

## The Legacy of Rudy Wiedoeft

[A modified transcript of a performance by Ted Hegvik on videocassette.  
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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*.