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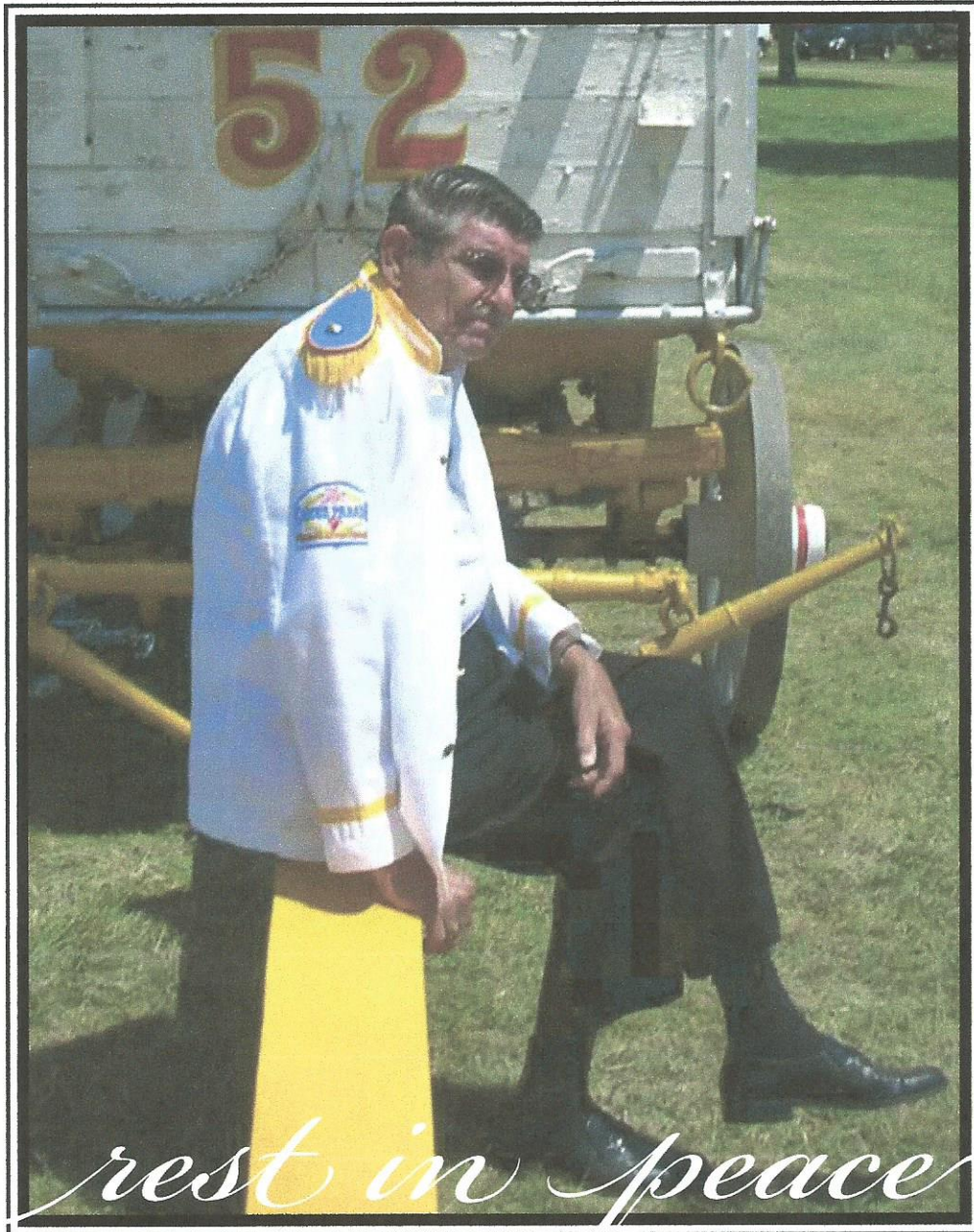
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*rest in peace*

