

Joe Stephan WJU Hall of Fame - 2007

By Charles Bennett, Jr., WJU #1

Joe Stephan played under Merle Evans in the Ringling tent show days. He also played the solo book on Cristiani Bros Circus in 1959, and Mills Bros. Circus in 1960. For the seasons 1961 through 1965, Joe was Bandmaster on Mills Bros. where he gave me my first opportunity to play on a circus bandstand. My Dad mentioned to Joe one day "the kid loves circus music and plays comet". I was in high school at the time. So, Joe says to me, "tomorrow, bring out your cornet." I did, and what a musical education I got!

Bobby Danks and Ozzie Kristen played the solo book, and Joe sat me down between them! Joe was a fantastic comet player. He had also been principal trumpet with the Cleveland Symphony for a few years. This guy could pick up the horn "cold" during the show (believe me, with the likes of Danks and Kristen, he didn't have to play very much!) and blow the quarter poles off their foundation! The intro to Copa Cabana starts on middle C, going up to a G. Joe would often start on high C, and go up from there. His bands on the Mills show were fantastic.



Joe Stefan, Bandmaster of the 1961 Mills Bros. Band. Windjammer Lloyd Fengel is on trumpet, just to the left of Joe. The young announcer standing behind the microphone is Johnny Herriott.

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JOE STEFAN

Submitted by Bill Roosa

Joe Stefan was a native of Cleveland Ohio, and was born circa 1910, he started to play the cornet as most young boys did at that time. After he graduated from high school he attended the Cleveland Institute of Music. For a short period he was a member of the trumpet section in the Cleveland Philharmonic.

In the 1930's and 40's he became a solo cornet for the Ringling Bros. and Barnum and Bailey Circus Band, led by Merle Evans. He was one of Merle's favorite solo cornets. Following the recording session of the album performed by the New England Conservatory recording of circus music, "A Tribute to Merle Evans," led by Merle Evans, Merle reflects on his 50 year career leading the Ringling Band. He is asked "Merle who were the best solo cornet players you ever had on the band?" and Merle answered immediately "Joe Stefan and Bill Kirkhise-- they never missed a cue."

Joe played the solo book on Cristiani Bros in 1959, and Mills Bros. in 1960. For the seasons of 1961 through 1965, Joe was Bandmaster on Mills Bros. Circus Band. This circus was from the Cleveland Area—Painesville, Ohio.

