

TRIBUTE TO RONALD W. DRUMM (1934 – 2023)

By Rod Everhart, WJU #1351

Ronald Wesley “Ronnie” Drumm led the Ringling Bros. and Barnum & Bailey Blue Unit circus band from November 1975 through November 1981. His second wife, Beverly, was a wardrobe assistant during that time, and his son, Ricky, also toured alongside him for two years and 1000 shows as the circus unit’s percussionist and drummer.

Ronnie was born July 27, 1934, at Hazelhurst hospital in Springfield, MA. His parents were Homer James Drumm (11/18/1909 – 8/23/1957) and Maude Estelle (Waters) Drumm (4/11/1912 – 11/26/1981.) Ronnie was the second of five children, the others being Norbert James (1932-2012), Glenn Wilbur (1940), Sandra M. (1943), and Mark Waters (1954). At age six Ronnie picked up the trumpet and continued to play until his death July 18, 2023, at age 88. By the time he was 13, he was playing at gigs each New Year’s Eve.

At age 16, Ronnie won the “Ted Mack Amateur Hour” contest, an early version of popular television shows such as “America’s Got Talent.” Ronnie studied at the New England Conservatory of Music and led his own band at a young age. In 1960 his band competed in the Best New Big Band Contest that was sponsored by Jackie Gleason, and they placed second in the national finals. With his big band, he conducted musical artists such as Bob Hope, Wayne Newton, Jackie Gleason, Jack Benny, Steve Allen, Liberace, and Lorne Greene.

During the 1970s, Drumm was featured on TV specials, including Miss World USA and the Ringling Brothers broadcast. In a unique pop-culture contribution, he was hired to record trumpet selections featured in an episode of the animated TV show, *The Simpsons*.

The Miss World USA pageant had a special challenge in dealing with adversity, a skill that served him well with Ringling. After practicing hard for the Miss World USA Special, the day of the show found protestors picketing the arena. One of the performers, Sammy Davis, Jr., was unable to cross the picket line, forcing a last-minute



scramble to fill in all the gaps.

Founded in 1960, Drumm had a retail music store in West Springfield, MA – **Ronnie Drumm’s House of Music**. It was there he started a youth band of up to 60 students from the area. Aged 8 to 18, he took the youth band on a three-week performance tour in Japan. While there, they played for NHK Japanese television shows, did guest appearances in baseball stadiums, and recorded an album. In 1969, the Youth Band played for the American Federation of Musicians in Houston, receiving rave reviews. Ronnie was proud of the teaching he did in both the school programs as well as private lessons, bringing the joy of music to young people. Through the years he was able to continue maintaining contact with many of his students.

In 1975, Ronnie joined the circus, becoming the musical conductor for the Ringling Bros. and Barnum & Bailey “Blue Unit” for six seasons and over 4,000 shows. Also in 1975, Ronnie married Beverly P. (Shortt) Macomber (8/11/1932 – 10/7/2015.)

Rather than travel on the train, Ronnie and his wife lived in a big 5th wheel trailer towed by a heavy-duty pickup truck which Ronnie drove from engagement to engagement.

Eric Beheim (WJU #66), who played saxophone in the Ringling band when it visited the San Diego area, commented “*It was my understanding that Ronnie came to the show via Eastern States Exposition (Big E*

Expo). He took his job with Ringling very seriously and expected the local musicians who were hired in each town to do the same. Under his baton, the musical tempos were faster than those of any other of the Ringling bandleaders I worked for. In 1980 (the last year he led the band in San Diego and at the time when Charly Baumann was away in Australia) he seemed much more relaxed and the tempos weren’t quite so fast.”

Drumm was always passionate about the music performed, but circus life wasn’t easy. Constant travel was one factor, of course, but also dealing with emergencies was another.

He saw two people die after falling from their safety devices. At a live performance in Fresno, CA, he led the band to the “emergency music” to divert the children’s attention from the injured woman performer. He used Scott Joplin’s “The Entertainer” from *Sting* to signal all the clowns to come out as a diversion. The local newspaper criticized him for being “coldhearted”, but he held his position that what he had done was to protect the kids.

Ronnie was certainly “with it and for it.” During one of the 1980 performances, while they were wheeling in the heavy metal “Globe of Death” rig used for the motorcycle act, it got away from the crew. The band was set up at the other end of the arena and, as it was playing, Ronnie suddenly left the bandstand and ran down the track to help out with the Globe.

The soundtrack for the **Circus Super Heroes** TV special was taped in San Diego in 1978 and has Ronnie conducting the band. Some of the acts were taped in Florida and during the recording session, Ronnie had to conduct their music using a TV monitor playing back the tapes of them performing. Read Eric Beheim’s article on this in the November/December 2020 *Circus Fanfare*, pages 16-18.

In an April 17, 1979, **Lifestyle** article, journalist Hollie I. West headlined it with: “**The Band Plays on ... But the Sound Is New Under the Big Top.**” Her intro was: *In the days when beer was a-nickel-a-glass and gasoline a-dime-a-gallon, the circus band -- brassy, peppy and high-stepping -- was one of the grand delights of the Big Top. But the old days of bright red uniforms, high-plumed hats and the snappy marches of Karl King and Henry Fillmore are gone. Today the circus band wears black ties and tuxedos and plays an array of music from light classics to rock.*

