years.

You know, we did a tour with the two of them, Vaughn and Naomi. For about three months [after the first album came out]. It gave us the second album. We opened the show at Carnegie Hall without any rehearsal in January in a snow storm and we were still a hit. You know, when you’re young and stupid....

LOC: How did you cast the other roles?

BB: It was either people we knew or had worked with. We actually searched out a couple. Bob McFadden was a major voice actor at the time. Chuck [McCann] was a mutual friend of ours. Earle and I played some of the roles.

LOC: Did you and Earle write the entire album or did Vaughn Meader or others contribute?

BB: We wrote the entire album. After we made the deal, Earle suggested we bring in George Foster. George had credits in TV; we brought him in to punch it up. He was a third writer on it. But 95% of it was us.

Well, actually, one piece... Before we signed the deal, we went to Hugh Hefner to possibly finance [the album]. “Playboy” was in Chicago then and I knew Hef. When we went to the mansion, Shelley Berman--an old friend of mine from the radio--was there. I told Shelley about the album and I asked him, “Shelley--want to write for us?”

He said, “Bob, I just haven’t got the time for it.”

The next day, at breakfast, Shelley had written a piece for us. He said, after he had gone to bed that night, “I couldn’t get the idea out of my head.” So he wrote it and gave it to us.

I said, “How do we pay you?”

And, he said, “No, Bob, it’s a gift.”

It’s the cut on the album where you think Kennedy is talking about the budget but he’s actually playing Monopoly. Shelley wrote that for us.

LOC: On the original album, the performers are listed as playing “The Father,” “The Mother,” etc., not John F. Kennedy or other proper names. Why was that?

BB: A lot of that was input from Meader. Vaughn didn’t want to say he was doing the President; he didn’t want to use the Kennedy name. I never really understood his reasoning. I didn’t have a great relationship with Vaughn. There just wasn’t anything personal between us.

LOC: Did you face any issue with censorship?

BB: I found out really later when a gentleman in England [Nicholas Cull] opened up the JFK [Presidential] files a number of years ago and wrote a piece on what he found. There was apparently quite a bit in there on Vaughn and the album.

The story is that Pierre Sallinger and Arthur Schlesinger were in the car and heard the piece of the album where it's the press conference and the joke is "Mr. President, everyone knows you're Catholic. Do you think we'll ever have a Jewish president?" And the President says, "I'm sure we will have a Jewish President--though I couldn't vote for him."

Well, they were afraid people would mistake the recording for the REAL JFK! They tried desperately to stop the album. It was a devastating report.

Later I heard from a White House press reporter, Merriman Smith. He called me right after the album came out and said, "Jack is a friend of mine and he came into a cabinet meeting with a record player and your album. And before we started the meeting, he said, 'First I want you to hear MY album.' And he played the album for the cabinet!"

Of course, when the President laughed, everyone laughed.

I heard Kennedy later bought 100 copies of the album for Christmas gifts for friends and family. He had no problem with this sort of thing. He had a tremendous sense of humor about himself because it made him more human.

I think there was a lot of attempting to stop it that I never heard about; I never got a call to stop. Once I got one copy [sent to me] cut in half—I had a bad reaction to it.

Of course, 11 record companies turned us down. I finally went to Leonard Goldenson, who I knew. We played it for him and he had like five lawyers around him and three consultants. One of them was Ike's former press guy, James Hagerty. He spoke up afterward and said, "I think they'll love it—the communists will love it!"

Leonard finally said, "That guy doesn't know what the f--- he's talking about. Bob, the thing's [going to be] a giant hit and we can't do anything with it."

Leonard said, "You need a small company with one guy in charge who can make the decision."

Leonard Goldenson made the call to Archie [Bleyer] at Cadence.

LOC: Did the unprecedented success of the album surprise even you?

BB: We were surprised with the final numbers. But we truly believed it would be a hit.

But, my god, we were a hit in eight days! It was this year's hula hoop!

Bob Mack [production boss for Cadence] believed in the album. He went to every single record plant in America and took the masters to get it made. He's the one who made it a hit. If that album hadn't been available in the stores, it never would have been a hit.

It was such a hit in New York, they were actually selling it without covers. The cover printers couldn't keep up.

LOC: Why do you think the Kennedys and their era was so ripe for parody?

BB: I think we found great youth with them. He looked like a movie star. With a beautiful wife. There was such a big promise. He had a tremendous sense of humor about himself. And he was doing a good job and that was a big plus.

We were young again. Everybody loved him.

LOC: I feel I must ask: where were you when you heard about the shooting in Dallas? After the initial shock of it, what did you do in regard to the album?

BB: Neither Earle or I had any political connections. I've never been a Democrat or a Republican. I've voted for both parties. It was about humor.

When the news came, I was having lunch with Allen Ginsberg and Bobby Dylan. We were working on a film at that time with Ginsberg and having lunch in the Village. All these guys were always starving to death. Whenever Allen came to lunch, he'd always bring someone with him. So Allen introduced us though I knew who he was. He said, "He's Bobby Dylan and he's a poet." I never forgot that. Never mentioned his music at all.

During lunch, my secretary called and told me about the President. I dropped the phone. I ran out of the restaurant. I got the first cab back to the office. I got Archie on the phone and I said I wanted to take both albums off the market immediately! I didn't want this to be some sort of cash-in product. They got it stopped at the plant; they couldn't get it back from all the distributors.

We took them all and chopped them up and dumped them in a landfill in New Jersey. I never regretted it.

LOC: After JFK's assassination, though he continued to perform and even record, Vaughn Meader became something of a tragic figure. Did you keep up with him in later years?

BB: I got a call once or twice from him over the years. You know he didn't want to do the second volume [of "First Family"]. We had a deal to do two albums. He said, "I don't want to do Kennedy anymore, I'll get stuck with it. I want go back to my act."

I said, "You don't have an act!" We had to sue him to get the second volume.

The second album was a better than the first. The "New York Times" thought so too.

Afterward, Vaughn came to me and said, "Bob, you were right; it was a better album." I appreciated that he did that. He did a very good job.

It sold about half a million to 700K—then we had them totally destroyed.