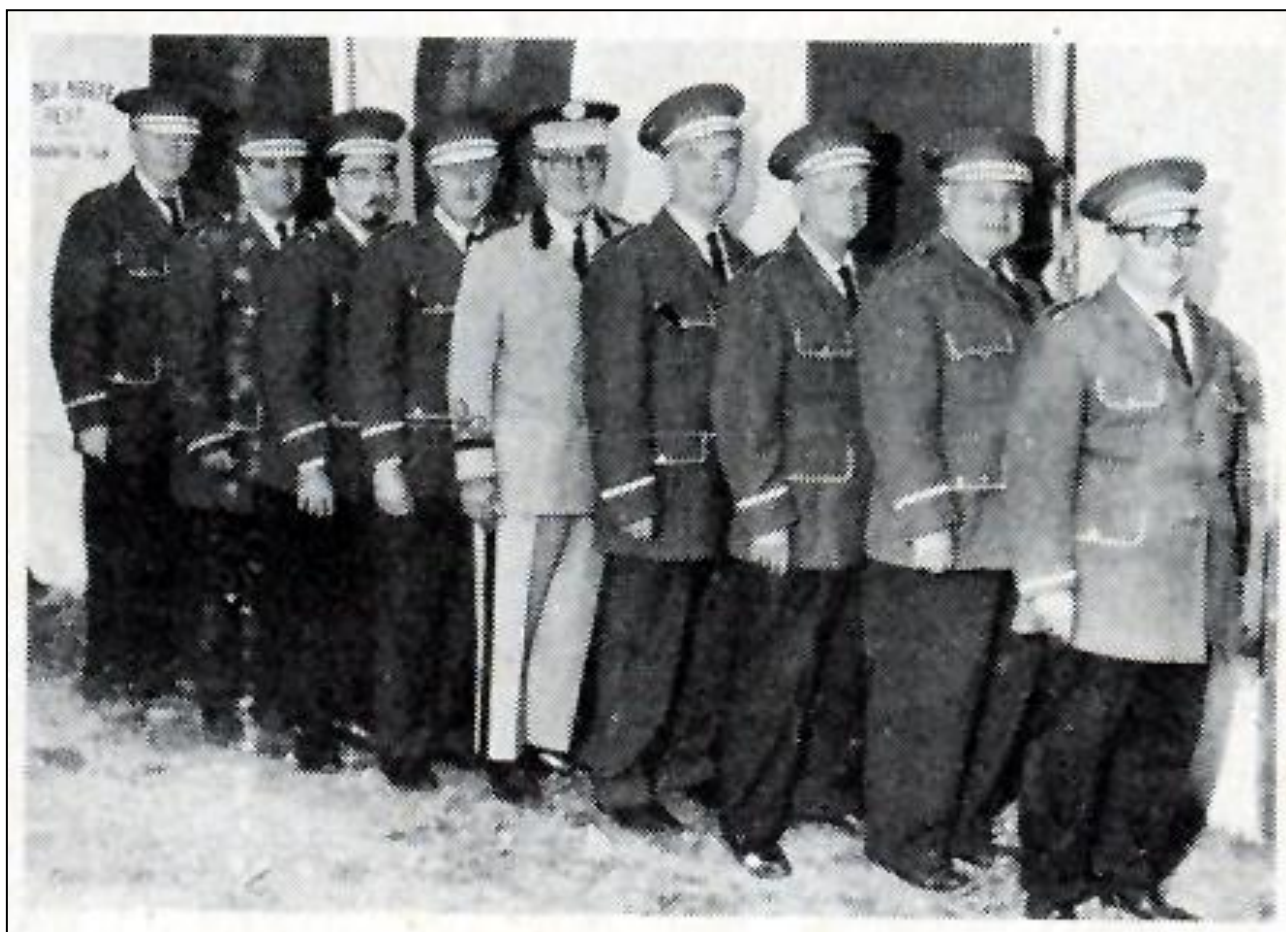
I met Joe when I sat in with the Mills Bros. Circus Band in Hazelton, Penna. I was told to sit next to Joe, and suddenly I realized I was in the presence of a fine trumpet player.

Joe was very friendly. We played some pieces then the band turned over to "The Storming of El Caney Galop"-- the speed at which this was played was nothing I had ever come up against. I was totally lost. I had my trumpet up to my lips and took a deep breath ready to play where I thought we were, when Joe grabbed my arm and said "we're done." I felt very humiliated. In the Marine Band- the 2nd Marine Air- I was their premier solo cornet player and I never missed anything.

Later during the Clown Act, Joe took the part out and asked me where was I going to come in-- I pointed to the middle of the page. He cracked up laughing and again, I was totally humiliated. He touched my arm and said to "you are the first one ever to sit next to me, who had never played a circus, and you were playing everything." I apologized and he said "in a few days you will be playing this like an old pro." Joe became a friend for life. I played next to him off and on until 1964.

He was a fabulous trumpet player, in all the shows I did with him, we played the Hungarian Dance No.5 of Brahms, and in it was one difficult trumpet solo, and when we came to it all the trumpets stopped to listen to Joe play the passage. He never missed a note, and it was perfect every time. Joe is and was one of the finest circus Bandleaders and trumpet players and he rightly deserves his place as one of the 2007 inductees in the Windjammer Hall of Fame.

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1963 Mills Bros. Circus Band- (Published in Amusement Business, September 7, 1963-
Photo C.W. Glotzback, Cleveland) *From the Buster Bailey Estate.*

From left:

Andy Anderson, trombone;

L.B. Oliver, tuba;

Bob Danks, trumpet;

Ozzie Kristen, trumpet;

Joe Stefan, director and trumpet;

Steve Palahack, baritone;

Frank Sullivan, sax and clarinet;

LeRoy Short, trumpet;

Dick Evangelista, drums.