

## WINDJAMMERS SELECT 2014 HALL OF FAME INDUCTEES: JOE BASILE, CIRCUS BANDLEADER AND CORNETIST

The second induction into the Windjammers Hall of Fame for 2014 is Joe Basile. Joe Basile led the circus band for thousands of Shrine Circus dates from 1931 until his death in 1961. He served as the bandmaster for the Gorman Brothers Circus in 1936.

He was born September 13, 1889 in Newark and began playing cornet at the age of 8. He was considered a cornet prodigy by the age of 14 and began playing as a soloist on the Keith Vaudeville Circuit as "Joe Basile, the Boy Wonder." He appeared in an endorsement for the Conn Perfected Wonder cornet in a 1907 edition of the Conn Truth.



Basile played in the Ringling Bros. Band under Al Sweet in 1910 and 1911 at a salary of \$18 per week.

He formed his own band in 1914, and led bands constantly until his death. At one time there were TEN Joe Basile bands on the road concurrently. His first gigs were velodrome long distance bicycle races. He became the bandmaster for Madison Square Gardens. He served as a bugler during World War I. In 1923, his band played for the legendary Jack Dempsey-Luis Firpo boxing match.

Basile began a long association with George Hamid productions in 1926 by playing at the New Jersey State Fair. By 1931 Hamid was a producer of Shrine Circuses, and Basile led bands for these events through 1958. From 1950 until 1957 he was the bandmaster on Sealtest's Big Top television program broadcast live every Saturday from Philadelphia's 5th Regiment Armory. Making his TV debut as a clown and announcer was a young Ed McMahon. Ringmaster Jack Sterling would introduce the circus band with, "Mr. Basile, if you will."

Basile died June 22, 1961 during a Shriner's parade in Miami while leading a band. He left a wife and four daughters plus the five children his brother left orphaned when he died in the 1930s. He also wrote several pieces of music, some for the televised circus show.

Basile had several nicknames, including "Captain Joe" and the "Brass Band King," but the one that seemed to stick was "Mr. 5 by 5." He was only 5 foot 5 and weighed 272 pounds. He claimed he kept his weight constant for many years by "only eating seven pieces of veal instead of the previous 14."

**Joe Basile - Sealtest Super Circus on YouTube** – this video link is just a long commercial for Sealtest dairy products, but the nostalgia can be seen at <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=9ZldsSnESew>

> Pictured here are quick screen captures from the YouTube clip showing Joe Basile leading the spectacle parade, and a very brief image of Basile above the main entrance into the ring on the bandstand with his circus band. <



**RECOLLECTIONS ON THE LIFE OF JOE BASILE - Mr. Five by Five** - From the Buster Bailey Collection

For years Joe Basile had been tooting his own horn. As a lad of 13, Joe aspired to be the world's greatest cornetist, he became one of the nation's busiest brass band leaders in an era that has seen the decline of this type of musical organization. Joe's father, a shoemaker, bought him a horn for \$3 and at 13 he became a soloist on the Keith Procter circuit. The work was not steady and counting loafing or off time it took three years to make the complete circuit.

While still a lad, he heard and admired a French cornetist but was disillusioned about obtaining artistic heights when he learned that this famous French cornetist committed suicide after living for a time on a collection taken up by members of Sousa's band. From then on the potion of solos, variations and triple tonguing were discarded. Joe then went to Remick, a music publisher, and bought *Won't You Come Over to My House*, a pop song of the day. He worked out his own arrangements and he was then on his way. At this time Joe was a soloist with the Morris Levy stage band.

In 1910, Al Sweet, bandleader for Ringling and a native of Newark, NJ offered Joe a solo job to play for the show and concert at \$18 a week. Father and mother Basile did not approve, thinking that their son had embarked on a dead end road. After a year and a half, Joe returned home to attend the National Conservatory of Music in NY, and to play with dance hall groups at Olympic Park in Irvington, NJ.

A contract for the bands at the Velodromes in Newark, NJ and New York City proved to be the start of a successful career. He met Tex Rickard and got into the old Madison Square Garden Band which played for 6-day bike races and all other events in the Garden. Rickard named him the "Brass Band King" and sold him to the Garden executives. He then played for several of the Dempsey fights, Heinz Ice Shows, as well as the early Shipstad & Johnson Ice Shows. His job of playing at the ice hockey games was ended with the introduction of the electric organ. At the Dempsey-Firpo fight, Joe was determined to get into the ring for a solo between bouts, even though Rickard turned him down. Announcer Joe Humphries squared that one and Joe played *You Belong To Somebody Else, But Tonight You Belong To Me*. This sort of song plugging was a goldmine for Joe who made more including new tunes in his repertoire than he did on selling the band. He also played the World Series.



