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## Troupers: Essays in Three Rings

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Troupers:  
Essays in Three Rings

A Thesis

Submitted to the Graduate Faculty of the  
University of New Orleans  
in partial fulfillment of the  
requirements for the degree of

Master of Fine Arts  
In  
Film, Theater, and Communication Arts  
Nonfiction Writing

by

Jon P. Pult

B.A. University of California, Berkeley, 1989

May 2009

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To my wife, Molly, for keeping the show on the road.

## Acknowledgements

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## Abstract

*Troupers: Essays in Three Rings* is a collection of fourteen essays focused mainly on variety entertainers (including the author). It leads the reader through a menagerie of the author's own enthusiasms--from clowning and circus elephants, to hot jazz and the ukulele. While the primary occupation of the "trouper" spotlighted here has always been to delight audiences, many of them--both human and animal--could not escape the hardscrabble, the sundered relations, the violence of everyday life. The author tells the stories of these "trouper" here, stories that reveal both their suffering and their refusal to suffer.

Keywords: Circus, Clowns, Radio, Ascona, Switzerland, Benny Goodman, Ukulele, Zoos, Elephants, Elephant executions, Paris, France, New Orleans Jazz, Lemon Nash, Vaudeville, Minstrelsy, Cliff Edwards

## **The Midway**



## Frivolity: A Preface

I never bought into the notion that a seemingly insignificant thing, the Red Sox winning the Series, say, or the recording “Satch Plays Fats,” could “change your life.” Certainly there are temporary pleasures, a small event that might put a little pep in the step. But life-changing? I mean, you live for decades, you develop a view of the world and your place in it, and then, *whiz-bang*, in an instant, everything is different? No, I didn't buy it. Until I was thirty-one, that is, when a small something came along and, indeed, the world was new.

What I mean to say is that most everything that follows here is related, directly or indirectly, to a single, ephemeral moment that I experienced while on a trip to Austin, Texas, from my home in New Orleans some twelve years ago. Oh, how I wish I could say it was something of real import, something deep, like the birth of a child maybe, or my bearing witness to some terrible injustice. But I can't. No, the thing that changed my course, inevitably and, it seems, irrevocably, was a circus clown on the back of an elephant.

True, this particular clown wasn't your typical, run-of-the-mill Joey. This fellow (Alan Ware, I found out later), he had real character. Affecting the persona of a flummoxed old man, he wore an over-sized plaid suit in muted burgundies and browns, and instead of a brightly colored wig, he wore skull-cap festooned with pell-mell tufts of hair. His greasepaint was flesh toned, and he jettisoned the large painted smile in favor of a small amount red and black that made his mien one of perpetual discomfort. And elephants, well, they're no small things either.

Alan Ware was part of Ringling Brothers and Barnum and Bailey Circus. Now, I was never much for that organization because with all that “Greatest Show on Earth” talk I believe it

lacks humility. But in 1997, during the 126<sup>th</sup> edition, I saw Ware do that little something that changed me forever. It was in the “Grand Spectacle” preceding intermission, when a herd of elephants, sixteen strong, were rumbling around the hippodrome track (or what passed for such, at Austin’s Frank Erwin Center). On the back of every other lumbering pachyderm was a rider in greasepaint. While seven of these clowns waved in the cloying and emphatic manner that is the hallmark of the contemporary circus, the eighth, Ware, cut a strange and unsteady figure stationed atop the elephant nearest the middle of the line. Draped about the elephant's neck, Ware rocked and rolled with exaggeration, all the while desperately trying to read a map. It was very subtle, and I would guess that most of those in attendance probably didn’t even notice, but I couldn't take my eyes off of him. It was the funniest thing I had ever seen. *Whiz, bang.*

Jack London, in the foreward to his novel *Michael, Brother of Jerry*, writes of growing up with an “insatiable curiosity” which often led him to “seek behind the performance in order to learn how the performance was achieved.” Well, I've got that, too. And I was feeling that way about this clown. I wanted to know what the impulse was that led him to come up with this bit of business where, in the midst of a thundering herd of elephants, tethered trunk to tail, he would imply that he was in control. A month later, while visiting my mother in San Francisco, I decided to try to find out.

In my frantic research on clowning that followed the Ringling performance, I had come across the San Francisco School of Circus Arts. I gave the place a call and asked if it offered private lessons in clowning. The school gave me the number of Karen Quest, a renowned juggler, physical comedian, and champion trick roper, who had taught at Ringling's Clown

College. When we spoke, she said that she could give me the most cursory of schooling in the art of clowning in three 75-minute sessions, and that we might start the next afternoon.

The following day I found myself in a classroom on the campus of the old Poly Tech High School near Kezar Stadium in the city's Haight-Ashbury district with a woman in her late thirties. Her approach, considering she was in the business of nonsense, was startlingly no-nonsense. "OK, let's get started" she barked. "Pretend you are walking through Jell-O." I slogged from one end of the room to the other. "Now, use this dumbbell as something other than a dumbbell." Telephone!

Over three days, in a little under four hours, Quest taught me the pratfall, the misdirection, entries and exits, the double-take and the perfect comic bow. But mostly she taught me about wonder, the idea that anything, as the old trope says, is possible. She taught me that maybe a dumbbell could be the start of a very interesting conversation.

I quickly became insufferable. In a bar on my first night back in New Orleans, for example, I told a friend who was enjoying a glass of the grape that I was an expert oenophile and that I could identify any wine put in front of me. "Watch," I said as I dramatically swirled her wine glass in the manner of the connoisseur. After a small sip and some dramatic contemplation I declared, "Red!" While walking down Canal Street later that evening, ruddy with my new outlook (and the boozing), I remarked, upon seeing a newly opened 99-Cent Store, "This place forced 'Everything One Dollar' out of business." I was on fire.

Clowns and clowning became my obsession, and I devoured every piece of information I could find on the subject. PBS aired a documentary on Vaudeville, which only served to heighten my interest. I took to reading and re-reading the book *Clown Scenes* by the French circus historian Tristan Remy. He had trolled the bars of Paris looking for the old masters and

helped them piece together the dialogue they used in their acts (before Barnum and his multi-ringed Big Top extravaganza, circus clowns talked). Soon, a friend and I wrote a 12-minute show about my newly minted and boozy clown character “Sazerac,” his bitter friend “Peychaud,” and a Ringmaster. It was wholly based on my quip that the 99-cent store put the dollar store out of business.

While the obsession remained, events intervened. I bought a house, got a new job. And then my mother got sick. So I moved back to San Francisco to take care of her in her final weeks. During the day, I would make her meals and take her to chemo, and at night I taught myself to play the ukulele. After nursing my dying mother, I would pick up my little guitar and play Jazz Age novelties, such as “Crazy Words, Crazy Tune,” or “My Little Bimbo Down on The Bamboo Isle” without much reflection, unconscious of the silly brand of painkiller I was administering to myself. It was only after my mother’s passing that I recalled the words of theatre critic John Lahr (his father Bert, one of the great American clowns). In an interview for the *Vaudeville* documentary that had so impressed me, he said: “A lot of people say that what the Vaudevillians did was just frivolity, but what is frivolity but the species' refusal to suffer?”

The essays that follow are in the spirit of Lahr’s philosophical question. The entertainers who peopled the Vaudeville stage and those who filled the ranks of the great American circus in its heyday were cut from the same cloth. (Indeed, many of these entertainers took turns on the Vaudeville circuit *and* under the big top in the course of their careers.) Their job, always, was to delight, to make laughter, and to turn people’s minds, for a few hours, from the pain and the humdrum. And yet these performers--human and animal--could not escape the hardscrabble, the sundered relations, the violence of everyday life. It is both their suffering and their refusal to

suffer that have fascinated me. And as you will see, they have inspired my own forays into the business of frivolity.

In tribute to them, I have decided to present this collection in three rings. In the first, I focus on clowning, both professional and amateur. As to the former, I offer “Chalk Face,” an attempt to briefly revivify “Frank “Slivers” Oakley, a turn-of-the-century sawdust revolutionary who changed the nature of American clowning before taking his own life in 1916. As for the latter, I take the stage. “Three Martinis and a Microphone,” is a bit of clowning on the notion of the personal essay wherein I recount the production of an episode of my late, lamented radio program “The Felicity Street Circus of the Air.” In “The Head Man,” I recall some (perhaps ill-advised) public clowning on a train trip from Switzerland to France.

The “walk-around,” in circus parlance, is when the clowns are loosed upon the audience to perform small, intimate gags while circus apparatus are being set-up or struck in the rings. Here, I use that idea to offer some shorter and personal pieces. The first such interlude is comprised of two New York stories that (quite incidentally) pay homage to the “King of Swing.” In the first, “Benny Goodman, or Song of Myself,” I use an Allen Ginsberg quote as a starting point in a discussion of my performance at the New York Ukulele Festival, accompanied by two professional musicians far outside my league, one of whom played in the Goodman orchestra as a young man. And in “Schmaltz it!” I recount a night spent in the thrall of octagenarian clarinetist (and arch Benny Goodman imitator) Sol Yaged.

The research that accompanied the production of my radio show--the desperate search for authentic storylines--revealed a recurring tale. Reading old circus biographies, inevitably the old sawdust veteran, recalling his or her days under canvas, would include a fanciful story of an elephant on the show, a big tusker, who had “gone rogue.” After an incident, tearing down the

menagerie tent, say, or killing the trainer, the problem elephant would have to be “dealt with,” and for the elephant it usually wasn't a good hand. That hand seemed to play out in one of three ways: 1) the elephant would be renamed (“Is that the killer elephant?” “No, that was Teddy, this here is Eddy”), 2) the offender would be sold to a Mexican circus, or 3) the elephant would be dispatched in some frightening manner. This, too, the execution of circus elephants, became an obsession. Here I include two examples. In the first, I use articles from *The New York Times* as a basis for a discussion of the death of Tip, a one time circus star turned Central Park scourge. In “Kenedy, Texas, October 1929,” I detail the last days of Black Diamond, a star of the Al G. Barnes Circus whose killing of a bystander during a parade in 1929, and subsequent execution, proved the virtual end of male elephants on the circus.

The second “walk-around” centers on small moments that passed during the same European trip recounted in “The Head Man.” “Satchmo's Mystery Menu” is a comic story about the vagaries of cross-cultural communication, while “Paris,” a so-called “short-short,” describes a moment where no communication can be made.

In Ring Three, I continue my attempts to excavate and animate forgotten American variety entertainers. In “Lemon Nash Sings the Blues,” I contemplate a forgotten New Orleans musician after listening to nine hours of recorded interviews at the Tulane Jazz Archive. “I Like (Ukulele) Ike,” is a profile detailing the life and career of Cliff Edwards, once a Jazz Age icon, later the voice of “Jiminy Cricket” and finally a penniless welfare case, forgotten and alone. The final entry in Ring Three, “Cliff Edwards: The Tower Transcriptions,” takes a close look and listen to Ukulele Ike's last great recordings, from 1944.

I end with two pieces on the changing nature of the American circus. In “Circus Square” I explore a footnote of New Orleans’ past in light of a recent, weeklong run of the “circus of the

future” outside the French Quarter. The phrase “All Out and Over,” is a circus term of art meaning the performance has ended, and the tent is empty. I use that phrase as the title of my final essay here, an elegy for the tented circus, an American institution in its twilight.

