

**The New York Public Library
Humanities and Social Sciences Library
Manuscripts and Archives Division**

**Alec Wilder
Collection, 1939-2000**

**Compiled by Laura K. O'Keefe
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Updated 1998; 2000**

SUMMARY

- Title:** Alec Wilder Collection, 1939-2000
- Size:** 2/3 linear foots (two archival boxes).
- Source:** Gift of William Engvick, 1994-1995; 1998-2000.
- Biographical Note:** Alec Wilder (1907-1980), the composer and songwriter, lived at the Algonquin Hotel in New York City for most of his life. He wrote several hundred popular songs, composed sonatas, operas, a concerto, and a ballet, and was the author of one book and co-author of another.
- Description:** Incoming letters to Alec Wilder from fifty-eight friends and acquaintances, including John Cheever, Harper Lee, S. J. Perelman, and Frank Sinatra; letters from Wilder to his friend and collaborator William Engvick; correspondence between Engvick and Wilder's biographer, Desmond Stone and James Dean's biographer, Val Holley, and others; and printed matter concerning Wilder.

BIOGRAPHICAL NOTE

Alexander LaFayette Chew Wilder was born on February 16, 1907, in Rochester, New York. He grew up in New Jersey, Long Island, and New York City, and attended the Eastman School of Music in Rochester, where he studied composition and counterpoint. His career as a composer began in 1930, when he was one of the co-writers of the song "All the King's Horses" for the musical revue *Three's a Crowd*.

Over the next fifty years, Wilder wrote several hundred popular songs, among them "It's so Peaceful in the Country," "I'll Be Around," and "All the Cats Joined In." (Frank Sinatra, Bing Crosby, Marlene Dietrich, and Anita O'Day are among the artists who recorded Wilder songs.) He also composed sonatas for the bassoon, flute, and tuba, works for the piano, a concerto for saxophone and chamber orchestra, five operas, and a ballet; and published two books: *Letters I Never Mailed* (1975), and, with James T. Maher, *American Popular Song: The Great Innovators, 1900-1950* (1972).

Wilder lived at the Algonquin Hotel in Manhattan for nearly fifty years. He died of lung cancer in Gainesville, Florida, in December 1980.

SCOPE AND CONTENT NOTE

This collection consists of about 200 letters, and several folders of printed matter, mostly clippings of articles and newsletters by and about Alec Wilder. Series 1 consists of incoming letters from various people to Wilder, preserved by William Engvick; Series 2 contains letters from Wilder to Engvick; Series 3 is printed matter; Series 4 consists of the correspondence between Wilder and Stone, and Engvick and Holley; and Series 5 contains letters to Engvick from Stone, Dudley Frasier, Ronald Prather, and Thomas M. Hampson.

PROVENANCE NOTE

Alec Wilder's collaborator of many years, William Engvick, not only saved and gave to The New York Public Library his correspondence from Wilder, but was also primarily responsible for the preservation of the letters to Wilder that comprise Series 1 of this collection. As Engvick recalled it in a letter to The New York Public Library:

The collection began when I found that Wilder had discarded a letter from Albert Schweitzer in my wastebasket. When I criticized his cavalier discard, Wilder said, "Why not? I had read it." After that, he gave most of his more interesting correspondence to me.

Engvick donated these letters to Wilder to the Library in October 1994. In 1995, he added to the collection over thirty letters from Alec Wilder to him, and a folder of printed items; since 1998, he has donated his correspondence about Wilder with Desmond Stone, Val Holley, and others; and other items, mostly printed matter.

SERIES DESCRIPTIONS

SERIES 1. LETTERS TO ALEC WILDER.

BOX 1, FOLDERS 1-8

The nearly 100 letters in this series were written between 1947 and 1972, with the bulk of them dating from 1955 to 1972. (There is also a clipped *New York Times* obituary from 1992 for the actress and director Margaret Barker.) Many of these letters, such as those from Harper Lee and Muriel Spark, are brief, polite acknowledgments of fan letters from Wilder about their work; others, such as the correspondence from Peter DeVries and Frank Sinatra, are more substantive, lengthy, and personal. In most cases, the letters concern the correspondents' or Wilder's achievements in the fields of literature, music, and drama.

SERIES 2. LETTERS FROM ALEC WILDER TO WILLIAM ENGVICK.

BOX 1, FOLDERS 9-12

These letters date from 1939 to 1979, and mainly concern their musical collaborations and related topics. Engvick has also included his comments on them, on separate typed sheets of paper.

SERIES 3. PRINTED MATTER.

BOX 1, FOLDER 13

Folder 13 contains clippings of articles by and about Alec Wilder, 1941-1994. Materials created after Wilder's death include Vols. 1-6 of the newsletter *Friends of Alec Wilder*.

SERIES 4. DESMOND STONE/VAL HOLLEY MATERIALS.

BOX 2.

Correspondence between Engvick and Wilder's biographer, Desmond Stone, 1986-1997 (ten folders); copies of two letters from Alec Wilder to a fan, Donald Velsey, 1977 and 1980; correspondence between Engvick and Val Holley, 1992-1993; and printed matter, including a copy of Edward Gorey's *The Bug Book*, signed by Gorey and given to Wilder.