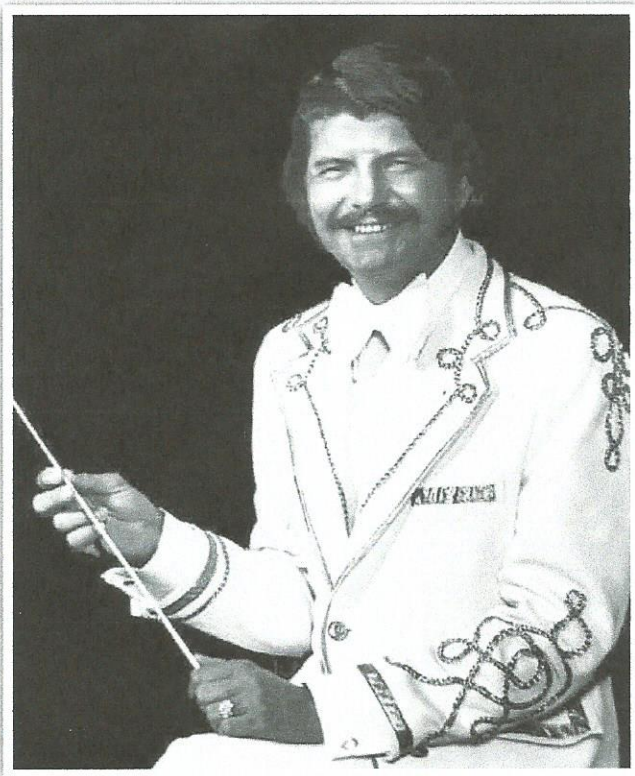
Maestro at rest at The Great Circus Parade, Milwaukee, 2009. Photo by: Dan Covington.

**CHARLES SCHLARBAUM** (January 9, 1938 - June 17, 2016)

# OBITUARY: CHARLES "Chuck" SCHLARBAUM, WJU #61

January 9, 1938 - June 17, 2016

Published June 18, 2016; Circus Fans Association of America.com



Bandmaster Charles "Chuck" Schlarbaum

Chuck Schlarbaum was without question one of America's foremost circus musicians. His knowledge of traditional circus music was unsurpassed. Perhaps only the name Merle Evans is better known in circus music history.

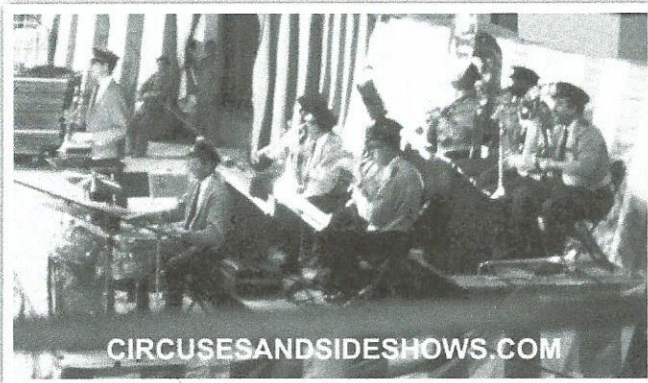
Charles "Chuck" Schlarbaum, 78, of Sarasota, FL, passed away June 17, 2016. He was born in Benton, IA on January 9, 1938. At an early age Chuck's family moved to Portland, Oregon where he was raised and attended school. Young Charles acquired an interest in music from his par-

ents who both played musical instruments. Chuck began his musical career in grade school and played in the school orchestra.

Schlarbaum obtained his interest in the circus through his Great Uncle, who was a circus musician. In Chuck's teen years he would travel with circuses in the summer months, working at various jobs in the animal and concession departments. After completing high school, Schlarbaum joined the United States Army where he served in the "Thirty Third Army Band", playing solo cornet and touring the U.S and Europe from 1955 until 1958.

