

“The First Family” (1962)

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Essay by Ronald L. Smith (guest post) *



“The First Family” album



Original label



Vaughn Meader, c. 1962

Though “comedy-on-vinyl” had always enjoyed some recording-buying success (Nichols and May, etc.), until “The First Family” became a million-seller, laughs-on-record were a lesser industry affair. The majority of best-selling albums in the slowly rising record store category of comedy were almost entirely stand-up routines. People who weren’t fond of nightclubs could hear Jonathan Winters, Shelley Berman, Lenny Bruce and others live on disc. And there were also compilation albums of novelty music (including Spike Jones and Stan Freberg) and a few obscure albums that offered the original casts of chi-chi New York satirical revues produced by Ben Bagley, Julius Monk and others. But...a custom-made complete album of sketch comedy? With no stars and no track record of being a success in a theater? No wonder “The First Family” came out via the indie label Cadence Records after being rejected everywhere else.

Vaughn Meader, a fairly unknown stand-up comic and mimic, starred as President Kennedy. Born in Boston (March 20, 1936), Meader played The Blue Angel nightclub in 1962 with a variety of impressions and gags. “Variety” noted at the time, “a few bits...register, but it’s the JFK that gives him the top plateau.”

The gags on the album about the colorful president and his young family were sitcom-mild. The most memorably quoted joke was President Kennedy’s complaint that his kids were playing with his bath toy. As Meader declared in full Boston dialect, with the seriousness of a campaign speech: “The rubber swan...is mine!”

“Novelty” and “fad” items are often inexplicably successful, and so it was that after some local airplay on New York City radio, stores began selling out of “The First Family.”

Recorded on October 22, 1962, during the grim times of the Cold War, few cast members had much hope that this album would even get a review. Meader recalled, “President Kennedy had just made his speech saying the Russians had missiles in Cuba. During rehearsals I snuck out to the hotel bar to watch Kennedy...thank God he took a strong stand, or our record would have died right there.”

By November 19th, the “New York Times” was reporting over 200,000 copies sold and factories were working overtime to make more. It was a Christmas gift for hundreds of thousands that year, ultimately selling a million copies. On March 18, 1963, Meader and company put out Volume Two, and he and his cast tried a nightclub tour, performing routines radio-style.

Since the 70's, sketch comedy's been alive and well via "Saturday Night Live" and in the 50's, there was "Your Show of Shows" with Sid Caesar, Imogene Coca and Howard Morris, but in 1962, there wasn't much going on. A one-hour comedy special was expensive to mount, safely starring a Bob Hope or a Jack Benny, and restricted by network regulations. Suddenly, with "The First Family," there was a new, inexpensive outlet for satire. What Stan Freberg dubbed as "Pay Radio," the comedy album was now proven to be a chart topper...and all one needed was a good idea, not a superstar performer.

As soon as "The First Family" stunned the record world, copycat albums quickly arrived: "The Family at The White House" was intended to confuse buyers into picking up "the wrong album." It was by the unknowns Hirsch and Dawson. Barely better known, Brill and Foster offered "The Other Family," satirizing Russia's leader Nikita Khrushchev. "The Last Family" from Tito Hernandez (who?) was about Cuba's Fidel Castro. Imagining a Jewish president was the theme of comedy writer Danny Davis's indie album "My Son the President" and another from Marty Miles. A black president was Willie Bryant's "Funniest Dream on Record," as well as the concept for "The Next Family," recorded by Bob Kennedy and Ralph Roby. Chuck McCann recorded an album of songs ("Sing Along with JFK") while London and Clark offered an "answer" album, "The President Strikes Back."

Kennedy didn't need London and Clark on his side. He had his own wit. Asked about the record, JFK said, "I enjoyed Mr. Meader's album very much. But I really think he sounds more like Teddy." References to the best-selling album were handy for the President. He opened a meeting with a Democratic National Committee group by saying, "Vaughn Meader was busy tonight, so I came myself."

Worrying over being typecast, Vaughn Meader signed a deal with Verve Records to create satirical sketch-comedy albums that covered varied topics...except for JFK. He was working on the album in November of 1963, when JFK was killed in Dallas, Texas. That night, edgy comic Lenny Bruce took the stage. How would he handle this tragedy? Would he dare make a joke? Accounts vary as to Bruce's exact wording, but even the cleanest version was prophetic: "Poor Vaughn Meader!"

Indeed, Meader, so closely identified with JFK, was soon shunned by the media. His appearance at the December 4th Grammy Awards was canceled. So was his week as a panelist on TV's "To Tell The Truth." Verve did issue their two contracted albums to no great interest. One sketch on his first album ("Have Some Nuts") involved an interview with Dr. Bow Wow, a dog behavior expert. "What can I do if my dog has tics?" Answer: "Don't wind him."

Eventually Meader drifted into total obscurity, living on a commune in the hippie late 60's, then moving to Maine where he dabbled in country music and singing.

In the meantime, the idea of made-for-vinyl entertainment further blossomed. Every presidency seemed to inspire novelty albums hoping for the success that Meader's had. Earle Doud, producer of the "First Family" album, cranked out several on Lyndon Johnson and brought back Meader in the early 70's for a concept album on Jesus Christ returning to Earth. Keyed to the success of "Jesus Christ Superstar," "The Second Coming" however turned out to be just the title of another failed record. (Doud later offered Meader a cameo on the 1984 album "The First Family Rides Again," with Rich Little playing Ronald Reagan.)

In a 1979 interview, Meader called himself, "A living reminder of tragedy." In the meantime, the 70's had given many "studio only" groups a venue to try comedy: Firesign Theater, Congress of Wonders, and Credibility Gap all experimented with "pay radio," with varying degrees of success, and even some stand-up performers (Jean Shepherd, Cheech and Chong and

Murray Roman, among them) experimented with comedy recorded in a studio with special effects and no audience.

There was no audience for Vaughn Meader however; he scraped by with local song appearances in Maine and other odd jobs until the end of his life. He died on October 29, 2004.

Ronald L. Smith is the author of "Who's Who in Comedy," "Stars of Stand-Up," "Cosby," "Carson," "Comedy on Record," "Laughter at 78rpm" and other comedy biographies and reference works.

*The views expressed in this essay are those of the author and do not necessarily represent the views of the Library of Congress.