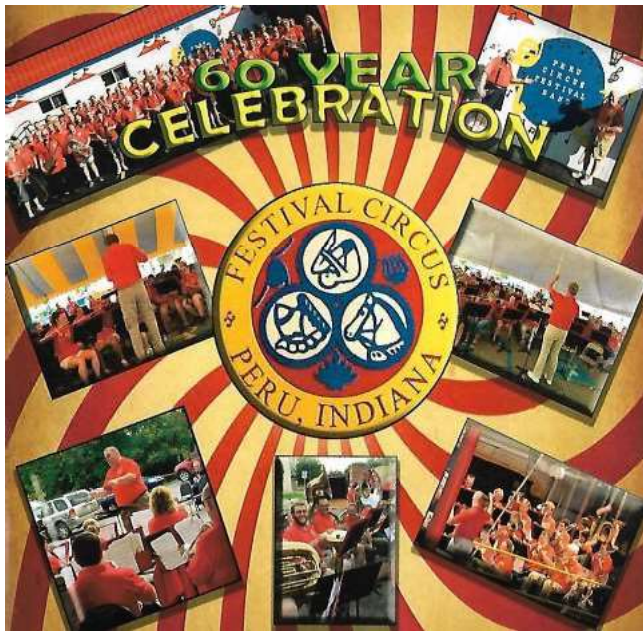


TOM GUSTIN & The Peru Circus Festival Band

By Ron Withers, a retired businessman who teaches for Indiana University.



CELEBRATING SIXTY YEARS

Whether labeled fate, serendipity, karma, or luck, the fact that a world-class musician named Tom Gustin ended up as the head of the Peru (Indiana) Circus Festival Band in its infancy was a happy circumstance for both the festival and the people of Peru, especially the hundreds of young people involved in the circus band over the last sixty years.

Peru, Indiana might seem like an unusual choice for a circus winter quarters. Winters can be brutally cold and north-central Indiana is snuggled nicely in the middle of what many people today consider “fly-over” country.

Fortunately for Peru, the sensibilities of a local 19th century businessman were more eclectic than most people of the day. The man was named Ben Wallace and he suffered from a severe bite of the circus bug. To the astonishment of Peruvians of the 1890s, he turned the town into the home of the Hagenback-Wallace Circus, one of the biggest shows in America.

While the circus left Peru in 1941, many circus performers remained in the area. By 1956, a group of them led by Robert Weaver, an artist with a deep love for all things big-top related, used a visit to Peru by the Circus Historical Society as an excuse to revive Peru’s heritage as “Circus Capital of the World.”

According to long-time circus band member Rex Stitsworth, the first year was more of a promotional tool for the local newspaper than a resurrection of Peru’s circus past, but by 1959 the original idea had grown into the notion of reviving the town’s history with a homegrown circus performance.

The big-top went up and under the direction of many retired circus performers, the Peru Amateur Circus was born.

Tom Gustin was born on August 15th, 1942. His parents, Harold and Dorothy, were both musically talented. His dad was a left-handed, self-taught guitar player who played an upside down right-handed guitar and his mother was a talented singer. Both parents had perfect pitch. By the time Tom was five, he was riding to band gigs with his father and learning to sing. He wanted to learn how to play an instrument. Although his instrument of choice was the accordion, his parents signed him up for piano lessons. Dorothy soon saw his frustration and bought an accordion for her son.

While Tom didn’t think he had perfect pitch, he was adept at learning by rote, the ability to play just about any tune after hearing it once or twice. He was able to turn his talent into a money-making enterprise at an early age.

By the time Tom was six he played his first gig, earning five dollars at a local party. He was soon playing for various events, honing his performance skills and learning the joys of a musical life. One of his most memorable gigs was a paid performance at a garden party thrown by Kate Porter, mother of Cole Porter. Tom strolled among the guests with his accordion, occasionally working his way back to his mother to get the name of the next song the audience requested.

On one of the trips for a new song title, Tom’s mother told him: “Look on the porch there at the house... It’s Cole Porter.” Tom looked and saw what he described as: *“a frail looking fellow on metal crutches. He had a kind face, but looked very sad to me. I remember this very well, but at the time I told mom I didn’t know who Cole Porter was! Well, live and learn. Over the years, I produced, performed, and organized so many Cole Porter tribute concerts that I can’t even remember them all, but I probably know as many of Porter’s compositions as Michael Feinstein!”*

By the time Tom entered junior high school, his musical concentration turned to the trombone. He had seen one of his neighbors, Dan Roberts, playing trombone in the high school band and was impressed and determined that the bone would also be his instrument. The two would later join forces in Dan’s Dixieland band. His father helped him to learn the instrument as well as music theory, even putting together a small combo to give Tom practical experience.

