

# Karel Goetghebeur Interview #1

**Jeff** - All right here we are ladies and gentlemen thank you all. This is Let's Talk About Sax and we have the man himself Karel Gutenberg did I get it right, did I get a right? I messed it up didn't I?

**Karel** – Oh, well you did a good job for an American. It's pronounced Goetghrbeur but that's not easy for non-Dutch natives.

**Jeff** - It's not easy I will agree it's not easy. Karel manufacturers saxophone in Belgium in Dinant and I may have missed pronounced that as well. Under the name of Adolph Sax which is remarkable he's keeping his name alive, manufacturing saxophones where the saxophone was born, and that's just a great thing to be doing. When did when did you start to play the saxophone?

**Karel** - Well I basically started when I was four or five years. Old of a friend of my parents walked in and he just got a saxophone, and for some reason they handed it over to me. And I put my mouth to it and I start blowing and it made a sound and it left such a big impression on me that was like wow. I need to play saxophone but I was too young at time. So I had to wait till I was 12 years old, go to Music school. And I went there with full enthusiasm like yeah I'm going to nail it. But three weeks later I didn't touch a saxophone haven't touched it. It was like when are we going to play saxophone? And the teacher made clear that first to go to three years of music theory and then maybe you get to choose between piano and guitar. I'm like what? String instruments that's inferior. I cannot do it. I decided to quit music school. And I decide for myself OK you know what maybe I only have a talent to enjoy music. Which is also very important. And I remember when I was 19. I just quit school and I did some volunteers work abroad and I return back to Belgium and I walked into music shop. And I was determined to buy a saxophone. So I went up to this guy and ask him "Hey what's the cheapest saxophone you have?" And he said something it was an amount similar to thousand three hundred US dollars. So I was like it's too much for me I mean my pockets were empty I did volunteers work so that doesn't really pay well. I said to the guy you know what, sell me a reed and I'll keep that reed as a promise to myself. One day I'll have my own saxophone. And it looked kind of strange to me but I was like OK you know what he sold me that reed it was a "Select Jazz" from Rico now D'Addario. A two and too soft. It took till I was 27 start playing it I just had money in my hands got a saxophone a tenor saxophone and started to play by myself first then after 10 months of messing around myself and I enjoyed it. I was quite good at it I went to music school. The problem was my teacher was a classical saxophonist and I wanted to play Jazz. Cause Jazz, It's the only righteous way to handle a saxophonist is to play jazz on it.

**Jeff** – Hey, Preach! I hear you!

**Karel** - Well she didn't really like me she wanted me to play classical music and children songs. And I refuse I had moral obligations. I couldn't do it my saxophone and I we're not made to play

classical music and children songs. So, it was a problem relationship we had. I mean she made me get rid of my Otto Link Florida Seven Star she hated it. I had to play a Selmer mouthpiece. I hated it but you know what sometimes you have to get over it.

**Jeff** – Yeah, and how did you get into the manufacturing part of it? I mean, from there, continue.

**Karel** – Well, two years later playing saxophone in the music school in conservatory. Me getting frustrated my teacher getting frustrated. All of the sudden I have an accident with my bicycle breaking my vertebrae. And my vertebrae in my back was crushed and broken in three places. And I actually shrunk half an inch due to the accident. The doctors told me I would be disabled for certain percentage and I would be in permanent pain for the rest of my life. And I was like don't tell me something is permanent I get to decided it. So but I had to admit it hurt my back hurts so much and I I couldn't play saxophone it more. So I ended up being so frustrated. I really wanted to do something with saxophone. But I decided to take apart my own saxophone. And I liked that so much it was so impressed by the ingenuity to technicality. How everything communicates with each other. It's so impressive. So I decided to get me another old saxophone and I got myself a Conn Chu Berry. I remember when it arrived. I bought it from the states. I open the box smell of old brass just hit my nostrils. I was like wow I fell in love basically there and then that's where I'd when I decided to start doing more with saxophones. And just looking at it and trying to play it. Because the smell of that old brass that actually brought me back to my childhood. I grew up in the shipyard my grandfather and we can work with brass and steal and iron. And that was the same smell so that's when I really fell in love. And that's how I got started trying to fix and repair saxophones myself. I bought a lot of old saxophones, mainly Americans because I really I adore American saxophones, I have to say especially the old one. I just studied saxophones the technicality. I saw that several things were different than the modern-day saxophone. Some things that I found on the old saxophones I couldn't find back on the new ones. So every time I want to know why and that's how I got drawn into the whole repair business, and eventually manufacturing business.