Taken as a whole, “Variety” offers a glimpse into the sort of frivolity I hold dear, so that the reader might find some wonder in a pantomimed ball game or a dose of antediluvian Vaudeville humor. At the same time, I trust the reader will find some insight into the significance of that seemingly insignificant thing--a clown, reading a map, on an elephant, under the big top, or what passes for such at the beginning of the twenty-first century.

## Ring One/ Clowns



## Chalk Face

On March 9, 1916, an item in the *New York Times* headlined "Slivers, Clown Suicide for a Girl" detailed the squalid end of Frank Oakley, the most famous American circus clown of the early twentieth-century. He had sealed his windows with bath towels at 308 West 71<sup>st</sup> Street in Manhattan and turned on the gas. A few years earlier, the *Times* had lavished praise on Oakley, deeming him in one fawning feature "Laugh Maker in Chief to the American People by Popular Acclimation." While the subheading in the news item about his death refers to Oakley as the "Man Who Amused Millions" there is scant mention of his sawdust triumphs, of "The Ball Game" or his famed "Lobster Walk-around." Rather, the focus was on Oakley's descent, a pathetic and familiar tale of sex, theft, alcohol, and loneliness.

Frank Oakley was one of the most influential figures in the transformation--the invention, really --of an American style of clowning, a move away from the European tradition of the talking clown that was suited to the intimate confines of the one-ring circus, and a move toward the outsized pantomime and grandiose slapstick necessary to entertain thousands in three rings under a vast canvas big top. And he was paid handsomely for his pratfalls and "panto," making \$1,000 a week, while other top circus clowns made less than \$100.00. Such was Oakley's talent and reach that no less an authority on the art of comedy than the great silent film clown Buster Keaton, in 1948, counted Oakley one of the three greatest comedians of all-time. But Oakley's legacy in the development of the American circus was overwhelmed by Keaton's chosen medium, the motion picture. Today, while other pioneering circus clowns such as Emmett Kelly or Lou Jacobs are still on occasion able, whether by name or by look, to muster some vague recognition, Frank "Slivers" Oakley is largely forgotten.

You can find a picture of Oakley in a recent compendium of circus photographs taken by F.W. Glaser between 1901 and 1927. Flip past the photo of an elephant receiving a pedicure while perched atop two wooden half-barrels (a true testament to the cooper's art), and past a picture of the famous pinhead "Zip, the What-is-it?" playing the violin at the entrance to Barnum's "Congress of Freaks," and there's Slivers, once known far-and-wide as "America's greatest chalk-face comedian."

Glaser took the photo on the Barnum and Bailey circus lot in 1903, at the beginning of Oakley's ascent. The big top looms close behind, its sidewall canvas sagging from the quarter poles. Oakley's greasepaint is standard clown white, with Harlequinade diamonds over the eyes. We can guess that his exaggerated mouth, and the triangular shape on his nose are red. His shirt is a collarless number, its front filigreed with the braid of a bandsman, while his pants are a gleaming white and heavily starched. The outer seams of each pant-leg curve in a sort of wild crescent, his lower extremities suggesting an empty parentheses. Finally, his shoes are in the shape of huge and exaggerated bare feet.

In the photo, Slivers holds his hand to his ear as if to hear something. His dirty palm (the remains of greasepaint or the result of a bout of rousting?) faces the camera. In his left arm, he cradles the handle of a bucket. His expression is deadpan, however, and his stony mien suggests that Oakley is wholly unaware that he is about to be hit with a cane wielded by fellow clown Alex Seabert. Seabert sits precariously on the back end of a mule. His curly shoulder-length wig (obscuring much of his face) and his outsize putty-nose are in the tradition of the grotesque. He's wearing a tutu of the sort that might be worn by a lithe funambulist, his muscular calves sheathed in white tights. In the left corner appear the words "Oakley and Seabert" in an ornate

hand, but there is no record as to whether this is perhaps the penultimate moment of their act, preceding a roaring "blow-off."

Oakley, a reedy Swede, was born in 1871, and by the time he appeared in this photograph, he was a bright star in Barnum and Bailey's "Greatest Show on Earth." This in an era when being a "star" of the circus meant something, when the great traveling tent cities -- Barnum and Bailey, Ringling Brothers, the Great Forepaugh Shows-- were at the center of America's cultural life. In his prime, Oakley performed for 20,000 people a day. And in that first decade of the twentieth century, when the circus still held sway, the sawdust spectacle perhaps most revered was Oakley's pantomimed baseball game. All the rings in the massive tent stood empty to make way for a lone and silent rail of a man, a "Sliver," acting out a scene from the nation's pastime. The "Ball Game" act was so popular that the sheet music to the tune that accompanied the performance, "Slivers: Rag Eccentric," was for sale at shops across the country.

Few other artifacts remain to attest to Oakley's facility under canvas. There are a scattering of photos, cartoon renderings, and newspaper clippings. A thumbnail description of Oakley's "Ball Game" survives in a Detroit obituary, and the routine seems to have been wholly based on exploring Americans' hatred of umpires. After setting up a diamond in center ring, Slivers acts out the great cry of the American sports fan -- "Kill the Umpire!"-- in a jaunty panto.

At the start of the routine, according to the Detroit writer, Oakley emerged as a catcher, with his "bird cage" mask and heavily padded mitt. He popped his fist in the glove a few times and set up, crouching behind the plate. He feigned receiving a pitch, and then in the midst of the motion of tossing the horsehide back to his battery-mate he suddenly wheeled to argue the call with the imaginary ump, throwing off the mask, gesticulating wildly and jawing with his adversary. Later, he took a turn at bat, and, after working the count full, "hit" one in the gap, but

was thrown out trying "to stretch a three-bagger into a home run." Another rhubarb with the umpire ensued. By all accounts, at this point the crowd watching Slivers was delirious. One circus memoir of the period references the need for extra medical personnel because so many in the audience were passing out from laughter. "The entire act was in pantomime," the writer states. "No one but Oakley was on the stage. But so realistic was every move and gesture, so convincing, that he never failed to carry the house."

There is no film of Slivers performing the "Ball Game" routine, but considering Buster Keaton's comments about Oakley, it's not hard to conclude that the masterful solo baseball interlude in Keaton's classic 1928 film "The Cameraman," replete with threatening gestures, crazed pratfalls, and pick-off plays, is an homage to Oakley. With the aid of that cinematic paean, the press clippings, and the photos of the stained and billowing tents laid out on the scruffy lots where Slivers performed -- the gilded cage wagons with their exotic cargo of giraffes and hippopotami, the elegant equestriennes, the army of clowns -- we can try to put Oakley inside, put him under canvas, and imagine what it might have been like in mid-summer, in Omaha or French Lick, around the turn of the century, the "Circus Age," when whole towns would shut down for the arrival of the big show. The heat amplifying the heady smells of elephant dung and sawdust, the din of the crowd, peppered with the cries of candy butchers- "Cracker Jack . . . Lemonade." Anticipation, the floor of the big top empty, and then release as the band, forty men strong, plays the first strain of his spry namesake rag. Here comes Slivers "the only clown in the circus history for whom the three rings were ever cleared." Thousands of faces focus on the silent figure in the center of the big top. "Hardly human is Slivers," a Detroit newsman writes, "He is, rather, a vitilized caracture [sic]; a Sunday comic supplement character, life-sized and animated; he endures blows, buffets, kicks, falls without a sound. The children,

and at a circus everyone should be a child, watch him with rapture." They have probably all been waiting for this day, circus day, and this moment. Slivers Oakley, the clown pictured on the heralds that have been pasted all over the town for weeks. Peals of laughter. Surprise. Like that of a young Studs Terkel who said of the sight of the vaudeville clown A. Robin, "the Banana Man," on the stage of the Palace Theatre in Chicago: "Me flesh and blood, him on the stage flesh and blood, ecce homo, behold the man."

In 1907, his last season with Barnum and Bailey, Slivers was at the height of his popularity and fame, but according to an interview he gave the *Times* in March of that year, that height didn't bring happiness. The headline read "Mr. Slivers on the Serious Business of Being a Clown," and right below, a subheading: "There are Bruises and Hurts and Moments of Mental Anguish, But the Public Laughs at Them All and Wants the Clown to be Funny in Private Life as Well." In the article, Oakley describes a multitude of indignities suffered at the hands of children of all ages: "It's funny how people can't understand that we clowns are fellow human animals with just about the same outfit of feelings that the rest of 'em have." And later, "I'm afraid I'm a social failure."

Professionally, however, he was at his peak. After studying the audiences in the large theatrical palaces of New York, Oakley, at the end of the 1907 season, left the circus and translated his act from center ring to center stage. And for a while he was a success. Although a mere speck on the grand expanse of stage of the New York Hippodrome, he was able again to "carry the house."

But things didn't go as planned. He was married, but soon divorced. Then the story becomes sordid. He played the vaudeville circuit and took to drinking. For a time he bummed

around Detroit and "during a spree he got in a row." When the police were called, and he told them that he was the famous clown Slivers, the *Detroit Free Press* reported that they "were not impressed in the least."

And then in Utica, New York in 1913, came the beginning of the end. At a vaudeville house he met Viola Stoll, seventeen, a young "hooper." Oakley was forty-two. Stoll was a kid down on her luck. The show business wasn't working out for her, so she set up house with Slivers in Manhattan. He showered her with jewels, \$4,000 worth that he had bought for his ex-wife. *The Times* explained that after a few weeks she felt "a revulsion" towards the older man. She took a train to St. Louis, with the jewels, and Oakley had her arrested. She was sentenced to three years in the reformatory.

But Oakley never stopped pining for young Stoll. Six months before her scheduled release he sought out her mother. He had a message for Viola: he wanted to marry her, to make an honest woman out of her. The mother relayed the message, but two-and-a-half years of confinement had changed Viola Stoll. She wanted no more of the stage and even less of Oakley. She found the prospect of life with a "traveling clown" unappealing. She wanted to be a dressmaker. He didn't take the news well. And then the headline, "Slivers, Clown Suicide for a Girl."

While the *Times* focused on the tawdry intrigue in its report on the suicide, an uncredited writer for the *Detroit Free Press* composed a sort of elegy to Oakley, detailing his many triumphs including a long loving paean to "The Ball Game," before more thoughtfully noting his troubled end: "Shattered by whisky, penniless...America's greatest chalk-faced comedian finished his act in tragedy. For years, Slivers' salary was close to \$1,000 a week. Night before

last he tried to borrow a quarter and failed. And so he who was the peer of clowns passed unknown and in poverty, and an art went out with him."

After 1925, Oakley's name, at one time among the best known in show business, didn't appear in the pages of the *Times* again until 2004. On October 17 of that year, an article in the Real Estate section reported the opening of the 300 block of West 71<sup>st</sup> Street, which since the turn of the century had been a dead end. It remains so for Slivers Oakley and his legacy, both a literal and figurative one. While the article, in discussing Oakley and the site of his death, details the Stoll affair and the suicide, there is no mention of his importance or renown, merely that he was "known as Slivers the clown and toured with the Barnum and Bailey circus." An art went out with him, indeed.