Tom says his father was the best musician he ever knew. For the next few years, they played gigs every weekend, honing Tom’s natural skills and expanding his knowledge of music. By the time he entered high school, he was an outstanding musician.

Tom Gustin and James Noble, the high school band director, soon became great friends. It would be the kids of Peru who reaped the greatest benefit from this musical friendship. "Nobe" had played with the Indianapolis symphony and had also played with various circus bands when they passed through the area. He and Tom played a key role in the creation of the first circus festival band in 1959.



Tom Gustin Photo courtesy Tom Gustin

Tom tells the story best:

"The summer after graduation from high school I began working for the city, and several notables in our community decided to engage some of the old circus folks who lived here to train some acts that would be performed in a real circus tent that was purchased to help enhance the circus heritage of the area. I got involved with some friends in an act called "Adagio!"

At the same time, Jim Noble was asked to put a band together to play for the acts to be held in the tent. I got asked to help with that also. The city street department (my employer) was asked to help erect that smelly old tent and I got to help raise it. Those old circus performers knew exactly what to do, and under their guidance we raised the tent. It was a wonderful experience watching it go up just the way they said it would.

Putting the music together with Nobe was another neat experience. When Mr. Noble asked me to assist in putting together a band, I was honored. In 1958, we formed a small circus-type band for the first downtown shows. Our little "throw-together" band also played in 1959. The two shows were both sell-outs, so the organizers were determined to add three more shows.

Nobe had experience playing in circus bands and knew how rigorous it was to play shows night after night. Because of his busy schedule as high school band director, he didn't want to continue and asked me if I would like to take over directing the band. I said I would love to. I did it for the next fifty-five years!"

Things didn't go flawlessly at first. In the beginning, Tom had a difficult time finding enough musicians to play for all the shows, especially as the circus grew to two shows on Friday night and three performances and a parade on Saturday. Tom was sometimes forced to play the trumpet parts on his trombone because of a lack of trumpet players. While this was a problem for Tom, it was a blessing in disguise for many budding young musicians, including the author of this article. The lack of trumpets allowed me as a twelve-year-old to play for my first circus in 1967 and I was soon a full-fledged member of the circus band. My story was not

rare for the time and many young people were blessed with the opportunity to be part of the circus band.

In 1968, the festival moved from its tattered tent to a new facility, a defunct lumber yard at the corner of 7th Street and Broadway in downtown Peru. It had a large walled-in area that was perfect for a three-ring circus. However, there was no roof. When renovations started, Tom was not consulted about the needs of the band so when the bandstand was constructed, it was only ten feet wide and fifty feet long. It was also forty feet above the dirt floor of the arena.

"When I saw the bandstand, I laughed. What an awful joke! When I was asked what was wrong, I tried to explain all of the problems plus the fact I was scared of heights! We made it work anyway. By now, the band had grown to around fifty musicians, but the bandstand could only hold thirty-five people, instruments, and stands, and that was using a shoe spoon! It was still an improvement over the tent. One of the worst experiences in the old tent was having a wild animal cage with lions and tigers right in front of the band. The smell of animal urine made it difficult to catch your breath!"

The growth of the band by the late 1960s was remarkable. By 1968 the quality of the music reached the point where Tom decided it was time for the circus band to cut an album. In February 1968, the circus band set up at the local Loyal Order of the Moose and recorded an entire album in one long day. I remember arriving at about 8:00 AM and not getting home until about midnight.



Recording Session in 1968.

Photo by Kevin Murphy

Part traditional circus music and part contemporary, the album included songs from *The Sells-Floto Triumphal* and *Robinson's Grand Entry to Mame* and *Born Free*.

Many of the selections featured the stellar work of Tom Gustin and his trombone. A roster of the musicians who played on the album shows that many were students. While not destined for platinum status, the album is a good representation of the circus band in the early years.



