

Vaughn Meader: He'd Rather Be a Riot Than President

One smash-hit record, and suddenly a young comic has a host of fans—including the Kennedys, who are the subject of his devastating impersonations

By BOB DRISCOLL

TWO COPIES of a new record album recently were rushed by jet from New York to London—addressed to Princess Margaret.

Another hundred copies found their way to a certain Washington, D.C., address—1600 Pennsylvania Avenue. More than 2,000,000 others wound up in American homes within three weeks of the record's release.

The disk is simply labeled "The First Family," and its star is a hitherto little-known Boston comic, Vaughn Meader, 26, who does a hilarious impersonation of President Kennedy.

I had known Vaughn before the record, and so I was eager to talk to him and his petite, German-born wife Vera about his sudden success. When I arrived at their new three-room New York apartment, the first thing that struck me was how tired Vaughn looked. His complexion had grayed, a telltale sign in the entertainment business that a performer is spending a lot of time indoors working and not so much time outdoors pounding the pavement.

"Welcome aboard," he greeted me in his Kennedy voice. "It's nice of you to interview me for FAMILY WEEKLY aftah 'The First Family.' The question I must ask you is this: wherah were you befoah?" He grinned and settled back on the couch next to Vera.

Turning off Kennedy, Vaughn said: "You know, for a time I thought I should be a politician. I figured that if I was going to make a living, it would have to be with my mouth; I've never had a bit of trouble talking.

"The way things are working out, though, I'd rather be a riot than President. For one thing, it pays better. Or at least it does for the time being with this record. Six months ago I would have done anything that paid for some groceries."

Meader is the first to admit that his is a Horatio Alger story "with a lot of horseshoes, a wonderful wife, and good friends thrown in."

"As for my President Kennedy imitation," he relates, "that came about only because some of my friends ribbed me about being from Boston and taunted me into impersonating the President. The voice was easy for me. Within a week, I had



it down. The gestures took longer—the better part of a month. It was only then that the commercial aspects of my little game occurred to me.

"The right people happened to catch the act. Then came 'Talent Scouts' and 'The Ed Sullivan Show' on tv—and the record."

Vaughn playfully locked his arm around Vera's neck, drawing her to him, and said: "You helped a little bit, didn't you, Honey? Let's see, you paid the bills off and on—mostly on—for the last six out of seven years of our marriage. That helped some. And you did laugh at my jokes even if you didn't understand them at first."

He turned his attention back to me. "I drifted until I met Vera. Come to think of it, we then drifted together until I got this big break.

"I was born in Boston, you know, just like President Kennedy. And that's about where the resemblance ends. My father was killed in a swimming accident when I was 18 months old, and Mom went to work as a waitress to support us. I had to shuttle around between relatives, and for a while I was boarded at Parker Homestead Grammar School.

"Happily, I learned to play the piano at Parker Homestead. When I joined the Army at 17 and was shipped to Germany, I began to play piano and sing in a hillbilly band. Pretty soon I was

leading it and filling in with some chatter.

"One night a pretty blond waitress came over to the piano, and asked, 'You will play "Sawdust," bitte, ja?'"

"I cracked up—nearly fell right off the piano stool. I saw I was hurting her feelings, so I controlled my laughter as best I could and said: 'You mean "Stardust," I think.' She laughed as heartily as I had when I explained the difference."

Vaughn married Vera and brought her home. He then went to the School of Radio Technique in New York. "I thought I might as well be a radio or tv producer," he said. "But after looking all over the East for a job, I returned home disabused of that idea. I landed a job as an usher in a movie theater. Then I sent a résumé to a department store, and to my surprise they answered that they had a job for me. So I became an announcer—I don't know how many girdle sales I announced—before I returned to New England and some two-bit dates in night clubs."

Vaughn then decided to try some topical political humor and landed a job at Phase 2, a Greenwich Village club, which now boasts: "Home of that Kennedy man: Vaughn Meader."

SUCCESS has had little effect on Vaughn's home life. He's busier and has moved into a new apartment, but his friends have remained constant. "They're bums just like me. Only now I'm a successful bum," he adds. "And now I can afford to see the pro football Giants in person instead of on tv. And I can indulge a hobby; I brew the best New England clam chowder in New York."

Vaughn feels that he has to work hard to stay on the top. "Right now I'm stereotyped as an impersonator," he says. "But that's only part of my act, as I hope everyone will soon find out. I'd like to do everything—everything but dance, that is. I have flat feet."

"How would you like to be President?" I asked.

Vaughn's facial muscles changed, his index finger jutted out at shoulder level, and he was President Kennedy again. "In answer to yoah question," he intoned, "let me say this: I have made a judgment not of what my country can do foah me but what I can do foah my country. And if I were President, heaven help us."

COVER:

A pensive J. Edgar Hoover, photographed by the distinguished Karsh, recalls the most inspiring moment in his life and shares it with us in the dramatic story, "Appointment with Destiny," on page 4.

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