### Three Martinis and a Microphone

On a recent Thursday evening, Jon Pult, the comedy ukulelist and pie-eyed radio personality, is sitting at the end of the bar at Rene Bistrot, the popular Common Street restaurant in New Orleans' Central Business District. Dressed sharply in a navy pinstripe suit and a crisp white open-collared shirt, he takes short and nervous pulls on a cigarette while intently watching Marie, the black-clad bartender, pile a ridiculous number of olives onto a dish in front of him. "Oh, yes. The Sazerac salad," Pult says, sneaking one of the pimento stuffed queens from the plate, "but what I really like is the dressing -- *gin and vermouth!*"

The salad reference is to Pult's broadcast alter ego, Sazerac, the harmless if dipsomaniac clown who inhabits the Bakelite Radio Theatre's "Felicity Street Circus of the Air" each Sunday on WTIK 690AM, strumming his ukulele and stirring up trouble on the fictional circus back lot in between visits to the Big Top Lounge. Pult's radio work, combined with his many personal appearances on the ukulele, is a sort of naïve vaudeville fantasy made strangely real. "I am probably the top amateur comedy ukulelist in New Orleans," he says with misplaced pride while chewing on the olive, "as well as the top AM radio clown."

Pult turns his attention back to the bar where Marie pours a healthy amount of liquor into his glass and then artfully composes the cocktail, laying a flat plastic stirrer across the top, skewering three of the olives from the plate and then balancing them across the rim of the glass. "There you go, honey," she says.

Now comfortably sipping on a martini, Pult, who is loquacious by nature but especially so at the cocktail hour, tries out some new comedy material gleaned from a batch of humor pamphlets from the nineteen teens and twenties he received by post earlier that afternoon, their



colorful covers promising “Choice Vaudeville Gags” and “Snappy, Crisp Jokes.” Scanning their yellowed and fragile pages he picks out a one-liner, at random, and rephrases it for the present context. “I’m crazy about the bartender,” Pult says, his arms and body moving with the outsized gestures of an earlier comedic age, “but she is always ignoring me.” He pauses, places a hand over his heart and dramatically delivers the hoary punch line, “*It was love at first slight.*” There is much eye rolling among the regular crowd, and for a moment they are charmed. But Pult, dispensing humor without restraint, as is his wont, continues. By the fifth joke -- “You’ve heard about the jockey who didn’t make weight...he was putting *a la carte before the horse*” – the crowd seems thankful that they can steel themselves with another two-dollar Gibson.

Suddenly, and to the relief of many, something interrupts Pult’s routine. “Oh, no!” he says, assuming the panicked voice of his radio character, “The Ringmaster!”

Chris O’Neill, thin and lanky, and wearing his prized camel hair coat (purchased, he will tell you at every opportunity, for a song when the local Lord and Taylor’s closed), strides to the bar and nearing Pult says, in the authoritarian tone of the circus’s Equestrian Director, “Sazerac, are you drinking...*again!*”

O’Neill is Pult’s partner in “The Bakelite Radio Theatre,” and Thursday is the night the duo record the show. The process always starts with what they call a “script meeting,” and although the plot will be discussed, usually in the ear of a disinterested bar patron, the Thursday meeting is more an excuse for the pair to avail themselves of René Bistrot’s “l’heure joyeuse” martinis. They loosen themselves up for their impending spell in front of the microphone.

“Marie, feed Chris’s creative spirit, will you please,” Pult says, and the bartender responds by not only pouring a martini for O’Neill, but also topping Pult’s off.

“Oh thank you, Marie,” he says, “you are a true patron of the arts!”

The Bakelite Radio Theatre is an extension of the pair's "Felicity Street Circus Show," the first performance of which was presented at the Contemporary Arts Center as part of its annual "Dramarama" in 1998. Their fifteen-minute vaudevillian skit was entitled "Peychaud's Shopping Trip" and was based on the premise that the 99 Cents Shop put the Dollar Store out of business. While Sazzie had spent his money at the Dollar Store, Peychaud had bought the same items (swizzle sticks, martini glasses) from its competitor. Performed in Spanish (*Senor Ringmaster!*) for comic effect, "Peychaud's Shopping Trip" moved *Gambit Weekly* theatre critic Dalt Wonk to call the pair "creators of a daft little world." After a five-year hiatus, the act returned in 2003 with the "Circus of the Air."

At the bar, O'Neill rummages through his backpack and pulls out an old and frayed book. Its cover, still a brilliant red after more than eighty years, features an illustration of an impish, curvy soubrette. "Oh, yeah. *McNally's Bulletin number 10*," he says, waving the vintage compendium of comedy monologues, sketches, and parodies in the air. McNally's was one of many such serials published throughout the teens and twenties for use by comedy troupers from coast to coast.

O'Neill rustles through the pages and says, "Here we go, 'Monobits for the monologist'" and then, in a voice more Catskills than Vaudeville, begins to read: "To have a house like Jack built – *save your Jack!*" He takes a slug from the martini and then tries another, "Jon, here's one for you. 'They say peace is right around the corner, but I don't buy it. I just saw an ad offering ukuleles *on the installment plan!*'" He finishes his drink and hands the book to Pult. "Another year's worth of material right there," O'Neill says, and then catches Marie's eye and points out the empty glasses.

The humor pamphlets and bulletins are all part of the raw material that informs the Bakelite Radio Theatre. Old movies, like the *Thin Man* series with William Powell and Myrna Loy or the films of the forgotten comedy team Wheeler and Woolsey, combined with Pult and O'Neill's broad knowledge of and delight in the popular culture from the 1890s through the 1930s, are prime sources of inspiration and find their way into the weekly mayhem.

“We have done more than 60 shows so far,” Pult says, now working on his third martini. “I like to think that the Bakelite Radio Theatre can be seen as a sort of wide-ranging homage to the forgotten American entertainer.”

If one had never listened to the show, it would be easy to dismiss that statement as mere gin-soaked hyperbole. Yet the “Felicity Street Circus of the Air” is a great fount of oddball references. Where else might one hear a character referred to as “a young Eugene Sandow,” alluding to the famed turn-of-the-century strongman, or a speeding Indian cab driver described as “the Hindu Barney Oldfield,” in honor of America’s first auto-racing hero? And then there are the crooners. A continuous story line concerns Sazerac’s fruitless attempts to convince the Ringmaster to allow him to pay center-ring tribute to the likes of Gene Austin and Seeger Ellis, Russ Colombo and Whispering Jack Smith.

“Marie, the dawn is breaking,” Pult croons. “Marie, you’ll soon be waking. To find your heart is aching, and tears will fall as you recall. . . .” After three martinis Pult has immersed himself into character and begins his own sort of tribute, crooning to the bartender the Irving Berlin tune that bears her name. She has heard it many times before and recognizes the off-key rendering as a harbinger of Pult and O’Neill’s exit.

“Here’s the bill, baby,” she says.

“Whoa, \$4.54,” Pult says passing it to O’Neill. “Tell 1926 jokes, pay 1926 prices!”

A little later, after a stop in a local Japanese Restaurant for something to help soak up the gin, they arrive at O’Neill’s apartment in the French Quarter, which they have fondly dubbed the “Governor Nichols Street Studios.” Now drinking a sliver of Lord Calvert in honor of radio legend and famous tippler Phil Harris from a glass that says “Sazerac” pinched from the Fairmont Hotel, Pult declares, “I’m all Sazzified,” and they are ready to begin the session. It takes the pair a while to choreograph this eccentric ballet. Scripts in hand, they hover and pace around a microphone that has been fitted with a 1920s megaphone, much like that used by the crooner Rudy Vallee. The apparatus gives the recording an echoey, old-time feel. They must get the timing right, not only of the jokes, but also the spacing for the sound effects, and the entrances and exits of characters. Since they both voice at least two characters each shown -- O’Neill portrays both the Ringmaster as well as Sazzie’s trusty sidekick and bitter friend Peychaud while Pult doubles as Sazerac and show announcer William McKenzie -- they also have to plot out their physical movements.

Tonight they are recording the ninth and final episode of a storyline that has dragged on for more than two months, “Sazzie Brings ‘Em Back Alive!” The story pays small tribute to Frank Buck, the popular big game hunter whose films and books detailing his battles with exotic animals around the globe made him a household name in the 1930s. In the Bakelite homage, a lion – Brutus, the Man Eater -- has escaped from the circus menagerie and for the last eight episodes has been loosed upon the nameless town where the circus seems to be in permanent residence. Brutus has finally been cornered in the back of a butcher’s shop, and the script calls for Peychaud to fill his pith helmet with a bottle of gin, which Sazzie had secreted in a knapsack for himself. Peychaud, however, decides to subdue Brutus—surely thirsty from his incessant roaring and “eating all that meat” —with Sazzie’s stash.

“Wait,” O’Neill says, interrupting the final run-through before they commit the show to tape, “there’s no re-blocking joke!” He is referring to another of the shows recurring gags, this one about the Ringmaster’s fastidiousness regarding his top hat.

The reference duly inserted, Pult sets the level on the inexpensive four-track cassette machine, presses record and “take one” begins with Pult as the voice of announcer William McKenzie, generic radio man:

“In 5,4,3,2,1. When we left off on our last program Sazerac had been left alone to contain a lion.”

They move through the thirteen-page script in about nine minutes. After the third take, O’Neill asks, “You got enough?” Pult decides that he does, so they then make a list of the necessary sound effects. Pult produces the show at home in the “Annunciation Street Studios,” where he splices in the sounds: lion roars, Model-T horns, harp glissandos, and most important, laugh tracks.

“The crowd always loves the show,” he says.

“Give me a minute, Buster, just give me a minute,” Pult says while using his elbow to keep back a medium-sized dog of indeterminate breed. (“He has mastered a sad, blank stare, so I tell folks he’s a Keaton terrier,” Pult says, referencing the dog’s namesake). It is Friday evening on Annunciation Street and Pult, feeling the effects of the previous night’s martinis, is trying his best to position a microphone next to a ceramic bowl marked “DOG.” He is preparing to record Buster’s radio debut, delineating the role of “Brutus, the Man Eater” drinking gin. In a fortuitous twist Buster has just been released from a five-day stay at the Magazine Street Animal Clinic after a bout of pancreatitis. When Pult went to pick the dog up, the vet told him that although

they had been giving Buster intravenous fluids for five days, he is going to be unbelievably thirsty because he hasn't had anything to drink. Pult said that would be perfect.

In his recording room, Pult puts on the headphones and cues the tape. First he must put in the pouring–the-gin-into-the-pith-helmet sound effect. He presses the “record” button and pours water into the bowl, all the while keeping the parched and panting dog at bay with his free hand. In the show that effect is accompanied by Sazerac, in a high pitched whine pleading, “No! Peychaud, that’s *GILBEY’S!*”

Pult then fast-forwards the tape to Peychaud’s line: “Look Sazzie, I think he’s going to drink it,” presses “record” and lets go of the collar. Buster laps furiously, right on cue.

“On the first take! A triumph of the canine spirit!” Pult yells to his wife who is somewhere in the house. Molly, a mild-mannered professor of history at the University of New Orleans, responds with a distant “What?”

Coming down the stairs, Pult continues, “He nailed it, sweetie, it was perfect.”

“Are you finished, then?” she says.

Sunday morning Pult delivers the completed tape to George Buck at the French Quarter Studios of WTIK on French Market Place. Buck hosts the weekly “Golden Era of Radio” program each Sunday from Noon to 2 p.m., offering an odd assortment of programs that originally aired between the early 1930s and mid 1950s. There is “The Jack Benny Show,” “The Great Gildersleeve,” “Inner Sanctum” and “Escape.” Tucked in between, at around 1:15, is Pult and O’Neill’s “Bakelite Radio Theatre.”

“I have some bad news,” Buck says over the air. “Usually the Sazerac at the Circus program is hand delivered around noon.” There is a pregnant pause. “The bad news is that it

was.” Pleased with himself, Buck continues. “Here it is, the ninth and final episode, thank goodness, of ‘Sazzie Brings ‘em Back Alive.’”