Tom Gustin
Photo courtesy Tom Gustin



Tom directing the band in the old band loft. Tom Gustin photo

Playing in the elevated circus band loft in the new building was tough. In 1968, there was no roof, so the band had to deal with extreme heat and a powerful afternoon sun that baked the musicians. By 1969, a new tent shaped roof was added to the building and things got dramatically worse.

Being forty feet above the ground in an enclosed building with no exhaust fans and filled with over a thousand spectators on a typical Hoosier July day was nothing short of brutal. The temperature in the band loft typically soared to well over 100 degrees. It was a love of the music and dedication to Tom that kept the band operating at a high level that year. By the end of the performances, we had all lost weight and most of us had bloody lips.

Exhaust fans were built into the west wall before the 1970 season, alleviating some, but not all the problems of the original bandstand. Again, in Tom's words:

"After a couple of years in the band loft, someone had the brilliant idea of stringing a cable across the arena from the bandstand and putting a motorcycle act on it. I thought the cat urine was awful, but the exhaust fumes from that motorcycle burned our eyes and lungs, almost asphyxiating us!"

In 1970, the band was prominently featured in the NBC documentary *Circus Town*. As the band grew in size and experience, Tom started looking for a way to move the bandstand. This was achieved when a circus parent named Bill Lester built a large new bandstand at the west end of the circus arena. It holds approximately sixty-five musicians and their gear.

By the 1980s, the band was ensconced in this new area and eventually the arena was air-conditioned, making life for the average circus band musician an entirely different experience from the early days. Crowding is still a problem in the modern era, however. There are now between 120-150 musicians who want to play in the band each year. We play in shifts so that everyone gets a chance.

Tom Gustin is the main reason for this success. He brought music into the lives of hundreds, if not thousands of young



Charter members Rex Stitsworth and Tom Gustin on July 3, 2019

Tim Bath photo; Kokomo Tribune

The Peru Festival Circus Band Loft in 2019.

Ron Withers Photos this page



Tom Gustin directing The Peru Festival Circus Band in 2019.

musicians, worked countless hours to make the circus band a quality group, and provided love and guidance to everyone. Over the years, Tom has received numerous awards, including a national Jefferson Award as well as being named by Indiana as a "Sagamore of the Wabash", the highest honor a Hoosier can receive.

While the influence of Tom Gustin on the circus band is immense, he has always had help with the group. Assisting from the beginning was a quiet, dedicated young man named Rex Stitsworth who was always willing to fill in when Tom's professional obligations got in the way of his circus commitments. Tom and Rex are the only two current band members from the very beginning of the Festival.

Rex Stitsworth has served as a director, board member, and president of the band over the last sixty years. He has also been there every year with his trumpet and remembers the difficulty of recruiting and keeping musicians involved during the grueling early days. He was instrumental in building up a group of musicians who understood the unique needs of the amateur circus and provided a dependable, experienced band. The author has had the privilege of sitting next to Rex for many a circus performance.

Another notable addition is the inclusion of Diane Haley (WJU #3914), a music teacher who eventually became the high school band director at Peru, as a co-director of the band. She has been involved since the late 1970's and is currently the main director of the circus band. She sets a high standard of musicianship. The quality of the Circus Festival Band is evident on the latest album recorded in celebration of the 60th anniversary of the festival.

One of the happiest days of my life was when I retired and returned to the band after a 40 year hiatus. I came back to a fantastic organization. The band now has its own rehearsal



Tom Gustin, Ron Withers, and Rex Stitsworth during the 60th Anniversary Recording Sessions. These three are the only ones who played on both the 1968 and 2019 albums

building and a sheet music library. The music has changed over the years, with more modern tunes replacing much of the older, more traditional circus music of the early days, but each performance of the Circus Festival Band begins with a piece entitled, *A Festival Circus*, written by a Peru musician for the festival.

These days, people return to Peru from all parts of the United States to play for the circus. It is more like a family reunion than work. We crowd into what was once a spacious bandstand that has shrunk with time (unlike our waistlines!) We take turns playing so everyone gets a chance and we really enjoy the air-conditioning in the arena. We get to watch the youth of our town perform phenomenal feats of daring. In other words we are some of the most fortunate people in the world. Much of this is due to the effort, dedication, and selflessness of our friend and mentor, Tom Gustin and the people who help him. The Peru Amateur Circus is forever in their debt.

<https://www.perucircusband.com>

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