

## Bobby and Jackie and Jack



*The Kennedys during JP's time as ambassador to the UK Eunice, JFK, Rosemary, Jean, JP, Edward, Rose, Joseph Jr., Patricia, Robert F, Kathleen.*

A seemingly innocent satirical cabaret song in Act II, "Bobby and Jackie and Jack" presents us with real evidence of the genius of Stephen Sondheim. He has fashioned a song, supposedly created by the show's characters, that could have been written in 1960...but, of course, wasn't. The emotional impact of *Merrily We Roll Along* is that the audience becomes more "knowing" of the characters whilst they themselves become less knowing. We know the final outcome whilst we see the characters step into situations, oblivious to the eventual consequences of them.

And so it is with Bobby and Jackie and Jack. The song works because we know the final outcome. It works even better because it was "written" from the perspective of 1960; three years before the dream of Camelot was destroyed for ever with the assassination of John Fitzgerald Kennedy. In one fateful moment, or so it seemed, the hopes and aspirations of the American people had vanished. As so often in *Merrily We Roll Along* we observe and contemplate "if only they knew what was going to happen."

The USA emerged from WWII as the pre-eminent power in the World. True, it had suffered terrible losses, but none so devastating, nor as financially far-reaching as those on the European continent.

The years following the War saw the USA reeling through a series of events and ever-increasing social change whilst it also came to grips with its position as leader of the free world. National paranoia didn't begin with the events of 9/11: trawl through the years 1945-1960 and you'll see a nation struggling to let go of values previously dictated by Victorian-born leaders; increasing awareness of (and covert involvement in) the unfriendly politics of neighbouring Southern American countries; the race to produce the H-bomb; aspirations of a middle-class (and ultimately false) lifestyle portrayed in the media; a realization that this same media was corrupt and peddled falsehoods as truth; race riots; increasing involvement in un-winnable, ideological wars and so on.

But greatest of all was the fear of world domination by communism and the threat that this posed to the fabric of American life. The launch of the Sputnik in 1957 was a tangible reminder of how real that threat was and was greeted by many Americans as a portent of dreadful things ahead. Indeed, the threat of nuclear annihilation was only narrowly averted some three years later when the USSR came to the aid of Cuba in the face of American aggression. The world held its breath.

The new pretender, JFK, who stood for liberal values; who was going to stand against the legal tyranny of the security services and who would champion the American underclass – so often the blacks – promised a new dawn. ...and, as was predicted, the start of a new political dynasty in

American leadership. In fact this family, one of the most powerful in American politics was also one of the most tragic.

Bobby and Jackie and Jack is of a time when the Kennedy family had only suffered comparatively private family tragedies. The very public tragedies that would compound these were yet to happen and as the Kennedy family grieved, so would America with them.

Joseph Patrick Kennedy and Rose E Fitzgerald married in 1914. He was a wealthy businessman (and American Ambassador to the UK: 1938-40): she, the eldest daughter of a Boston politician. They had nine children four of whom died before their time.

The eldest, Joseph Jnr. was groomed for a political career but died in 1944 aged 29 when his bomber blew up over the English Channel. Their second child John Fitzgerald achieved the political dream only to be assassinated in November 1963 not quite three years after his inauguration, aged 46. Kathleen (b. 1920) married the "unsuitable" (i.e. Protestant) William Cavendish. He was killed in battle in 1944 just four months after the wedding: Kathleen died in a plane crash over France in 1948. Robert (b. 1925) served in the Navy during WWII and then as his older brother's campaign manager...and, as the song says, became Attorney General during JFK's presidency. He was assassinated in 1968 having won the California primary.



*Sputnik 1957*

Four of the Kennedy children survive: Rosemary Kennedy (b. 1918) suffered from mental retardation. She still lives in a nursing convent following a failed lobotomy in 1941. Eunice (b. 1921) has devoted her life to helping the disabled – especially those with mental disability. Patricia (b. 1924) was married to – and later divorced – the actor Peter Lawford. Jean (b. 1928) also works with people with disabilities. Edward (b. 1932) was denied nomination for the Democrat Presidency due to embarrassing questions concerning an incident at Chappaquiddick, Massachusetts when the car he was driving went off a bridge. Although he survived, his passenger didn't and he left the scene of the accident.

The tragedy that has dogged the Kennedy clan also extends to the grandchildren; most notably the children of the assassinated brothers John and Robert. John and Jackie's eldest son John (whom most people remember as a young boy standing tearfully by his mother saluting at the time of his father's murder) died with his wife in 1999 as the plane he was piloting to a family wedding crashed. Their youngest child, Patrick survived only two days in 1963. Robert and Ethel Kennedy gave birth to 11 children, the last being born after Bobby's assassination in 1968. Of these, David (b. 1955) died of a cocaine overdose in 1984. Michael (b. 1958) died in a skiing accident in 1997 following very public allegations of an affair with the family's babysitter.

Commentators have spoken of the "curse of the Kennedy's" and questioned just how much tragedy one family can stand. Others have commented on the stoicism that the family has shown in the face of tragedy after tragedy. A week after losing her son Robert to an assassin's bullet, Rose appeared on television with her surviving son, Ted. She drew on her faith in God to describe her reaction to the tragedy. "We cannot always understand the ways of Almighty God, the crosses which He sends us, the sacrifices which He demands of us," Rose said. "But we know His great goodness and His love and we go on our way with no regrets from the past, not looking backwards to the past, but we shall carry on with courage."