

WINDJAMMERS HALL OF FAME

Ramon M. Escorcía (1899-1982), Inductee 1979

By Charles Conrad, WJU #1525

Circus bandmaster and musician **Ramon Manuel Escorcía** was born in Tulancingo, Hildango, Mexico on August 31, 1899. His parents were Fernando and Margarita (Torres) Escorcía. In his Naturalization Petition on January 6, 1928, Ramon declared his arrival in the U.S. was at Laredo, TX on March 22, 1918. However, he had been working with a U.S. circus prior to that time.

Ramon Escorcía had two separate circus band careers. The first was from 1916 until 1921, when he played in the **Sells-Floto Circus** band under bandmasters Karl L. King, C. L. Brown, and Don Montgomery. Ramon's first year with Sells-Floto happened to be the last one that included Buffalo Bill Cody. Karl King had a 21-piece band that year and the Assistant Bandmaster was tuba player, composer, and bon vivant Walter P. "Woody" English (Windjammers Hall of Fame 1984). Unfortunately, Woody's health failed during the 1917 season and he died in Denver, CO on June 4, 1917.

For the 1917-1918 seasons, King took on the Barnum & Bailey band and C. L. Brown, a cornetist from the interesting sounding town of What Cheer, Iowa, took over the **Sells-Floto** band in 1917 and stayed for three seasons. This 30-piece band featured "Brown's Saxophone Six," an ensemble that would stay together after leaving the circus and tour in vaudeville.

When Escorcía registered for the U.S. Draft in 1918, he listed his occupation as musician with **Sells-Floto Circus**, Denver, CO and his address as *The Billboard*, Cincinnati, OH. He was still a Mexican citizen at the time and not drafted. He also had added a year to his birthyear, making him 18 instead of 19. Years later when he registered for the WWII draft, he was both a U.S. citizen and back to being born in 1899. At that point he was living at 262 W. 73 Street, a four-story, seven-unit apartment complex in New York City.

No doubt, Escorcía continued his career as a musician, possibly on Broadway, but confirmation of that is missing until 1951. That year he joined the **Ringling Bros. and Barnum & Bailey Circus** band under Merle Evan's leadership. He was a part of this group through the 1955 season, and then in 1956 joined the band of the **Maley Bros. Circus**. He then started the 1957 season with the **Mills Bros. Circus** band under bandmaster Ovila "Frenchy" Leboeuf.

Mid-season 1957, Escorcía left Mills Bros. to join the **Cristiani Bros. Circus** band which was led by A. Lee Hinckley (Windjammers Hall of Fame 1977).

Escorcía started the 1958 season with Cristiani's new bandmaster Phil Doto, but Escorcía soon replaced him at the helm of the ensemble. The 7-piece band on the Cristiani show was outstanding and composed of all "white tops" veterans. It featured both Escorcía and Joe Stefan on trumpets – "the best one/two punch" ever, some would say.

Escorcía would stay in this position for two seasons before taking on the special assignment of leading the **Ringling Brothers and Barnum & Bailey** band on a South American tour. At the same time Joe Stefan (Windjammers Hall of Fame 2007) took on the bandmaster role at Mills Bros. Circus.



Starting in 1962, Escorcía was with the **Sells and Gray Circus** as bandmaster for two years. His replacement for the 1964 season was someone familiar to many Windjammers – Charles Schlarbaum! (WJU #61, Windjammers Hall of Fame 2007).

Escorcía played cornet with the **Clyde Beatty & Cole Bros. Circus** in 1964 with bandmaster William "Boom Boom" Browning, one of the few bandmasters who played the drum set. Escorcía was elevated to bandmaster of this eight-piece ensemble for the 1965 season. He left at the end of the season and was, for the second time, replaced by Chuck Schlarbaum.



For the 1966 season, Escorcía again joined the **Mills Bros. Circus**, this time replacing Joe Stefan as bandmaster. The above photo is from that season. Lloyd Fengel (WJU #42) is on trumpet, front row far left and WJU co-founder Charlie Bennett, Jr. (WJU #1) is sitting next to drummer Dave Mobbs. Bennett has commented that Escorcía “really knew how to program a ‘book’ and was an excellent trumpet player.” He added, “When you were on the bandstand, you definitely did things ‘Ramon’s way’! I learned a lot from this dude.”

For the four years after 1966, it would appear Escorcía was likely back in the **Clyde Beatty-Cole Bros. Circus** band under Schlarbaum. Then he spent the 1971 - 1972 seasons with the **King Bros. Circus** band as a co-conductor with another WJU Hall of Famer (2014), Charlie Stevenson. Next, from 1973 until 1976 Escorcía was back with the **Sells & Gray Circus** band.

