

Current Comments®

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How Rudy Wiedoeft's *Saxophobia* Launched the Saxual Revolution

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It is widely known that scientists seem to have a special affinity for music. It surprises me that I've never written about the music-science connection. As I've indicated in a recent essay on art and science, this gap will be filled in the near future.¹ In the meantime, I've been yearning to return to one of my personal passions—saxophones. I have previously written about the saxophone² in *Current Contents*®, not to mention jazz transcriptions^{3,4} and women sax artists.⁵

Recently, I saw the now-celebrated film *Bird*, about the tragic, yet artistically brilliant life of the alto saxophonist Charlie Parker. The film was directed by Clint Eastwood, an actor best known for his iconographic portrayals of the lone, harried law enforcer. The Cannes Film Festival honored the film with two awards—best actor (for Forest Whitaker's sensitive portrayal of Parker) and best sound track (which actually featured Parker's own saxophone performances). The awards were well deserved. Incidentally, I mentioned about 10 years ago² that Parker was voted in jazz enthusiast polls as the best alto saxophonist from 1950 to 1954, the year he died.

But my purpose here is not to diverge on the tempting topic of the *Bird*. Rather, it is to fulfill an ambition to write about a mostly forgotten, much earlier hero of the saxophone who died 14 years before Parker.

While the modern mass media have made names like Charlie Parker internationally famous, even those Americans and Europeans who were exposed to his progenitor's music cannot name the man today. Indeed, the story of this man's life presents an incredible opportunity for a filmmaker even now.

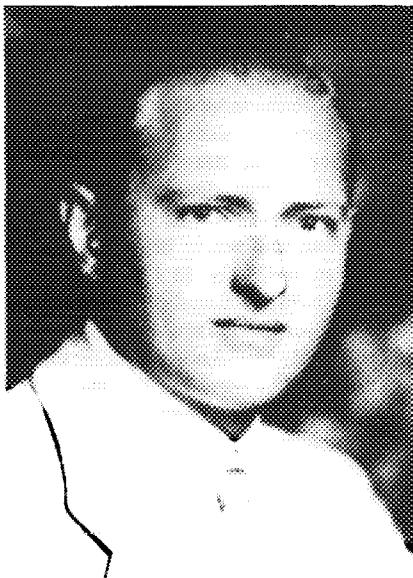
Rudy Wiedoeft

Any discussion about jazz and saxophones in the history of American music must include the person who had the greatest impact on the instrument's popularity (both here in the US and in Europe as well)—Rudy Wiedoeft (1893-1940). Although virtually unknown to audiences today, he is one of the important links in the history of modern jazz.⁶⁻⁸ Sadly, the amount of information concerning Wiedoeft is meager—if one considers the stature he once had. Detailed research on the life and work of Wiedoeft has been done by a handful of enthusiasts, including Todd Granzow,⁹ Jim Walsh,¹⁰⁻¹³ and Irving Levin.¹⁴

Perhaps one of the most informed people on the topic of Wiedoeft and his influence on American music is Ted Hegvik, School of Music, West Chester University, Pennsylvania. I first met Hegvik about 10 years ago, and we began to correspond in April 1981. I can't even recall how I encountered his recorded interpretation of Wiedoeft's music. But, shortly after that, I invited him to perform at an ISI® dinner in honor of 10-year employees. This proved to be a memorable event that I hope can be repeated someday. Last year I was motivated to contact Ted again because I had somehow lost my only copy of his recording.

