

MUSICAL TREASURE CHEST

DRG Archive DARC 2-1101, Queen Bea; DRG Archive DARC 1-1106, Command Performance; DRG Archive DARC 2-2100, 25 Years of Recorded Sound (1945-1970) From the Vaults of MGM Records; DRG 6100, Very Good Eddie; DRG 6101, "The Act"; DRG 6102, Special Occasions: Richard Rodney Bennett plays the Ballet Music of Cole Porter, Harold Arlen & Richard Rodgers; DRG SL 5178, Noel Coward sings his score for The Girl Who Came To Supper; DRG SL 5187, Judy Garland/The Beginning; Capitol SM SLB 8099, Judy in London; STET DS 15013, No Strings; STET DS 15016, The Boys From Syracuse.

Hugh Fordin seems to be the mastermind behind the listed records and others in the ever-growing DRG catalogue. Some are originals which Mr. Fordin has pursued, like Very Good Eddie and Special Occasions; others, like Queen Bea and the Garland albums are reissues; still others are imports. Mr. Fordin has been involved with records before, and an interesting array they turned out to be. A series of three albums, issued by a mail-order company, Out-Take Records, called CUT! gave us musical numbers recorded, and sometimes actually filmed, which were subsequently cut from films. There was a heavy emphasis in these albums on the MGM films and especially on the numbers sung by Judy Garland. Out of 51 tracks 17 were sung by Miss Garland; 37 were from MGM films. Mr. Fordin has carried his enthusiasm for both MGM and Garland to his new company.

The two Garland albums are a curious cross-section of that lady's long and checkered career. Judy in London was originally released in 1960 by Capitol records and its current two-disc packaging adds nothing to the original. Garland is in decent shape vocally and the songs are all standards. The sessions were studio ones and the sound is just fine, but as stated, this album really adds nothing to what already exists of Judy Garland material. The other album, however, brings us a few choice and curious articles.

Mis-titled The Beginning the re-issues date from 1940 thru 1947, at least four years after the real beginning of Garland's recording career at age 13. It would have been nice to hear some of the truly early recordings such as Stompin' at the Savoy (Decca 848) or Figaro (Decca 2873) or Sweet Sixteen (Decca 15045) but instead the 1940's material has been presented to us, represented as the very early Judy. Not that I have any qualms about the quality of the chosen material. On the contrary I am delighted with the songs. Side two of this record brings us all the sides from Judy and Mickey Rooney's Girl Crazy album and her three recordings, two with Dick Haymes, from The Shocking Miss Pilgrim. Side one includes two Christmas songs, The Birthday of a King and The Star of the East, both beautifully and movingly recorded. The balance of the album is just as much fun and, with none of this material currently available anywhere else, it is good to have it all collected in one place. I only wish the album had been called something else, something more to the point. There is at least one more Garland album,

not sent to me in this batch, in the DRG catalogue. It is called The Wit & The Wonder and it makes me wonder what material comes under such a heading.

Now to Mr. Fordin's other obsession, MGM. 25 Years of Recorded Sound brings us what we hope should be real gems. Very few of them are. Some of these singles have never before been released and in most cases they do deserve a hearing; others, like Kathryn Grayson's Love is Where You Find It have been heard once too often. The extraordinary collection of performers on this album are occasionally matched by the material. Bing Crosby and Louis Armstrong perform Lazy River with an ease and grace which exemplifies the talents which made and maintained them as major artists. Lena Horne's Every Little Bit Hurts and He'd Have to Get Under--Get Out and Get Under sung by Debbie Reynolds and Carleton Carpenter are highly enjoyable items. But such curiosities as Danny Thomas' Singing in the Rain, Monica Lewis singing A Kiss to Build a Dream On and Red Skelton's version of The Foggy, Foggy Dew are really a waste of time. There are a number of non-vocals and these also, though pleasant, add nothing. Just to round this one out, the other vocalists who appear on this album include Betty Garrett, Jimmy Durante, Harve Presnell, Jane Powell, Billy Eckstein (their spelling, not mine), Sarah Vaughan, Rhonda Fleming, Arthur Godfrey, Rosemary Clooney, Jose Ferrer, Dan Dailey and others. I hope there won't be a Volume Two of this one.