Pult, as William McKenzie, introduces the program to the familiar strains of “Mosquito’s Parade,” the show’s theme song. “The Bakelite Radio Theatre presents the Felicity Street Circus of the Air!” The spliced-in audience cheers. Over the next nine minutes, as Sazerac and Peychud go through their paces, there is a constant audience giggle. Barely humorous *bon mots* are met with gale force eruptions of laughter and huzzahs. It is all chaotic and bewildering.

As Sazerac ends the show with a fanciful flourish on his ukulele, the canned audience goes wild. There is a big and brassy “tada.”

McKenzie shouts, “Another successful Bakelite Radio Theatre production!” Then, as the applause fades, he reminds his listeners to tune in next week “for another edition of the Felicity Street Circus of the Air.”

## The Head Man

The train was somewhere between the Ticino, where Switzerland shares a border with Italy, and Paris. Paris is in France.

I was hung over. I had spent the previous night in the small town of Ascona, on the Swiss side, at the Elvezia Hotel's restaurant, listening to a sort of ghostly jam session. About fifteen musicians, mostly American, played in the dark, the small stage illuminated only by moonlight streaming in through the large glass windows that faced the town's lake-front plaza. The musicians all had an early bus to Zurich, so instead of sleeping they played. Until sun-up. I availed myself of a variety of free drinks and barely had time to catch the 7:15.

The train car was choked with smoke. I was surrounded by old Swiss men smoking Parisienne brand cigarettes, non-filtered, one after another. They clutched the crumpled yellow packs in their hands so as to be sure they had the next link in the chain at the ready. I had decided to join them.

In my debilitated state, I took little notice of the five Swiss government agents when they fanned out among the passengers in the train car. I still had the tune "Crazy 'Bout My Baby," the rousing *finale* at the jam session, careening through the haze in my head:

*I'm the world's most happy creature, tell me, what can worry me?  
I'm crazy 'bout my baby, and my baby, she's crazy 'bout me!*

They were young, these agents, and stout. They wore yellow windbreakers emblazoned with some official insignia. One of them seemed to be in control. He was the head man. His hair was cropped close, and he gave orders to the others in a low voice. Then he approached various passengers, engaging them in short conversations. He was stone-faced, this fellow. All business.



When he reached me, he leaned in close and said something I didn't understand. It was in German, one of the three Official Languages of Switzerland, along with French and Italian, but for my purposes all "Greek." I shrugged, shook my head and said, "Um, English?"

"Do you visit Switzerland for business or pleasure?" he said in a curt and vaguely sinister manner. As I said, I hadn't really been paying attention, and I mulled over the question because although I found myself in Switzerland in a quasi-official capacity, as a journalist, I had been having what can only be described as "a ball." Finally, I said "I guess, business, yeah, business."

"And what is your business?" he said.

"I'm a writer," I said, making a sort of international scribble gesture. "I was covering the New Orleans Jazz Festival in Ascona."

"Ascona? Passport, please." I handed it over, and he took it to a group of his comrades. He fingered through it briefly and then barked out an order in German. The train came to a sudden halt. The old men in the car looked slightly perturbed by this turn of events and glanced at their watches (it was Switzerland after all) and then lit another round of cigarettes.

This was in July of 2002, and it was my first trip to Europe. For eleven days, I was surrounded by friends from New Orleans—musicians and Jazz fans—and it was much like being at home. Because I knew nearly everyone in Ascona, being in Switzerland had seemed strangely ordinary. After eleven days, this train trip was the first experience that felt the least bit "foreign," and mostly because everyone was smoking. On the train.

"How long in Switzerland, Herr Pult," the head man said. He called me "Herr Pult." It occurred to me that I was hearing my surname in its original German pronunciation. I come from a long line of Herr Pults.

“Eleven days,” I said.

“We are Customs,” he said. “We are going to need to see your baggage.”

“Sure,” I said, nonchalantly. “Have at it.” I gestured toward my bags, stored above one of the old smokers. All five of the Yellow Jackets were suddenly swarming around me. The head man said, “You will take them down.”

When I got to my feet, the head man leaned in and whispered in my ear. “I don’t think you understand, Herr Pult, we are *Customs*. Do you get it?” This time his voice was downright sinister. There was nothing vague about it. I shook my head. I didn’t get it. Then he leaned in again and said in an even more sinister whisper, so close that I could feel his breath on my earlobe, “*The Drug Police.*”

What a relief!

Liquor has always been my drug of choice. For me it’s either Champagne, Martinis, or Canadian Club, all part of my of my Hot Jazz delusion, where any barroom, and even my kitchen table, is transformed, in my mind’s eye, into a roaring twenties speakeasy. After eleven days in Ascona, where they start uncorking the Prosecco before noon, well I was pretty sure Prohibition was not in effect. If he had smelled my breath, still redolent of the gratis cocktails at the Elvezia, he would have realized his mistake.

“Please, the briefcase,” he said, and I reached up and pulled it down, a handsome and roomy black leather affair. “Open it,” he said, and I complied. One of his lieutenants pulled out my laptop computer, gave it a cursory look, then grabbed a sheaf of papers, and handed them to the head man who began rifling through them. The head man then decided to make some inquiries.

“What is this?” he said.

“Let me see. Well, that’s a hotel bill,” I said. “It was a tiny room, but as you can see, I only paid for incidentals. Totally free room! *And* I got meal vouchers! And that there,” I said, pointing to what the head man was now holding, “that’s Roy Smeck’s Ukulele Method. I was practicing, in my hotel room in fact.”

I said this while making the International Gesture of Ukulele Strumming, much to the amusement of the other passengers. I turned to one of the hovering Yellow Jackets and said, “You know, in the 1920s, in vaudeville, Roy Smeck was known as the ‘Wizard of the Strings.’”

He would have been amused if he spoke English.

“Open this here,” the head man said, and I unzipped an interior pocket. He pulled out a small package, opened it and unwrapped a small square of tile depicting two dogs and the words “*Attenti Al Cani.*”

“My one keepsake of the Ticino,” I said. Perhaps they were aware of my proclivity towards *tchotchke*, and the absence of an Ascona Snow Globe or Ticino toothpick holder had aroused suspicion.

He unbuckled another section of my briefcase and pulled out a stack of business cards and started riffling them like a magician. He pulled one out. “Who is this?”

“Lino Patrino, the Italian Eddie Condon,” I said.

“And this?” asked the head man. He was fanning the stack like a deck of cards.

“Butch Thompson, the piano player. He’s very big on public radio in the States. *Prairie Home Companion?*”

“And this?”

“Tommy Sancton. From New Orleans originally, plays the clarinet in the George Lewis manner. He was the Paris Bureau Chief for *Time Magazine.*”

“And this one?” he said, dealing a slightly oversized card with an old woodcut of a guitarist and the words “Put Jazz Back In Saloons.”

“Marty Grosz, the star of the festival. I saw all twelve of his performances.”

This was getting to be fun, and I could have gone through the whole stack, but the head man noticed that some of his deputies were starting to enjoy my antics. He abruptly stopped.

Then the head man started smelling cigarette packs. You see, I love novelty, so while in Ascona I bought every brand of cigarette that I could find. There were the aforementioned Parissiennes, and Marylands, Swiss-made Chesterfield’s in four strengths, cork-tipped Marlboro Lights. I had all of these brands in partly smoked packs, and the head man was sniffing every one. And I thought, “Sniff away, head man, sniff to your heart's content. If you only knew how absurd this affair is. You will find nothing.”

“The next piece, please,” the head man said.

I handed him a medium-sized duffel bag. “Knock yourself out.”

After the bag was unzipped, one of his stooges took out my banjo-ukulele. It is an odd 1920s model with “F” holes on the back for decorative purposes only. He held it at every angle to see if I had secreted anything inside.

“See the cartoon and signature?” I said, pointing to a small illustration and inscription that had been recently applied to the calf-skin head. “It’s by Marty Grosz, you saw his business card! You know, his father Georg was one of the founders of Dada.”

The head man was angry, and while one fellow searched the duffel, he asked me to bring out the suitcase. The big one. I brought it down from the overhead rack. “Open it,” he said.

This was getting to be a bit much, but remaining in a light-hearted mood, or perhaps unbelieving, I said, “You might want to stand back. I was in Ascona for eleven days, and I never found a laundry. It might be a little *ripe*, if you get me.”

The head man was not amused.

Did I mention that they had stopped the train? That the Swiss rail system had been brought to a halt in order to find drugs on me? This was a very rich moment in my life. As I said, except for the occasional bender, I’m about as straight as they come. I often listen to circus music.

While one of the agents continued to pick through my duffel, another set about my clothing. The head man was lording over this scene and suddenly seemed to find something very curious. There was some Germanic banter and much finger pointing which led to the fellow in the suitcase holding up one of my sneakers. The head man made a command, and the other lifted heaps of what was once my wardrobe, but could now be only fairly described as my laundry, and then shrugged his shoulders. He handed the shoe to the head man.

“Herr Pult,” he said, brandishing the sneaker dramatically, “why only one shoe? Where is the other shoe?”

The head man believed he had found an opening. His promotion was almost secure. He believed he had something on an American who often wore a clip-on bow-tie and, in fits and starts, followed the *Charles Atlas Program for Everlasting Health, Strength and Personal Magnetism*.

“Well, sir, see I left this jam session, jeez it was after six in the morning and, well, my packing was a little haphazard. You might check the duffel bag.”

When I said this, one of the head man's deputies could barely contain his laughter. He was giggling and then turned away, covering his mouth.

The fellow in my duffel bag said, "Here is the other."

The one giggling excused himself to the next car.

The head man was not pleased. He had been thwarted. The shoe theory was a bust. He began to feel his command slipping away. Mutiny was almost at hand. So he angrily ordered his deputies to examine every single personal effect in my suitcase. They inspected each fetid sock, every soiled shirt. I felt sorry for them. My clothes so reeked of stale cigarette smoke that, if it weren't for the fact that every other passenger on the train was smoking, thereby causing the car to reek of cigarette smoke, the car would have reeked of stale cigarette smoke.

They found nothing.

"Your wallet, take out your wallet," the head man said. I obliged. "How many Swiss Francs?"

"Sixty-eight" I said.

"And Euros?"

"They only used the Swiss Francs in Ascona."

"Your credit cards." The head man was nothing if not thorough.

"This one here is connected to my checking account," I said, flashing my blue BankOne Check Card, and making the international gesture for Automatic Teller Machine.

"How much money in your account?" he asked.

"About three-thousand U.S." I said.

"Any other credit cards, Herr Pult?" he asked.

“Well this one, it’s what we call in America ‘maxed out,’” I said. “So it and 10 francs will get you a grappa at the Bar Lago, if you know what I mean.”

Another deputy let out a muffled laugh and disappeared.

The remaining agents chatted among themselves for a moment, and the head man made a gesture for them to repack my belongings. It took them a while, and they had to use their jack-boots to apply enough pressure to re-zip the suitcase. It was nice of them.

“Your luggage, Herr Pult,” the head man said, waving his hand over the bags. ”Enjoy your stay in Switzerland.”

“France,” I said as the head man turned to leave the car, anxious to be rid of me. “I’m going to France.”

