

WINDJAMMERS HALL OF FAME

Boom Boom Browning (1925-1996), Inductee 2026

By Rod Everhart, WJU #1351



W.R. Browning - Sverre Braathen photo,
courtesy Milner Library, Illinois State University

"Boom Boom" Browning (WJU #68) was a highly celebrated American circus bandmaster and master drummer. Best known for his powerful rhythm on the "double drums" and his vibrant leadership. He played for Merle Evans at Ringling Bros. and Barnum & Bailey, and he anchored major circus bands for decades, most notably serving as director of music for the Clyde Beatty-Cole Bros. Circus 1960-1964.

William Reed Browning, Jr. was born March 16, 1925, in Wichita Falls, TX to William Reed Browning, Sr. (1898-1975) and Ennis Eloise Humphries (1903-1984.) When he was three years old, the family temporarily moved to New York. While there, at age 10 he began his drumming career and had five years studying under Gene Krupa. He attended Long Island high school as a percussionist. While attending school, he lived with his mother's sister, Minnie, and her husband.

He registered for the draft March 16, 1943, and enlisted four months later, serving in U.S. Army bands during World War II. After his discharge from the Army on February 24, 1946, he earned a Bachelor of Music degree from Baylor University. He later pursued advanced percussion training under some of the nation's premier instructors, graduating from the Julliard School of Music in 1950.

Asked why he became involved with circuses, Browning replied, *"Damned if I know. I just saw the Ringling Bros. show at Madison Square Garden when they were there in April 1950. I said, 'I'd like to do that.' So, I talked to Merle Evans, and he said he needed somebody. I told him I had just graduated from Julliard, and he asked if I wanted to sit in and play a show. I sat in on bass drum and played a whole show cold. Merle asked me to drop him a line when the show got back from Cuba, so I did. He wrote me back and said, 'You're hired'."*

On March 10, 1952, Browning married Martha Mary Kohoutek (1930 – 2009) in Waco, TX. They had three children, Maggie, Sharon Evelyn (1955 – 2013), and William Thomas (1956) before divorcing January 25, 1974. Browning married again on August 7, 1976, to Patricia D. Linders, but that lasted less than a year with a divorce on May 27, 1977.

Despite Merle Evans taking a five-year "time out", or sabbatical 1956 – 1960, Browning stayed with Ringling until 1960, drumming under Izzy Cervone 1957 – 1959. He recalled his time with Ringling, saying *"We all traveled on the train and the band had their own private railroad car. The cars had rows of three high bunks ... it was an old World War II hospital car converted. Merle seemed to favor the drummers, so I always got a lower bunk. We'd get in at night between one and two in the morning and then get up late and have breakfast in the car. They had buses that took the acts from the train to the lot and after breakfast we'd grab a bus to the band tent to change into uniform. We were down in Cuba in 1959 when Castro came in. They held us captive, living on black beans and rice, for about ten days before they let us out of the country."*

In the circus world, everything and everyone had nicknames. Thus, circus musicians were called "Windjammers" because of spending their days "jamming wind through their horns." And individuals had their nicknames, too. In Browning's

case, it was “Boom Boom” because of the power of his drumming. For most, those names faded over time or were forgotten, but for Boom Boom, that was how he was known the rest of his life.

With the ongoing changes at Ringling, including reducing the size of the core band and using locals to flesh out the rest, Boom Boom joined the Clyde Beatty- Cole Bros (CBCB) circus band in 1960 as drummer and band leader. In the early 1960s, when many truck-show circus “bands” consisted of only 2 or 3 players, the Beatty-Cole show carried an 8-piece band of first-class musicians. Appearing primarily in the Eastern United States, the show moved on a fleet of 32 semi-trucks and used a big top that could seat 4,800 patrons.



In 1961, “Boom Boom” used a drum set consisting of four various sized drums and two cymbals, all of which had been custom-made for him by George Way Drums, Inc. of Elkhart, IN. The only other set like it was used by Ringling’s drummer “Red” Floyd. His 1961 band consisted of Mike Carli, Robert Danks and Tom Nappli, trumpets; Mike Smith first trombone and arranger, Jack Evans second trombone, Roy Gardner baritone & bass trombone, Tommy Comstock on organ, and Boom Boom on drums and conducting. In 1961, Browning composed “*The Clyde Beatty March*” for Beatty himself, and the original score is now held at Circus World Museum in Baraboo, where Boom Boom was inducted into their Circus Hall of Fame in 1982.

In addition to serving as Beatty-Cole’s band leader, “Boom Boom” handled the inside ticket exchange booth before the performances and drove the truck that carried the bandstand and Beatty’s steel “Cats” arena. In later seasons he also served as the show’s equestrian director/announcer while still playing the drums and leading the band.