In a recent conversation, I asked Ted how he would characterize the musical style of Wiedoeft. Hegvik's response is interesting:

When you look at the music on paper, it's ragtime. Essentially, it is very square-cut ragtime, but he played it with an energetic vaudevillian kind of style, not strictly



Rudy Wiedoeft (1893-1940)

like ragtime. And people will—according to what they know of Wiedoeft—refer to him differently as a ragtime saxophonist, as a vaudevillian saxophonist, as a concert classical saxophonist.... It's just that his style is hard to define, and he falls between the cracks. Wiedoeft is definitely a transitional artist. It is a sad fact that he was famous in this country until the crash of 1929 and then was quickly forgotten when everything went into swing music. But in Europe he remained popular right through the 1930s up to when World War II broke out.¹⁵

During the height of his popularity in the 1920s, Wiedoeft was featured on hundreds of recordings. Table 1 lists some of the more important ones.¹¹ Today, none are commercially available (such as through record catalogues) except perhaps via the collector's market or places that sell antique disks. About the only way you can listen to Wiedoeft-style playing is to obtain Hegvik's recordings^{14,16} or to catch one of Hegvik's inspired performances of Wiedoeft's music.

As you would notice if you were to listen to Hegvik's faithful interpretation of Wiedoeft's style of playing music, the sound would be very different—mellower and warmer than the modern saxophone. The

Table 1: Selected list of American records by Rudy Wiedoeft. Asterisks indicate Wiedoeft compositions available on tape recordings by Ted Hegvik, available from Crest Music, Robbinsville, New Jersey (609-587-1988).

EDISON DIAMOND DISCS (1917-1924)

Saxophone Sobs. Reverse: *New York Blues*
**Valse Erica.* Reverse: *Light as a Feather*
**Saxema.* Reverse: *Return of Spring Waltz*
**Saxarella.* Reverse: **Valse Vanite*
**Valse Llewellyn.* Reverse: *My Waikiki Mermaid*
Velma—Capriccio. Reverse: *Where the River Shannon Flows*
Saxophone Fantasie. Reverse: *Fantasia from Simon Boccanegra*

VICTOR (1921-1927)

**Saxophobia.* Reverse: **Valse Erica*
**Saxarella.* Reverse: *Souvenir*
**Valse Vanite.* Reverse: *La Cinquantaine*
**Dans l'Orient.* Reverse: **Serenade Badine*
**Marilyn.* Reverse: **Saxema*
La Golondrina. Reverse: *Rubenola*

AEOLIAN-VOCALION (1919-1920)

**Valse Erica.* Reverse: *Migilavacca—Mazurka de Concert*
**Valse Erica.* Reverse: **Saxema*

RUDY WIEDOEFT'S SAXOPHONE SEXTET (1923)

Pan-American. Reverse: *Country Dance*

EMERSON (1919-1921)

Pretty Little Rainbow—Waltz. Reverse: *Mavis—Waltz*
**Valse Erica.* Reverse: **Saxophobia*
**Llewellyn Waltz.* Reverse: *Fluffy Ruffles*
Beautiful Ohio. Reverse: *Till We Meet Again*
**Saxema.* Reverse: *Do Another Break*
The Moonlight Waltz. Reverse: *My Desert Love—Fox Trot*

GENNETT (1922)

Valse Yvonne. Reverse: *Pyramids Polka*

OKEH (1924)

Valse Yvonne. Reverse: *Page Padrewski—Fox Trot*

PATHE (1919-1921)

Drigo's Serenade. Reverse: **Waltz Llewellyn*
**Valse Erica.* Reverse: *Silver Threads Among the Gold*
Velma. Reverse: *Marriage Bells*

simple explanation is that Wiedoeft played the C-melody tenor saxophone. In his recitals, of course, Hegvik uses such an instrument.

To those unfamiliar with the history of this instrument, it is noteworthy that, originally, there were two families of saxophones.