The new “circus” sound was more likely to include the boogie strains of “*Ease on Down the Road*” from “The Wiz” or Chuck Mangione’s smooth “*Feelin’ So Good*.” The journalist pointed out that Merle Evans, then age 86 and 10 years retired from Ringling, wasn’t a fan of the music. Evans said “*The stuff they play doesn’t fit the acts. They don’t play many galops, and not many marches.*” But Ronnie Drumm had a different perspective, saying “*We play a little bit of everything. I missed the big band era, but we play a lot of good charts in the (Stan) Kenton, (Woody) Herman vein.*” And the band still plays waltzes for most of the high wire acts and blazing fanfares during the opening moments. With Ringling, Drumm also had to deal with different musicians

in every town. Gone were the days of circuses carrying their own, often large, bands intact. Instead, the traveling musicians were an organist, trumpeter, trombonist, and conductor/trumpeter. Generally, the Ringling band had up to 22 musicians for circus performances, depending on location and union rules. The rest of the band in each city was comprised of local, mostly younger players. In large cities that generally worked out well, and, in fact, Drumm noted “*Right now, we’re using first trumpets from the U.S. Marine and Navy bands, and a top-flight civilian first trumpeter.*” At a circus performance in Los Angeles, Marshall Royal, former lead saxophonist for Count Basie’s Orchestra, filled in. In contrast, Drumm cited the example of being in Billings, MT and needing ten musicians ... but they “*only had eight in the city!*” He added that in Asheville, NC, they had a high school girl who had only played saxophone for a year.

Early on, Ronnie Drumm married his high school sweetheart, Marilyn Rita Scully (1935 – 2022) and they had four children before divorcing in 1972. The children are Rick, Ronnie, Eileen, and Robert John “Robbie” (1957 - 2005).

Ronnie’s family was also quite involved and musical. As previously mentioned, Ricky was a professional drummer and toured with his father and stepmother on the Ringling show. During the 1978 tour, Rick’s wife served as the Blue Unit’s school teacher for the circus kids. They were expecting a child, so by the next year, Ronnie was a grandfather. His son Ronnie sold Ringling programs in 1980 and did quite well financially. He was able to buy his own van and had two or three other people working for him selling programs. His daughter, Eileen, was an excellent pianist and accompanist in numerous musicals in Massachusetts. His son Robbie was a gifted saxophone player, moving to Los Angeles in 1981 to perform. He played with the circus band whenever it was in LA. His saxophone playing was featured in the movie “*Staying Alive*.” Unfortunately, Robbie died in 2005 at age 48.



Drummer Rick Drumm, son of Ronnie, with the Ringling circus band

For eight years (2006 - 2013), drummer Rick Drumm served as president of music accessory giant D’Addario & Co., one of Long Island’s largest and most successful manufacturers. At the time, **Music Trades Magazine** ranked D’Addario as the 13th largest music-related manufacturer in the world. The privately held company recently reported annual revenue of \$378.4 million for fiscal 2026.

In his 70’s, Ronnie was teaching 4th to 8th grade Montessori School students in Bradenton, FL, plus creating and conducting both a school concert and Jazz band.

In retirement, Ronnie Drumm was a resident of Horizon West in southwest Orange County, FL, and he thoroughly enjoyed playing for the residents of nursing homes and assisted-living facilities. Those “shows” were well-rounded, consisting of singing and trumpet, and featuring tunes from the song books of Sinatra, Elvis, classic music, and country. He once said, *“Emotionally for me, I get more satisfaction playing for these people. I can go into a room, and no matter where they are, once you start this music, on some level, it consumes these people. They’ll be sitting there and tapping their feet, and then they’ll start mouthing the words to some of the old songs. That is when you know that you’re really doing something good for them”.*

Upon his father’s passing, Rick started his tribute on Facebook with: *“Our father, Ronnie Drumm passed away this morning and has now officially joined the Big Band in the Universe. I am imagining the conversation with St. Peter going like this: “Yes, Ronnie, I know who you are and who you have performed with, but you still need to start in the 4th trumpet chair.”*

On LinkedIn, Rick commented on his dad being a great trumpet player, teacher, and father. He noted he had 23 reel-to-reel tapes of his father’s, most of which were over 60 years old and in various states of decay. Digitizing them before they become “Dust in the Wind” is just one of Rick’s priorities following his father’s passing, noting, “Pops, I’m glad you kept the tapes. Having your music keeps you with us.”

Lifelong musician, Ronald W. Drumm had a significant impact on many, and his years as a windjammer were more than worthy! Bravo!!



Ronnie Drumm’s collection of tape recordings of his various bands, including one of his youth band performing in Japan in 1971, and another with the performance piece in the Best New Big Band Contest sponsored by Jackie Gleason in 1960. Hopefully, some of the Ringling circus recordings can be digitized for inclusion on our WJU website.



Note the unusual modification to his trumpet, no doubt to aid in projecting the sound across large arenas. His vintage Selmer trumpet has been restored by the David French Music Co. in collaboration with the team at S. E. Shires Co. to breathe new life into this treasured family heirloom.





Ronnie Drumm and his Orchestra

1960

Say Gleason To Audition Ronnie Drumm

Trumpeter Ronnie Drumm of Springfield may be auditioned for a spot with the staff of entertainer Jackie Gleason this week.

Drumm and his band took part last week in the "Best New Dance Band of 1960" contest in Detroit. Having finished second last year and highly touted this year, the Drumm band with four Holyokers, failed to survive the semi-finals. Jimmy Cook and his band from Las Vegas won the trophy and the big prizes of bookings, new equipment and national appearances which went with it.

1973

RONNIE DRUMM GROUP TO PERFORM AT BIG E

Ronnie Drumm, of West Springfield, will provide the drum beat at Eastern States Big E with his American Eagles orchestra on the final two days of the fair which runs from Sept. 14 to 23. Before this appearance, Drumm will have played at the Royal International Circus Sept. 17 to 19.



San Diego - 1978 - Eric Behiem photos

Ronnie Drumm leading the Ringling circus band