Hey There

Sammy Davis Jr

Original Recordings 1949-1955
Including . . .

THAT OLD BLACK MAGIC
BECAUSE OF YOU
THE BIRTH OF THE BLUES
THE GYPSY IN MY SOUL
A FINE ROMANCE
LOVE ME OR LEAVE ME
AND THIS IS MY BELOVED
LONESOME ROAD

Nostalgia
NAXOS

SAMMY DAVIS Jr
'Hey There' Original 1949-1955 Recordings

Sammy Davis Jr went through many different stages in his amazing career.

Starting out as a childhood hoofer, he later morphed into a slick variety performer, a clever impersonator, charter member of 'The Rat Pack' and Broadway superstar, eventually being canonized as 'the world's greatest entertainer' before finishing his career on a sad note of self-parody.

But one thing remained constant through all of these various manifestations of the Samster's personality until nearly the very end: he was a dynamite vocalist.

At his best, Davis was a songwriter's dream: able to squeeze maximum juice out of any melody, while still giving the lyric full value and wrapping the whole thing up with his own unique brand of showmanship that made any number seem special.

The selections on this album are assembled from a six-year period in his career (1949-1955) with most of them actually having been recorded in the course of fourteen months (June 1954 to August 1955) which would feature some of the most defining events in his life – including a near-fatal accident and a religious conversion.

There are unmistakable changes in style over that year that are fascinating to note, but first, it's necessary to recall where Davis came from.

He was born in Harlem on 8 December 1925, the son of a Puerto Rican mother and a black father, both of whom were vaudeville dancers.

When he was three, his parents divorced, and Davis's father took custody of young Sammy. He brought him on the road along with another hoofer named Will Maston, and the youngster made his stage debut as part of an act called 'Holiday in Dixieland', billed as 'Silent Sam, The Dancing Midget'.

Davis was a natural with audiences and the act soon changed its name to 'Will Mastin's Gang Featuring Little Sammy'. Film appearances followed as did a 1941 stint opening for Tommy Dorsey, where Sammy was first to meet Frank Sinatra.

After a stretch in the army, he returned to join his old buddies and as The Will Mastin Trio they became an increasingly popular act, playing clubs like Ciro's and the Copacabana. During these years, Sammy discovered his gift for celebrity impersonations and the humour they added to the mix made it click even more readily.

The first recordings we hear are from that period and we discover a young, callow Sammy, making up in energy what he lacked in polish. The 1949 pressing of **Smile, Darn Ya, Smile** even features a sample of the legendary Davis tap-dancing skill.

But in 1954, Decca picked up Davis and his recording career took off at once. The arrangements of Broadway favourites like **Hey**

There or **And This Is My Beloved** are lush and confident, with Sammy doing his best to live up to them.

He sounds good, but it still feels a bit like a kid wearing a borrowed tux: there's a sense of entitlement that's missing. It's only when he tears into his comic impersonations, demonstrating how everyone from Jimmy Cagney to Cary Grant would sing **Because Of You**, that he truly seems at home.

And then, it all suddenly changed for Sammy in one split second.

It was 19 November 1954 and he was trying to drive back overnight from Las Vegas to Los Angeles. Just before dawn, on the outskirts of San Bernadino, he became part of a freak auto collision and the steering wheel column of his beloved Cadillac destroyed his left eye.

At first, Davis was in despair, but friends like Sinatra and Tony Curtis rallied round and he found the courage to continue. He also made an amazing decision to embrace Judaism which he said helped him start to rebuild his life again.

One month after his accident, Davis stepped into a studio in Los Angeles and recorded **All Of You**. The change in his style is instantly apparent. The voice is more burnished, and there's the beginnings of a willingness to open himself up honestly to the listeners, where before there had only been slickness.

He made his comeback at Ciro's on 11 January 1955 to a packed celebrity crowd that cheered him on.

Two weeks later, he recorded **The Birth Of The Blues** and it's possible to see yet another level of depth in Sammy's vocals. There's more abandon now and a touch of pain – qualities that he was to exploit brilliantly for decades until he finally, unfortunately, began to lean on them excessively in his final years.

