

[CHIP DEFFAA'S THE SEVEN LITTLE FOYS](#)

Once upon a time, there was a thing called vaudeville. It started in the days before movies when theaters booked three shows a day. It was as diverse as it was raucous. It was also a launching pad for future stars that included the likes of Fanny Brice, Eddie Cantor, Harry Houdini, Al Jolson, Gypsy Rose Lee, Ethel Merman, Sophie Tucker, Mae West – and Judy Garland. All had roots in vaudeville. It is a time we will never see again. Or, will we?

Chip Deffaa's The Seven Little Foy's is a bustling musical all about vaudevillian Eddie Foy and his Irish family of seven kids (there's even an *Irish-American Vaudeville Medley* !) Together with Original Cast Records, Deffaa has affectionately captured the heart of an era in this homespun show on the disc. The lively musical had its local debut at the New York International Fringe Festival a few years ago. It was well received; and with good reason. Wearing many hats as writer, arranger, director and producer, Chip Deffaa presents a lighthearted, well-crafted period piece worthy of a longer life. It overflows with vintage gems like, *Shine On Harvest Moon*, *Some Of Theses Days*, *Meet Me Tonight In Dreamland* and *Second Hand Rose*. All are preserved on this sweet show captured here with so much heart.

The songs on the CD are performed by a talented cast led by Michael Townsend Wright (Eddie Foy, Sr.) It is a story worth telling; well-researched by a historian with an encyclopedic knowledge of the past and a reverence for the greats that paved the way. And, it all tips its hat to the age of song and dance hall entertainment. Vaudeville. Ultimately, it turns into an all encompassing pastiche that blatantly wears its heart on its sleeve as the story of the Foy's unfolds. At times, the perky toe-tapping songs jump out at the listener beginning with a gleeful rarity called *Smiles* by the forgotten team of J. Will Callahan and Lee S. Roberts led by a sweet-voiced Jillian Wipfler and the "Foy kids." Incidentally, Ms. Wipfler narrates most of the story. The catchy number kicks off a magical songbook that is nothing short of a valentine to the past. Deffaa, a respected archivist (in or out of the theater,) has astutely managed to stitch together a heartfelt piece of time and captured the warmth of a kindly family that sticks together through the good and the bad.

Some historical footnotes here to help to fully appreciate this CD and the genre: Vaudeville began around the early 1870s. It caught on fast and evolved into the most popular form of entertainment of the day running full throttle through 1935 before movies eclipsed its luster. It was a hugely popular form of variety entertainment comprised of a hodgepodge of acts at varying degrees of quality - on the same bill. This musical carnival included everything from acrobats, jugglers, animal acts, magicians, dancers and a host of good and bad singers. The potpourri also included minstrel acts, mini-plays, athletes and celebrities of the day. Variety was the key. Vaudeville was the name. Historians have noted that in its heyday, vaudeville was called, "the heart of American show business." Enter Eddie Foy. Born in 1856, he died in 1928. Along the way, show business history was made by a song and dance man who mattered.

After years of performing as an established soloist, and following the sad passing of his wife, Eddie Foy decided to take his seven children (!) on the circuit (skirting child labor laws of the day.) It was a natural. They loved to sing and dance. They had a truckload of talent. Foy was a popular attraction. And, with his best friend's stamp of approval, they became the most popular act vaudeville had ever seen. Incidentally, that best friend happened to be George M. Cohan. Through period songs, narration, soft piano in the background and some very clever original songs, it all comes together in this delightful CD brimming with a Ft. Knox minefield of gold for anyone with a flair for the way it was. If you're a sucker for unadorned, old fashioned harmonies and family style sing-alongs, this is your cup of tea. Fusing a generous dose of schmaltz and sentiment, it's like having a front row seat on the Orpheum circuit.

