



WINDJAMMERS HALL OF FAME



Joe Basile (1889-1961), Inductee 2014

Edited update by Rod Everhart, sourced from a February 2014 *Circus Fanfare* article



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

From 1931 until his death in 1961, Joe Basile led the circus band for thousands of Shrine Circus dates. In 1936 he was the bandmaster for the Gorman Brothers Circus.

Joe was born September 13, 1889 in Newark, NJ and began playing cornet at the age of eight. His father, a shoemaker, bought him a cornet for \$3. By the age of 14 he was considered to be a cornet prodigy and began playing as a soloist on the Keith Proctor Vaudeville Circuit where he was billed as “Joe Basile, the Boy Wonder.” The 1907 edition of *Conn Truth* featured the 18-year-old Basile in an endorsement for the **Conn Perfected Wonder** cornet.



Still a young lad, Basile was a soloist with the Morris Levy stage band. During that time, he 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.

Joe Basile played in the Ringling Bros. band under Al Sweet (WJU Hall of Fame 1982) during the 1910 and 1911 seasons. His salary was \$18 per week. His parents did not approve, thinking their son had embarked on a dead end road. After a year and a half with Ringling, Basile returned home to attend the National Conservatory of Music in New York and played with dance hall groups at Olympic Park in Irvington, NJ.

In 1914, Basile formed his own band, and led circus bands constantly until his death. At one time there were TEN Joe Basile bands on the road concurrently. His first bandmaster gigs were 6-day velodrome long-distance bicycle races and other events at Madison Square Garden. He led the Madison Square Garden band for seventeen years.

During World War I, Basile served as a bugler. On September 14, 1923, his band played for the legendary Jack Dempsey-Luis Angel Firpo boxing match, one of the most significant events in sports of that era and held at the Polo Grounds, New York City. At the fight, he was determined to get into the ring for a solo between bouts, and convinced announcer Joe Humphreys to allow it. He played "*You Belong to Somebody Else, But Tonight You Belong to Me*."

Song plugging was a gold mine for Basile who often made more from including new tunes in his repertoire than he did from the band's gigs. In addition to Dempsey fights, he played for Heinz Ice Shows, the early Shipstad & Johnson Ice Shows, and the World Series.

In 1926, Basile began his 37-year-long association with the George Hamid booking agent productions when he played at the New Jersey State Fair. By 1931 Hamid was a producer of Shrine Circuses and Basile led the bands for these events through 1958. Basile was 20 years with Bob Morton on the Hamid-Morton Circus dates.



Ducan Schiedt Collection, National Museum of American History

From July 1, 1950 until September 1957 Joe Basile was also the bandmaster for Sealtest's Big Top television program that was broadcast live every Saturday from Philadelphia's 5th Regiment Armory. Ringmaster Jack Sterling would introduce the circus band with, "Mr. Basile, if you will." A young Ed McMahon made his TV debut with that circus as a clown and announcer. During its run, "Big Top" presented over 2,100 circus acts and was nominated for Emmy awards in 1953 and 1954 as "Best Children's Program."

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

Basile's 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, were all musicians who served in the Basile band. Basile's family group was big and very close. Whenever he was home on a Sunday, twenty-four sat down with him at dinner. He himself never had any sons. His daughter Elsie married Carl Sonitz, an 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 had made friends with in most of the cities in which he 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 local unions.

Basile was from the old school where 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 37 years. On one of his birthdays, it was estimated 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 bandmen 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.

Joe Basile died as he lived, happy and in the harness. He passed away June 22, 1961 while leading a Shriners' parade band 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.