Each session Sammy stepped into that emotionally charged year revealed another side of himself. His March recording of **That Old Black Magic** showed a new sensuality and a sense of rhythmic variation that crackles with excitement.

A Man With A Dream which came on 2 May, marks the first of the great anthemic Davis songs, the ones where he goes to the wall with a number, belting out the final notes with that unique bravado he possessed. You can see the first draft of later hits like "What Kind Of Fool Am I?" in this Victor Young tune from *Seventh Heaven*.

The very same day, he also paired up with Carmen McRae for a saucy, conversational rendition of **A Fine Romance** that presages his later breezy on-stage repartee with The Rat Pack in Las Vegas.

On 18 August, he recorded a pair of songs from *Guys and Dolls* (**I'll Know** and **Adelaide**) which find him venturing into a more sophisticated Broadway style, anticipating his Gotham debut the following year in the musical, *Mr. Wonderful*.

But his final session of the year on 10 November yielded a song which has to be listened to several times to discover the levels of meaning inside it.

Called **The Man With The Golden Arm**, it

was written by the team of Sammy Cahn and Jimmy Van Heusen, originally intended to be played over the opening credits of the Frank Sinatra film of the same name about a heroin addict, but director Otto Preminger wisely opted for Elmer Bernstein's moody jazz instrumental instead.

The song is definitely too mainstream to have accompanied such an uncompromising film, but it works well as a milestone of discovery for our Sammy.

It's possible to listen to it as a tribute to his pal, Sinatra, who was there for him during the worst of his post-accident depression.

But when he barrels into the song's pounding bridge, it's hard not to think that Davis had also found a generous measure of autobiography in the lyric:

'But there's a chance that he
Can shake the misery.
That's if he's strong enough
And fights it long enough …'

That ill-fated bend in the road on Route 66 may have taken away Sammy Davis Jr's left eye, but it gave him something in return: a way of looking at the world which brought his talent to a whole other level.

These songs clock the journey he took that year – for good as well as for ill – and it's magical to hear the way he learned how to redefine his life through his music.

Sammy Davis Jr. Oh yes, he was much more than "The Candy Man".

Richard Ouzounian

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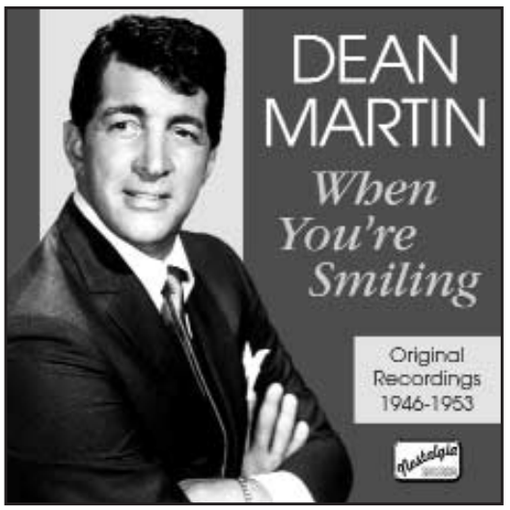

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These titles are not for retail sale in the USA

1. **The Gypsy In My Soul** *2:34*
(Clay Boland–Moe Jaffe)
With Morty Stevens' Orchestra
DDR 102, mx 201
Recorded 1953, New York

2. **I Don't Care Who Knows** *2:41*
(Buddy Johnson)
With Dave Cavanaugh's Music
Capitol 15390, mx 3861-1
Recorded 13 January 1949, Hollywood

3. **Smile, Darn Ya, Smile** *2:34*
(Max Rich–Charles O'Flynn–Jack Meskill)
With Dave Cavanaugh's Music; tap dancing by Sammy Davis Jr.
Capitol 57-70045, mx 4740-2
Recording 29 July 1949, Hollywood

4. **Azure** *2:23*
(Duke Ellington–Irving Mills)
With Dave Cavanaugh's Music
Capitol 57-70045, mx 4742-2
Recorded 29 July 1949, Hollywood