SERIES 5. ADDITIONS TO THE COLLECTION

BOX 2

Letters from Dudley Frasier, 1963-1965; additional letters from Desmond Stone, 1996-1997 (including copies of his correspondence with others); letters from Ronald E. Prather regarding his work on an article "The Popular Songs of Alec Wilder" and a bio-bibliography of Wilder, 1990-1992; and a letter from Thomas M. Hampson enclosing a letter containing biographical information about Wilder.

CONTAINER LIST

These papers are contained in two boxes. Series 1, letters to Wilder from various people, are filed alphabetically by correspondent; Series 2, letters from Wilder to William Engvick, are filed chronologically; Series 3, clippings and other printed items concerning Wilder, is also arranged chronologically, as is the correspondence in Series 4 and 5.

Series 1. Letters to Alec Wilder:

Box Folder

- | | | |
|---|---|---|
| 1 | 1 | Edward Albee: December 12, 1962; Jan. 17, 1963
Emanuel Balaban: June 7, 1955
Dorothy Baker: two undated letters
Margaret Barker: January 23, 1963; obituary, April 8, 1992
Laura Benet: January 26, 1963
Marcus Blechman: April 1, 1955; four undated letters
Margaret Boylen: January 16, 1962
Richard Bradford: September 19, 1971
Stella Brooks (quoting at length from a letter to her from James Blake):
ca. 1963 |
| | 2 | Bruce Catton: October 18, 1965
John Cheever: January 18 [no year]; June 28 [no year]
Sarah Churchill: November 27, 1954; April [1955]
Katinka DeVries: September 24 [no year]
Peter DeVries:
April 15, 1958
March 28, 1960
February 11, 1962
June 30, 1963
February 22, 1966
June 23, 1966
December 4, 1968
November 21, 1969
September 16, 1970
February 3, 1972
David Diamond:
June 4, 1955
January 30, 1956
February 17, 1956
Gerald Durrell: November 19, 1966; one undated letter |
| | 3 | Loren Eisley: December 11, 1970
Bruce Jay Friedman: January 31, 1967 |

Dave Garroway: January 17, 1961

Margaret Halsey: June 15, 1964; July 3, 1964

Walter Hendl: January 25, 1967

James Leo Herlihy: April 5, 1961; November 1, 1965

Jerome Hill: September 8, 1955

Judy Holliday: three undated letters

Libby Holman: one undated letter

- 4 Joseph Krungold: March 9, 1960
Harper Lee: September 2, 1960
Johnny Mercer: April 25, 1966; one undated letter
John Osborne: March 24, 1959; one undated letter
S. J. Perelman: December 26, 1957; November 17, 1969
- 5 Lillian Ross: October 2, 1964
William Matson Roth: December 27, 1966
Emanuel Sacks: June 22, 1945
Carl Sandburg: March 13, 1954
Gunter Schuller: May 20, 1961
Albert Schweitzer: December 23, 1957
Frank Sinatra: January 10 [1950?]; one undated letter [1960?]
Muriel Spark: June 18, 1962
- 6 Harold Taylor: April 21, 1959; January 4, 1963; December 2, 1969
Helen Thurber [1962]
James Thurber: September 23, 1952
Alec Waugh: December 15, 1970
Gerald Weales: September 8, 1968
Arnold Weissberger: August 16, 1956
Donald Westlake: October 7 [no year]
Eudora Welty: August 5, 1972
E. B. White: December 5, 1962
Thornton Wilder: August 26, 1947; September 7, 1969; February 24, 1972; one undated letter
Tennessee Williams: February 24, 1970
- 7 Oxford University Press reception for Alec Wilder, 1972.
Replies to invitation:
John Green: April 14, 1972
Kay and Stanley Green: April 28, 1972
John Hammond: April 17, 1972
A. A. Heckman: April 19, 1972
E. M. Radley (secretary to Mayor John Lindsay): April 18, 1972
Hans Spialek: April 23, 1972

Thornton Wilder: April 15, 1972
P. G. Wodehouse: April 21, 1972

- 8 Sibley Watson (James S. Watson):
April 15, 1960
July 16, 1961
January 10, 1966
February 12, 1966
February 20, 1966
February 21, 1966
October 22, 1966

Series 2. Letters from Alec Wilder to William Engvick:

- 9 1939 (one letter)
1944 (two letters)
1945 (three letters)
1946 (two letters)
1947 (one letter)
1948 (one letter)
- 10 1950 (one letter)
1951 (one letter)
1952 (two letters)
1955 (three letters)
1959 (two letters)
- 11 1961 (one letter)
1962 (one letter)
1963 (three letters)
1964 (one letter)
1965 (one letter)
- 12 1973 (one letter)
1976 (one letter)
1977 (three letters)
1978 (one letter)
1979 (one letter)

Series 3. Printed matter

- 1 13 Clippings, articles, etc. concerning Alec Wilder, 1941-1994.

Series 4. Desmond Stone/Val Holley Materials

- 2 1-9 Correspondence of William Engvick and Desmond Stone, 1986-1997
- 10 Copies of Stone's correspondence with others re Alec Wilder, 1993
- 11 Copies of letters from Alec Wilder to D. Velsey, 1977, 1980
- 12 *The Bug Book* by Edward Gorey
- 13 Reviews of Stone's biography of Alec Wilder, 1996-1997
- 14 Correspondence of William Engvick and Val Holley, 1992-1993

Series 5. Additions

- 2 15 Letters from Dudley Frasier, 1963-1965 and Desmond Stone, 1996-1997
- 16 Letters from Ronald E. Prather, 1990-1992 and Thomas M. Hampson, 2000.