Chuck's first job as a musician on a circus was with the Cristiani Bros. Circus in 1958. His first Band Leader position was with the Hunt Bros. Circus in 1959. During his long career he conducted, composed and arranged music for most major circuses in the United States. To name a few: Cristiani Bros. Circus, Hunt Bros. Circus, King Bros. Circus, Clyde Beatty Cole Bros. Circus, Ringling Bros and Barnum & Bailey, Garden Bros., Toby Tyler Circus, James E. Strates Shows and numerous stage productions. His 1984 recording with the Toby Tyler Circus Band is considered the last commercially available recording of a traditional circus band featuring touring musicians.

Chuck was active in the circus business until his death and devoted much of his time in recent years to the Showmen's Shrine Club and the International Independent Showmen's Association in Gibsonton, FL. He was a charter member of Windjammers Unlimited, and often served as bandmaster when Windjammer members performed. Chuck was inducted into the Windjammers Hall of Fame in 2007. In 2011, he was inducted into Sarasota's Circus Ring of Fame.



Clyde Beatty Circus Band in 1967



Clyde Beatty - Cole Bros Circus Band in 1972

# CHUCK SCHLARBAUM ... In His Own Words

Sourced from an Oct 31, 2008 Audio Interview by USF Tampa Library and World History Program

I was born in Iowa, but my family moved to Oregon where I graduated from high school in 1955. My mother and father both played instruments. My Dad was semi-professional, but his career followed a different line. I started in the grade school orchestra. Played trumpet, but would fill in on whatever they were short on. While trumpet was my main instrument, I really don't have a favorite.

After high school, I joined the Army and during 1955-1958 played solo cornet in the 33rd Army Band. That was the headquarters band for the U.S. Army in Europe, located in Heidelberg. It was the Army's #3 band, after the Army Band and the Army Field Band. We'd play for dignitaries, concert tours, retreats, and so on. The important thing is it kept me in shape.

The circus was of interest to me long before going into the Army. My Dad's brothers were musicians on the road, and my great uncle led bands starting in 1913. He was doing wagon shows. Forget the railroads and semi trucks ... they were using mules! I guess I got the circus bug from listening to all of his war stories. Even in high school I had a plan to play in, and lead, circus bands. I was experimenting with the high school band, writing arrangements. I composed a march. I had a little dance band I was leading. Yes, I already had ambitions in my mind to be a circus bandmaster.

But back then in the circus world, you started at the bottom. As a teen, that meant when it was summer, I worked a shovel. Originally I was around animals. At the time, Clyde Beatty was everybody's idol ... greatest cat trainer of all time. I also did some concession work. My philosophy was if it didn't hurt me, I did it. Over the years I've done whatever was needed ... playing, announcing, leading the band, selling tickets, being the performance director, putting the show together.

When I got to play in the Cristiani Brothers Circus band in 1958, I found it required a lot more than with the Army band. It took endurance to do it. Three shows, two hours each per day. We'd play while people were coming in. And in the old days there was also a parade and an after show, typically a Wild West type. The band would play a galop and the cowboys would come line up. Cisco Kid. Hopalong Cassidy. It was an attraction for the city folks. Twenty-five cents for the After Show. All were reserved seats. You know why? Because everything else was being torn down for the jump to the next town.

I made the transition to circus band leader in 1959 on the Hunt Brothers Circus. I had played the Beatty show at Palisades Park (NJ) earlier that Spring. That fit since the Hunts always opened May 1 and closed Labor Day. They had the oldest running family-owned show in the history of show business. With Cristiani, we had jumped from Akron to New York in 1958 and I had a couple days free. So I decided to visit the Hunt's show. Their trumpet player was under the weather and they asked me to fill in. So, I did that job. I met band leader Stella, and Harry and Charlie Hunt. That Fall, I got a letter from Boss Hunt asking if I could drive a truck. It was a school bus fixed up with bunks as a band sleeper. I said I could. So, trumpeter by day, driver by night. Perhaps as a test, Stella asked me if I could lay out the music program for the show. So, I did. While Stella was the official band leader and playing the Hammond Organ, I was actually starting and stopping the band.

