

Mr. Tuba: Harvey Phillips

By Rod Everhart, WJU #1351



Harvey Gene Phillips, often called the "Titan of the Tuba", was a musician who truly "made a difference." His goal in life was to raise the appreciation and profile of the tuba, his chosen instrument. In that regard, he said: "I am determined that

no great composer is ever again going to live out his life without composing a major work for tuba." Prior to Harvey, the instrument was generally thought of as one aimed at providing orchestral comic relief, the "Oom" in "Oom-Pah-Pah".

Harvey was born December 2, 1929 to a farm family in rural Missouri. He was the youngest of ten children. Early on, Harvey was wanting to play in the school band, but his parents couldn't afford to buy him an instrument. But five days after his 12th birthday, the Pearl Harbor attack happened and we were at war. The young man playing the school's only sousaphone -- an old Martin horn on its last legs and looking like a war relic -- graduated early in 1942 and joined the U.S. Navy. Harvey, possibly due to his size, was invited to replace him on "bass horn". Harvey thought he had won the lottery.

Within three weeks Harvey was able to play well enough to attend band rehearsals and then did a decent job on "Pomp and Circumstance" at the graduation ceremonies. Next came bad news, or so he thought. His music teacher left to teach at a school in Oklahoma, and he was told he would not be allowed to keep the school's sousaphone at his home for the summer -- it would be locked up for safety. Board of Education rules.

After a summer of not playing, his spirits were lifted when Harvey learned the new music teacher would be retired circus bandmaster Major Homer F. Lee and the band would be meeting three times a week instead of two. Harvey remembered attending a Town Band concert in Monett, MO, several years before and seeing Lee as its conductor. That was his first live band experience and he had been impressed by the man who had magically waved the small white stick, "causing" music to come from the band.

Playing under Lee turned out to be life changing. As Harvey later commented, "My exercises then became all of the great circus marches, galops and waltzes." Weather permitting, Harvey carried the sousaphone home daily, riding his bicycle with the horn perched on his shoulder. He reports "I soon became expert at tacking the bell, as one would tack a sail on a sailboat, to best utilize the prevailing wind." And for subsequent school breaks, Homer Lee got the rules changed so Harvey could have the instrument to practice on all summer long.

When Lee insisted the thirteen-year-old Phillips play a tuba solo at the 1943 District Music festival, he performed "Solo Pomposo" by Al Hayes (a pseudonym of Henry Fillmore.) As Harvey learned later, Fillmore used other names when he wrote music he considered unworthy of his real name!

At age 15, Harvey joined the Sedalia Local 22 of the American Federation of Musicians. Harvey continued to perform especially well in regional and state contests and concerts, and earned a scholarship to the University of Missouri as a result.

As Harvey was graduating from the Marionville (MO.) High School in 1947, Lee arranged a summer job for him playing tuba with the King Bros. Circus. At \$55 a week plus room and board, it was more than Harvey could earn doing farm work. So that Harvey might accept his first professional engagement, Lee was able to locate a York BBb 3-valves upright tuba for an affordable \$60. No case. When the family's Methodist minister heard the news, he came to their house, delivering a lengthy sermon to Harvey's mother that can be summed up with, "That boy will be destroyed if he works in a circus. Circuses are full of the wicked and degenerate. He will be lost." His mother replied, "Reverend, you don't seem to have much faith in Harvey. But I do, and I'd like you to leave now!"

In later years, Harvey reminisced, "Joining King Bros. Circus in Waterbury, Connecticut, as a 'First-of-May' twelve hundred miles from home was an unforgettable experience that I wouldn't have missed for the world. I can still recall the smell in the air that first day. I had never seen a circus before! It was difficult as a green youngster to cope simultaneously with seeing and playing my first circus performance. Playing the tuba was fun and I was being paid to do it -- what a life!"

