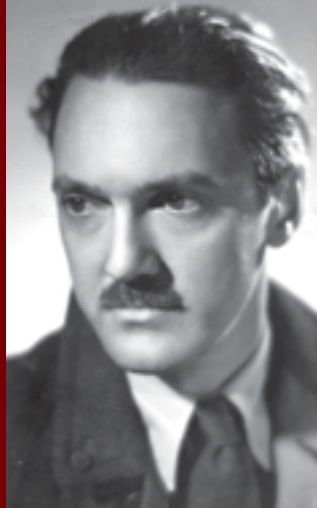


Alec Wilder



PHILIP LAMBERT

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ALEC WILDER

AMERICAN

Composers

A list of books in the series appears
at the end of this book.

Alec Wilder

Philip Lambert

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*To the memory of
my father-in-law,
Ben Taublieb,
and
my mother,
Joanne Lambert Todd*

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PREFACE

ALEC WILDER (1907–80) WAS A MAN of diverse renown. Sophisticated audiophiles in the early 1940s knew him as the composer of a highly original series of octets that deftly melded jazz, pop, and classical traditions. Musicians and producers in the New York recording industry in the 1940s and '50s knew him as a talented arranger and orchestrator. To legions of children and their parents during that time, he was the creative mind behind some of the happy sounds playing over and over on the phonograph. Mabel Mercer, Tony Bennett, Peggy Lee, and many other recording artists in the middle decades of the twentieth century knew him primarily as a gifted songwriter. The filmmaker Jerome Hill knew him as a composer of movie music. In the late 1950s through the 1970s, Wilder was especially known as a composer of chamber music for every instrument and concert music for large ensembles. Meanwhile, he was also writing a trailblazing book and cohosting a radio series on the subject of the American popular song in the first half of the twentieth century. Throughout his life, to musicians across the professional spectrum, including the likes of Mitch Miller, John Barrows, Harvey Phillips, and Marian McPartland, he was known as an eccentric visitor, composer-on-demand, poet, prolific correspondent, and loyal friend.

He was also a bit of a mystery. With talents that could not be exclusively claimed by either the jazz or classical communities, he was never fully embraced by either. He avoided the limelight and was unknown to the general public for most of his life. He often wrote music as gifts for friends, without keeping a copy for himself, and he may not have known whether his work was ever performed. People wondered: What inspired him? What were the roots of his unique gifts? Was he a visionary? Dilettante? Lovable eccentric? Tortured genius? Often the question was simply: Where is he? He had no true permanent residence throughout his adult life, just an informal arrangement with the Algonquin Hotel in New

x York City, and he could disappear on a moment's notice into a compartment of a passenger train destined for parts unknown.

Fortunately, he had friends and admirers who have sought to tie together some of the diverse strands of his life and career. Aware that Wilder's instrumental scores were scattered among offices and studios and piano benches around the country and largely unavailable to performers, the tubist Harvey Phillips first began to collect and organize Wilder's music in 1964. The publishing catalog and inventory eventually shifted to Gunther Schuller's Margun Music publishing company in 1976, more recently to Schirmer and Hal Leonard. The vocal-music scores mostly remained in the offices of the Richmond Organization (TRO) in New York, thanks to the support and generosity of Howard Richmond and Al Brackman, and the diligent stewardship of Judith Bell. Meanwhile, manuscripts, letters, poems, and other documents that had somehow survived Wilder's nomadic existence—mostly because friends such as William Engvick and James Sibley Watson Jr. had never thrown anything away—found a home at the Alec Wilder Archive of the Sibley Music Library at the Eastman School of Music in Wilder's hometown of Rochester, New York. Eastman also helped bring Wilder's achievements more into the public consciousness, awarding him an honorary doctorate in 1973 and dedicating the Alec Wilder Reading Room of its newly built library building in 1991. Recognition also came with a posthumous election to the Songwriters Hall of Fame in 1983, and with annual concerts of the Friends of Alec Wilder in New York, which continue to this day.

Important publications about Wilder's life and work began to appear in 1991, in the form of an especially informative publishers' catalog from Margun Music, followed by David Demsey and Ronald Prather's comprehensive bio-bibliography published by Greenwood Press in 1993, a valuable snapshot of the state of Wilder research at that time. The definitive biography of Wilder, Desmond Stone's *Alec Wilder in Spite of Himself*, appeared from Oxford University Press in 1996. Drawing from extensive personal interviews and close access to primary documents, Stone revealed copious details of Wilder's life, including revelations about his alcoholism (and his reputation for abrasive behavior while intoxicated), sexuality (he claimed to be heterosexual but may have had homosexual relationships), and parenthood (he apparently fathered a daughter with a woman he saw often early in his adulthood, although in later life he maintained no relationship with her or the child). On the Internet, an Alec Wilder group has flourished on Yahoo.com, and wilderworld.podomatic.com helped celebrated the Wilder centennial in 2007 by inaugurating a series of podcasts of Wilder's music, including both well-known

recordings and rare ones. A good many of Wilder's scores are now available for rental or purchase, and new song collections and recordings continue to appear. He is not the shadowy figure he once was.

The mysteries that remain mostly concern the nature of his art. One primary goal of this book is to give closer consideration to Alec Wilder's music—to consider not only the biographical circumstances of his creative pursuits but also the historical context of his basic musical language, his artistic debts and influences. In Wilder's case, this often means focusing on the nature of musical style and how traditional conceptions of style may or may not apply. It also means paying close attention to particular compositional techniques as they arise and evolve. The trends that emerge take their place in an overall narrative that is essentially chronological, in separate chapters roughly corresponding to the decades of the Christian calendar, following Wilder's personal and artistic growth from childhood through maturity. A final chapter offers a general perspective on the composer and his work. Seemingly disparate musical and biographical threads ultimately weave together into a complete fabric.