## **A Manhattan Walk-around**



## Benny Goodman or Song of Myself

When I was in college in the late 1980s in California, I remember, vaguely, having to watch a documentary about Walt Whitman. What I recall of it, what has stuck in my mind since then, is a scene featuring the poet Allen Ginsberg. He is sitting cross-legged on some New York rooftop saying something to the effect that he had “slept with a guy, who slept with a guy who slept with a guy who slept with Walt Whitman.” And then he ended by saying: “So in some sense I’ve slept with Walt Whitman.”

It’s not an exact quote, but this was the general idea. And I always thought it outrageously funny; something about the combination of Ginsberg's voice delivering this absurd theory has remained with me as a compelling, yet distinctly irreverent way of describing one's connection (or lack thereof) to artistic greatness.

In April of 2006 I found myself on a New York rooftop, the Chelsea Inn on West 17<sup>th</sup> Street. A few hours earlier I had made a bit of a success fronting my little novelty outfit “The Genial Orleanians” to a crowd of an hundred-or-so folks at the inaugural New York Ukulele Festival. So, rather than detailing some whimsical connections associated with my sexual history, I passed around bottles of champagne and whisky with my wife and bandmates, celebrating a small triumph.

My appearance at the New York Uke Fest came about strictly out of sympathy. In the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina, the producer of the show thought it might be nice to have an act on the bill from New Orleans, you know, as a show of solidarity. The producer picked me as the New Orleans entry solely on the basis of my purchase, two years earlier, of his 1920's Roy

Smeck Vita Uke on Ebay (“in original case!”). So my ukulele bona fides consisted of owning an instrument.

Considering my skills as a ukulelist, I thought the opportunity to play in New York one that should be filed in that drawer marked “Once in a Lifetime.” So I paid for a little professional backing, a couple of pals (on clarinet and bass) who occasionally accompany me in New Orleans when I play in front of highly unenthusiastic crowds, a half-a-dozen strong. It cost me, subsidizing their airfare and an extra room at the Chelsea Inn for a gig that paid in the hundreds. But New York! It turned out, to be worth every penny. My mix of hoary jokes in the vaudeville manner and self-penned novelty songs, in the midst of all the sparkling virtuosity and dogged earnestness on display, served as a kind of sledge-hammer, laying waste (in a good way) to the proceedings. As I walked off of the stage to raucous applause, the producer grabbed my hand and said, “Next year, you are a Saturday night feature!”

As April 2007 approached, with the prime Saturday night Uke Fest invitation still standing, I realized (pay scales at festivals dedicated to the humble ukulele being what they are) that for my return engagement I could not afford to bring the boys. So I essentially called a bluff. While working for a small independent record company, Jazzology, I had heard and become enamored of the records of a trumpeter by the name of Peter Ecklund. While he is a specialist in the hot trumpet style of the 1920s and 30s, the music of Armstrong and Biederbecke, his career has placed him in contexts across the broad spectrum of American popular music. He has accompanied the Allman Brothers and Leon Redbone, Maria Muldaer and David Grisman. I had met him a few times, and I recalled that when I told him, at our initial meeting, that I played the ukulele, he had offhandedly said “Well, if you're ever playing in New York, give me call....”

When such a call materialized, Peter seemed surprised that my “playing in New York” actually came to pass. (He had briefly heard me perform.) But he nevertheless, and very kindly, agreed to join me on stage at the festival. Before he hung up, I said, “And another thing, Peter, if you could find me a bass player, that might be nice.”

The night before I left for New York, I received a curt e-mail message of a single line: “Dear Jon: What are times, places, etc. for Sat?” I responded with the necessary details and closed by asking if he had found a bass player. Checking my e-mail before boarding the plane the next morning, I found a four word missive: “Have bassist – Murray Wall.”

I have read a lot about show people and the show business. And I have found that many of them were superstitious. So in a sort of show business folly, I thought I needed my own superstition. I booked the same room in the same hotel. After settling back in at the Chelsea, I called Peter and set up a short rehearsal for the next afternoon. Killing time on the Internet a short time later I googled “Murray Wall.” I kept seeing his name associated with some recordings under the name of Benny Goodman, but really late-career Goodman, 1980s Goodman. With the information available it was impossible to tell if it was a band led by Benny Goodman himself, or a band doing Goodman arrangements under his auspices. I hoped the latter, as the prospect of having a veteran accompanist of the “King of Swing” was too troubling to contemplate.

I am an amateur so, needless to say, I was a bit nervous waiting for Ecklund and Wall (who for the occasion I dubbed my “Surly Manhattanites”) in the belly of the rambling Theatre for the New City. I had my uke, and a clutch of doggerel tunes by my own hand -- repetitive

paean to my dog, and invitations to “do that dance they call the Asparagus Spear.” -- and I started to get embarrassed having these fellows, New York professionals, one of whom I had never met, play this material. Sure, they were masters of American popular song, but what about American un-popular song? I seemed to be asking Peter and Murray to “pay their dues” retroactively.

When they arrived, I handed them the simple chord charts and nervously explained the conceit of the show: that the ukulele is actually from France (instead of Hawaii), and that I tend to make jokes about my accompanists. *“I hope you guys won't mind the dusty jokes and might I introduce you, Murray, as being 'an extraordinary musician....By that I mean extra-ordinary,' and Peter, would it be O.K. if I tell them you studied trumpet for two years in Paris, four years in Berlin, and six years in vain, and...”* Sensing my nervousness, and the attendant run-on sentences, Peter said quietly, “Relax, it's going to be fine.”

We ran through my program, “That Specific Pacific Islander,” “Un-American in Paris,” “Moon Man Cheese,” “The Moon Man Cheese Dance,” and the rest. It sounded almost like real music. After we went over the last number, Murray put me at ease saying, in an accent that seemed somewhere between New York and New Jersey, by way of his native Australia, “Looks like we got a show!”

I perform as “Sazerac the Clown,” sometimes in make-up, sometimes not. On this evening I decided to sport a white dinner jacket and clown shoes, but, working under the theory that anything worth doing is worth doing half-way I jettisoned the red nose and greasepaint. Peter wore a black tux, and Murray, black pants under a sand-colored tuxedo jacket, an unattractive sartorial choice, he admitted, “But it's an Armani!” flashing the label inside of his coat. (Apparently, the owner of at least one well-known jazz club had pleaded with him to never

turn up in the sand-colored coat again.) Just then the stage manager whispered that it was about time to go. The emcee implored the crowd to receive warmly “Sazerac and his Surly Manhattanites.”

I began with a few comic announcements, about how my usual bandmates were back in New Orleans, busy with the rebuilding, so I picked up a few hard-luck locals. We played a few numbers, I did my “the ukulele is from France” schtick (“originally a type of baguette, ladies and gentleman, brought to America by returning World War One soldiers, the 'Doughboys'”), followed by a song in the key of G, “as a tribute to Gallic people the world over,” and later “In the key of F this time, tribute to France.” They ate it up. With the last number, I offered to choreograph the crowd, nearly 300 strong, in “The Asparagus Spear.” “Ladies and Gentleman,” I said, “the instructions are in the lyrics:”

*Just put your left foot next to your right  
Stand stalk still do nothing all night  
It's really great  
It's up-to-date  
It's like you're in a vegetative state!*

So many were on their feet, I had a built-in standing ovation. As it turns out, I would have had one even without the help of my “novelty no-step.” We were a hit.

Backstage, as we put our instruments away amid many and hearty congratulations, I said to Murray, “If I might ask a question, did you actually play with Benny Goodman?”

“Four years,” he said, “I played bass in his last Big Band.”

It was then that I recalled Allen Ginsburg’s absurd theory. That night I had played with a guy, who played with Benny Goodman. So in a sense, I’ve played with Benny Goodman.

Later that evening, drinking champagne on the roof of the Chelsea Inn, I explained to my wife that since I played with a guy who played with Benny Goodman, well, then in some sense I've played with Louis Armstrong, and Bix Biederbecke and Duke Ellington, and...

I never thought that I would reach such heights.

## Schmaltz It!

Il Valentino, a toney Italian restaurant in the Sutton Place Hotel on East 56th Street in Manhattan, doesn't look much like a jazz club anymore, though it used to house the wisecracking guitarist Eddie Condon's club in the 1960s. For starters, it's not dark and the lights aren't trained on the band. Instead the main attraction, 80-plus-year-old Sol Yaged, mills between the tables, clearing a path with his clarinet, pausing periodically to point it towards the ear of one of the diners, or tapping another one on the shoulder with the end of his horn, shouting "Pay attention!"

At the bar there recently, a couple from New Orleans introduces themselves to Mr. Yaged, who leads the band there five nights a week, as he orders himself an orange juice. "New Or-leens," he shouts raising his clarinet, still clutched in his right hand although his second set of music is through. "Hey, I was there in the 50s!"

His sartorial style --picture a wide white neck tie over a loud turquoise zag-zag of a shirt-- certainly makes one *think* of the 1950s. But his musical style is, as one writer once described it, "more Benny Goodman than Benny Goodman."

Yaged has been playing the clarinet since 1935, when, as a young man he came under Goodman's spell, so much so that twenty years later he was hired as a technical advisor on the 1955 film *The Benny Goodman Story*, teaching Steve Allen not only to how to play, but also how to *act*, like the great clarinetist. His jazz bona fides include stints at such hallowed New York landmarks as Jimmy Ryan's, Nick's, The Three Deuces and Birdland, performing with Coleman Hawkins, Jack Teagarden, Cozy Cole, and the New Orleans-born trumpeter Henry "Red" Allen.

Yaged insists that the couple join him at his table in the restaurant. "I'm gonna play all Dixieland tunes for you, from your hometown!"

Just then, a young well-dressed man enters the bar and gently taps Yaged on the shoulder. "Hey, Pop," he says.

"Jonathan!" Yaged says, throwing his arms in the air. "I want you to meet my friends from New Or-leens!" Turning to the couple he says, "This is my grandson Jonathan. He's a big shot lawyer for Miramax. He works with the Weinsteins!"

"I'm in the book division," Jonathan says.

"He worked on *Big Russ!*" Yaged says (referring to Meet the Press host Tim Russert's pean to his father), and then admonishes "Jonathan, give them your card!"

Yaged is fond of business cards and exclamation points. When the comedian Jackie Mason stops by on his way out of the restaurant, Yaged gets another chance to use both. "Sol, I enjoyed it very much," Mason says.

"Jackie! Thank you, Jackie! And let me introduce you to my grandson, Jonathan! Jackie," Yaged continues, pretending a whisper, "he works for Miramax...a lawyer. Jonathan, give Mr. Mason your card."

Upon meeting the couple from New Orleans, who are finding this to be one of their more madcap episodes in recent memory, Jackie Mason says, "New Orl-eens? That's a long way to come to see Sol Yaged! Nice to meet you." Then he makes his exit.

True to his word, Yaged begins his final set by playing "Tin Roof Blues" a pearl by those Jazz Age revolutionaries the New Orleans Rhythm Kings. Backed by a trio of musicians – guitar, bass and trombone -- Yaged constantly moves around the room. His lead on the melody is clear



and swinging, dropped here and there when he stops to talk to diners, but always coming in again on the right note. "Pay attention," he says to a man at the next table. "This is the real New Orleans for my friends. It's their anniversary!"

It was not their anniversary, but why correct him?

When a waiter walks by carrying a full tray, Yaged stops him and says, pointing to the New Orleans couple, "These are my friends, take care of them. They are my guests, understand?" Then he puts a final flourish on the "Tin Roof Blues."