Much of Joe's time, energy and talents were given to help the less fortunate. He never put money before God. While doing good for himself, he has seen to it that all of the members of his family have been cared for. His oldest brother died at 39, leaving a wife and five children whom Joe then included in his own family group. His nephews, Charles, Glen and Joe, are all musicians who served in the Basile band. Joe's family group was big and very close. When ever he was home on a Sunday, 24 sat down with him at dinner. He himself never had any sons. His daughter Elsie married Carl Sonitz, indoor circus agent. He also had three other daughters: Ethel, Dorothy and Helen.

He was a prodigious writer of postcards, sending them mostly to crippled children he has made friends with in most of the cities in which he has appeared. As a result of the giving of his time and talent, he held life memberships in 37 Shrine organizations. He was also a life member of the Woodmen of the World, the Elks, and the Eagles. He belonged to the American Legion, having served as a warrant officer in World War I. He also belonged to the Knights Templar and the National Showmen's Assn. In Newark, he maintained a clubhouse for nearly 200 musicians, all of whom belonged to New York and New Jersey locals.

Joe was from the old school when a handshake meant something and with all his dates he never had a contract. He could uniform a band containing from 1 to 100 members at any time. Joe played at Olympic Park, Irvington, NJ for years. On one of Joe's birthdays, it was estimated that 17,000 turned out to help him celebrate. At a dinner staged in his honor, 800 paying guests turned up and Joe turned the money over to the bandsmen for new uniforms and instruments. He won 61 State and National band awards in competitions staged by the Eagles and the Elks. At one convention, his group won 7 out of 8 possible awards. Some of his musicians were with him for 42 years.

Some of the high spots in Joe's career and which are held by no other man include, 17 years leading the Madison Square Garden Band, 37 years at Olympic Park, 37 years with the George Hamid booking agency, and 20 years with Bob Morton on the Hamid-Morton Circus dates. Joe died as he lived, happy and in harness. He passed away at a Shrine convention in Miami, and if he could have picked the occasion he never could have made a better choice, as he loved the Shrine and a good portion of his life had been involved with the Shrine and its many children.

### Additional information on Joe Basile posted on [BucklesW.Blogspot.com](http://BucklesW.Blogspot.com)

Recollections of the TV program Sealtest "Big Top" are vague at best. I do remember the opening though. The camera would focus on the shows logo and then the logo would move slowly upward until you would see the face of a clown. The "Big Top" logo was printed on the top of the clown's head. I also seem to remember that the ringmaster would call to the circus band leader.

After a "Google" search, the majority of the information and pictures came from websites for the Broadcast Pioneers of Philadelphia ([www.broadcastpioneers.com/bigtop.html](http://www.broadcastpioneers.com/bigtop.html)), and for Dan Lurie ([www.danlurie.com/](http://www.danlurie.com/)). Mr. Lurie was the circus strongman. Another source that offered some information was IMDB, the Internet Movie Data Base ([www.imdb.com/title/tt0042082/](http://www.imdb.com/title/tt0042082/)).

From these sources "Big Top" first aired on July 1, 1950. It was broadcast by WCAU-TV, Channel 10 in Philadelphia. The show was sixty minutes and aired live. After its first few months on television, "Big Top" settled into its familiar Saturday afternoon slot. In 1953, CBS began to air "Big Top" nationwide. It was sponsored by the dairy company Sealtest. The show featured a live circus band under the direction of Joe Basile.

"Big Top" had a core cast consisting of seven regulars: Bob Russell (Circus Barker); Jack Sterling (Ringmaster) - a well known radio personality and actor; Dan Lurie (Circus Strongman) - he finished second overall in the Mr. America competition in 1942, 1943, & 1944; Ed McMahon (Clown) - he later became famous as Johnny Carson's straight man; Chris Keegan (Clown); Barbara Cubberly (Majorette).

For Christmas Day in 1953, "Big Top" presented a special one hour performance. The show aired live from 3:00-4:00 P. M. On that show among other acts were Professor George Keller with his cage act, The Coronas (a high wire act), the Quaker City String Band, and a special appearance by Santa Claus. "Big Top" was nominated for two Emmy awards in 1953, and 1954 for "Best Children's Program". "Big Top's" last show was in September 1957. During its run, "Big Top" presented over 2100 circus acts.

Here is the Sealtest "Big Top" Song:

Now's the time to have some fun  
Lots of thrills for everyone  
Beneath the Sealtest Big Top.

Clowns and acrobats are here  
Daring feats that you will cheer  
And Sealtest Ice Cream too!

*Photo below of the 1960 Shrine Circus in Memphis featuring the Hamid-Morton Circus. Bandleader Joe Basile is front right in his resplendent white suit.*

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