**Jeff** - So you're self-taught. You taught yourself how to build a saxophone.

**Karel** - Yeah that's it that's it. I mean it's maybe it also has to do with the fact that I'm not... I used to have a problem with authority so being taught is not an easy thing or it used to be not so easy for me. So, I had to do everything myself I'll find out the truth myself. That's also similar to Adolphe Sax himself he was very creative he started repairing and making things even toys when he was 10 years old, making his own toys. At 12 he was helping his father in the factory. His father also made musical instruments and his father was also self-taught. So, I don't know if it is the thing that for some people that tend to be a little stubborn it works better to be self-taught.

**Jeff** - if it works for you, it seems to have I have worked for you in a great way. So, your website is AdolpheSax.be am I correct?

**Karel** - Yes that's correct, that's correct

**Jeff** - For people who were listening to the podcast. When did the company start?

**Karel** - I started the company in 2012 shortly after I discovered that I could acquire the worldwide rights to the name Adolphe Sax.

**Jeff** - And how did you go about getting those right? I can't imagine that it was an easy thing to do.

**Karel** - well it was kind of it was kind of special in 2012 February 22 two thirty in the morning. I wake up and I hear this very distinct thought in my head like OK you have to look up the name Adolphe Sax on the trademark registry. And I was debating with my own thoughts. I was like give me a break everybody knows that in 1929 Selmer from Paris bought the almost bankrupt business of the son of Adolphe Sax. So, they probably still have the right to the name. But I couldn't get back to sleep so I got up. Started my computer I was like OK humor me. And I checked the trademark registry and it was not registered. So, that night I just started procedure and I acquire the world-wide rights the name Adolphe Sax. And that got me started. So as soon as I, it takes half year for you get noticed that it that you have the rights, because there's a lot of research being done. And September 27 of 2012 I gave the press conference announcing that I would re-launch the first saxophone brand of the world Adolphe Sax 2.0

**Jeff** - Did any family members come out of the woodwork? I know you had a brother and I had a son who continued for some years after him how many this is Early 1900s. When his son I believe maybe mid 1900s or something like that. He kept the name going to date did anyone say "Hey, wait a minute that's my great grandfather!" or something like that. Did anyone approach you at all? From the family.

**Karel** - No, in fact no. Unfortunately, there are no more living family member of the Sax family. Which is the pity because it would be so cool to be acquainted with them.

**Jeff** - it would, it would.

**Karel** - But nobody is left anymore because a lot of the family members, well they basically died young. If I recall correctly, I don't remember Edward Sax having a lot of kids.

**Jeff** - Right, that's what I was wondering about. And how did the local? You told me a story the other day about it. It's such a great story. You have to share it with people about the local stuff and how they took to you, you, know, starting this company.

**Karel** - Well before I was I was going to do I wanted to do a press release, in Dinant. That's the birthplace of Adolphe Sax Nunes and a French speaking part of Belgium. So, I called the Mayor's Office and I asked the secretary of the Mayor of Dinant "Hey can I give a press release in Dinant because I want to launch a new Belgium saxophone brand." I didn't want to reveal what it was

just wanted to see if it was possible. She said okay, give me a minute and I'm going to talk to the mayor. Five minutes later she comes back and she says no you can't. "Like why not?", she says "well here in Dinant we cooperate with Selmer, and so you can't give your press conference here." and that was the end of the conversation. I was kind of well, I was kind angry actually. I was like "What!? This is not fair!" And I was so frustrated but I decided you know what? Let it be. I mean also Dinant, being the birthplace of Adolphe Sax, I think it's not more than a month later the family already moved from Dinant. The saxophone was actually invented in Brussels in 1841. But I decided to do it in Bruges and I gave a press conference that's my hometown. So, I gave the press conference and wow it was national news. Everybody was so enthusiastic about it. And all of a sudden, a few days later I receive a phone call from secretary of the mayor of Dinant. And the secretary said "hey the mayor of Dinant wants to meet you." I was like OK, so up I went. Well the conversation didn't go that smooth. First, he wanted to impress me, sort of intimidate me but I'm not easily intimidated. Then I saw him trying to put me up against Selmer. I was like no you're not going to do this, and I don't want to pick a fight with Selmer. I mean I respect Selmer. I mean it's a great company. They really did a lot of good. They actually changed saxophones. They kind set the standard for modern day saxophones. But I'm not going to pick a fight with them. The mayor well he saw that he couldn't manipulate me and that I was not really impressed by his persona. So we went our ways and in the years after that every time when we were on the same events whenever he saw me he always went the other way. I was like, too bad for you I don't care, it's OK. That was my encounter with the former mayor of Dinant now they have a new mayor and it seems to go well. That's the whole thing. Not everybody is always enthusiastic. I mean Adolphe Sax in his day he had a lot of enemies.

