

MERCURY · THE SOUND OF MY VOICE AND OTHER NOISES · SEVERN DARDEN AT THE SECOND CITY

OCS 6202

MERCURY STEREO



The Sound Of My Own Voice

AND OTHER NOISES

Severn Darden

AT THE SECOND CITY



ORIGINAL CAST ALBUM





SEVERN DARDEN ET AXE



NOTES ON “THE SOUND OF MY OWN VOICE AND OTHER NOISES”

“I am allergic to only two things,” Severn Darden says, “kitty-litter and a species of common fern called ‘maiden-hair’.” I hasten to add a third: He is very allergic to Gloom. Most of Severn Darden’s days and nights, in fact, have been devoted to discovering cures for Gloom. His best remedies—these luminous, original, funny, baroque monologues and skits you are about to hear—have banished Gloom in audiences in Chicago, St. Louis, New York, Virginia, San Francisco and Hamtramck, Michigan.

The first time I saw Severn Teackle Darden was from the window of a streetcar jogging down Lake Park Avenue near the campus of the University of Chicago. Sartorial in applegreen waistcoat, cane, English tweeds and white tennis shoes, Severn was emerging from a dilapidated mansion complete with Charles Addams’ cupolas, festoons and forbidding shuttered windows. He was all of 19. Later I heard that Severn shared this home with a mad ballerina in her early 60s and a cowboy poet named Buck Rosen. At the College of the University of Chicago, which Severn attended in the late 1940s, he was a campus legend, one who brought felicity and Dada freedom into the intense, sober, medieval atmosphere of the College in those days. Only a month or so ago I heard an undergraduate retell (probably for the 1,000,000th time) one of the choicest of the Darden legends: One evening in great, gloomy, deserted Rockefeller Chapel, Severn was giving an organ recital for the edification and delight of some young lady. Suddenly an irate campus watchman appeared, brandishing flashlight and oaths. Black Mexican cape flapping, Severn fled like the Phantom of the Opera to various parts of the Chapel, the watchman hot on his heels. Finally he stopped dead where the altar should have been (Rockefeller Chapel being nondenominational, has no altar) and his arms spreadeagled Severn boomed: “Sanctuary! Sanctuary!” The startled watchman gaped; and not knowing what to do, he retreated sheepishly.

Who is Severn Darden? He is that canny, astonished, ebullient child in all of us whom we have almost forgotten. He is the child who knows that the Emperor is really naked. Instead of saying so immediately, Severn weaves out of words an imaginary suit more fabulous than the Emperor’s new, invisible clothes. He might begin, for example, an extemporaneous lecture on the subtle changes of fashion from the days of the loincloth of St. Simon Stylitus to the tuxedo of Daddy Warbucks. Or he might with infinite variety recite a thirty minute Dada poem consisting entirely of the word “bare.” Gradually the Emperor and subjects get the drift and, relieved, laugh away their pomposity.

Severn Darden’s humor is a potpourri of heady, surrealist New Orleans, where he was born, and tough, caustic “Chicago Style” comedy. New Orleans (where his father was District Attorney) has left its imprint deep in his imagination—the ghosts of that city, its intricate, whimsical, aristocratic charm, its odd, European juxtapositions. But the Darden humor is also “Chicago Style”—pungent, concrete, satirical, informed, very involved with everyday politics and folkways and business. Darden was one of the backbones of Paul Sills’ *Compass Players* who in the middle 1950s acted in taverns and clubs around the University of Chicago. Mike Nichols, Elaine May and Shelley Berman cut their comic teeth as Compass Players. The others (who appear with Severn on this record) went on to establish Chicago’s famous *The Second City* in which Severn, under Sills’ fine direction, acts today.

And there is a third, rich ingredient in the Darden humor. A peculiar kind of erudition runs through these monologues and skits. I do not mean egghead. Mort Sahl is our classic egghead comic: political, topical, a Hip Will Rogers of the USA earth, earthy. Severn, on the other hand, is the only American comic of the first rank who can incorporate in his act something like the wit and scholarly, wry, scurrilous, outrageous puns and jokes of James Joyce. One can imagine Severn Darden—especially when he speaks as the Mad German Professor—saying something like this celebrated pun in *Ulysses*: Stephen Dedalus, delineating his theory that all of Shakespeare was inspired by his wife Ann Hathaway, quips: “If others have a will Ann hath a way. By cock, she was to blame.”

