

BANDMASTER JIMMY ILLE

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Jimmy Ille had circus music and jazz in his blood. He played under Merle Evan's baton, and briefly succeeded Merle at Ringling Brothers and Barnum & Bailey Circus when the show split into two units. In addition to leading circus bands, he was a sought after jazz musician.

Unfortunately, not much has been published about Jimmy.

James Alvin Ille was born October

25, 1920 in the "metropolis" of Biwabik, Minnesota, midway between Duluth and the Canadian border. Literally born into show business, Jimmy's arrival occurred while his parents were playing the town as members of a stock company. Irving Ernest and Marie Margaret (Markson) Ille's show business career included tours with the Cotton Blossom Showboat, Primrose Minstrels, Mrs. Tom Thumb, and the Forepaugh & Sells Bros Circus, as well as vaudeville appearances.

In 1926, with his step-father, Fred Royal Herniman, now heading the family, they came off the road and soon thereafter moved to Los Angeles, CA. It was there a young Jimmy -- about six and a half years old -- started trumpet lessons. Playing trumpet and cornet suited him well. By the time he graduated from high school, he was playing in jazz bands at saloons in the L.A. area.

In 1939, Jimmy enlisted in the Army, playing in the 20th Infantry Band. Apparently, the Army recruiter had convinced him that by joining the Army band, he would get paid for playing and it would be a lot like going to music school. One of his stops was Camp Pickett in Virginia. While there, on December 11, 1942, he married Carmen Weeks, a marriage that did not survive through his time in the military. Of course, World War II was on the horizon and by 1944, he found himself in France, with his cornet still at

hand. The day France was liberated, Jimmy and other Army musician buddies were in Paris. They dropped in at a night club that happened to be featuring famed Belgian-born French jazz guitarist and composer, Jean "Django" Reinhardt (1910 - 1953). Jimmy was fascinated and spent as much time at the Club as he could.

With the end of the war, and six years of playing in Army concert bands, Jimmy returned to California and joined Gus Arheim's band. But soon after, Jimmy was with Merle Evans and the Ringling Brothers and Barnum & Bailey Circus Band. For the next ten years, and occasionally during the ten after that, Jimmy was on the bandstand with Merle, usually playing the solo part. Jimmy once commented on Merle, saying: "He was a great man in my life. A marvelous man and a great cornet player. I was the youngest cat in the band when I joined. Half the guys had played with Sousa. But they were dynamite players!"

"In those days," Jimmy told his magician/illusionist friend, Mike Martin, "we got on the train to New York, loaded into the Garden and rehearsed for three days. Then we opened. But we had only rehearsed the production numbers. There were five of them, including the opening, the aerial, a specialty number (usually horses), the elephant act, and the closing. But there were 20 to 30 displays in the show and on opening night we'd never seen any of the music for those acts. That was some fancy sight-reading! Everything was up for grabs."

When Jimmy wasn't playing with the circus, he was playing in jazz bands, such as the Russ Morgan Band, Henry Busse's Orchestra, or Wingy Manone's Jazz Band.



JIMMY ILLE

Bandleader Circus Circus, Las Vegas

Often, he was out front with the top jazz clubs in Chicago or Los Angeles. However, in October 1968, the Circus Circus Hotel & Casino opened in Las Vegas with Jimmy as bandmaster, setting the music for all the acts, and conducting the evening shows. There was an Act every 20 minutes and Jimmy only used traditional circus music. He said, "You know, it's different than any other kind."

Jimmy loved circus music, and particularly admired circus music composers like Fred Jewel and Charlie Duple. And while he sometimes played a trumpet, he preferred the cornet when in the circus environment. He explained: "I had an English Besson horn for years. It's a fine instrument. With the cornet, it's small, you can conduct and play. I'm blowing a Conn Victor model now, one they built in 1959. Man, it still sounds great!"

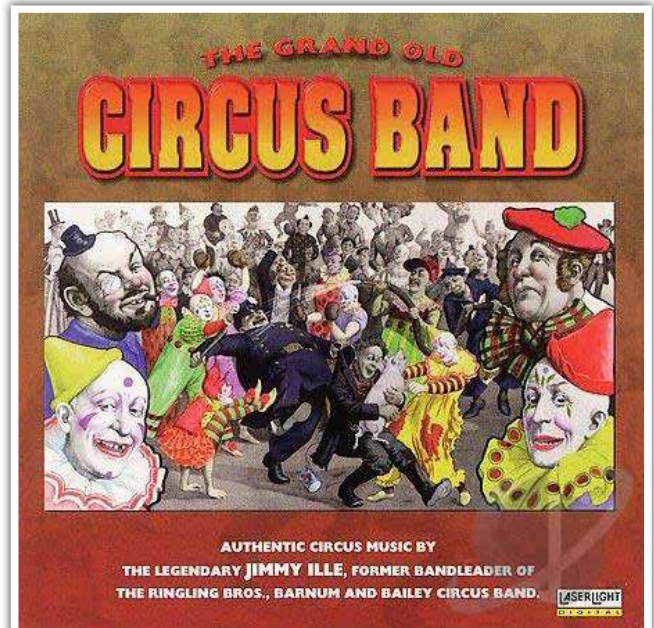
In 1969, when Merle Evans retired and the Ringling show split into two units, Jimmy took on the bandmaster role for one of the new shows. However, he was only in that role for one Season. He was then hired as the band leader for the Royal Hanneford Circus. It was there he met and married the show's equestrian star, Kay Francis Hanneford. They left the show when, in 1975, Jimmy became the bandleader for the Clyde Beatty-Cole Bros. Circus. Unfortunately, soon thereafter, Kay was diagnosed with cancer. At the close of the season, and with Kay's health in mind, Jimmy left the circus and took his band to New Orleans. Kay died November 2, 1976 and is buried at Manasota Memorial Park in Bradenton, FL.



Jimmy on Bourbon Street, New Orleans

Jimmy then headlined for years at the **Famous Door** Dixieland jazz club, and later the **Blue Angel** and other clubs. While in New Orleans, he formed **The Grand Old Circus Band**, and in October, 1997, released a CD of "authentic" traditional circus music.

Jimmy Ille died in New Orleans on April 1, 1999, with his Volume 2 of circus music by **The Grand Old Circus Band** still in the early planning stages. His circus library ended up in storage in a horse trailer at the Hanneford Circus winter quarters in Florida. Pete Rosa, who played trumpet in the Clyde Beatty Cole Bros band and then worked in the office at Royal Hanneford Circus purchased the music from the Hanneford family. Windjammer Trustee Don Covington now owns the music. It, along with the extensive Charles Schlarbaum Music Library, has now been moved to Oskaloosa, IA and housed in the C.L. Barnhouse facilities while the materials are being reviewed and indexed.



Tunes on the CD are: *Fanfare, The Caravan Club, Georgia Girl, Entry of the Gladiators, Slim Trombone, Amparita Roca, Broadway One-Step, Trombone Blues, Crimson Flush, Espana, Abdullah, The Teddy Bears Picnic, Jungle Queen, Bombasto, Ringling Reminiscence Medley (Be A Clown, The Circus on Parade, Greatest Show on Earth), The Cantonians March, They're Off, and Billboard March.*
(Run time 46:21)