That summer, Stella said to me "You're spinning your wheels around here. My brother-in-law's got a show. An indoor show: The Frank Wirth Circus. Big, beautiful. His bandleader, Mickey Sullivan, is coming to visit and I want you to meet him." That Fall, after we closed, I went with Mickey and did the Eastern States Exposition. Then, that Spring, I went over with Mickey full time. Often we had two units, so I'd be leading one and Mickey the other. We opened on Long Island during Easter Vacation and then did Shrine Circuses in Hartford, CT, Springfield, MA, Syracuse, NY, Utica, and Montreal, finishing up the middle of May. I stayed with him that summer and did a few park concerts, regattas, Grand Stand shows at Fairs, and so on.

In 1960, I was with Sells & Gray Circus as bandmaster. Then bandmaster in 1961-62 with King Brothers Circus. 1962-63 found me at Al G. Kelly and Miller Brothers Circus as bandmaster, and in 1964 I was back at Sells & Gray. Next came Hoxie Brothers Circus in 1965.

When I joined Clyde Beatty Circus as bandmaster (1966-1974), I was the youngest guy around. The toughest thing I faced was managing people. Old timers were retiring. You had to hire and you had to check backgrounds. But I knew people from my previous work with Cristiani and others. So I was able to put together musicians who were experienced and whose habits I knew. We carried eight musicians on Clyde Beatty and then hired local musicians to come up to the local union's minimums for our sized show. It varied. At the time, Merle Evans at Ringling was down to only trumpet, organ and drums on payroll, or what I called a "Cocktail Trio." He had a tough time of it as he



1974 Clyde Beatty Circus Band. Chuck Schlarbaum on trumpet with Charlie Bertini (left) and Richard Wessels (Pedro) on drums. Photo courtesy of Jim Buttolph.

had to break in local guys in every town, trying to cram the music for a two hour show into a two hour rehearsal and not wanting to pay overtime, and so on. If you are in Podunk, watch out. Small towns just don't have the talent for playing shows.

Merle said to me once, "When you gonna play Roanoke, VA, Chuck? That's the worst band I've ever had." Later on I was there and, sure enough, had a terrible time. After the contract's two hours of rehearsal, we were still working the opening number and hadn't even gotten to the show itself. The union secretary was in the band, reacting to my frustration with "Remember, we don't do this for a living, you know!" Ugh. But my next stop was Maple Leaf Gardens in Toronto and I had 26 guys there who came in, sat down, and "Bing", they got it.

Another town I really liked was New Orleans. We played it nine years straight with the Clyde Beatty band, and then I played Royal Hanneford there for another three years straight. We'd have about 16 guys playing that town. Great city for music.

The biggest bandleader skill is picking the right music. Music, costumes and lights are the backbone of the show. The music dictates the pace. Some acts would have their own music. Most didn't. So, you had to find out what the act does and what fits best. I did some composing, but mostly arranging. I'd generally write for the brass section to have everything covered, with perhaps a calliope or Hammond organ filling in. If other instruments were appropriate, they would reinforce the basics.

Depending on the act, the style of music would be quite different. For the flying act, maybe a fanfare to announce the act, a march while they're getting up there, and then the waltz. Cut to announce the passing leap or the triple. Drum roll.

Then if they don't make it, back to a waltz, Hit a chord when they do make it. Then a galop for the come down with a fanfare when the last one is ready for the final chords and bows. For the finish of a juggling act, maybe put in Saber Dance. For a Cat Act, Oriental things. Spanish tunes for Liberty horses. I would change parts of the music every year so the band doesn't get bored.

Since the inception, popular tunes have been used in the circus and I've done the same. In my last year with Clyde Beatty, I got into disco. You get younger people into the act and you have to match what they want. Like, themes from movies, Mission Impossible, Sputnik, Jungle music, New Orleans, Mardi Gras. You have to go for a balanced mixture of old and new, Yes, include real circus marches ... barnburners ... but also stuff that sells, that they'll listen and relate to during the acts.

