

RUDY BUNDY

by "First of May" Bill Armstrong, WJU #3610

Rudy Bundy was born in 1908 in Quaker City, OH. He attended QC Schools and was the band director at Quaker City High School while he was still a student there. Three weeks after graduating in 1925, Rudy was hired as a sax & clarinet player with a Chicago-based vaudeville act called "The Blossom Heath Entertainers". By 1927, Rudy was leading his own touring band on the Orpheum Theater Circuit throughout the U.S.

Rudy was an outstanding clarinet player and known for his ability to triple tongue. The Rudy Bundy Orchestra was a big hit at big night clubs and ballrooms during the Roaring 20's and through the 1930's. In 1928, he joined George Olsen's "Good News of 1928" on Broadway. He led the NBC Orchestra in the 1930's and was broadcast nationally on the NBC Radio Network.

On New Year's Eve 1940, Rudy was in Sarasota, Florida to open The Lido Casino, a new ballroom and casino owned by the city. Not only was the band a great hit, but on that night John Ringling North, owner of Ringling Brothers Barnum & Bailey Circus, called Rudy over to his table. They hit it off and soon became great friends. John Ringling North played the saxophone and soon was sitting in with Rudy's band. John Ringling North had a private train car that had once belonged to his uncle John Ringling, one of the original Ringling Brothers. After a night at The Lido, they would adjourn to the "Jomar", John and Mabel Ringling's original private railroad car, for all night jamming and partying.



John Ringling North in his rail car "JOMAR"

In 1944, the two decided to open their own night club, and chose to open a club in The John Ringling Hotel in Sarasota. The club was named The Moto Room after Gargantua's mate. A famous John Ringling North quote was: "Rudy,



Merle Evans & Rudy Bundy

we'll open a night club in the John Ringling Hotel and if nobody comes we'll drink all the drinks ourselves". The place, however, was an immediate success and soon became one of the hottest places on the Florida Gold Coast.

Many politicians, movie stars and high rollers came to The Moto Room on a regular basis: Bette Davis, Charlton Heston, Betty Hutton, Prince Rainier and a host of celebrities, for example. On Wednesday nights in the winter months they would also have the top Ringling Circus acts perform in the ball room. The Moto Room was THE place to be seen and to be invited to the Jomar after hours had serious social credibility. The Moto gig lasted 10 years. During that time Rudy became very well acquainted with the circus and even played in Merle Evans' amazing circus band some in the summers. Merle Evans gave Rudy one of his cornets and I now have it on display in my living room.

In 1954, John Ringling North told Rudy it was time he quit the music business and come to work full time for the circus. Starting out as "Superintendent of the Front Door" meant he was in charge of ticket sales. Rudy's easy going manner and fair and honest dealing was something unusual in the world of circus bosses. Within a couple years he had risen to Treasurer and by the 1960's was VP & Director of Operations for the whole show.

In the late 1950's Rudy bought an 85-foot surplus hospital railcar from the U.S. Army and had it remodeled into a traveling home/office/studio for he and his wife Katy. They traveled about 17,000 miles a year touring the country with the circus. The car had 2 bedrooms and 2 baths plus a kitchen, living room, dining room and music room. A long list of great musicians visited in whatever city they were in. Bedtime was usually around 6 AM. Rudy and Katy continued to tour with the circus until his retirement in 1970. Not ready to give up on show business entirely, Rudy was



Bundy (in suit) playing with the Ringling BB&B Band under Merle Evans (1969 Photo)

subsequently general manager for Gene Kelly's production of *Clown Around* starring Ruth Buzzi, and was also finance director for *The Lipizzaner Stallions* US Tour.

However, the musician never left Rudy Bundy. He continued to play jazz clarinet up into his 80's. Even though he enjoyed the "High Life" and the "Night Life" to the fullest, he lived to be 93. There are six LP albums of Rudy's bands and jam sessions as well as a host of 78's from the 1930's.

In the winter months, when the circus was in Winter Quarters at Sarasota and while he and Katy were living at their very modern home on Lido Key, Rudy would play jazz at a couple of Sarasota clubs. During this time, Rudy was also saving pictures and records from his big band days, and collecting circus memorabilia and signed baseballs from Hall of Fame players. He soon filled his house's walls, basement bar, and the train car with interesting things from his career. In the 1960's, Rudy converted his father's dairy barn in Quaker City into a vacation cabin that was soon also stuffed with big band and circus history.

Last fall, I was fortunate to meet Rudy's Granddaughter Molly Goodall and her husband Jim, who let me start re-researching Rudy's barn. The deeper I got into all this history, the more I wanted to try to expose this great story of a boy from Quaker City who had show business in his blood from a very early age and ended up running "The Greatest Show on Earth"

Thank you to new member Bill Armstrong for this article on Rudy Bundy.

Submissions of material for consideration of publication in "Circus Fanfare" are welcome! Please email editor@circusmusic.org if you have any material you would like to submit.