

WINDJAMMERS HALL OF FAME

MERLE EVANS: Reflections Over a Century

A 2019 tribute on the 50th Anniversary of his retirement from Ringling Bros. and Barnum & Bailey Circus and the 100th Anniversary of his joining Ringling.

By Chris Berry

Fifty years ago, on December 17, 1969, 76-year old Merle Evans formally announced he was leaving the circus, only two weeks after the Ringling Bros. and Barnum & Bailey Red Unit had completed its 47-week cross-country tour. At the time Merle said he wasn't retiring, but just that he wanted to take life a little easier. "I'm tired and I want to do something else for a change," he told reporters.



Merle Evans on November 30, 1969 in Utica, NY. at his last performance on the Ringling bandstand. Zack Bloom photo

Merle's announcement came 50 years after he had first picked up the baton for Ringling Bros. and Barnum & Bailey. Thus, 2019 is the 100th anniversary of that first performance of the combined shows in Madison Square Garden on March 29, 1919, a day when New York was feeling the brunt of a powerful winter storm. Despite city sidewalks that were caked with ice and cold winds that howled in the streets, it was springtime inside Madison Square Garden, where an enormous crowd soaked in the smell of popcorn and sawdust, and the music of the Ringling circus band.

Merle recalled that opening performance, the first of three in the Gardens where he would lead the circus band. "We had bright new uniforms and every member of the band sat like

he was starched...I felt really important, real proud. I'd come a long way, for a country boy from Kansas."

For the grand entry of the first performance of the combined circus Evans chose a march titled *Crescent City* (J. Lopez; see JUL-AUG 2018 *Circus Fanfare*, pages 8-9.)

While waiting for his cue to start the performance he encouraged the band to, "Give it all you've got boys," and they did. In its review of the New York opening, *The Billboard* made special mention of both Merle Evans and the band saying, "It is without a doubt one of the finest combinations of musicians that Ringling has ever had."

With the exception of the band, all the other departments in the show were staffed with veterans from either the Barnum & Bailey Circus or Ringling Bros. Circus. The only new department head was Merle Evans, an outsider hired to replace both Barnum & Bailey's bandmaster Karl King, and Johnny Richards, who had led the Ringling Bros. musicians the previous season. Decades later Evans said he believed the stars aligned for him on August 12, 1918 when he was in Sioux City, Iowa on the same day that the Ringling Bros. circus pulled into town.

Although only 26-years old, Evans was already a capable veteran who had led the band for a number of touring shows, including the 101 Ranch Wild West in 1916.

Evans had friends on the circus and while visiting that summer day in 1918, he had a conversation with the Ringling bandmaster. Evans recalled the conversation as being brief and "frosty" and remembered Johnny Richards as being rather distant. The two only exchanged a few words, but later that day when Evans spoke with sideshow manager Lew Graham, he was told there might be an opening for a bandleader in 1919.

Several months later while Evans was performing with Gus Hill's Minstrels at a theatre in Cincinnati, Charlie Wilson, the trainmaster for Ringling Bros., caught the show. During the conversation that day the young cornet player mentioned that if anything turned up he could be found with Brunk's Comedians out of Wichita.

Although none of the Ringlings had ever met Merle Evans, the brothers clearly had a tremendous respect for Wilson, as just before Christmas 1918, and only a few days short of Evans' 27th birthday, he received a telegram from Charles Ringling. It read: "HAVE POSITION FOR YOU AS LEADER OF RINGLING CIRCUS BAND. REPORT AT YOUR EARLIEST CONVENIENCE."

The telegram did not specify what the pay would be, but Evans said that he was not concerned. "I knew they'd be fair with the salary. It had to be more than I was making, and it was a great honor to be band leader on the Ringling Show."

Although we may never know for certain why the Ringlings decided to go in a new direction, Merle told biographer Gene Plowden that he believed Karl King, who had led the Barnum & Bailey band, had fallen out of favor with John Ringling because of the extended trips he had taken with his new wife during the 1918 season. Evans was also told the musical arrangements that Johnny Richards had chosen for the Ringling Bros. band in 1918 did not sit well with Charles Ringling because of his use of symphony-like orchestrations rather than the brassy, fast-paced music normally associated with a circus.

As he reflected on his 50 years leading the Ringling Bros. and Barnum & Bailey circus band, Merle said that the 1919 performance featured the greatest array of stars ever seen on any show. "We had talent everywhere," he recalled. "A lot of it; the top performers from both big circuses."

In the years that followed, Merle Evans created the soundtrack for generations of circus fans, who watched the very best performers on The Greatest Show on Earth. From Lillian Leitzel to Unus to Tito Gaona and Gunther Gebel Williams, the acts followed a fast-paced arrangement that included dozens of cues and changes in tempo that would be perplexing to a musician who didn't have the chops.



Merle Evans and Ringling Band in 1941

At the time that Merle started with the "Super Circus" of 1919, the show was still owned by John, Charles and Alf. T. Ringling. In the decades that followed his bosses included Samuel Gumpertz, John Ringling North, Robert Ringling and Irvin Feld. No other performer had survived so many changes in leadership. Obviously, Merle was doing something right.