**Jeff** - Yes, he did

**Karel** - I mean, they even tried to kill him.

**Jeff** - I know.

**Karel** - I mean it's like wow. All the intrigues. They stole from it it's a torch is his workshop they stole his plans and everything. They hated him so much and the reason why they hated him was because he did such an amazing job. You have to know that Adolphe Sax arrived 1842 in Paris. And was actually lured over there by Lutheran general Count Rumigny. Because he already met Adolphe Sax in Brussels.

**Jeff** - Right

**Karel** - He was really impressed by his knowledge persona of Adolphe Sax. And he decided to lure Adolphe Sax to Paris to bring some extra competition for the French instrument builders. Because in those days if you want to business you wanted to supply the army with musical instruments. That was the most important contract you could get. And the French instrument builders they actually all cooperated. So, like "Factory A" made this "Factory B" made that part another factory another part. And then an "Factory D" they assembled everything. So,

everybody cooperated and they always got money in and they became lazy and start doing sloppy work. But, hey where would the army get their instruments else. So, they decided, you know what it's OK to do it this way. So that's how Adolphe Sax basically arrived in Paris. And he started working you didn't share his work he did everything himself, under one roof. And his competitor didn't like it. The problem was that the quality of his work was so high that the poor quality of their work was really very obvious. So, that's when the hatred started. Although he lived in Paris, they always called him "The Little Belgium" the Belgium guy and they really hated him. They hated him basically.

**Jeff** - So how long does it take you to build a saxophone? Do you go by the same technique do you do it all yourself?

**Karel** – No, not yet, not yet. I have several parts made elsewhere because I mean some of the machinery, I need cost \$300,000. To get I would need that machine for like one day a month. That I would be a bad investment that's why I work with other factories that a part for me. After my design then I assemble them. That's how I can make it affordable because.

**Jeff** - I understand

**Karel** - I have to acquire all those machineries myself my saxophone would cost fortune.

**Jeff** - right

**Karel** - And I think if you have to sell kidneys on the black market to get enough money to pay to get a saxophone, I'm not doing a good job. I don't want that I need a lot of smarter people than I and I am they come to me and say "Hey Karel do you have something very valuable I mean you have to raise your prices make it really exclusive." And I'm like you're right but that's not what I want to do. I mean I don't want to be exclusive in my ivory tower looking down. I want to make saxophone the way I want them to be made for me. And all of the criteria is don't make them weirdly crazy expensive.

**Jeff** - Right, they look very wonderful on your website and I really like the names you have for them your name them after various cities and in Belgium. There's even one named Paris. How how did that come about?

**Karel** – Well, I mean in business they always ask you to turn the focus on a group, like what is your target audience. Like this but, I don't want to choose of course my heart my passion is jazz music. But, no, I want to make saxophones for everybody. That's how I came to that to the several series like the "Dinant." Well that's my baby that's the ultimate jazz saxophone I want to create. And you have the model "Brussels." That the silver-plated one, that's more of an all-round sounding horn. Then you have the "Paris" and the "Paris" is more of a classical set-up. And then you have the "Bruges." Well the is Bruges, that's going to be a model that keeps on innovating because that will be the 2.0 version of what I already have. Monthly trying to

research new technology. I'm working together with universities and I'm really on top of new technology basically. I'm currently developing through the Bruges model.

**Jeff** – Right, you had mentioned when we talked the other day that you had a friend who had like the largest collection of Adolphe Sax & original saxophones in the world. What's his name and have it, did that and have you used any of those saxophones in to you know and some of your designs or influence how are you manufacturer yours?