There were the C and F instruments for orchestras, and the B-flat and E-flat saxes for bands. According to Hegvik, the C and F alto and tenor saxophones did not catch on with the American public, and so their production petered out after the 1920s.¹⁵ But I think it is a tribute to Wiedoeft's ability to captivate the American public of the Roaring Twenties that saxophones endured (when Wiedoeft did not) and became an integral part of the mainstream of popular music. As though an echo of Wiedoeft's heyday, there appears to be another American saxophone craze in the making now—musical-instrument manufacturers report they just can't make enough saxes to keep up with the demand.¹⁷

At a Washington, DC, concert performed during the 1985 Eighth World Saxophone Congress held at the University of Maryland, College Park, Hegvik gave a well-received presentation about Wiedoeft and of his music. According to Hegvik, recently there has been a renewed popularity of Wiedoeft's music in Japan (where the largest sales of his music occur) and in Third World countries as well.¹⁵ I have attended several of the World Saxophone Congresses,

which are held every three years. The aural experience of strolling in a building with dozens of simultaneous performances by hundreds of saxophonists is truly one I will not soon forget. Kenneth Fischer, vice-president, International Saxophone Committee, and School of Music, University of Georgia, Athens, informs us that the next World Saxophone Congress will be held in either Ancona or Pesaro, Italy, in 1992.¹⁸

What follows is a modified transcript of Hegvik's presentation about this important, colorful—yet little-known—precursor of modern jazz.¹⁹ I hope that I've made clear that by presentation I mean a concert recital that is interspersed with a historical-biographical account of the composer of *Saxophobia*.

I hope that this brief essay is but a prelude to an effort to encourage the creation of a dramatic documentary of this fascinating story. Consider that—in an earlier generation—Wiedoeft was as popular as Frank Sinatra is today.

* * * * *

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The Legacy of Rudy Wiedoeft

[A modified transcript of a performance by Ted Hegvik on videocassette.
Transcript copyright 1978 Ted Hegvik.]

Rudy Wiedoeft—a man almost totally forgotten today. And yet, at one time, during that incredible decade of the 1920s, his name was literally a household word. He packed every major theater in this country, and single-handedly started the saxophone craze that was to sweep the nation. Every kid wanted to play just like him, and every home had its share of the old gramophone disks of Rudy Wiedoeft dispensing his own special brand of ragtime.

Wiedoeft had a special style all his own, a way of sliding from one note to another that captured the imagination of the American public. In fact, Bing Crosby, singing with the Paul Whiteman Orchestra, said he adapted the crooning style that was to make him famous by studying the saxophone recordings of Rudy Wiedoeft.

By 1926, the saxophone craze—this national mania—had reached such epic proportions that Kansas City, Missouri, was forced to pass a saxophone curfew. It became illegal to play the saxophone within the city limits between the hours of 10:30 at night and 6:00 in the morning. Newspaper accounts of the day placed the blame squarely on the shoulders of Rudy Wiedoeft.

He recorded for every major record company of that time period—Columbia, Edison, Victor, Emerson, Brunswick, Aeolian-Vocalion, Okeh, Pathé, Gennett—hundreds of recordings, captured by the acoustical recording horn. The basic sound of that era, whether classical, jazz, Gershwin, or ragtime, was still that of the piano.

Hubert Prior Vallee idolized Wiedoeft to the extent that he took to following him about the country. He wrote eight long, impassioned letters telling of his great devotion to the saxophone—none of which were answered. Finally, as he lay on his hospital bed after his second operation for appendicitis, Vallee wrote a letter of such stirring pathos that Wiedoeft's manager was moved to compassion. He invited Vallee to the little publishing office he shared with Wiedoeft in New York City, and there, Vallee met his idol at last.

Vallee saw the gold-plated C-melody saxophone that had lifted Wiedoeft up from obscurity, and the ever-present hip flask that was eventually to destroy Wiedoeft. Vallee was so overcome by his

meeting with the saxophonist that he decided to take Wiedoeft's name as his own. He became *Rudy Vallee*. (Vallee said later that this was the least he could do.)

Rudolph Cornelius Wiedoeft was born January 3, 1893, during the Gay Nineties. His parents were German immigrants, and their large, musical family comprised the Wiedoeft Family Orchestra, playing hotels and cafés in Detroit, and later, Los Angeles.

Rudy, the little genius in the family, started violin at the age of six. Soon he was practicing six to eight hours a day. At the age of 10, he fell off his bicycle delivering newspapers, broke his right arm, and was never able to bow properly again. He switched to the clarinet, and soon—six to eight hours a day. By the time he was 15, Rudy was a top professional.