After having played just twenty King Bros. Circus shows, Harvey stepped off the bandstand after a matinee show and was greeted by man who said he thought Harvey played great, but needed a better instrument. And he had just the instrument at home. Harvey could have it -- a like-new BBb King Recording Tuba with case -- for \$150 or \$100 plus his old York. Harvey tried it out at the evening performance. With the first notes, the tuba played so much better Bandmaster A. Lee Hinkley almost dropped his cornet. He advanced Harvey the \$100 to complete the purchase. *[A. Lee Hinkley was Windjammers Hall of Fame inductee in 1977.]*

After a fabulous summer in Hinkley's 15-piece circus band (plus calliope) and playing 106 shows, Harvey returned home to enroll at the University of Missouri. "Everything went pretty well for me until the middle of February when a telegram arrived from Merle Evans offering a job with his Ringling Bros. and Barnum & Bailey Circus Band. Merle Evans, the greatest circus bandmaster of all time! The Big Show! The Greatest Show on Earth! It was unbelievable!" Harvey sought advice and most of the people he talked to strongly advised him to stay in school and get his degree. But then he talked with Homer Lee, who said "Oh, Harvey, you go with Merle Evans. Why, this is your chance of a lifetime!" Harvey joined the Ringling band.



As Harvey arrived for his first Ringling rehearsal, he was plenty nervous. He would be sharing a stand with Reuben Clinton "Johnny" Evans -- no relation to Merle. Johnny was a terrific bass player, one of the best ever, who

supposedly never got along with other bass players.

When Johnny did his warm-up routine, Harvey couldn't believe what he was hearing, saying "The sound, range, technique, scales, arpeggios, slurs, and articulation all blew me out of the water." But all went well and Johnny took Harvey under his wing as a surrogate father or older brother. When Harvey asked Johnny how they could be such good friends given his reputation for not getting along with other bass players, Johnny replied, "Hell, Harvey, they never gave me anybody who could play!" *[Clinton "Johnny" Evans was Windjammers Hall of Fame inductee in 1991.]*

When those 1948 rehearsals in Sarasota ended, Harvey was upset to learn that Johnny had personal domestic problems that would prevent him from playing any of the six-week Season Opener shows at Madison Square Garden. However, Merle Evans was able to hire the great William J. Bell, noted principal tubist with the New York Philharmonic, as Johnny's replacement. Bell, considered at the time to be the best tuba player ever, quickly recognized Phillips' talents. He agreed to mentor him and gave him personal lessons during holiday breaks.

Johnny was back for the rest of the 1948 Season, but couldn't play the 1949 Season. So, Harvey was now lead tuba in the Ringling Band. Johnny was back for the 1950 Season. In mid-August 1950, Bill Bell sent Harvey Phillips a telegram: "Have scholarship at Julliard -- live in my studio -- come to NYC ASAP." So, having not quite completed three years as a tuba player with Ringling, Harvey made the decision to leave, but didn't know how to tell Merle Evans. After a few days worrying, he scheduled a meeting between shows: "At the appropriate time, I rapped lightly on the door of his red wagon. He invited me in and, once we were seated, he asked what I needed. Saying nothing, I simply handed the telegram to him and awaited the expected explosion. After a long silence, Merle looked up smiling and said, 'Well, Junior, I think you should be with Bill. We'll work something out.'" Given that Bill Bell was also a friend of Merle's, it's likely the telegram wasn't a surprise.

Nevertheless, after Harvey left the circus to go to Julliard, he played the Ringling show when it was at Madison Square Garden from 1951 through 1967, except for his two years in the Army Field Band.

At Julliard, Harvey soon complained to his teacher, Vincent Persichetti, about the tuba repertoire (or lack thereof) and got this response: "So you want better music for the tuba? You think the violinists are going to do anything about that? The flutes? If you want better music, you have to do something about it." So, Harvey launched in earnest his quest to assure future tubists would have more respect and better music choices. Over time he personally commissioned more than 200 works for tuba, saying, "I never let a composer out of my sight without getting them to agree to write something for tuba."

