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## (Abbott) Vaughn Meader

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**MEADER, (ABBOTT) VAUGHN** (*b.* 20 Mar. 1936 in Waterville, Maine), Grammy-award winning comedian known for his uncanny mimicry of President John F. Kennedy, and whose career never fully recovered from Kennedy's assassination.

Abbott Vaughn Meader was the only child of Charles Vaughn Meader, a mill worker, and Mary Ellen (Abbott) Meader. After Charles broke his neck in a diving accident and drowned when Abbott was only 18 months old, Mary moved to Boston to pursue a career as a cocktail waitress, leaving her son behind with relatives. A sometimes unruly and troubled child, Meader was sent back to his mother in Boston at age 5, but she had developed a drinking problem and placed him in a children's home. After shuttling between several schools in both Massachusetts and Maine, Meader eventually graduated from Brookline High School in 1953, and then joined the Army. While stationed in Mannheim, West Germany as a lab technician, he formed a country music band (the Rhine Rangers) with fellow soldiers, later adding some impressions of popular singers to his repertoire, and also married his first wife, Vera Heller (1956).

After his discharge in 1957, Meader sold sewing machines door-to-door in Maine before moving to New York City in 1959 to study at the School of Radio Technique, under the G.I. Bill. While performing as a singer/musician/comic in small nightclubs, Vaughn Meader (he dropped his first name) began impersonating then-Senator John F. Kennedy during the 1960 presidential

campaign. The audience reaction was so favorable that Meader ended every performance with a “JFK press conference.”

Although Meader was *not*, strictly speaking, an impressionist – the Kennedy routine was just five minutes of his 30-minute act, which included original songs, parodies, and jokes – he mastered all of Kennedy’s mannerisms (such as jabbing his forefinger for emphasis) and phrases (“let me say *this* about *that*”). His physique was similar to JFK, and he even adopted a Kennedy hairstyle. The Kennedy bit got enough attention for him to appear on “Celebrity Talent Scouts” on CBS during the Summer of 1962, and to have a full-page captioned photograph in *Life* magazine as part of a feature on Kennedy mimics.

After seeing Meader’s stage act, producers Bob Booker and Earle Doud, who already had been planning a comedy album based on the Kennedy family, quickly signed him up. “The First Family” was recorded on 22 Oct. 1962 before a live audience – the same night that President Kennedy himself was on television announcing that the Soviet Union had nuclear missiles in Cuba. Rejected by a dozen labels, the album was released on Cadence Records on 7 Nov. 1962, and it became a sensation, helped also by the fact that Kennedy’s popularity had soared due to his strong stand during the Cuban Missile Crisis.

The record consisted of mostly short segments gently satirizing the Kennedys by putting the president in non-presidential situations, such as sorting out children’s bathtub toys (“the rubber swan is *mine*”) and asking for green

stamps at a gas station. Record distributors could barely keep up with demand, and it became the fastest-selling record in history (about 4 million copies in 4 weeks). Meader, only 26 years old, appeared on numerous television programs, including Ed Sullivan, Jack Paar, Steve Allen, and Andy Williams, and went from earning \$7.50 a show in nightclubs to over \$5,000.

Meader's mimicry was so good – *Playboy* called him a “carbon copy of the President” – that even Arthur M. Schlesinger, Jr. (a special assistant to the president) was startled when he heard “Kennedy” make some impolitic comments on the radio. Although Jacqueline Kennedy did not appreciate the record, Kennedy himself was amused, even playing it for the Cabinet and purchasing 100 copies to send as Christmas gifts. Officially asked at a press conference if the album annoyed him, Kennedy quipped, “I actually listened to Mr. Meader's record but I thought it sounded more like Teddy than it did me – so *he's* annoyed.”

After the cast went on a successful tour (opening at Carnegie Hall), Meader began to grow weary of the act. While the Kennedy routine had been very profitable for him – he earned 7 cents in royalties for every album sold, and women threw themselves at him as if he really was JFK – he feared being typecast, and initially resisted participating in “The First Family, Volume Two,” which was released in March 1963. He signed with Verve Records and began working on an album of new material.