Boom Boom explained that being a circus drummer/leader required specialized musicianship. *“It’s not the role of a concert drummer, not the role of a dance band drummer – you’ve got to have it all. You’ve got to be able to play concert work, good fast marches, and galops. You’ve got about 250 different music changes in a 2 ½ hour show, and you’ve got about 200 to 225 different cues to catch. Every time an elephant lets one loose you’ve got to catch him, or you sit there and roll for five to ten minutes while a high-wire man decides he’s going to do a somersault. You build a really strong pair of wrists, and you have to be able to read like a fiend. The acts throw music at you and, being leader and using local men, I have about two hours to whip 10 to 28 musicians into shape before the show. Most acts have their own music, and some don’t. The ones that don’t, you have to figure out what they want by what they say. Sometimes even the acts you know switch their routine. It’s a case of knowing or out-guessing what they’re going to do because you’ve got to be able to follow every move, every dancing horse’s hoof beat – which they say I do pretty well.”*



Following are two examples of the music program from the Clyde Beatty-Cole Bros (CBCB) Circus 1961 and/or 1963, courtesy of Eric Beheim (WJU #66):

Elephants - Entry of the Gladiators (up-tempo) for entrance of bulls, *Night Train* (up-tempo, jazzy feel, tempos adjusted during act to match behaviors), *Barnum & Bailey’s Favorite* (galop tempo) for exit of bulls. As noted by Eric in his November/December 2019 *Circus Fanfare* article on the 1961 Clyde Beatty - Cole Bros. Circus Program, the elephant act that year utilized parts of 16 tunes over a 6-minute span, three of which were the up-tempo circus marches *Olympia Hippodrome*, *Quality Plus*, and *Bravura*.



August 1960 - Braathen photo, Milner Library, ISU

Clyde Beatty Wild Animals – *Special Beatty Fanfare*, *William Tell Storm Scene* (furiously up tempo) to bring cats into the arena), *Burma Patrol* (up-tempo), *Bolero* (slow tempo to match cat on ball), *Salute to the Sultan* (up-tempo), *The Breeze and I* (ballad to match “waltzing cat”), *March from Love of Three Oranges* (slow to match cat sit up and lay down), *Princess Theme from “In a Persian Market”* for single tiger, *High Speed* galop for “fight sequence” and exit of some of the cats, *Misirlou* for rearing tiger, *Big Cage Galop* (top speed) for exit of rest of the cats.

Boom Boom’s personal recording of the complete (84-minutes) CBCB 1961 performance in Orlando, FL is available on the mywju.org website’s Circus Music Recordings tab.

Thanks to good organization and an experienced and dedicated staff, CBCB quickly became a major player in the circus industry. Those circus fans whose memories go back to the early 1960s remember it as being a beautiful sight when set up on a lot with its white tents (new canvas was purchased each year) and its brightly painted and well-maintained equipment.

Browning said later, *“I stayed (with CBCB) for about 5 years (1960 – 1964) before I went to work for Slingerland (Drum Company.) I didn’t do any drumming for about three years. Then one of the guys came through town and called me and said, ‘I need a drummer for the Shrine Circus when it comes to Columbus’, which is where I was living. I said, ‘O.K., I’ll do it.’ The word got out that I was in the business again and*

then they kept calling and calling, so I took on more and then started leading again.” In addition to his work with quality control and repair at the Slingerland factory in Chicago, plus being a salesman, Boom Boom did about 25 Shrine circuses a year as drummer/bandleader.

“Boom Boom” became an early member of Windjammers Unlimited as WJU #68. When his schedule permitted, he attended meets and conventions as a percussionist and to talk about his circus experiences. He served a term as a WJU Trustee, starting in 1976.

On April 21, 1996, Boom Boom wrapped up a gig in Omaha, NE with the Tangier Shrine Circus. He conducted his circus routine for the last time. He did not play drums that time, but directed the fourteen-person circus band, closing the show with *“Auld Lang Syne.”* Roland Gibbs (WJU #459) was on hand to shake his hand and wish him the traditional “See you down the road,” before departing.

The next morning -- Monday, April 22, 1996 -- Boom Boom left Omaha and headed east on I-80, bound for his home in Newark, OH. Some 30 miles east of Des Moines near Grinnell, IA, he had an apparent fatal heart attack. According to the Iowa State Patrol, he crashed into the guard rail and then into the median.

William Reed “Boom Boom” Browning, Jr. died at age 71. His contributions to the circus and circus music were more than substantial. Windjammers Unlimited is pleased to honor him with inclusion in its Windjammers Hall of Fame as the 2026 Inductee.



Buckles Blog.com



1961 - Braathen photo, Milner Library, ISU