While at Julliard, Phillips' free lance career in NYC flourished. In 1951, he was able to substitute for Bill Bell at the New York Philharmonic for two weeks, which prompted full time offers with other orchestras and symphonies. He declined because (a) he was still a student at Julliard, and (b) he would lose his

draft deferment while the Korean War was in play. He said, "I thought I was in musician heaven as a freelance player because there was so much variety." However, he did play the short seasons (April-May; October-November) of the New York City Ballet Orchestra from 1951 to 1971, plus *The Nutcracker* at Christmas. In between, he took other gigs like the rodeo, circus, opera, Broadway, ice shows, clubs and recording sessions, and even municipal bands. He made a point of being able to perform any style or type of music.

Harvey met Carol Dorvel in 1952 and they were married February 22, 1954. After four years at Julliard, Harvey's draft deferment ran out and he had to report to Fort Dix in November for infantry training. Following basic training, thanks to some good networking and his musical reputation, Harvey was invited to join the Army Field Band at Fort Meade, Maryland, effective the last week of January, 1955. Then, after 22 months of concert tours on behalf of the Army, he was granted an early release and returned to New York to attend the Manhattan School of Music. By the time he got back to the city, he had more than twenty gigs booked, including the rodeo, an ice show, the New York City Ballet, and the New York Brass Quintet, a group he helped found previously. In 1959, he started doing solo clinics for the Conn Corporation. In some years, he would spend 60 days or more doing Conn clinics, and generally, he would gain additional bookings from music educators attending the clinics.

So, Harvey's musical career continued to blossom. In addition, from 1967 to 1971, Phillips held the position of vice president for financial affairs for the New England Conservatory of Music in Boston, commuting between that city and New York for performances. He also taught tuba and played jazz, performing in clubs and recital halls. However,

wishing to spend more time with his wife and three children in a "country" environment, he accepted the tuba professorship at Indiana University in 1971. He succeeded his friend and mentor, Bill Bell, who retired June 1, 1971, after being in that role the 10 years following his retirement from the New York Philharmonic. The Phillips family moved to Bloomington, Indiana to property they called TubaRanch. Bell died August 7, 1971, triggering what has become a lasting Harvey Phillips legacy.

At first, Phillips hosted extremely well-attended tuba clinics in Bell's honor. But the significance of William J. Bell having been born on December 25, 1902 led to an innovation: **TubaChristmas!** The tradition began in 1974 with a special holiday concert at Rockefeller Center, orchestrated by Harvey and performed by 300 tuba players; created to both remember Bell and raise the tuba's profile. It also reflected a touch of Phillips' circus showmanship. The TubaChristmas extravaganzas took off and now tuba players (along with baritones, euphoniums, sousaphones and trombones) mass in hundreds of cities around the world every year to play carols and festive arrangements, especially composed for bass instruments. He created the Harvey Phillips Foundation to administer TubaChristmas, TubaSanta, TubaEaster, TubaJazz, OcTUBAfest, and others.

Harvey G. Phillips died October 20, 2010 at his TubaRanch home as a result of complications from Parkinson's Disease. That year, TubaChristmases were hosted in 252 cities. His legacy lives on.