Queen Bea is also a collection of older records reissued in a double-disc format. Sub-titled "A Musical Autobiography" it turns out, rather, to be An Evening with Beatrice Lillie (1955, London Records) and Auntie Bea (1958, London Records). The liner notes by Stanley Green and the accompanying photos are fascinating, but once again the album's chief value is in collecting into one place these two out-of-print items. True, the songs do represent items performed over a long career, but most of them come in the latter half of Miss Lillie's life and the use of the "musical autobiography" is perhaps a bit overstated. It would be grand if someone could collect the early Bea Lillie into a comprehensive album and release it, along with her cuts from the musical High Spirits, in conjunction with this album. Then we'd have a true musical life history of this extraordinary, comic songstress.

I don't know why Mr. Fordin chose to record "The Act"; I suppose it's because recordings by Liza Minnelli, like those of her mother (remember Judy Garland), sell very well. "The Act" brought Ms. Minnelli back to Broadway in a concert with a story somewhere behind it. It was created for her by John Kander and Fred Ebb who have written for her and written for her and written for her. The material here is not up to their usually excellent standards. There are some good songs, but the material is so Las Vegas splashy that the most interesting item turns out to be Turning (Shaker Hymn), a song adapted by Kander and Ebb from an actual Shaker hymn. My other favorite track is My Own Space which has Ms. Minnelli movingly accompanied by John Kander. In both cases the singer reaches for her deeper tones and she uses them well. The rest of the score is slick and slippery, unmemorable and strictly for

die-hard Minnelli fans. She sings all but one song and that is reprised, I suppose, to give the listener the feeling that this really was a Broadway show.

Very Good Eddie, the other Broadway show album in this batch, is a much more traditional piece. It has music by Jerome Kern and lyrics by a wide array of wordsmiths; the score as it existed this "revival" was culled from almost twenty years of Kern material. I dislike new versions of old shows which feature restructured, rewritten books with very little of the original score and reams of interpolated music billing themselves as revivals. This has been the Goodspeed Opera House trademark and Very Good Eddie is a perfect example. For this album of the New York rehash, James Harder, who is pictured and listed, is not allowed to give his one line in the opening number, and Joel Craig, also listed and pictured, doesn't sing his one song, I've Got to Dance. I don't know why not, but this sharply detracts from the original cast value of the recording. When I reviewed this show I meant to applaud the performance of Travis Hudson as Mme. Matropo, but for reasons of space I couldn't. I'd like to recommend that lovers of good music and of good theatre listen to her renditions of O, Moon of Love and Katy-Did on this album. They are wonderful. DRG has also released the recent A Party with Comden & Green, Snoopy, Best Foot Forward, Together With Music, and another Kern revival, Leave It To Jane. These were not sent for review.

A number of British show albums appear in the DRG catalogue, among them the sequel to The Boy Friend, Divorce Me, Darling by Sandy Wilson. That, and the British TV series, Pennies From Heaven are the only native albums in the catalogue; neither was sent for review. Instead the English cast albums of two American classics were presented. Both have fine Richard Rodgers scores and both are based on highly successful New York productions. The Boys From Syracuse, with lyrics by Lorenz Hart, is the more interesting item. Based on the off-Broadway revival of the mid-sixties, it carried over the fine Ralph Burns orchestrations, the Christopher Hewett direction, and the basic vocal types of the American cast. There have been adjustments, of course, but they are relatively minor. I do have some reservations about the cast. Maggie Fitzgibbon, an Australian with a strident voice, plays Luce with an American accent so forced it isn't laughable. She strives for the Mid-west and doesn't make it, but her singing voice is something of a compensation, particularly in the trio, Sing For Your Supper, a showstopper which almost caused me to pause in my listening to play it again. Lynn Kennington, Adriana in this production, has a vibrato so wide I found it irritating. In Falling in Love with Love this was picked up on and amplified by having the brass members of the orchestra vibrate to the same degree. It drove me crazy. The rest of the cast is marvelous. Bob Monkhouse, whose antics I have always enjoyed in films, and Ronnie Corbett are great Syracuseans and Denis Quilley sings well as Antipholus of Ephesus but is not the most sensitive interpreter of lyrics. It's not a bad album and certainly stands head and shoulders over No Strings.