Yaged begins another tune. After completing the chorus, while the band continues the rhythmic backing, he says, "This is 'Snag it!' by Joe 'King' Oliver from New Orleans. Now here it is my way. I call it "Schmaltz it!" He embellishes the melody with comic touches. While the trombonist solos, Yaged continues to move around the room, filled on this Friday night with a crowd that includes several obvious regulars, and loudly trumpets the virtues of his "Friends from New Orleans," explaining to the crowd that his musical choices this evening are in their honor.

"I played this next tune at the Famous Door on Bourbon Street in New Orleans," Yaged says, "with the great trumpeter "Sharkey Bonano!" He then coaxes the familiar opening notes of "Basin Street Blues" from his horn before beginning yet another trek around the room. On this journey he ventures to the couple from New Orleans (at "his" table) and then proceeds to nestle the bell of clarinet inches from the ear of one of them and play a solo.

When he finishes he says, "Just like Bourbon Street, huh?," before turning to the next table and shouting, "Pay attention."

## Center Ring: The Elephants

## The Dead Rogue

“Is he really, truly dead?” asked one little girl of her nurse.  
“Yes,” said the nurse, “Tip has been killed.”  
“And he was a effalunt,” said the child, as if that fact alone were guarantee that he ought not to have been killed.

– *The New York Times*, May 12, 1894

The accounts don't suggest how much movement the chains afforded Tip, the massive Asian elephant housed at the Central Park menagerie, only that he had been chained continuously for nearly five years. Measuring in at nine-feet, six inches tall and weighing some 10,000 pounds, Tip was billed as the largest and most dangerous of his kind in the country.

He had become a “rogue”—the term used for elephants that had gone, in the parlance of the time, “bad.” Over the course of his confinement he had continually attempted to attack his keeper, William Snyder, the park's Elephant Superintendent. The situation in the spring of 1894 had become untenable, and zoo officials were publicly debating whether Tip ought to be killed.

This information was breathlessly imparted to readers of the *New York Times* over a nine-day period when a life and death drama was played out at the zoo and in the pages of the newspaper: a daily and sensational account of man versus beast. The trouble was first revealed in print on May 3 under the headline “Tip Must Reform or Die.” The paper reported that for the second time in three years, Tip had attacked Snyder, knocking him to the ground and then attempting to “stamp” him to death. Snyder described the elephant as “wicked,” “a treacherous beast,” and “the most vicious elephant I have ever seen,” and declared that the only way to cure what he described as the elephant's “vile temper” was to kill him. The article detailed the various crimes the “ungrateful pachyderm” had allegedly committed over his long career of

“treachery,” with special focus on those acts committed against Snyder, who assured the reporter that Tip was “determined to kill me,” and that the elephant’s two unsuccessful attempts had only made him “more bent on it.” Snyder had even sawed off most of Tip’s four-foot tusks in the interest of personal safety. By now Tip’s life was, according to the *Times*, “in the balance.”

Although it was news, this was not a new story. As journalist Shana Alexander explained in her book *The Astonishing Elephant*, “Humankind over the millennia has devised many ways to exterminate undesirables, and – save for burning at the stake – I do not know of one of these techniques that has not also been used on an elephant.”

Elephants have been beasts of burden in parts of Asia for thousands of years. But with the golden age of the American circus, the struggle between elephants and their keepers entered a new arena: the arena of entertainment for the masses. By the late nineteenth century, elephants had begun arriving in new American zoos--often after they were too old, or too violent, to appear in circus acts anymore. Indeed, in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, the line between circus menageries and zoo animals was blurry at best. The story of Tip and his demise is a story about the efforts of American promoters and showmen to bring the most colossal representatives of the wild kingdom before the American audiences. As Tip’s sad fate proved, those efforts often ended in failure. The apparatus of American show business, like the chains on his feet, proved no match for the will of an elephant.

A two-year-old Asian elephant was the first to arrive in North America, in 1796. Purchased in India for \$450 by a sea captain named Jacob Crowninshield, the eponymous “Crowninshield Elephant” was first exhibited in New York, on the corner of Beaver Street and Broadway. It reportedly toured the eastern seaboard for the next 24 years. The second elephant,

Old Bet, arrived in Boston in 1804. Twelve years later, Old Bet would become the first elephant executed in America when, near Alfred, Maine, she was shot by an angry farmer and religious fanatic who thought it a sin for people to spend money to see an elephant, especially on Sunday. “Little Bet,” presented to audiences the following year, was gunned down in May of 1826 when a half-dozen adolescent boys decided to test the ballyhoo offered by Bet’s trainer, who, as part of his spiel, repeated many times that an elephant’s hide was so thick that bullets couldn’t penetrate it. To Little Bet and her trainer’s regret, the boys proved his florid assertions wrong.

Since the early nineteenth century, scores of so-called “rogues” have been executed in America. In addition to the dozens of deaths by firing squad, elephants have been hanged (“Murderous Mary” from a railroad derrick in Erwin, Tennessee in 1916), electrocuted (the most famous carried out by Thomas Edison on “Topsy” at Luna Park on Coney Island in 1903, the act saved for posterity on film), and, most bizarrely, killed with pitchforks (“Prince,” in Racine, Wisconsin, in 1898). More recently Tyke, a female African elephant, was shot to death by police in an arena parking lot after killing her trainer and then running amok during a performance in Hawaii in 1994.

Hunters caught Tip in the wild, in India, in the 1860s, and he spent his early years in the Royal Menagerie of Victor Emmanuel, the king of Italy. Upon Emmanuel’s death, and the ascension to the throne of his son, Umberto, the crown sold the menagerie to a new owner who shipped the young elephant to Germany. The animal would spend the next few years in the care of the Hagenbeck Zoo.

In 1882, the American Adam Forepaugh acquired Tip and displayed the well-travelled elephant on his “Great Forepaugh Show,” one of this country’s largest circuses, for the next six

years. While no contemporary accounts have been found, the *Times* noted that during his half-dozen years in the American amusement industry, Tip had killed from five to eight men, two of those during the 1888 circus season. At the end of that year, Forepaugh, began negotiations to give Tip—worth a reported \$8,000—away.

It seems that rather than pointing to Tip’s alleged history as a “rogue” as the reason for his wanting to present him to the burgeoning Menagerie at 5th Avenue and East 64<sup>th</sup> Street, Forepaugh instead implied that he did not want to “favor Philadelphia” (his hometown, to which he had given another elephant, Bolivar, as a Christmas gift) over New York. He negotiated with the City to present Tip as a New Year’s gift on January 1, 1889.

Tip’s life in New York started with great promise. On December 29, 1888 the *Times* reported that the City’s park commissioners had accepted Forepaugh’s offer of his “bright particular star” who was reportedly “docile as a lamb” and would be the first elephant ever to make its permanent home in the city. Three days later the “distinguished pachyderm” was, according to the *Times*, “royally received” as revelers celebrated the New Year by welcoming Tip and his handlers as they wended their way through the streets of Manhattan, from the foot of 23<sup>rd</sup> Street, up 10<sup>th</sup> Avenue. By the time they reached 39<sup>th</sup> Street, the crowd had grown to more than 3,000, “2,000 of which were dirty, ragged young boys.” When they reached 5<sup>th</sup> Avenue, the swells promenading on that famous thoroughfare were horrified by the motley assemblage. “The masses have no respect for the classes,” the *Times* noted, and “caused considerable consternation.”

When the parade finally reached the menagerie, a cheer went up that caused “the American Eagle in the cage opposite to screech with envy.” Forepaugh assured the assembled

dignitaries that Tip was kind and intelligent and “would always be docile provided there was but one person who was recognized as [his] master.”

Tip’s relationship with this “master,” Snyder, was rocky from the start, and reached its breaking point in May of 1894. Perhaps unwittingly, Snyder offered a clue as to the reason for the elephant’s foul disposition. He told the *Times* that Tip’s previous attack came “just about this time of year in 1891.”

The fact that both incidents occurred in the spring is important and suggests that Tip was in the throes of “musth,” a physiological condition that affects the male elephant. Although little is known about this annual condition, it is most commonly referred to as a sort of male “heat,” a period of increased testosterone production leading to enhanced sexual function and heightened aggression. The condition declares itself with the excretion of a foul smelling liquid from the elephant’s temporal glands, small slits on either side of the head. During musth, the elephant is almost completely unmanageable. In the history of man’s relationship with the elephant, this period of musth has always been a problem. Not surprisingly, perhaps, the majority of so-called “rogue” elephants put to death—and their numbers are legion—have been males.

Contemporary accounts of elephant rampages, and the too-often attendant executions in American zoos and circuses in the first third of the twentieth century often noted that the animal was in its “bulling period,” or musth. These include the deaths by firing squad of “Floto,” “Snyder” and “Black Diamond.” In fact, “Diamond’s” killing of a leading female citizen of Corsicana, Texas, in 1929 would lead to what might be described as a wholesale slaughter of male elephants in America in the early thirties.

Musth is referenced in only one of the nine articles in the *Times* that detailed Tip's plight, calling it, simply, "synonymous with madness." But the condition was widely known. Because male Asian elephants can be two feet taller and one ton heavier than females, and because only the males have tusks (lending themselves to circus press-agentry), amusement impresarios of the period jettisoned caution and care in favor of the idea that bigger is better. Even today, after exhaustive research, experts know little about the condition. For their part, contemporary circuses are not taking any chances; they almost exclusively feature female elephants. A current guide for "mahouts," the traditional Indian name for elephant trainer, states rather unscientifically that during this period an elephant will show great animosity to its trainer because "it is believed that during musth, elephants recollect all the pain and punishments and become vengeful." Never forget, indeed.

Charles Davis, Forepaugh's agent in Tip's transfer to New York, proved the animal's most vocal defender, arguing vociferously and often to the *Times* on Tip's behalf, and suggesting ways to remedy the situation. "What Snyder ought to do is to get Tip down and hammer him," he told the paper. "The way to conquer an elephant is to force him to get down on his belly and then pound him with a hickory sapling about five or six feet long until he squeals. That is their way of acknowledging that they are conquered."

This, he said, along with a little exercise, could reform the "elephantine colossus."

Davis' pleas went unheard, and the menagerie's superintendent recommended to the Board of Park Commissioners that Tip be killed and his remains be put on display at the American Museum of Natural History, where "he would make a great exhibit."



As the drama played out, menagerie visitors voiced their support for saving Tip, and some private citizens took the elephant's case directly to the commissioners. One "Joshua Crosby of 132 West Twelfth Street," suggested affixing an electrode to Tip's leg as means of reformation, and giving him a shock "when he shows a disposition to attack his keeper." The *Times* detailed the efforts of a nicely dressed young woman who had momentarily "forgotten maidenly reserve" and burst into the office of Charles De F. Burns, Secretary of the New York's Department of Public Parks to plead on Tip's behalf. According to the *Times*, Burns "had experience enough with women visitors to know that it is well to listen until they have fully stated their case, so he waited until the pretty Portia had concluded her appeal" to tell her that the decision had been made.

It was Burns who made the final recommendation to the Park Commissioners. On May 10 1894, the *Times* dutifully printed in full Tip's bill of indictment. After detailing the elephant's "crimes" including his alleged killing of five men and "a boy" during his years with Forepaugh and his many attacks on menagerie staff, Burns stated that Tip "is known throughout the country as the most vicious elephant in captivity." Burns concluded, "In view of the facts as stated, I recommend that the beast be killed as quickly and quietly as possible." When the recommendation was presented to the board, the *Times* reported, the members replied immediately and in unison, "Kill him!"