Still there were things occurring during those 50 years that were outside of Merle's control, most significantly a musician's strike in June of 1942 that was ordered by James Petrillo, president of the American Federation of Musicians. Despite the fact Merle had told Petrillo that he and his musicians were "perfectly satisfied" with their salaries and working conditions, the musicians were off the lot in Philadelphia on June 6.

"We wanted to play today," Merle told *The Billboard*, "but the union refused to let us. For the remainder of the 1942 season circus audiences heard canned music, and because the band had yet to record Igor Stravinsky's *Elephant Polka*, the highly touted composition was replaced by records of *Dance of the Hours* from the opera *La Gioconda*.

With the musicians strike underway, Merle spent the rest of the summer of 1942 and the Fall football season at Hardin-Simmons University, where he led the university's famed cowboy band, mounted on horseback.



LIBERTY BANDWAGON

With the start of the 1943 season, Robert Ringling was in control of the circus, and the theme was heavy on nostalgia. In addition to a six-pole big top, the circus featured a Spec titled, "Hold Your Horses," which was a tribute to the old-time street parade. During the show Merle and the band appeared atop the new Liberty bandwagon that had been created in the circus winter quarters specifically for the tour.

The next season was also a milestone in Merle's career as his coolness was praised from coast-to-coast in news dispatches about the Hartford Fire on July 6, 1944. Evans was said to be the first to spot the flames, ordering his band

to begin playing the Sousa march, *Stars and Stripes Forever*. The band played to the last possible moment. As soon as the band evacuated the tent, a quarter pole fell on the bandstand, exactly where Merle had been standing.



Ringling Band bandstand in Hartford after the fire

It was at the end of the 1955 season when Merle tried to retire the first time. After 37 years he said he was ready to "rest a while." Merle also felt there were so many things impacting on circus operations that, perhaps, the Big Top days were numbered.

The next season he was replaced by Izzy Cervone, who led the band in the transition from canvas to arenas following the July 16, 1956 performance at Heidelberg Raceway in Pittsburgh, PA.

Izzy Cervone left the show after five seasons, and in 1961 Merle Evans was back on the Ringling bandstand that was no longer under canvas. Further, the band he led was a shell of what it had been during its heyday, now comprised of local musicians hired for each date, and a core team of just three: Merle, drummer Red Floyd and Roy "Buddy Roye" Blomster on electric organ.



Roy Blomster, Merle Evans, Red Floyd

Merle and his wife Nena continued to troupe with "The Greatest Show on Earth" throughout the 1960s, finally deciding to retire at the end of the 1969 season, 50 years after his first performance, and 50 years ago this year.

In the years that followed, Merle Evans continued to lead community and academic bands, touring at a pace that would tire a man half his age. For example, in the summer of 1985 Merle was featured in a performance at the U.S. Capitol where he led "Pershing's Own" Army band. The tour that summer also included performances in Pittsburgh, Newport News, Akron and Sioux Falls, South Dakota, all at the age of 93.

Merle died on New Years Eve, 1987 at age 96, and a part of American history passed with him.

In a letter he wrote 50 years ago on Christmas Day, 1969, to circus fan Sverre Braathen (WJU Hall of Fame 2009), Merle reflected on his time with the circus:

"The circus has been good us, and it has made me. If it was not for the circus no one would have ever heard of me.

The Blue show will be a good show. They took the four best acts we had along with Ronk and Duane Thorpe to back him up as announcer. The Red show won't have much that I can tell you now, and they will have a lousy route of two-day stands. They wanted us to stay on the show and they had [Performance Director] Bob Dover come to see me. Mr. Feld talked to Nena, but we decided we should get away.

So, the days of circus music and circus bands are gone, along with Show Boats, Minstrel Shows and Vaudeville. But I can always say I was with the Ringling Circus when it was something, and you will never see it again."

CIRCUS BAND CONCERT

featuring
MERLE EVANS
Formerly
Director of Ringling Bros. & Barnum
& Bailey Circus Band with the
ELKHART MUNICIPAL BAND
Arthur J. Siedelitz, Director
216 N. Adams, Elkhart, Ind. 46520
TEL. 291-1234

ADMISSION FREE
SUNDAY, MARCH 23, 1958
3:00 P. M., E. S. T.
ELKHART HIGH SCHOOL AUDITORIUM

Program

Proud Heritage - Gassen March	March	Ladies
Polka		M-Raw
Music For A Carnival		Crusade
Symphonic March	Mel Weber, Conducting	Frost
Slyton - Descriptive March	Merle Evans - Conducting	Alone
Southern Home - Maypole		Banberg
Southern March		Drum
A Hunting Scene		Burlesque
Dinnered Band		Motto
Beautiful Galop		Variations
Old To Rhythms		Waltzes
	Circus Pastime To be selected by Mr. Evans	
Stars And Stripes Forever		Scene

Example from Merle's "first" retirement, a Circus Band Concert at Elkhart, IN on March 23, 1958.