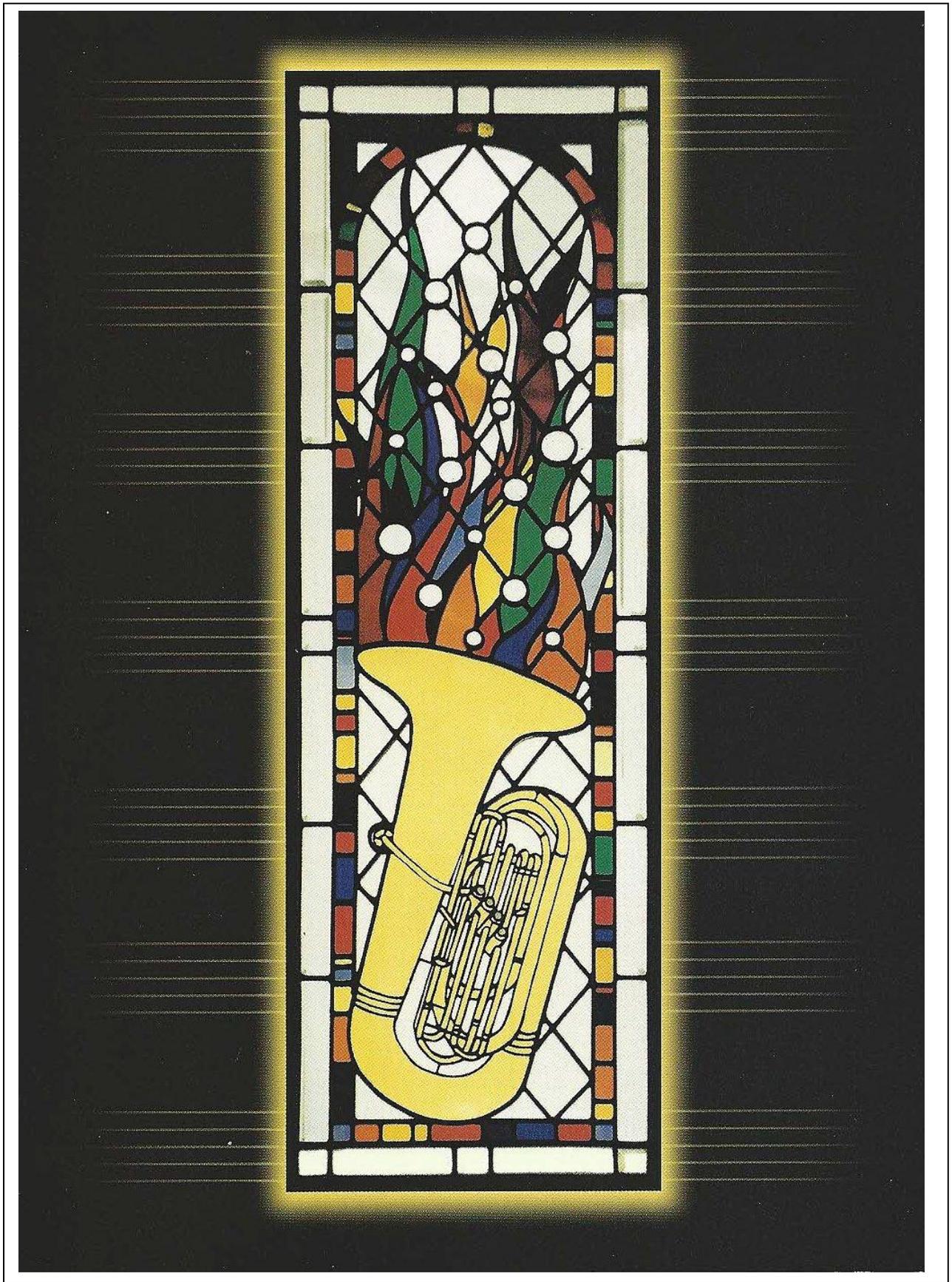
He was inducted into the Windjammers Hall of Fame in January, 2010. His other honors and recognitions, such as Honorary Doctorate of Humanities Degree at University of Missouri, would take a full page to list. Truly, he was Mr. Tuba.



2009 Tuba Christmas rehearsal in Minnesota
MPR Photo/Tim Nelson



2014 TubaChristmas - The 41st at Rockefeller Center



Cover of Harvey Phillips 1998 Christmas Card, featuring the 21"x65" Stained Glass TubaWindow at his TubaRanch.
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The "OGM" and "PAM" sections in 1948: R. C. Johnny Evans and Harvey Phillips, Tubas: Frank Simmer and Paul Davis, French Horns.