In the days leading up to the "sentencing" of Tip, the papers contained considerable discussion about the method of execution, including this colloquy between a reporter and Superintendent Burns:

"If the Park Commissioners decide to kill him, how will you do it?"

"Shoot him."

"Why not kill him by electricity?"

"Because we could not get near enough to him to attach the electrodes..."

In the end, and after much debate, like some elephants before and many elephants after, Tip was poisoned.

New Yorkers awoke on May 12, 1894, to a page-one headline that read “Big Elephant Tip Dead.” It was accompanied by a simple illustration showing an elephant with the telltale sawed-off tusks, lying on his left side, eyes slightly open and downcast. The caption read: “The Dead Rogue.” Behind him, the illustration showed a man, his hand gripping one of the bars of the cage, his chest thrust out. We can imagine this was Snyder.

Strangely, after a week of cheerleading for the prosecution and vilifying the elephant, the *Times*'s mood had tempered. “Tip is dead,” the article began. “The big elephant that had been for years the playmate of the children of Central Park, and the terror of Snyder, who was his keeper, was put to an agonizing death yesterday.”

The story went on to describe that death in excruciating detail, rendered with a sense of sadness for the elephant and scorn for not only his executioners, but also for their invited guests, “unsentimental persons” who “fancied there was an element of danger in attending the execution, such as there is when one hunts wild elephant.”

At times, the account reads like a description of the final hours of some leading citizen, and a reader half expects the appearance of the parish priest to administer the last rites.

The execution got underway at about 7:00 a.m., beginning for Tip a day of “full of misery pain and torture.” Inside the elephant house that morning, more than a hundred witnesses had gathered. Along with Superintendent Burns, the Park Commissioners and assorted dignitaries—politicos there for a thrill, members of the College of Physicians waiting to cart away organs, and

taxidermists anxious to get to their formidable work—there was the hired executioner, Otto Mopis, once an elephant trainer on the Barnum show.

Menagerie visitors had held out hope that Tip might be saved that morning. An “anti-Snyder” sentiment began roiling through the growing crowd—held back from the elephant house by a phalanx of police—as they clamored for a last-minute pardon. In the end, the *Times* pointed out, “the poor fellow had no ‘pull.’”

The poison Mopis had selected was cyanide of potassium. In the initial attempt, he secreted a two-ounce capsule of it into both an apple and carrot and offered them to Tip, whom zookeepers had not fed the previous day in hopes of intensifying his hunger. Mopis first offered the carrot to the elephant and, after a few quick chews, the pachyderm promptly spat it out. The apple was tendered with the same result. As the *Times* put it, “He could not be beguiled.” But the reporter speculated that some of the poison had been ingested and “a bit of nausea was twisting his elephantine insides” causing his “little yellow eyes to lose their brilliancy.”

Then Tip rallied, and the eyes once again brightened. As the day wore on, there was talk of using the rifles Mopis had brought with him, a desire to “chalk Tip’s forehead and send a volley of bullets at him.” But instead the poisoning continued. The peanut shells and bits of bread spiked with poison and fed to Tip produced “no visible effects.” This went on for more than eight hours, with the elephant by turns docile and violent.

Enter Snyder. The commissioners recommended that the elephant keeper, “the chief complaining witness in the case in which Tip was the defendant,” stay away during the proceedings to “avoid meeting his old enemy.” Officials feared Tip might act aggressively at the sight of his nemesis. But in the end, and perhaps fittingly, Snyder would administer the fatal dose of poison, offering final retribution in the form of a “panful of wet bran” spiked with

multiple capsules of the cyanide. With a few deft motions of his trunk, Tip formed the contents of the pan into a small ball and brought it to his mouth.

Within minutes Tip began to weave and stumble. The great pachyderm then “raised his trunk high into the air and trumpeted his agony,” and, in a final act of defiance, made an effort at freedom, lunging towards the back of his pen. “In his paroxysm he whirled about the little limits of his cage,” the *Times* reported. “Chains that bound him broke like strings.”

Finally, with only one foot still chained in place, he relaxed, blood rushing from his mouth. He staggered momentarily. Then, after one final and desperate pull at his last chain, the elephant fell to his side. “Tip was dead.”

“It is claimed for his poisoning, that it was a success,” the *Times* wrote, seemingly disgusted by what had transpired that day. “Its success is in the fact that Tip was killed.”

In the end, Tip was given more than 100,000 milligrams of Cyanide of Potassium before he succumbed. And he was not the last Central Park elephant to meet that fate. In 1902, the park officials executed Big Tom, Tip’s replacement, after he turned “rogue” and attacked his keeper, William Snyder. He was poisoned with some 39,000 milligrams of Cyanide. By contrast, it would have taken just 300 milligrams to kill Snyder.

Kenedy, Texas: October 1929

Except for a boy in the background they're all men, turned out for the occasion in silken ties and wide-brimmed hats. Two hold rifles, one aloft in a gesture of victory. All of them are smiling, but a sense of propriety dominates the scene, a certain formality. Except, that is, for the man at the far right. His newsboy cap rests at a jaunty angle, and his left hand is draped across his belly and grasping his right forearm. His grin is the broadest, as if he is proud to be witness to the event. The rest, though, seem simply pleased and assured. One of the gunmen rests the stock of his rifle on the mass that dominates the lower left-hand corner of the photo: the elephant's head, horizontal in death, nearly reaches the man's hip. The head seems a confused jumble of shapes, the curve of the massive eye-socket, the triangle of tusks with their tangle of clasp and chain.

A viewer might mistake the image for a souvenir from a wild game hunt. But in fact, the picture is closer to a lynching photograph, the kind turned into postcards at the turn of the last century, with smiling townsfolk gathered around a corpse. (In 1916, in Robinson, Texas, several counties north of where the elephant fell, a smiling crowd posed beside the charred remains of Jesse Williams. On the reverse of that photograph, in an unsteady hand, there is a greeting: "This is the barbecue we had last night....your son Joe.") The two photographs—of man and of beast with their killers—delineate a similar brand of vengeance once rendered in small southern towns, the sentiment that drove a community's conquest over a threatening "brute." Both portray justice meted out by the giddy mob clamoring for revenge. Both mark a ritual kill.

“Black Diamond,” was an Asian elephant, *Elephas maximus*. He was a male tusker who for twenty-nine years had been a circus attraction, entertaining and, in those days before zoos were common, educating American public. Exhibited variously as “Diamond,” “Congo,” and, beginning in 1927 when he arrived on the Al G. Barnes Circus, “Tusko.” The last appellation was a shrewd and interesting one, since he shared the bill with another Asian male, “The Mighty Tusko” who was often unmanageable and had to be confined for long periods at the Barnes Winter Quarters in southern California. A pair of elephantine colossi, both called “Tusko,” assured the show a return on its ballyhoo cry: “Featuring Tusko, the World’s Largest Elephant in Captivity!” In October of the 1929 season, when the circus trains pulled into Corsicana, Texas, on the Cotton Belt Route, both elephants were in the show.

Curly Prickett had handled Diamond for years on the Atterbury Bros. Circus, a small “mud show” that would travel by wagon from small town to small town. But Prickett tired of the vagabond existence, the building and rebuilding of a small city day after day. So he settled down in Kerens, Texas, on the farm of Eva Donohoo. One can imagine that he knew Diamond, now with the Barnes Circus, was on his way, that the colorful Barnes circus heralds that moved ahead of the show told him so, and that it provided the lowly farmhand an opportunity to animate his tales of glitter and greasepaint and sawdust and spangle, a chance to prove that his own personal bally—of having the vicious “Black Diamond” as his charge—was true. “I’ll show them,” he must have thought, “parade that mountain of flesh and bone right down Main Street.” So on the morning of October 12, he went to the rail yard.

Amid the bustle, the unloading of pole and canvas, the clatter of winch and hoof, perhaps Prickett approached the elephant car. Diamond in there? he might have said. Can I see him? And here the story becomes unclear. Accounts are unreliable.

According to Al G. Barnes, when Curley entered the boxcar, Diamond trumpeted with joy at the return of his former master, tears staining his grey-brown skin.

Or maybe not.

It seemed to Slim Lewis, one of the show's elephant hands, that Diamond recognized Curley, but no longer cared to have him around.

In his mud show days, made safe by the long nightly walks of 20 or 30 miles, Diamond worked in the ring. Too tired for trouble. "A pretty fair single act" the trainer Bill Woodcock said. Three-leg hop and shimmy dance, ringing cowbells and a hind leg stand. Then the railroad show. Chained to the floor of a stark compartment. No room to move. Pent. By 1929 he was pure spectacle. A heaving monster burdened with martingale, hobbled with shackle and chain, a steel bar bolted across the width of tusks to keep his trunk at bay. No performing, merely staked on the picket line of the menagerie top at safe distance so that the paying customers could gawk and feel the thrill of fear. And then the trip from the rail yard, through the circus day crowds lining the street a half a dozen deep.

"Can I take him?" Prickett might have asked. It would be just like old times.

It ought to have been the same thing every day. A regimen. Comfort in routine. Diamond was chained to an anchor elephant to keep him in line. He got the signal, the verbal cue. "Hup, Diamond! Move up!" They made the walk, they had to keep him moving. But

there was a delay, a back-up at the intermediate watering stop, and the procession came to a stand-still. The regimen had changed.

There were too many people, and they were too close. And they moved closer. The handler sidled Diamond between two parked roadsters to wait it out. On the parade route Prickett spotted a familiar face in the throng. “Say, Jack, how’s Diamond? There’s someone I want him to meet.” Eva Speed Donohoo is Prickett’s boss. She wrote the society column for a Houston newspaper before she inherited her father’s “Shoestring Plantation” in Kerens, fifteen miles to the east. “Can I touch him?” she might have asked. “Curly, can I touch him?” A hand reached out and there was confusion. Suddenly Curley was airborne, hurtled over one of the automobiles, his wrist snapped on landing. And then Diamond speared one of the cars with his tusks. And then he speared Donohoo.

He weighed more than a thousand pounds. A pile driver. He was out of control. Donohoo, bloodied, lied prone in the street. But Diamond wasn’t finished. Somehow, through the maze of restraint, he wrapped his trunk around her again. The deep grunts of the elephant, the clap of his chains and the screams. Bedlam. He’s was tearing her apart. Finally a man, bare-fisted and heroic, pummeled Diamond about the face and, finally, the elephant relents. It was too late. Eva Donohoo was dead.

Donohoo was a leading citizen, and local feeling was running high so the circus stationed armed guards around Diamond’s railcar. The people of Corsicana wanted blood. The circus said Diamond was too dangerous just now. “Kill him now!” the people said. Just let him settle down, the circus said, we’ll kill him.



Headline writers had a field day as the newspapers spent days reporting it: “Maddened Elephant Kills One” “A Nine-ton Brute Engine of Destruction” “The Jungle Craze Still Reflected in the Mad Gleam of his Eyes.”

In darkness, the Cotton Belt route runs 229 miles to North Bay. They had to keep the Western Union office open late to read all the telegrams expressing the local feeling. Running high. The natives wanted blood. But how? They build and rebuild the tent city. Diamond remains shackled in his wheeled cell. Next stop Corpus Christi.

How?

Speculation on the method was rampant. “Drowning Suggested: The Corpus Christi Chamber of Commerce proposed that the animal be brought to the wharves, to tie thirty tons of lead to his feet and to have two tugs drag him into the bay.” “May be Choked: Six of Black Diamond’s fellow elephants will be his executioners. Three will be hooked to each end of a chain as if for a tug of war. In the middle of the chain, however, there will be a loop and Black Diamond’s head will be in the loop. When the tug-of-war starts the elephant’s huge neck will be contracted.”