Darden’s Herr Professor Valter von der Voegelweide has a similar streak of poignant, Rabelaisian humor. His erudition is an erudition gone haywire. The only dramatic scene I know that is comparable to the Mad Professor’s “A Short Talk on the Universe” is the famous metaphysical spiel given by Lucky in *Waiting for Godot*. It is a “mad, bad, sad, glad” lecture. “Now, the Universe we examine through what Spinoza called the Lens of Philosophy,” the Professor begins—and then goes right off his trolley. The Professor is as crazy as life itself. This is the lecture we secretly longed to hear during all the dreary classes we had to sit through. We are left at the end laughing in the Void. Professor Voegelweide is, in fact, the Mad Professor of the troubled, hopeful dreams of our schooldays who lectures forever in a classroom located somewhere between Iowa City and the platonic schools of ancient Alexandria.

(“A Short Talk on the Universe” was originally developed when Severn was with the Compass Players; the first time it was performed as a solo act was in 1959 Chicago when he appeared at Alan Ribback’s *Gate of Horn*.)

All of the ingredients of the Darden humor—whimsical surrealist, concrete and caustic, loony erudition—give charm, edge and wit to the ‘Vienna 1885’ burlesque in which Severn plays Dr. Siegfried Fafnir, head of the Imperial Medical Society and Howard Alk is straight man as Sigmund Freud. Only Darden could pull off the fantastic bits which make the skit great: The little girl swinging back and forth with her long, white beard at the tip of which is a tiny, tinkly bell, the doughnut factory, the Jules Verne trip to the moon which isn’t the moon but—(I don’t want to spoil your fun by giving away this bizarre punch-line).

Talk about Severn Darden always seems to end with everybody telling one or another of the Darden legends. Let me leave you with two of my favorites: One day in a bar Severn fell into casual conversation with a stranger. The man began telling anecdotes about a gnomish, baroque character he knew who lived in a round room which contained only a round bed and a round mirror directly above on the ceiling. As the stranger went on Severn heard a more and more familiar note. At last he could contain himself no longer and asked casually, “What’s your friend’s name?” “Severn Darden,” the stranger said. Or there is this one: Severn had a friend named Seth, an angular Greek scholar who looked as if he were an aristocratic Barcelona Jew of the XVIIth century or an authority on the foot fetish industry on the Isle of Corfu. Seth in black German ski cap and Severn in Mexican cape were walking down 55th Street bound for a University of Chicago party. It seems that Severn’s reputation and appearance had for some months bedeviled an excitable young philosophy student named Bloom. Well, this particular evening Bloom happened to spot Severn and Seth. He saw red. Something about them prompted Bloom, frothing, to stride up to Severn and demand, “Do you really think it’s worth the candle, old man?” Without replying Severn simply reached into his cape and produced a candle (he had been asked to bring some candles to the party) which he held while Seth lit it and then, handing the candle to the flabbergasted Bloom, walked away without saying a word.

—PAUL CARROLL

METAPHYSICS LECTURE

MRC Music, Inc. (BMI) . . . 16:05

VIENNA 1885

MRC Music, Inc. (BMI) . . . 3:52

CHRISTIAN MORGENSTERN

MRC Music, Inc. (BMI) . . . 4:51

OEDIPUS

MRC Music, Inc. (BMI) . . . 7:45

ASSISTED BY SECOND CITY CAST

CELLIST—PHILLIP BLUM

HARPSICORDIST—WILLIAM MATHIEU



OCS 6202

ALSO AVAILABLE ON MONAURAL OCM 2202

This is a true stereophonic disc record recorded in accordance with standards developed by the Record Industry Association of America, Inc.

THE SECOND CITY CAST



CAST

HOWARD ALK
ALAN ARKIN
(ROGER BOWEN ON SABBATICAL)
SEVERN DARDEN
ANDREW DUNCAN
BARBARA HARRIS
MINA KOLB
PAUL SAND
EUGENE TROBNIK

COMPOSER

WILLIAM MATHIEU



This Mercury STEREO record has been cut with variable groove spacing and electronic groove depth control, thus producing a 2-channel disc of exceptionally wide dynamic range, reliable stylus tracking throughout the frequency range, and startling clarity and definition of instrumental timbres.

This Mercury STEREO record should be played according to the RIAA standard with a stereo reproducing cartridge having a stylus tip not exceeding 7 mil. For best results, be sure that your two loudspeakers and amplifiers are correctly balanced in terms of output and phase, and that the loudspeakers are placed in the room so as to provide an even “spread of sound” from one to the other.