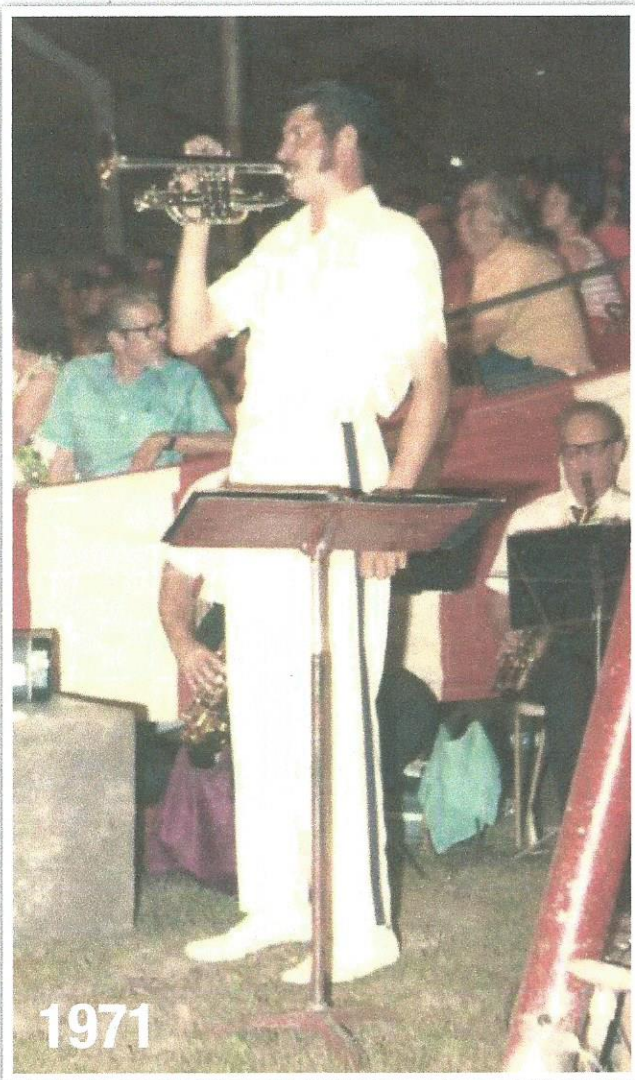
Another thing you have to think about is the flow of the show relative to all the rigging, the props and the costume changes. Some performers are in two or three different acts, so you have to allow for costume changes as well. You have to lay out the show so it runs smoothly and the pace is not slowed. Once you lay out the music program for the show, however, it doesn't change for the Season. Workers prepping for other acts outside the tent would know how much time they had by what tune the band was playing. Changing the order or the tune would NOT be a good thing. But if there was a mishap and an act was in trouble, I'd go to "Hello Dolly", or some other tune not in the show, to alert the people in the backyard that something was up and they should come running.

My favorite gigs were playing for headliners. I had a reputation for animal acts, mostly because you never knew what would happen. Other acts are pretty much routine, but with animals you never know. The circumstances are



1967 - Chuck on Calliope at Beatty Circus. Photo from [Circusesandsideshow.com](http://Circusesandsideshow.com)

different, almost every time. Sometimes slight, sometimes significant. How do you react? You've got to keep playing no matter what and see what happens. I had everything numbered, so had signals for skipping a tune, repeating, vamping, or whatever. Regardless, keep playing, and if the safety tune is needed, cut to it. Once we were playing for a "Rocket Act". The ground was soft and didn't hold the stakes. The rigging broke loose and it was coming right at us. The drummer didn't see it happening and was injured. At the hospital the doctors and nurses were asking what happened, and, in somewhat of a daze, he said "The rocket ship crashed."



Building relationships and knowing people in the industry is another important element to my job. When I would be in New York, I'd have people who played in the Sousa band. One guy was personnel manager for the Goldman Band. Half of the West Point Army band wanted to play in our shows. At one point I was offered the assistant conductor position at West Point if I'd come back into the Army. I declined. And then arrangers from the big publishing houses would seek me out, some with a batch

of arrangements under one arm, and a twelve pack under the other! "Hi, I'm Paul Yoder. Harold Walters told me about you. Could you use any of these in the show?" They would give them to me free to gain exposure.