The April 2006 *Circus Fanfare* featured this quote from WJU co-founder Bennett:

“I learned a lot from Ramon. I wish I could have heard him in his prime. As it was, he could play the hell out of a trumpet when he was in his 70s. This guy was the fastest double-tonguer I ever heard. The first time



Ramon Manuel Escorcía

I sat on his bandstand, on the Mills show, we were playing the usual pre-show concert of several marches. During the first march while I was playing, he shoves the bell of his horn down on my foot. Same time, next strain, he does it even harder. After we concluded he says, ‘no tap your feet on Ramon’s bandstand.’ During the spec he takes his horn and rams my cornet up in the air. I thought I would need a lip operation. After the spec he says, ‘Circus cornets don’t play into the stand, only dance band players do that.’”

In several hours of interviews with legendary Ringling Brothers and Barnum & Bailey bandmaster Bill Pruyn (WJU Hall of Fame 1997) shortly before his death in 2003, I asked him about Escorcía. He considered Ramon as a friend, although his comments concerning Escorcía’s musicianship were not nearly as kind as those by Charlie Bennett. He said that Escorcía was a good cook and a really nice guy, but that he was a lousy cornet player. He mentioned that Escorcía served as Merle Evans’ librarian and that he used a hyperbolic mouthpiece. This was an experimental oval shaped mouthpiece that was tried by many players in the 1950s and 1960s. He also stated that Escorcía tended to let the elephant music drag and had been fired from the Mills Bros. show in 1966. Nevertheless, Escorcía had a long and interesting career as a windjammer and bandmaster, and in 1979 was named as Windjammers Unlimited’s ninth Hall of Fame laureate.

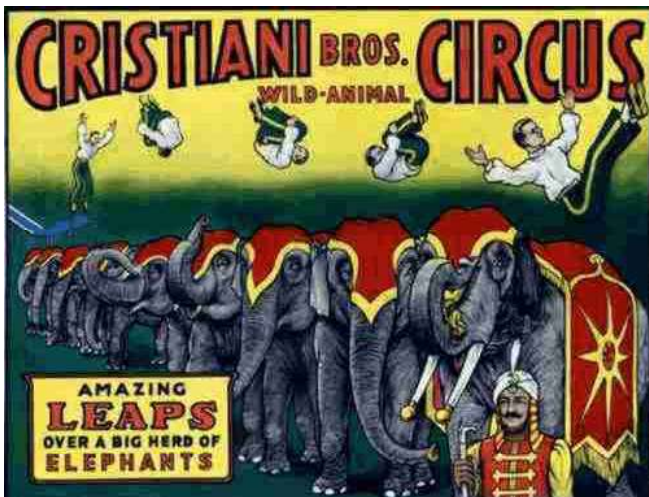
Ramon Escorcía was married to Loretta Frances Snow (1902-1981) and they had three children, Anita Gloria (1923-1992), Dolores (1927), and Ramon James (1928-2006). Ramon M. Escorcía died in Colonia Ex Hipódromo del Peralvillo, Mexico on July 20, 1982 at age 82 of “metastisized gastric cancer and cardiorespiratory arrest” and was buried in Mexico (Los Cipreses Cemetery.)

Cristiani Bros. Circus 1959 Musical Program

By Eric Beheim, WJU #66



Cristiani Circus Band in Milwaukee, WI on July 15, 1959. Bandleader Ramon Escorcia (WJU Hall of Fame 1979) Photo by Sverre O. Braathen (WJU Hall of Fame 2009). Photo courtesy Special Collections, Milner Library, Illinois State University, Normal, IL.



One of the largest under-canvas circuses to tour North America in the late 1950s was the **Cristiani Bros. Circus**.

Traveling on fifty-two trucks, it was considered by many to be second only to the Ringling Bros. and Barnum & Bailey show in size.

The Cristiani Family came to the U.S. in 1934 when John Ringling North convinced them to end their circus operations in Italy and perform their world acclaimed bareback riding act with Ringling-Barnum.

In 1949, the 26 members of the Cristiani family pulled their circus equipment out of storage and went out on their own. As befitting a major circus, Cristiani Bros. carried a traditional band made up of first-class musicians. In 1959, **Ramon Escorcia** (WJU Hall of Fame 1979) was in his second full season as the Cristiani's bandleader. Phil Doto and A. Lee Hinckley were his immediate predecessors on the bandstand.