A NOTE ON SOURCES

THIS BOOK HAS THREE APPENDICES. “Selected Works” compiles essential information about Wilder’s work to support and supplement the main text. Full citations for major writings by and about Alec Wilder are given in “For Further Reading,” and major recordings are listed in “Suggested Listening.” Many other important sources, including monographs, articles, and recordings, are fully cited in the endnotes.

References to the three primary collections of unpublished Wilder-related material may appear in the main text or endnotes as follows:

Wilder Archive The Alec Wilder Archive at the Sibley Music Library, Eastman School of Music, Rochester, N.Y.

TRO Archive The extensive collection of original manuscripts, reproductions, and published scores, mostly of songs and other vocal music, kept in the offices of the Richmond Organization (TRO) in New York.

Wilder Papers Two boxes of letters, clippings, and other documents, held by the New York Public Library Primary Research Division (catalogued as “Alec Wilder Papers, 1939–2000”).

References to, and quotations from, Wilder’s writings may be cited in brief within the text or endnotes as follows:

“The Tuxedo” Wilder’s first attempt at an autobiographical essay in the early 1960s, surviving as a typescript of about sixty pages, with pencil corrections (Wilder Archive 5–2, box 2, folder 8).

The Search A much more expansive memoir handwritten in 1970 on 171 pages of two spiral notebooks (Wilder Archive 5–2, box 1, folder 15).

Life Story The final version of Wilder’s memoir, written in 1971 and 1972 and surviving as a 189-page typescript, with pencil corrections (Wilder Archive 6–1, box 1, folder 1).

American Popular Song Wilder's major treatise on popular song in America in the first half of the twentieth century, published in 1972 (full citation in "For Further Reading").

Letters I Never Mailed An autobiography in the form of personal letters, first published in 1975 (full citation in "For Further Reading"). Page references are to the 2005 edition.

Elegant Refuge A never-published memoir written in 1976 about Wilder's experiences at his only real "home," the Algonquin Hotel in New York, surviving as a 250-page typescript, with pencil corrections (Wilder Archive 5-2, box 1, folders 5 and 6).

Songs Were Made to Sing The third edition of the Wilder popular-song collection, published by TRO-Ludlow in 1976, which includes Wilder's verbal preambles to many of the songs, providing valuable historical and biographical context.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

MORE THAN THIRTY YEARS AFTER Alec Wilder's death, the community of Wilder friends, fans, and advocates is still going strong. This first became apparent to me at the beginning of my research for this book, when I contacted Bob Levy, and he put me in touch with a network of Wilder enthusiasts who were eager to help in any way they could. I thank Bob for his passion and generosity. He is more than a Wilder expert and valuable resource; he is also an inspiration.

Among the happy consequences of Bob's assistance was the chance to know a key member of the network, a remarkable woman named Judy Bell, who is creative director of the Richmond Organization in New York. With an encyclopedic knowledge of all things Wilder, Judy was an endless source of crucial information for this book. More importantly, she allowed me unrestricted access to TRO's extensive collection of Wilder manuscripts, mostly the hundreds of songs and other vocal music. She also shared recordings and other arcana. I thank her for her generous, authoritative assistance and support. This book would not have been possible without her help.

I also gratefully acknowledge other members of the Wilder community who offered valuable advice and perspectives, including David Demsey, Rob Geller, Tom Hampson, Helen Ouzer, William R. Ploss, and Ronald Prather. I benefited enormously from their willingness to answer queries and share opinions.

Another vital part of the research for this book was the time I spent at the Wilder Archive in Rochester in August 2010. This was an enriching experience, not only because the holdings there are so extensive and beautifully preserved, but also because the staff members of the Sibley Music Library are so competent and accommodating. I thank David Peter Coppen for his able assistance, both when I was on site and in response to numerous subsequent followup inquiries and requests, and his assistant Matthew Colbert.

Back downstate, I acknowledge Bob Kosovsky and the staff at the New York Public Library for the Performing Arts at Lincoln Center; Thomas Lannon and Amanda Siegel at the main branch; and the librarians and interlibrary loan staff at the Newman Library of Baruch College, City University of New York.

I am also grateful to the Research Foundation of the City University of New York for funding in support of travel and other expenses. At the University of Illinois Press, I thank Laurie Matheson for her oversight of this project since its inception, and Tad Ringo and Matt Mitchell for their capable assistance with production and copyediting.

Saving the best for last, I thank my co-residents in the sorority house we call home: my wife Diane and our daughters Alice and Charlotte. They make everything and anything possible.

As I was nearing completion of this book, our family lost two of its most beloved, influential figures. My father-in-law, Ben Taublieb, was a war veteran and pillar of the community whose daily life epitomized hard work and devotion to family. My mother, Joanne Lambert Todd, was an educator and businesswoman whose personal warmth and irrepressible spirit touched everyone she met. I dedicate this book to their memory, hoping that anything valuable in its pages will stand as evidence of their impact and legacy.

Excerpts from the following unpublished writings of Alec Wilder are quoted by permission of the Wilder estate: *Elegant Refuge* (Wilder Archive 5–2, box 1, folders 5 and 6); *The Search* (Wilder Archive 5–2, box 1, folder 15); *Life Story* (Wilder Archive 6–1, box 1, folder 1); and “The Tuxedo” (Wilder Archive 5–2, box 2, folder 8).

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