Saxophones were just beginning to come into the US. They were considered a novelty, a toy which no one played well. Rudy picked one up on a whim, thinking the novelty might help augment his income, and very shortly, the instrument became his life's devotion.

Wiedoeft came East in the pit orchestra of a show called *Canary Cottage*. When the show hit New York, one writer said Wiedoeft received more applause for his flourishes from the pit than the singers from the stage. [It is known that the future Mrs. Wiedoeft was a chorus girl in the show.]

It was at this time Wiedoeft went to see the Wizard of Menlo Park, Thomas Alva Edison. Now Edison, besides inventing the electric light bulb and waxed paper, was also the inventor of the phonograph and the movie camera. Edison maintained a large recording division and an enormous moviemaking enterprise—over 1,300 movies, including the first Western, *The Great Train Robbery*.

Edison was unique, cantankerous, and almost totally deaf. Yet, in spite of that deafness, he insisted on personally auditioning every artist who recorded for him. On Wiedoeft's audition card he wrote: "He will do. His saxophone don't seem so mellow as others I have heard."

Be that as it may, Edison fully supported Wiedoeft, and in May 1917, they made their first

recording: Rudy Wiedoeft and the Frisco "Jass" Band playing the "Canary Cottage One-Step." One month later, with full orchestral accompaniment, Edison launched the solo career of Rudy Wiedoeft with the most brilliant original saxophone solo yet recorded. Rudy named it after his sister who had played piano in their little family orchestra years before: *Valse Erica*.

Edison was actually manufacturing long-playing records as early as 1924, almost 25 minutes to the side. But they were too new, and the public didn't accept them—in spite of the fact that one of those first "long-plays" featured Rudy Wiedoeft playing the exotic *Danse Hongroise*.

Wiedoeft's work with Edison was interrupted briefly by World War I, during which he enlisted in the Marines. Wiedoeft was placed in charge of camp shows on Mare Island, California, and his picture appeared in papers throughout the country. Wiedoeft later transferred to the famous Marine Band in Washington, DC. After the armistice, Rudy's penchant for publicity and his early recordings made him a postwar celebrity.

He formed one recording group after another, including the Palace Trio (also featured between movies at New York's famous Palace Theater), the Wiedoeft-Wadsworth Quartet (of which Edison wrote, "The saxophone was never meant to play this jazzy kind of music"), and the largest and most successful aggregation of all, Rudy Wiedoeft and his Californians.

But these were all left far behind as Wiedoeft's solo career skyrocketed.

In 1918 Rudy wrote the piece that was to make him famous. It became the largest selling solo in the history of the saxophone, and it became his trademark the world over. Wherever he appeared, it was to be found up on the marquee next to his name: "Rudy Wiedoeft—'Saxophobia.'"

In 1924, Wiedoeft joined one of the foremost touring groups in the world at that time: The Eight Famous Victor Artists. Wiedoeft starred on every major stage in the country—vaudeville theaters, big movie palaces, and concert halls. In 1925 the first electrical recording was issued. Wiedoeft played, of course, *Saxophobia*.

But as Rudy's career blossomed, so did the personal and marital problems that were to eventually bring him down. He had married a beautiful, dark-haired Irish girl named Mary Murphy. She was the personification of Auntie Mame. But her beauty was matched by her temper, and stories about their fights, their parties, and their drinking bouts crisscrossed the country. It reads like a story straight from the pages of F. Scott Fitzgerald.

Advertisement for a Wiedoeft concert, circa early 1920s.

In contrast, Rudy's music became even more bittersweet. In the entire country, there was a romantic yearning for the exotic, the long ago and far away. Oriental, Indian, and Arabian themes were everywhere: in movies, in music, in advertisements, in clothing styles, and also in one of Wiedoeft's most beautiful numbers—*Dans l'Orient*.

