



BUSTED RIBS AND BROKEN ENGLISH

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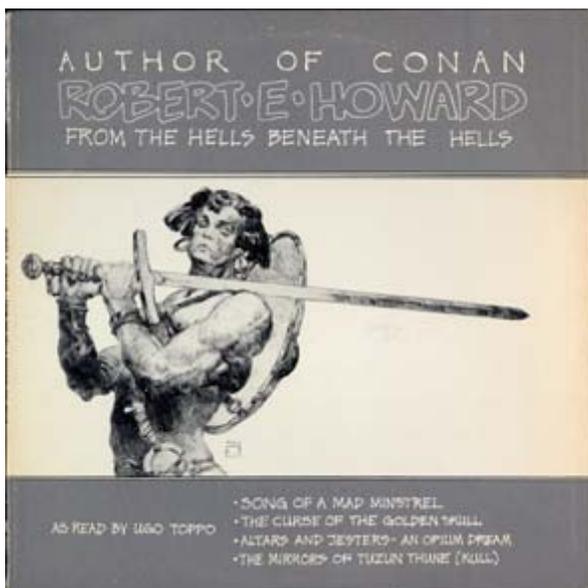
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Aural REH

Like many of you (from discussions I've had at Pulpcon), I was very pleasantly surprised with the CD which accompanied the Wandering Star *The Savage Tales of Solomon Kane*. When I first heard that there would be a CD with readings of the Solomon Kane poems with background music, I was skeptical. Not of the reading, but of the music. But I have to admit, it *worked*.

This took me back to prior attempts to portray Howard stories and poems through recording. There were several dramatizations of Conan stories, both original and pastiche, but the most interesting to me was the only attempt I'm aware of (prior to Wandering Star) to present Howard through dramatic readings. I'm speaking, of course, of the Alternate World Recordings LP *From the Hells Beneath the Hells*.



There are several interesting things about this recording. One is the choice of material. We have a mixture of prose and verse. And the prose is hardly the headlong action which many think of when they hear Howard's name. "Mirrors" is arguably his most poetic story. Its imagery and descriptions are incredibly vivid and many Howard fans rank it among their favorite stories.

"Skull" is a more minor tale, but it does have at least one distinctive characteristic which makes it well suited for inclusion here: it contains absolutely no dialog. This strengthens the reading as the orator does not face the dilemma of how to handle the different voices. Do you adopt differing dialects and possibly jar the listener for whom the voice does not match their own conception? Do you risk confusion by using a single voice? Mr. Toppo had to face this decision in "Mirrors" and I'll comment on this below.

The poems are rife with colorful and elaborate wordplay which Mr. Toppo seems to relish. And this leads to my observations of his approach.

Overall, I'd have to give Mr. Toppo fairly high marks. He has a powerful and expressive voice. He seems to have a good feel for the material and handles it well. I believe his family's poetic background serves him quite well.

There are a few problems, but they don't spoil things, just jar you out of the atmosphere briefly. An example of this is his reading of "blazing stars" in "Mirrors". His rushed reading of this phrase feels out of place. There is also a slight stumble over some words in "Mad Minstrel". And he does get a bit bombastic in spots, particularly "Golden Skull". But these aren't major.

His approach to the dialog in "Mirrors" is reasonable. He makes minor changes to his inflection and pitch, such as the slightly raised and breathy voice used to portray the sole female. Enough to differentiate the voices, but not glaring. Tuzun Thune has a slightly softer, higher voice, a bit unsteady, as befits one of his advanced years. Kull is strong and powerful. Brule somehow seems to lack a voice of his own.

There are also a few production problems. If you listen carefully, you can here pages turning in a few places. The enclosed booklet which includes the full text of the poems and stories was typeset on a typewriter. But it's hard to knock them for this as I consider it a great boon to have included the text at all.

To me, the biggest problem with this LP is not the fault of Alternate World Recordings, but that of time and technology. I very rarely listen to LPs anymore. CDs, despite their faults, are far more convenient. So a few years ago I made an attempt to transcribe the album to CD. It worked, sort of, but I was clearly feeling my way. The main problem was that recording levels were too high, leading to distortion. But it was still nice to have. This is the version I had in my car at Pulpccon this year. But on the long

drive back, as I was listening to the Wandering Star CD again, I was inspired to try to do this again, and this time do it right.

So here you have it! This time the recording levels were better, leading to a cleaner sound. I used Cool Edit Pro to clean up most of the ticks and pops that plague old vinyl. Copied the cover and cleaned it up a bit for the label. Ordered some CShell CD cases as there is no way standard jewel cases would survive being included in a REHupa mailing without at least half of them being crushed by the USPO.

I hope you enjoy it. I hope nobody has a problem with playing their CD. I chose a very high quality CD-R disc which should have a better than average level of compatibility with even older CD players, but problems can still arise.

I'll end with some detail from the back cover:

ABOUT THE STORYTELLER

Ugo Toppo was born into a family with a rich artistic background. His father, Renato Toppo was a famous artist and portrait photographer; his uncle was a renowned poet, his grandfather, the publisher of *La Follia di New York*, the oldest Italian weekly in the United States, was a devotee of the arts, possessing exclusive rights to the vast majority of Enrico Caruso's caricatures.

As a boy, Mr. Toppo sang with the choir of St. James and St. Bartholomew's Church. He has appeared in and directed many Off-Broadway and summer stock productions. His credits include *Look Homeward Angel*, *Dead End*, *Macbeth*, *Othello*, and *Richard III*. Mr. Toppo has received critical acclaim for his recordings from the works of Bierce, London, O'Henry and Poe. In addition, he teaches courses in mystery, horror and the literature of the macabre.

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