

REMEMBERING HAROLD RONK, THE SINGING RINGMASTER

By Eric Beheim, WJU #66

No discussion of the musical programs presented by the Ringling Bros. and Barnum & Bailey Circus would be complete without some mention of the "Singing Ringmaster", Harold Ronk. Since 2021 marks the centennial of his birth, it is appropriate this year for us to look back upon his 30-year circus career.

Harold Wilson Ronk was born on January 31, 1921, in Peoria, Illinois. Throughout his childhood he took singing lessons and appeared in school productions. Graduating from Bradley University in 1941 with a degree in music and theater, he served as a Navy communications officer in the South Pacific during World War II.

Mr. Ronk got his start in show business in 1948 when Broadway composer Sigmund Romberg hired him for a national tour of the musical *My Romance*. When the tour ended, Ronk settled in Washington, D.C. where he taught voice and became a soloist at the National Presbyterian Church. He also made guest appearances and recordings with the National Symphony and did concert work throughout the country.

In 1951, he auditioned for John Murray Anderson under the mistaken impression that Anderson was casting for a Broadway show. Anderson was, in fact, looking for a vocalist for the 1951 Edition of the Ringling Circus.

It was Anderson, in his capacity as director of Ringling's production numbers, who had first introduced a vocalist into the Circus' performance, beginning with the 1948 Edition. Although Harold Ronk would later be hailed as Ringling's first "singing ringmaster," that honor actually belongs to tenor Bill Tabbett. However, thanks to Anderson, Ronk got the job and for the next thirty years served as Ringling's primary vocalist-announcer, also becoming known as "The Voice of the Circus."

During his early years with the Ringling, Ronk only appeared during those "big venue" performances that took place in Madison Square Garden, the Boston Garden, and Philadelphia. Once the circus began its cross-country tour, however, others took over the vocalizing.

Then, beginning in 1957, the first year that Ringling went out as an "indoor" circus, he toured with the show for the entire season.



Unlike most of the other circus performers, Ronk did NOT ride or live onboard the circus train during his years with Ringling. He preferred staying in hotels.

In 1961, Ronk was featured on *A Day at the Circus* with "Mr. Singing Ringmaster," a long-playing album of music taken largely from Ringling production numbers and the DeMille film *The Greatest Show on Earth*.

The album's selections included *Popcorn and Lemonade* (Henry Sullivan), *Be a Jumping Jack* (Victor Young), *Polka Dot Polka* (Richard Barstow and written for the 1961 Edition's elephant act), *Be a Clown* (Cole Porter), *Over and Over Again* (Richard Rodgers), and of course, *The Greatest Show on Earth* movie theme (Victor Young).



WJU Members can now hear this entire album at MYWJU.ORG via our website's PRESERVATION tab.

In 1962, while I was still in high school, I met Harold Ronk while the Ringling show was appearing in the old Cleveland Arena. Just before the start of the evening performance, I was visiting the bandstand to have Merle Evans autograph a record album for me, when Ronk, Trevor Bale, Bob Dover, and clown Frankie Saluto all stopped by to chat with Evans. Taking advantage of this opportunity, I had all of them autograph my souvenir program which is now one of my most cherished possessions.



In 1965, Harold Ronk appeared along with Merle Evans on the album *Circus Spectacular*, which included these tunes:
Side One: *Fanfare, Caesar's Triumphal March, March Indienne, Jungle Queen, Russian Circus March, Trombone Blues, Wedding of the Winds, Symphonia March, Fanfare.*
Side Two: *Pajamah, Olympia Hippodrome March, Fan-Tan, Royal Bridemaid's March, If I Had a Dream, Flying High, Fanfare, Medley (Caesar's Triumphal, Kentucky Sunrise, The Greatest Show on Earth), Ponderosa.*

Unfortunately, for many circus music fans, Ronk's overly flamboyant announcements on this album, along with some totally unnecessary sound effects, overshadowed the band and ruined what should have been an outstanding album of traditional circus music.



Beginning in 1969, the Ringling Bros. and Barnum & Bailey Circus, which was now owned by Irvin and Israel Feld, sent out two units. Harold Ronk, along with Merle Evans and some of the performers from the 1968 Edition went out with the 109th Edition Red Unit, which featured Gunther Gebel



Ringling Ringmaster Harold Ronk November 30, 1969

Williams in his first American tour. That was also Merle Evans' last year with Ringling, closing out his years on the Ringling bandstand on November 30, 1969, in Utica, NY.

For the 1970 season, Ronk toured with the 100th Edition Blue Unit and would remain with the Blue Unit until his retirement at the end of the 1981 season, some 30 years after his first appearance with the Ringling Circus.

On August 8, 1974, I attended a matinee performance of the 104th Edition Blue Unit in Anaheim. I had just been released from active duty in the Navy and had arrived back in San Diego too late to see the show when it had appeared in the San Diego Sports Arena. But, I was able to get to Anaheim. That afternoon, Harold Ronk graciously inscribed and autographed both of his record albums for me.

Two years later in the San Diego Sports Arena, on the night that I played for my very first Ringling performance, Harold Ronk was there in his capacity as the Circus' announcer-vocalist. He was also there in 1978 when we taped the Ringling TV Special *Circus Super-Heroes* in San Diego.

The last time I worked with Harold Ronk was when the 110th Edition Blue Unit appeared in San Diego in 1980. Following his retirement the next year, Harold Ronk returned to his boyhood home of Peoria, Illinois. He passed away on August 2, 2006 at the age of 85.

In a 1965 interview, Harold Ronk said:

"Some friends of mine in musical theater feel I have wasted my talent, but I don't think so. Popcorn and lemonade are certainly a far cry from 'Pagliacci,' but essentially, a stage is a stage. I feel I have given something in the way of fun and razzle-dazzle that they cannot give."