No Strings is the other Richard Rodgers show which made the

transition from New York to the West End; this time Rodgers is his own lyricist. The Broadway original starred Richard Kiley and Diahann Carroll and their roles herein are assumed by Art Lund and Beverly Todd. Interesting. Art Lund has long been one of my favorite singers. I enjoyed him in The Most Happy Fella, several times, worked with him in Sophie and often listen to his records from the forties and fifties. Here, he is not in top form. He tends to sharp now and then, usually on a rising musical line and although the old robustness is still evident in his delivery, he seems to spend too much time enunciating the words and not enough time to understand them. How Sad on side one is his best solo. Beverly Todd sings sweetly but not in a truly theatrical manner. She also seems to spend more time than necessary on her enunciation. Maybe I'm crazy, but the total effect is of a first read-through. The supporting cast is fine: David Holliday, Marti Stevens and Ferdy Mayne do as good a job as the principals. Only Hy Hazell, as the ragazine editor Mollie Plummer, delivers a thoroughly professional, highly enjoyable rendition of her, alas, only number, Love Makes the World Go. For a change, I wish Mr. Rodgers had written more numbers for a minor character. Once again Ralph Burns orchestrations, sans strings a la the title, have been imported. They don't fare quite so well this time. Minor nuances which heightened the dramatics, and which can be heard on the American cast album, are missing: the exciting drumroll at the end of Nobody Told Me, for example, has been played down and keeps the musical excitement from happening. Pity. With Lund and Hazell it could have been such an exciting recording.

As a partial balance to the disappointment of No Strings, DRG has brought us on Command Performance excerpts from the Night of 100 Stars, a benefit show presented at the London Palladium at midnight on June 28, 1956. Every item on side one of this album is a joy; Peter Ustinov, Laurence Harvey and Paul Scofield, all in drag, do an otherwise unrecorded Noel Coward routine, Three Theatrical Dames; Laurence Olivier, Vivien Leigh and John Mills transport Irving Berlin's Top Hat, White Tie and Tails; Tyrone Power sings Chattanooga Choo Choo. Side two adds some unusual and delightful performances by Noel Coward, Beatrice Lillie, Tallulah Bankhead and Mabel Mercer. An item any collector of theatre performances should have, by all means, and one of the best albums DRG has presented.

Two other DRG items of interest which I owned and which I would like to comment on are the Noel Coward and Richard Rodney Bennett recordings. First the Coward. These demonstration recordings of the score for The Girl Who Came To Supper present both the man and his work in their best light. He is relaxed and very much in command of all the material and his delivery assures each song its place, both in the show as originally conceived and in the greater history of his seemingly inexhaustible output. The record includes six songs which were cut from the show and original versions of others which underwent drastic changes. Herman Levin's notes, a tribute really, are moving and informative and the two photos seem to bring us closer to the genius who created such joyful musical moments as these. DRG has released other Noel Coward

recordings and I look forward to hearing them in the future.

The final item is perhaps the most unusual recording of theatre material to come my way in years. Mr. Bennett, a composer and pianist, has, with the help of William Bolcom and recording engineer Les Paul, Jr., brought us three ballet scores written by three Broadway composers in stunning two-piano versions. Mr. Bennett has done these arrangements and he plays them brilliantly. Harold Arlen's Civil War Ballet from Bloomer Girl is the least interesting of the three, but it has its moments of sheer fascination as the show's themes and songs intertwine with Civil War songs. Presented in the show, despite attempts to cut it, it must have been a joy to see.

Within the Quota, music by Cole Porter to a story by Gerald Murphy, was a satire on American life and the movie images of typical Americans. Composed in 1923 for the Swedish Ballet, it debuted on a double bill with Darius Milhaud's La Creation du Monde. It was well received on both sides of the Atlantic and then disappeared. The music, as presented here, is highly idiomatic. The sections are clear and the types are fairly easy to distinguish musically. It's just the sort of thing you'd expect from a man who would soon master the art of character writing in songs and stand the musical comedy world on its collective ear. Lost for years, this score has now been restored by Robert Kimball and William Bolcom and some enterprising ballet company should pick it up immediately and present it as part of its permanent repertoire. It's that good.

So is Richard Rodgers' Ghost Town written in 1939 for the Ballet Russe at the insistence of dancer/choreographer Marc Platt. Once again I feel sure that, now that Slaughter on Tenth Avenue has made it into the good graces of several ballet companies, this piece would still please a discerning dance audience today and ought to be given another viewing.

Richard Rodney Bennett plays all three pieces extremely well. It makes me want to cry out, "give us the orchestrations," but his two-piano textures are rich and lush where they should be, the Rodgers' work for instance, and clean and crisp in the Porter. This disc is truly one of DRG and Mr. Fordin's triumphs. Mr. Bennett has also done an album of Stephen Sondheim material which I haven't heard, but I'm certain that the two talents merge marvelously.

This treasure trove from a relatively new company seems to fluctuate between polished gems and costume jewelry, but I applaud their work and look forward to seeing what they come up with next from that infinite mine of entertainment recordings.

J. Peter Bergman