Rudy Wiedoeft belonged to a breed of virtuoso individualists that seemed to flourish through-

out the 1920s. Their personal lives were as interesting as their musical abilities were amazing. For example, in many of his public appearances, Rudy insisted on wearing a cowboy suit—chaps, spurs, vest, everything. On the street he wore a huge, white ten-gallon hat, and friends who played golf with him say he would often arrive on the course in a business suit and change into his cowboy outfit in the car.

Nineteen twenty-six marked the peak of Wiedoeft's career. The saxophone craze had become so outrageous that stores literally couldn't keep them in stock, for any instruments were gone the moment they arrived. The Instrument Manufacturers of America, in a gesture of gratitude for this incredible prosperity, voted to sponsor Rudy Wiedoeft in a special saxophone concert to be held in New York City's prestigious Aeolian Hall. It was considered a landmark concert, and was broadcast countrywide on April 17.

Later that year, he made his triumphant tour of England with Oscar Levant as his accompanist. Now Levant was, in contrast to Wiedoeft, urbane, sophisticated, biting, and sarcastic; in his autobiography, Levant's only mention of this trip to the UK is that he was constantly embarrassed by Wiedoeft's *going everywhere in his cowboy hat*. On this occasion, Rudy went even further. Wiedoeft also rented a horse, donned his full cowboy regalia, and saw the sights of London from horseback!

Levant's reaction is lost to posterity. Whatever their differences, the two made a series of recordings for British Columbia that still stand as some of the most beautiful and brilliant ever performed on a wind instrument. When they returned, the US was playing Rudy Wiedoeft's classic *Valse Vanite*.

In 1928, the Broadway vaudeville team of Fanchor and Marco hired Rudy to tour the country as headliner of his own show. Wiedoeft formed a troupe of beautiful showgirls (all playing the saxophone), designed elaborate costumes and sets, and toured the country as the "Saxophobia Idea." For one year, coast to coast, three or four shows a day (sometimes seven days a week), people came out in droves to hear the man who had made the saxophone famous. In 1929, Wiedoeft's luck

was to change forever. But, until then, he was still the cat's pajamas.

The 1930s didn't treat Wiedoeft as kindly. Times were hard, radio was king, and the record companies folded, one by one. Wiedoeft appeared frequently on radio, especially the Rudy Vallee Show, but times and music styles had changed dramatically.

Wiedoeft starred in a Vitaphone movie short, one of the early talkies. It was called *Darn Tootin'*, and Rudy appeared dressed as a clown (with saxophone in tow).

Rudy and his wife moved to Europe, where his recordings were still popular. They lived in Paris for a year, and he soloed in the major capitals of the continent. They then returned to the US.

For some reason, Wiedoeft invested his entire fortune (what was left of it) in a Death Valley, California, gold mine. He hired a crew of men, and "went West" to mine it himself. Rudy truly believed it was the legendary Lost Dutchman Mine (the one with a curse on all who mined it). When the money was gone, Wiedoeft was forced to leave—only to return again and again—sometimes working alone in Death Valley's terrible heat.

Then, on March 24, 1937, his wife—in a rage that she was no longer supported in her former style—grabbed a butcher knife and stabbed Rudy. She was taken off to jail in tears, and Rudy, to the hospital, unconscious. Almost six months later, when he appeared on the Phil Spitalney Show, Wiedoeft was still walking with a cane. As far as is known, this was the last public appearance of Rudy Wiedoeft.

Rudy never pressed charges against his wife, and ironically, they reunited and returned to their home in Flushing, New York, on Long Island. There, a short time later, on February 18, 1940, Wiedoeft died from hemorrhaging—due to cirrhosis of the liver.

But it was back in the beginning of this bleak period that Rudy Wiedoeft wrote his last great solo. It was a beautiful evocation of a bygone day—the 1920s love of the exotic, their romantic yearning for the long ago and far away. But it was the voice of another time, and it was singing his swan song: *Valse Sonia*.