I've done lots of Shriner's Circuses over the years, building relationships there as well. I'm a Mason. My great-grandfather was a Mason. My grandfather was supposed to be, but joined Odd Fellows instead. Merle Evans, Henry Fillmore, Karl King, Fred Jewell, and Charlie Barnhouse were all Masons. I'd play the Shrine band to keep my lip up as well as helping them out. I was a Charter member of the Showmen's Shrine Club and have been going through the chairs. Will be first chair in 2009. I'm active with the International Independent Showmen's Association. I've been three times the Commander of the Legion Post 148, and am in my second year as Senior VP at the Riverview V.F.W. I was bandmaster of the Garden Bros. Circus 1977-1989, and have had short gigs with a number of others, including playing for Ringling (1969-1971).

But times are changing, as they say. Circus bands were still going pretty good in the 1970's, although the trend was to reducing band payrolls for smaller towns and adding on with locals for bigger places. Clyde Beatty held on for a long time. I had the last union band under canvas with Beatty. As I look at it from my perspective, Merle Evans did the first half of the century, starting with show boats, Buffalo Bill and all that, and ending with Ringling. And I took it the rest of the way. There were a lot of people in between who were pretty fair band leaders, but I guess they didn't all get the same publicity. So not many of us left.

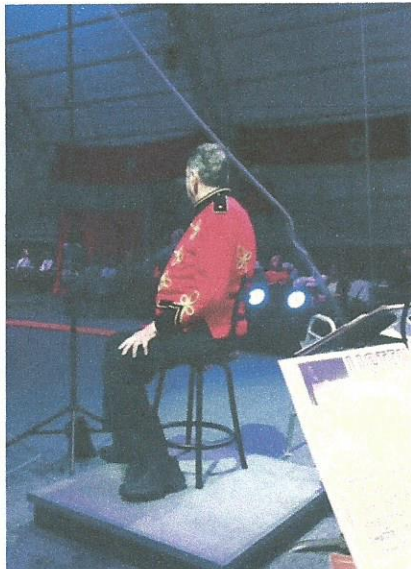
Sadly, the 1980's saw the real decline. Got down to where most circuses were operating with just the "Cocktail Trio". Things get dicey when you are down to locals for that! Then technology brought us those MIDI tracks where you can program them and cue the entire show. They'd just carry a drummer to catch the action and then run the machine. Some circuses are not even using live drummers anymore. The trick is continuing to evolve with the times. While the circus world has continued to change, in that sometimes crazy world I grew up in I would often say: "Miracles take a little longer; the impossible we do right away."



2011 Ring of Fame.  
*Photo by Gloria Cooksey*



1970 Clyde Beatty - Cole Bros. Circus Band



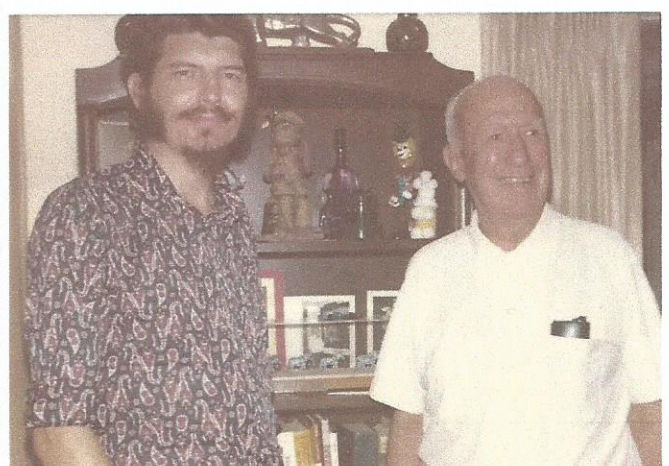
January 2016. Conducting the  
Windjammer Circus Band at his  
last Sailor Circus, Sarasota.  
*Photo by John Wetzel*



Windjammer founder Charlie Bennett with Chuck Schlarbaum  
at Lake Geneva in 1972



First Windjammer Unlimited Convention - 1973



Chuck with Merle Evans in 1974