On 22 Nov. 1963, Meader was in Milwaukee for an appearance before a group of Wisconsin Democrats, when a cabdriver asked him if he had heard that Kennedy was shot in Dallas – thinking he was being set up for a punchline, he replied, “No, how does it go?” Because of JFK’s assassination, Meader’s television and nightclub appearances were immediately postponed or canceled, and any remaining copies of both “First Family” albums were recalled and destroyed by Cadence. Meader announced that he would never do Kennedy’s voice again and went into seclusion. On stage for the first time after Kennedy’s death, comedian Lenny Bruce (after a long, dramatic pause) cracked, “Boy, did Vaughn Meader get fucked.” (Bruce would later observe that they put two graves in Arlington National Cemetery – one for Kennedy and one for Meader.) Strangers came up to Meader on the street to offer their condolences, as if he were a Kennedy family member. Ironically, although the material he had taped for December’s Grammy Awards telecast was cut out, “The First Family” won Album of the Year, and Meader won Best Comedy Performance.

Kennedy’s assassination effectively put a halt to Meader’s career, since (as he himself put it in 1977), he was “a living reminder of a tragedy.” The public was not interested in any of his new albums or routines, and he went through what he described as his “wine, women, song, and drugs period.” He drank heavily, his first wife left him, and by 1965 he had blown all the money from the original album. Meader briefly quit the music business and lived in a log cabin in Maine

with his second wife before giving away all his possessions and moving to San Francisco in 1967, where he began to use LSD, which later progressed to cocaine and angel dust.

He continued to work throughout the 1970s and 80s as a saloon singer (reverting to his given name, Abbott), forming various country/bluegrass groups in Kentucky and Maine, and even tried his hand at film music and acting, starring briefly in a play in Los Angeles about a man obsessed with JFK. After marrying his fourth wife in 1986, Meader began managing a restaurant in Hallowell, Maine, and continued to perform original songs, although he suffered from emphysema. He never had any children.

Meader's talents as a satirist and singer were always overshadowed by his impression of John F. Kennedy, with whom he was perpetually linked, both in life and death. He stayed on top for one year, before Oswald's bullets disrupted two careers.

Although there is no full-length biography of Meader, aspects of his career appear in *Whatever Became of...? Fifth Series*, by Richard Lamparski (1974), *Joe Franklin's Encyclopedia of Comedians* (1979), and *Who's Who in Comedy*, by Ronald L. Smith (1992). An interesting profile of Meader was written by Andrew Goldman ("Vaughn Meader is Alive and... Well, He's Still Alive") in *Boston Magazine*, Mar. 1997. Other informative articles are by Rudy Maxa ("Camelot's

Comedian: Getting Ready for Teddy With Vaughn Meader”) in the *Washington Post Magazine*, 4 Nov. 1979; David Lamb (“A Long Way From Camelot: Vaughn Meader’s JFK Impersonation Made Him a Star. Then An Assassin’s Bullet Took Everything Away”) in the *Los Angeles Times*, 20 Apr. 1997; and Stephen Nohlgren (“From Camelot to Gulfport”) in the *St. Petersburg Times*, 21 Mar. 2000. There is much valuable information on the website “Vaughn Meader – JFK’s Myna Bird” <<http://www.geocities.com/Broadway/Stage/1985/>>.

An early article about the “First Family” album is by Peter Bunzel (“A Kennedy Spoof Full of ‘Vigah’”) in *Life*, 14 Dec. 1962. Reactions to Meader’s record by Kennedy and his advisers is covered in “No Laughing Matter: Vaughn Meader, the Kennedy Administration, and Presidential Impersonations on Radio,” by Nicholas J. Cull, *Historical Journal of Film, Radio and Television*, Vol. 17, no. 3 (Aug. 1997): 383-399.

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