Thanks to a far-sighted circus fan, a 1959 Cristiani Bros. performance was recorded while the show was playing in Los Angeles. In addition to giving us some idea of what Cristiani Bros. Circus performances must have been like, this recording also provides us with an opportunity to take a closer look at Ramon Escorcia's musical program for 1959.

Here are those titles that Don Covington (WJU #119) and I were able to identify:

Fanfare (Evans)

Introduction: actor Noah Beery, Jr. as honorary ringmaster

Display No. 1: Opening Spec:

Mardi Gras on Parade, Men of Sparta (Zamecnik)

Display No. 2: Trick Riding on the Hippodrome Track

The Big Cage Galop (King)

Display No. 3: Eddie Kuhn Mixed Wild Animal Act

Bravura (Duble), **Jungle Queen** (Barnard), **Lady of Spain** (Evans), **El Cumbanchero** (Hernandez), **Hindustan** (Wallace-Weeks), and **Walsenburg Galop** (King)

Display No. 4: High Wire

Siboney (Lecuona), **Begin the Beguine** (Porter), **Stranger in Paradise** (Borodin-Wright)

Display No. 5: Clowns

Trombonium (Withrow)

Display No. 6: Leapers

Sunshine Galop (King)

Display No. 7: Lady Principal Bareback Act

Everything's Coming Up Roses (Styne), Unidentified, **Whip and Spur Galop** (Allen)

Display No. 8: Aerial Ballet

March of the Spanish Soldier (Zamecnik), **Fascination** (Marchetti), **Around the World** (Young), **Chaser No. 1**, **Drigo's Serenade Chaser**

Display No. 9: Dressage Riders

El Toro (Norris), **Marchita** (Ponce), **Tico-Tico** (Abreu), **La Cumparsita** (Rodriguez), **Carmen: Toreador Song** (Bizet)

Display No. 10: Con Colleano low wire act

Spanish March and tango, **El Caballero** (Olivadoti)

Display No. 11: Roman Riding on the Hippodrome Track

Circus Echoes Galop (Hughes)

Display No. 12: Jugglers

Brazil (Barroso), **Copa Capana** (Walters)

Display No. 13: Flying Trapeze

Valencia (Padilla), **Nights of Gladness** (Ancliffe), **Galop "Go"** (Jewell)

Display No. 14: Elephants

On the Square March (Panella), waltz, **I Dreamt I Dwelt in Marble Halls** (Balfe), **On the Square March** (trio), **The Hearse Song** (traditional), **Ringling Bros. Grand Entry** (Sweet), **Turkey in the Straw** (traditional), **The Streets of Cairo** (Bloom), **The Merry-Go-Round Broke Down** (Friend-Franklin), **Quality-Plus** (Jewell), **London Bridge** (traditional), **Quality-Plus** (trio), **Aida: Grand March** (Verdi), **Lohengrin Entrance Music** (Wagner), **On the Square**

Display No. 15: Clowns - **Bull Trombone** (Fillmore)

Display No. 16: Zaccini Cannon

Garland Entry (King), (cannon), **Garland Entry** (reprise)

Exit Music: **Stars and Stripes Forever** (trio) (Sousa)



CIRCUS RING OF FAME Website Comments:

The Cristiani Family was inducted into the Circus Ring of Fame in 1995. The Cristiani circus family can trace its roots back to 1840 when Emilio Cristiani, a gymnast and bareback rider, joined a traveling circus in Pisa, Italy.

While performing in Brussels, Belgium in 1933, the troupe was "discovered" by Pat Valdo of Ringling Bros. and Barnum & Bailey. The family came to America in the spring of 1934, making an appearance in Madison Square Garden. However, because of a dispute with the Loyal-Repenski riding act, the Cristianis were moved to the Ringling-owned Hagenbeck-Wallace circus for the remainder of the 1934 season, continuing with Hagenbeck-Wallace 4-Paw Sells in 1935.

In 1936 the family moved over to the Ringling-owned Al G. Barnes Circus where they introduced a teeterboard act to their repertoire. They remained with the newly named Al G. Barnes Sells-Floto circus through the 1937 season. The act moved to Ringling Bros. and Barnum & Bailey in 1938. However, the labor strike that cut the season short that year had the family finishing out the season with "Al G. Barnes and Sells-Floto Presenting Ringling Bros. and Barnum & Bailey Stupendous New Features" for the remainder of the season.

In 1939 they were back with Ringling-Barnum where they continued to be featured through the 1942 season. The act appeared in Robert Ringling's indoor circus at Madison Square Garden in 1943 prior to leaving the Ringling organization and becoming circus owners themselves