**Karel** - I always Leo van Oostrom, is the, he's from the Netherland lives in Amsterdam. And he's world renowned collector of original Adolphe Sax saxophones and also all other brands. He has so many saxophones and he wrote a very good book about it. "One Hundred Plus One Saxophones" that really good book you can find them bookstores in United States too. And I knew that I had to meet him, but I was kind of you know, intimidated. Because I already had some negative reactions a lot of people were not so happy that I revive the name Adolphe Sax. But I was like, OK I have to meet this man for he has been some sort of a hero to me. So I sent him an email and I said "Leo I'm Karel from Belgium I'm revising Adolphe Sax is it OK for you if we meet?" and he just sent me a short answer "Yeah" that's it "perfect you're welcome this is the address." So I drove to Amsterdam and I ring his door and it was kind of nervous for his response maybe he would think that I was doing sacrilegious stuff. he opens the door and he immediately hugs me, and says "Finally somebody does something with that brand name" and he kind of adopted me. And that's also, how I met his other friend Nico. Nico, is he has quite a reputation is called the emperor of the saxophones. He's a crazy ass technician. I mean in his appearance he's just kind of character and I really liked him and I remember that one, the first day that we got acquainted. We talked hours and hours about saxophones. He opened his collection of saxophones. And Niko said "Hey Karel, OK I see your prototype but maybe you should change this and that and that. And it was, it turned into a very important friendship. And yes I actually focus on the old saxophones.

**Jeff** - it's great that you have access to some of Adolphe's original saxophones and more than one, so you can use that for your research. You did use it for research, right?

**Karel** - I did, I did but I have to say that the most things that I took over at a lot of things that I applied to my saxophones come from old American and old French saxophones. I mean Adolphe Sax, he made crazy good saxophone but it would be weird if the saxophone would not have developed after Adolphe Sax. So a lot of other brands picked up on saxophone productions. And they really brought in a lot of innovations like the micro-tuner that the Conn saxophones have. And I really like that a lot of interesting details that you don't find on modern day saxophones anymore. And as I said I tried to look back on why did they stop using this or that saxophone? And sometimes it was because well it was not as functional. but a lot of the things that disappear from saxophone were just dropped because it was too much labor to make those parts. It was too much work I was like hey but if this is good and functional I want to bring it back. So that's how I start developing my saxophones.

**Jeff** - So what have you brought back that left?

**Karel** - A lot of details like, a modern-day-saxophones, I hate the adjustable thumb-hooks. I mean the design of those thumb-hooks ergonomically it's a hell. And the adjustable fact is, well you only need to adjust it once to make it fit better and that's it. And it's a lot of material a thick plate a thick screw and you don't need that. So I looked at thumb-hooks from old American saxophones and again the old American saxophones really made a big impression on me. And that's what I brought back. It's an ergonomically well shaped thumb-hook. And I soldered it on the body and the no adjustable screw no extra mass on the body. I try to remove excess weight of the saxophone. I also did, bringing back the key guards of King Zephyr. King is another great American brand that was out during the days and I really liked its wire rounded key guards that especially was used on the King Zephyr but other brands and makes also had that style. It was specifically the design of the King Zephyr that I used. Also, Oh yeah, I have an element that was used, the gold medal or as a SML that was the French brand. They were actually quite in demand back in the day and we're actually a big competition that specific model, or the Selmer models. And they had on the next socket so when you put the neck on the body the ring to tighten it, they change that. Instead of making one cut and a screw that tightens it, they made for cuts and they made an adjustable ring around it a rotating ring that you could tighten and that's actually quite genius. Because if you have one cut and one screw and you tighten it and do that for decades you start getting an oval shape. Because you're tightening that one spot. And with four cuts and the rotating ring you have even pressure all around. You have no leaks. Those are just a few of the details that I adopted for the saxophone.

**Jeff** - You have this other project that that is extremely interesting I went to your website. And you have to talk about it. Sax4Pax you have to. I'll let you go and because it's so interesting and people need to hear about it.

**Karel** – Yes! Sax4Pax. I don't know if people understand the word “Pax.” Pax is Latin a peace. I think it was 2014. Yes, it was 2014 when I saw the old testament prophecy of Isaiah and it's also a verse that is in the UN building, near the UN building in New York that says “And then they shall beat their swords into plowshares.”