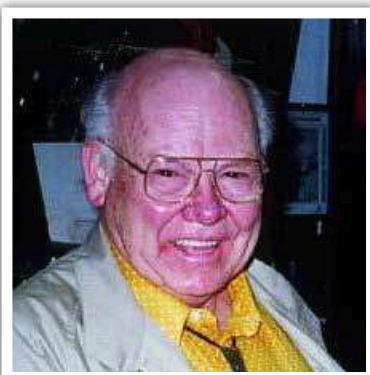


# TRIBUTE TO BUSTER BAILEY, WJU #17

By Bill Armstrong, WJU #3610



Elden Chandler  
"Buster" Bailey was born in Portland, ME, April 22, 1922. When he was five years old his mother took him to the circus. His love for the music and the big show would stick with him for life.

At age six, Buster started studying the snare drum. At age nine, he was studying xylophone with Vaudeville drummer Howard Shaw. By age twelve he was playing xylophone solos at area events. Buster won a scholarship to New England Conservatory of Music where he studied for a short time before WWII broke out. Buster was called into the Army where he served for three years with the 154th Army Ground Forces Band, working as an arranger, pianist and leader of the dance band, playing clarinet in the concert band and snare drum in the marching band.

After the war he enrolled at Julliard and studied with probably the two most legendary percussion teachers on the planet -- Morris Goldenberg and Saul Goodman. There was a lot of work for good musicians in NYC and Buster stayed busy playing his way through school. Studio recording sessions and performances included being an original member of The Little Orchestra Society and the Sauter-Finegan Orchestra, a new hot jazz outfit with arrangements that included much auxiliary percussion. (Listen to Buster on snare on Sauter-Finegan's "Doodletown Pfiere" at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=lz8mNvCABiQ>)

Somehow, with all he had going on, he still had time to notice the cute young "Girl Drummer" at Julliard. Barbara & Buster would be a matched pair from then on.



Upon graduating from Julliard, Buster was invited by Timpanist Saul Goodman to audition for an opening with The New York Philharmonic. He played his audition for conductor Leopold Stokowski, got the snare drum gig and held on to it for 42 years, working under Stokowski,

Leonard Bernstein and Zubin Mehta. His classic snare drumming can be heard on over 200 recordings, including Shostakovich: Symphony No. 5 / Bernstein - New York Philharmonic Orchestra; Malletoba Spank - Duke Ellington; Sketches of Spain - Miles Davis; and Bernstein: Symphonic Dances (WSS) - Mambo, Cha-Cha / Bernstein • New York Philharmonic. Probably the most important recording of Buster's playing is the Bernstein recording of the Nielsen 5th Symphony (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=y6o3JnyVRCw>)



In 1969, Bailey joined the faculty of the Juilliard School, where he remained until 1993. He is the author of the highly acclaimed method books Wrist Twisters - A Musical Approach To Snare Drumming and Mental and Manual Calisthenics: For the Modern Mallet Player.

In the mid-1950's Buster had the opportunity to meet Ringling Bandmaster Merle Evans while catching the circus at Madison Square Garden. Famed Ringling drummer Red Floyd became a great friend as well and Merle would supply the NYP percussion section with complimentary passes whenever the circus was in town. One year Red took ill and suggested to Merle Evans that Buster might be interested in subbing for him. Bailey played the show for 3 days and said it was the time of his life.



Buster playing  
Ringling at Madison  
Sq. Garden

As Barbara tells it: "Rudy Bundy had given Buster one of his special passes so Bus could come and go to the Ringling show as he had time. Bus would focus on Red's playing. By the time of Red's illness, Merle knew that Buster was the only outsider who knew the show, acts and all. So Bus asked the Philharmonic for time off. NYP President Carlos Mosely was told. Carlos' replied it would kill Bus not to do it, but the personnel manager should decide and NOT tell Carlos any more about it. Bus played for 3 days and got back to the NYP in time for a dress rehearsal Thursday morning and the concert that afternoon. Many years later we were in Milwaukee, after the circus parade, and Carlos was also there. Carlos was asked if he had ever had to "turn a blind eye" to some incident and Carlos replied yes, he had, and it involved Buster, who was, of course, sitting right there. It seems that the Master contract between the Union and the NYP prohibited NYP musicians from playing Burlesque shows or circuses. But as long as Carlos didn't know about it, it would be okay. So he turned a "blind eye" in this case. Imagine our surprise!"