5. **Because Of You, Part 1** *2:40*
(Arthur Hammerstein–Dudley Wilkinson)
With Morty Stevens' Orchestra
Decca 29200, mx 86373-A
Recorded 7 June 1954, New York

6. **Because Of You, Part 2** *2:45*
(Arthur Hammerstein–Dudley Wilkinson)
With Morty Stevens' Orchestra
Decca 29200, mx 86374-A
Recorded 7 June 1954, New York

7. **Hey There** *2:46*
(Richard Adler–Jerry Ross)
From *The Pajama Game*
With Sy Oliver's Orchestra
Decca 29199, mx 86370-A
Recorded 7 June 1954, New York

8. **And This Is My Beloved** *2:51*
(Robert Wright–George Forrest, after Alexander Borodin)
From *Kismet*
With Sy Oliver's Orchestra
Decca 29199, mx 86371-A
Recorded 7 June 1954, New York

9. **All Of You** *2:42*
(Cole Porter)
From *Silk Stockings*
With Sy Oliver's Orchestra
Decca 29402, mx L 8066-A
Recorded 22 December 1954, Los Angeles

10. **The Birth Of The Blues** *5:10*
(Buddy DeSylva–Lew Brown–Ray Henderson)
With Orchestra conducted by Joseph Gershenson or Morty Stevens
Decca DL 8118, mx L 8152-A
Recorded 26 January 1955, Los Angeles

11. **That Old Black Magic** *3:17*
(Harold Arlen–Johnny Mercer)
With Sy Oliver's Orchestra
Decca 29541, mx 87521-A
Recorded 10 March 1955, New York

12. **A Man With A Dream** *2:53*
(Victor Young–Stella Unger)
From *Seventh Heaven*
With Morty Stevens' Orchestra
Decca 29541, mx 87848-A
Recorded 2 May 1955, New York

13. **Something's Gotta Give** *2:03*
From *Daddy Long Legs*
(Johnny Mercer)
With Sy Oliver's Orchestra
Decca 29484, mx 87523-A
Recorded 10 March 1955, New York

14. **A Fine Romance** *2:52*
(Jerome Kern–Dorothy Fields)
With Carmen McRae and Jack Pleis's Orchestra
Decca 29620, mx 87850-A
Recorded 2 May 1955, New York

15. **Love Me Or Leave Me** *2:56*
(Gus Kahn–Walter Donaldson)
With Sy Oliver's Orchestra, featuring Sam 'The Man' Taylor, tenor sax
Decca 29484, mx 87526-A
Recorded 10 March 1955, New York

16. **In A Persian Market** *2:32*
(Albert Ketelbey–Mack David)
With Morty Stevens' Orchestra
Decca 29759, mx 87849-A
Recorded 2 May 1955, New York

17. **I'll Know** *3:00*
(Frank Loesser)
From *Guys And Dolls*
With Jack Pleis' Orchestra
Decca 29672, mx 88533-A
Recorded 18 August 1955, New York

18. **Adelaide** *2:48*
(Frank Loesser)
From the film *Guys And Dolls*
With Jack Pleis' Orchestra
Decca 29672, mx 88532-A
Recorded 18 August 1955, New York

19. **The Man With The Golden Arm** *3:10*
(Sammy Cahn–Jimmy van Heusen)
With Morty Stevens' Orchestra
Decca 29759, mx L 8786-A
Recorded 10 November 1955, Los Angeles

20. **Lonesome Road** *2:10*
(Nat Shilkret–Gene Austin)
With Sy Oliver's Orchestra
Decca DL 8118, mx 86372-A
Recorded 7 June 1954, New York

Transfers & Production: David Lennick
Digital Restoration: Graham Newton
Original recordings from the collections of David Lennick, John Rutherford and the Belfer Audio Laboratory & Archive, Syracuse University

Original monochrome photo of Sammy Davis Jr from Michael Ochs Archives / Redferns

Sammy Davis Jr

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NOTES AND FULL RECORDING DETAILS INCLUDED

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