With 37 (!) cuts on the album, there's something here for everyone. Using some unaffected young talents fused with more experienced pros only adds to the charm factor here. It all fits the cozy flavor of these wistful

songs. Following Townsend Wright's nurturing lead, the cast also includes a wonderful Beth Bartley (Mrs. Foy) who sings a trenchant *Meet Me Tonight In Dreamland* (Whitson-Friedman) and that multi-talented phenomenon (and veteran of other Deffaa shows where he received raves portraying George M. Cohan,) Jon Peterson. Both are a sensation in their solo and ensemble turns. The rest of the merry band of players is made up of mostly young folks at various levels who deliver the songs with a gentle longing that enhances these relics as it embraces what vaudeville was really about. The whole brood is not *part* of the act – they *are* the act! The little Foy kids here shine as well as their seniors. The mix also includes an impish *Irish-American Vaudeville Medley* (mentioned at the top)) and a feisty *A World War One Medley*. Both medleys are full of raw pearls like: *Bedelia*, *That Old Irish Mother Of Mine*, *Goodbye Broadway*, *Hello France* and that warhorse, *Pack Up Your Troubles In Your Old Kit Bag And Smile, Smile Smile*. Where else will you get to hear such dreamy sentimentality from one show? As they sing and playfully interact with each other, the cast displays period accuracy with ample affection all lavished on these songs. Repeatedly, they bare their souls adorned with affection for each other. Yes, it's kinda schmaltzy in an endearing way (as also previously mentioned) but it's cup runneth over with more charm than a litter of kittens lapping up spilled milk.

There are more standouts. Playing Bryan Foy, Broadway's Devon Eddy is quite the highlight and showman on *If I Was A Millionaire* and *Goodbye My Bluebell*. This is a young man with a future. Tyler DuBoys, as Richard Foy, nails *Shine On Harvest Moon* (Norworth-Bayes) perfectly and is great on the memorable *One More Christmas* (by Deffaa) as an all round song and dance man. The whole troupe is very well cast. With so many vintage songs on one CD, there's a lot to take in. Of those 37 cuts, some are solos, medleys and reprises sung by the family intertwined with dialogue from the script. As a result of the latter, the listener gets a fluid picture of the action. Rediscovering such musical evergreens is a treat for layman and sophisticates alike from a genre and era that defined itself in song. And, show biz anecdotes pop up such as the time Madeline Foy took sick at The Majestic gig in Dallas. In a panic, Eddie somehow found a cute local gal and hired her as a “ringer” to fill in for two weeks. The inexperienced young lady liked the singing and dancing so much, she decided to shoot for a career in show business. Her name was Ginger Rodgers. Zachary Riopelle, a student at New York's LaGuardia High School, is special and landed his solo spots with ease. His lack of seasoning, adds even more authenticity to Deffaa's well written storyline. The younger kids get their chances to shine throughout with a shout out to Alex Craven and Maxwell Beer. They all give Irving Berlin's *The International Rag* perfect pizzazz. And so it goes with this must have album.

High praise to musical director Richard Danley. He has magically captured the spirit of the times through voracious musical instincts and raw talent. Andy Stein is simply perfect on violin. Incidentally, Chip Deffaa's hands-on attention to detail as he assisted with arranging some musical numbers enhances the vital old fashioned flavor of the whole album.

This CD is significant for many reasons. The Foy's were an integral part of the history of this milieu. A 1955 movie starring Bob Hope was made about the life of Eddie Foy and a 1964 television special ran starring Mickey Rooney. Foy's name is on all the lists of greats from the age of vaudeville. It's terrific stuff and a treat for any collection. It's also like that special ornament hung at the top of a Christmas tree; special and loving without explanation. Just there.

The CD is a keepsake that lovingly reflects an age when values were different; doors were held for each other and gentlemen tipped their hats to the ladies. Too, show business was all about vaudeville and specifically, a musical vagabond named Eddie Foy and his seven talented little vagabonds who carved out a legacy worth remembering. How lucky to have an album of these treasures to show us what we missed.