Not so well known is Buster's emergency subbing on the Clyde Beatty - Cole Brothers Circus. Barb had this to say about that: "We had bought tickets and went to the show and Buster said we'd stop to see Charlie Schlarbaum on the way in. As we walked up to him, Charlie said to Buster, "You are a sight for sore eyes!" The drummer had thrown his back out while setting up and couldn't play, so would Buster sit in and play the show? Are you kidding? He had a field day. Never used the music, but just followed Charlie's cues. Charlie called out the meter, changes and tempo and told him which ring to watch to catch the tricks, etc. I sat next to the band stand like the girl singers used to do with the big bands and just marveled at Buster's quick adjustment. What a contrast to his 'Day Job'!"



Buster with Beatty Bandmaster Schlarbaum

Even at the very top level symphony percussionists sometimes have a slow evening with dozens if not hundreds of measures of rest to count. As a perfect

example of this here is a glimpse from the NYP archives of the timpani part from the Mahler 8th with Buster's hand written directions for Saul Goodman to "Wake Buster" at measure 57.



Bailey liked to keep things moving. Chris Lamb, principal percussionist at the Philharmonic, said he would often times improvise on an Irish jig or jazz song together with Bailey in the practice room at Philharmonic Hall while waiting to perform during a concert.

For a snare drum wizard like Buster, the "high, loud and fast" style of the circus bands was a perfect way to blow off some steam. In 1971, he noticed an ad in the Circus Historical Society's Bandwagon magazine looking for people to start a "Windjammers" band. He and Barb rarely did things together so they jumped at this opportunity and signed up as WJU members #17 & #18. The rest is history.



Barb & Buster at an early 1990's Windjammer Meet

You can listen to Buster's circus snare drumming expertise on YouTube with American Main Street Band's "Under the Big Top - 100 years of circus music" CD selections.

As a starter, click on: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=tG4H2AKPmDU&index=26&list=PL7FwNn6N0Su9QKx5F1Uz3Gcyqzo5IN8U> or Google: "Flying Act: Circus Echoes"



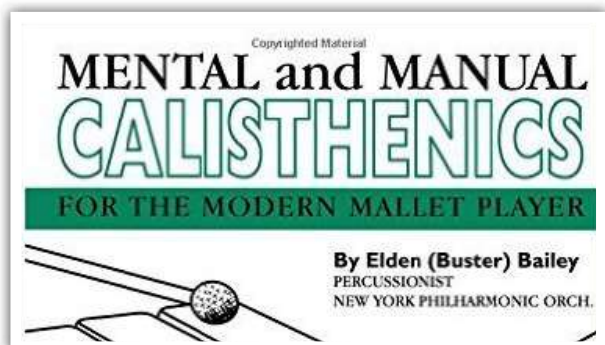
As Ron Keller says, "Buster was a rare breed. He knew many of the circus marches by heart and rarely looked at the music. His eyes were always on Merle or whomever was conducting. He had one of the smoothest rolls I have ever heard. He always had a smile on his face, and truly loved playing percussion. As a band director for over 40 years, I told him I had studied with Hascall Harr and he asked all kind of questions, especially how I approached the fundamentals of snare drum. A great guy that I had the pleasure to know."



Paul Yoder watching Buster playing Red Floyd's Snare drum; the drum is now in Julliard's archives



Buster Bailey and Doug MacLeod Windjamming



In 1996, Buster Bailey was inducted into the [Percussive Arts Society's PAS Hall of Fame](#). He was circus through and through, belonging to Circus Fans of America, Circus Model Builders, and Circus Historical Society in addition to Windjammers Unlimited.

He closed the show on April 13, 2004, in Sarasota. As a drummer myself and relatively new to Windjammers, I sure hate having missed him. While Buster would have said "No way!" to his being "great" or "the greatest" at anything, I'll close with a quote from former Julliard student Scott Wilkinson: "Buster's gone now, and I miss him. He was one of the most brilliant, kind teachers I ever had in my life. And I know, with unwavering certainty, he was the greatest snare drummer that ever lived."