RECORDED LIVE AT THE SECOND CITY CABARET THEATRE, CHICAGO, ILLINOIS ON JANUARY 30, 1961

PHOTO BY MORTON SHAPIRO

KLEIN-WASSMANN/DESIGN

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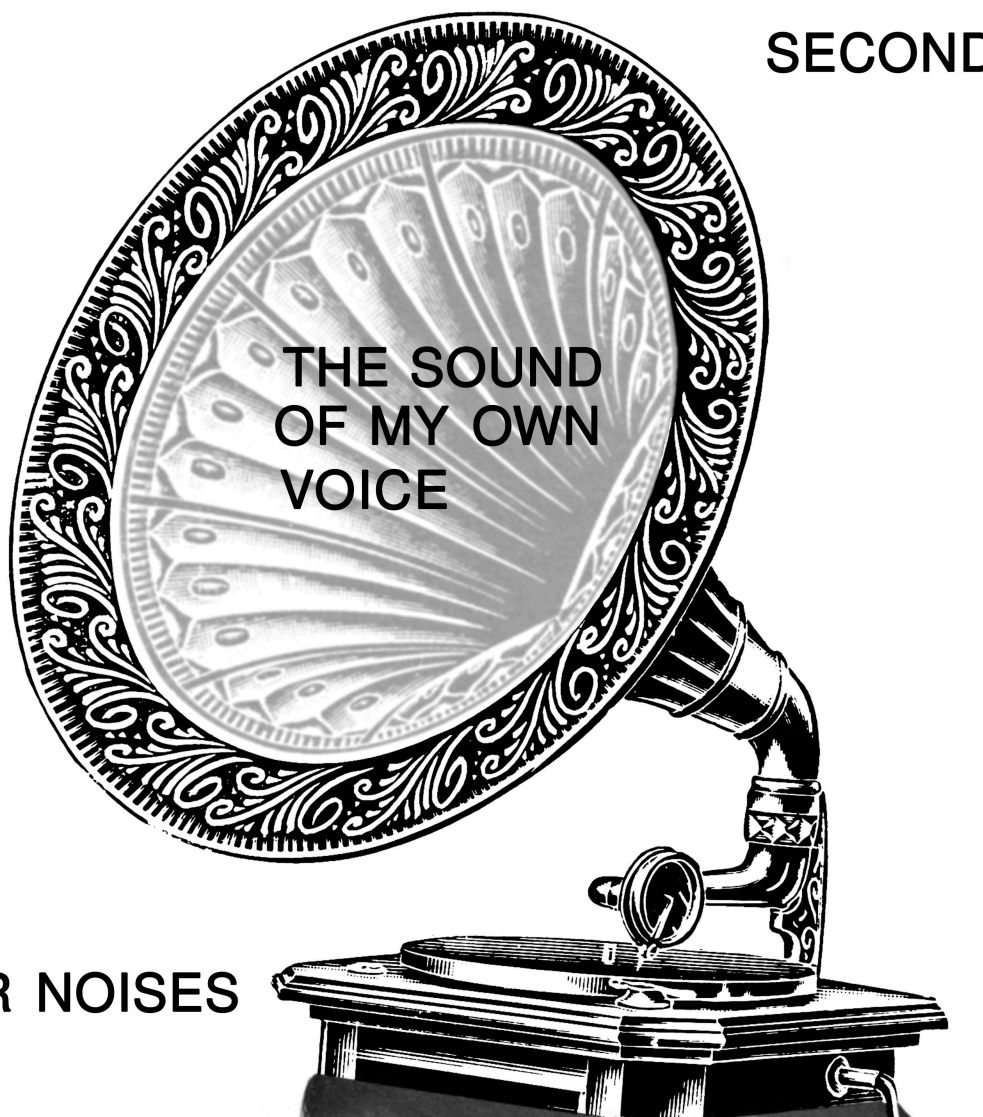
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OCS-6202
Side 1

A Stereophonic
High Fidelity
Recording

At The Second City

1. METAPHYSICS LECTURE - 16:05

LONG PLAYING HIGH FIDELITY

STEREO



THE SOUND OF MY OWN VOICE
AND OTHER NOISES
SEVERN DARDEN

OCS-6202
Side 2

A Stereophonic
High Fidelity
Recording

At The Second City

1. VIENNA 1885 - 3:52
2. CHRISTIAN MORGENSTERN - 4:51
3. OEDIPUS - 7:45

LONG PLAYING HIGH FIDELITY