

“Brother, Can You Spare a Dime?”—Rudy Vallee (1932)

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Essay by Doris Bickford-Swarthout (guest post)*



Rudy Vallee

The writers said this song was not meant to be a sentimental piece or one for begging. It expressed the frustration, anger and puzzlement of millions of the unemployed and hungry. When the Great Depression hit, working-class veterans of World War I were especially harmed. Back from the war with injuries and loss, they tried to rebuild their lives, only to find, suddenly, that there were no jobs and for many, no homes. Why, they ask?

*They used to tell me I was building a dream
And so I followed the mob
When there was earth to plow or guns to bear
I was always there right on the job.*

*They used to tell me I was building a dream
With peace and glory ahead
Why should I be standing in line
Just waiting for bread?*

*Once I built a railroad, I made it run
Made it race against time
Once I built a railroad, now it's done
Brother, can you spare a dime?*

*Once I built a tower up to the sun
Brick and rivet and lime
Once I built a tower, now it's done
Brother, can you spare a dime?*

Rudy Vallee was born Hubert Prior Vallée, July 28, 1901, at Island Pond, Vermont. His family moved to Westport, Maine, where he grew up. His earliest ambition was to play the saxophone in a band. He was a pupil of Rudy Wiedoeft, whom he admired so much that his friends began calling him “Rudy.” The name stuck, and the only time Valle used his birth name was during World War II when he served in the Coast Guard.

Vallee was accomplished enough while a student at Yale, that he was offered \$150 a week to go to London to play with the Savoy Havana Band. He became quite popular and was asked to stay on as a permanent member. But Vallee wanted to finish college, so he returned home. Thirteen years later, now a famous entertainer, he returned, an honored guest at the Savoy.

By 1928, Vallee had his own band, originally called the Yale Collegians, then later changed to the famous Connecticut Yankees. On January 8, 1928, a new club opened on New York's 53rd Street, called the Heigh Ho Club. This place would change Rudy's life, as the new owner made arrangements for the programs to be broadcast over radio. Working on a tight budget, Rudy did all the arranging, directing and singing for the local radio show. And the women went mad for this new radio crooner.

Starting on October 24, 1929, Rudy went national with the radio program, "The Fleischmann Yeast Hour." This show would go on to run for 515 consecutive weeks until its final broadcast on September 28, 1939. Besides Vallee, many entertainers got their start by appearing on this top-rated show, among them Alice Faye, Burns and Allen and Kate Smith. Other radio shows that Vallee did during his career included "The Rudy Vallee Show" and, in 1943-1944, "The Coast Guard Show," designed to inspire enlistments and the buying of War Bonds. (Vallee served himself during WWII and was honorably discharged in July of 1944.)

By this time, Rudy was already starring in numerous motion pictures. Vallee made his big screen debut in 1929; some of his early titles were "The Vagabond Lover" and "Campus Sweethearts." It was the beginning of a long and successful film career of over 50 movies.

At the dawn of television, Vallee began performing as a guest on many television shows. One very early appearance was on Ed Sullivan's "Toast of the Town" on January 2, 1949. He made his final TV appearance in "Hollywood: The Golden Years: The RKO Story." Filmed in 1986, this miniseries was not broadcast until 1987, a year after Vallee died.

Vallee is buried at Westport, Maine, for despite all his travels and fame, Maine was always to him, home.

Despite all this radio and motion picture fame, music was always Rudy's first love. Over the years, he recorded more than 600 records. Amongst the most memorable are: "As Time Goes By," "I'm Just a Vagabond Lover," "Goodnight Sweetheart," "My Time is Your Time," and "Empty Saddles," the latter which he sang at Tom Mix's funeral. But of all his recordings, "Brother, Can You Spare a Dime?" was probably the song most designed to reach all Americans rather than just his core fans.

Several singers, including Bing Crosby, also recorded "Brother," but Rudy's style was different. Vallee admitted he wasn't a great singer, but he put passion in all he did, and in this case it resonated with listeners.

Doris Bickford-Swarthout is the author of numerous articles and four books, including: "An Age of Flowers: Sense and Sentiment in Victorian America"; "The Best of Times, 1870-1915" and "Rudy Vallée: A Pictorial Biography." She is the co-owner of the Berry Hill Book Shop, and lives and writes in central New York.

**The views expressed in this essay are those of the author and do not necessarily represent the views of the Library of Congress.*