With the local feeling still running high, they killed him in Kenedy, Texas on October 16. The circus said that it must be done in the most humane way possible. Cyanide of potassium. The sheriff would load a few hundred grains in some oranges and peanuts, but his deputies would also load some rifles just in case.

He had been in the car for four days. No light. In the car they put the thick strap across his back, connected to the chains that tethered him to his anchor elephant. But it was heavier this time. Three elephant anchors. Babe and Jewell and Ruth. They started the regimen. Hup,

Diamond! Move up! His heft cast long shadows across the railroad tracks. Move up, Diamond! They start to make the walk. Keep him moving. Keep him moving. Thousands lined the streets to see the killer's cortege. Not too close. He could see the circus grounds ahead, the white tops billowing in the morning Texas sun. His pace quickened. But then the regimen changed. They turned away from the tops. He paused a moment and looked around. Keep him moving.

In the photographs the elephant looks calm. He seemed to offer no resistance as his keeper Jack O'Grady went about the grim business. He took the three chains that had anchored Diamond to Babe and Jewell and Ruth and fastened them taut to three trees at the edge of a cotton field. And then a glint of the regimen, Diamond's feet chained fast to the block that held him safely in the menagerie top. When secured, O'Grady, patted Diamond's trunk, said something in his ear and made his exit, the other elephants in tow. He wanted no part.

They offered the cyanide-spiked peanuts. He wouldn't eat them. A basket of laced oranges. He chewed the first and spat it out. Crushed it under foot for good measure.

Eyewitness accounts vary as to the number of shots fired. 170. 155. 48. 60. They're unreliable. Whatever the exact number of bullets, verily a fusillade. There were twenty executioners. Or one. Or five. Eager volunteers.

Ready...aim...fire! At the first volley, they say he let out a howl.

Ready...aim...fire! There is a photo of the second round, his left hind leg lifts slightly and there is a hint of twist in the body as it absorbs the impact.

Ready...aim...fire!

Finally Black Diamond's legs buckled under him, his six-ton body quivered, and then suddenly crashed to the ground, the chains screeching against the trees.

There were smiles all around, and much back-slapping. They took their pictures, and then, as at many lynchings, the spectators claimed their grisly corporeal souvenirs. They stripped his hide, cut off his head and legs and tail. Also a boon to the local tallow industry.

The circus pulled out. The next morning they built that city again. Put on a show. The menagerie top featured “Tusko the World’s Largest Elephant in Captivity!”

In Kerens, Texas the tombstone reads:

Eva Speed Donohoo  
Nov. 18, 1877  
Oct. 12, 1929  
Killed by Al G Barnes Circus Elephant

No one knows what happened to Curley Prickett.

Carmack Watkins was five years old when the circus came to Corsicana. “The Big Event of 1929,” he called it. Marked him. He built a successful business. Started to buy relics. The stake that held Diamond’s chains. Strips of hide. The severed head. He keeps them in his own museum, “The Trophy Room,” back of the office. There’s a photograph of Watkins standing next to the taxidermied head of Black Diamond, his right arm snaking around a massive tusk. He’s wearing a hunter’s pith helmet. And a smile.

## **An International Walk-Around**

## Satchmo's Mystery Menu

It seemed to me, when I went to Europe for the first time, that English had lost a bit of its luster (or in the Mother Tongue, “lustre”) as an international language. This feeling was especially keen in the restaurants of Ascona, Switzerland, where I spent eleven days reporting on that city’s festival of New Orleans Jazz.

One night, for instance, in an outdoor place where, with the point of a finger, a stoic, central-casting-villain-of-a-man seats patrons family-style at long picnic tables, I found myself surrounded by a half-a-dozen young Swiss on holiday. They spoke German, perhaps French and Italian, too. Their collective usage of my home language, though, seemed to be “Yes.” For my part, besides “Pult,” (translated roughly from the German “desk”), my mastery of their language was: “*Danke schoen, darling danke schoen, thank you for all the joy and pain.*” So, sharing a table, but unable to communicate in any meaningful way, I began delivering sparkling *bon mots* for my own amusement. “In America, we call this *Swiss Cheese*,” I told them, “I guess here it's just cheese,” and “This chicken is very nicely cooked” I said whilst digging in to a slab of beef. They would smile, and answer, sweetly and simply: “Yes.” Who knows what they were saying about me? At one point, I was almost sure they called me a “rube.” Ah, cultural exchange!

It was tough, this navigating of the restaurants. The menus in Ascona would have been confusing enough in Italian, the main language in the area known as the “Ticino,” but with every item described in Italian *and* German, well, that made things even more confusing. All I was sure of was that most places offered a plethora of meats and cheeses.

Take the Da Ivo, an elegant, if rustic, little spot on the Via Collegio, where not one staffer seemed to speak English. I was gestured to a small table and handed a menu that might have well have been written in Aramaic. At the point at which I was going to attempt to communicate to the waiter that I was in need of a dart and a blindfold to help me make an informed selection, he handed me a sheet of paper detailing a special three-course fixed price “Jazz” menu. And hey, look here, there’s a picture of old Louis “Satchmo” Armstrong on it! Now these folks were speaking my language.

I could glean that in the first course there would be a salad and cheese, in the second a grilled fillet of something would be involved, while the third and final offering would taste of vanilla. It seemed fine. When the waiter re-appeared, I pointed to Armstrong's smiling visage and said, “Put me down for the Satchelmouth Special.” Then I shrugged and pointed to a wine based on the number of Swiss Francs on my person.

Well, that was easier than I expected. And, as it turned out, delicious. I wasn’t crazy about the addition of cherries to the salad, but they were off to the side, no problem. The meat, served with a healthy portion of pasta, seemed from experience to be veal. It was a milky and thick medium rare fillet, topped with a razor thin and beautifully pungent slice of white truffle. Amazing. The pair of vanilla crème puffs, slathered in an airy chocolate frosting, satisfied as well. I was happy and sated. Before leaving the restaurant I made the “International Gesture for ‘May I Have a Copy of the Louis Armstrong Menu’,” which met with success. I folded the paper neatly and secreted it in my breast pocket.

A little later that evening, while delighting in the music and of the guitarist/raconteur Marty Grosz on the Stage Torre, I saw a woman I had met earlier in my stay, a local who speaks Italian, but also has a good bit of English in her repertoire. While we were talking I reached in

my pocket for a cigarette and, with it, pulled out the menu. Still a wee-bit curious about exactly what type of *bovine* I had consumed, I unfolded the paper and pointed to the word “*Struzzo*” (the “*filetto*” of which had been “*griglia con tartufo*” to great effect).

“Ahhh,” she cried while reeling backward, “you eat this?” Her antic gesture suggested that she would not eat *Struzzo* herself.

“Yes,” I said, “I ate it and it was good.”

“*Struzzo!*” she said.

“Yes,” I said.

“It is the bird, the large ugly bird,” she said, and then made a movement which, to me, translated as the “International Gesture for Turkey.”

“Turkey?”

“No,” she said and then made another movement that I was satisfied was the “International Gesture for Goose” and just left it that.

“O.K., great, . . . thanks!”

Although it really wasn’t O.K. I would rather have knowledge of what I ingest. Because of the flavor, and the texture of the meat, well, it hardly seemed fowl. But while I would have liked to have figured out exactly what I had eaten for dinner, there was *birra* to drink! And *grappa*! I just resigned myself to thinking I had eaten a very special goose, perhaps the goose from whose liver Foie Gras comes.

A little while later, packed close in a smoke-choked cave of a club where a small international jazz revolution was taking place, with musicians from a half-a-dozen countries wailing away on “That DaDa Strain,” I sidled up to another of my new European acquaintances,

a young woman of Rome. She, too, had a credible grasp of English at her disposal and used it to inquire as to where I had dined. Over the din of the frantic chorus, I handed over the menu.

She scanned it for a moment, and then, eyes widening, she pointed at the menu's second course and said, "Ah, *Struzzo*, did you like?"

"Sure," I said, "but what sort of goose is it?"

"Goose? It's not goose," she said.

"Well," I said, "what is it?"

"Struzzo, it is ostrich," she said.

"Ostrich?"

She nodded in the affirmative and said, "Yes, the bird with the egg," while making the irrefutable "International Gesture of the Ostrich Egg," thus solving the (delicious) mystery of the Louis Armstrong Menu.



## Paris

At my nadir, I had been invited, as a journalist, to the New Orleans Jazz Ascona Festival, which takes place on the Swiss side of that area known as the "Ticino." Ascona is set on the banks of Lake Maggiore, on the Italian border, and my hotel was on the cobbled plaza facing the lake. The stunning scenery notwithstanding, eleven days in Ascona, Switzerland had been quite enough.

For the first week of my stay, the heady combination of large doses of Pastis 51, boisterous rounds of grappa, and my native music in its most exultant form -- the music of Armstrong and Waller and Biederbecke -- careening around a Swiss resort from 11 a.m. until dawn had been a great tonic for the particular despair I had been going through, a strange sense of being unmoored.

Especially the Pastis 51.

My press pass afforded me many perquisites -- free espresso and meals, champagne parties at the Danneman cigar factory, and an odd sort of celebrity among the Germans and Brits who habituate festivals of this sort. But after six or seven days, the relative size of the place, and the small number of people (too many of whom were musician friends from New Orleans) got to me.

I wanted to disappear. I wanted to be alone with the gloom. I wanted my anonymity and my anguish.

So I took the train to Paris.

Ascending the steps of Gare Lyon, I was greeted on Boulevard Diderot by a great moving

crush of humanity. I reveled in it. The thickness of the crowd, the traffic, the heady smells, the din – like the fractious riot of activity you see in a drop of pond water under a microscope. It was a massive pulsing organism.

The buffetting of the crowd gave me a certain sense of ease as I clumsily headed for a taxi line. It held more people than I had seen in the previous eleven days.

And then I saw a pay phone.

Paris.

I had to call my mom, to share with her my excitement at the promise of duck confit and a really good baguette.

I picked up the receiver, swiped my card. After dialing the international code, I punched in that most familiar string of numbers, the first I had ever learned: 1-6-5-0-7-5-5-1-1-8...

When I realized what I had done, I clenched my jaw and closed my eyes hard, steeling myself against the wave of sadness that hit. My knuckles went white gripping the phone. And then I gently hung up and took my place in the taxi line.

I couldn't tell my mom about Paris. I had buried her eight weeks before.

### **Ring Three: Music and Minstrelsy**

## Lemon Nash Sings the Blues

Lemon Nash.

It's a good name for a musician. *Lemon Nash*. Evocative and bluesy.

The first time I heard that name was on Frenchmen Street in New Orleans, at Café Brasil. It was the last Sunday in October a half-a-dozen years ago and I was dressed in the guise of my character Sazerac, a genial, if dipsomaniac, ukulele-playing clown. I was hosting, as I have for more than a decade, something called "Nickel-A-Dance," a free afternoon concert series of traditional jazz that harkens back to the days of the New Orleans dance hall.

Strumming a few desultory chords on the sidewalk between sets of music by Lionel Ferbos and his Palm Court Jazz Band, I found myself in conversation with Richard B. Allen, the esteemed jazz historian who, in 1958, co-founded the Jazz Archive at Tulane University with pioneering record producer, William Russell. I mentioned to Dick that I couldn't think of one New Orleanian for whom the ukulele was a specialty. This was odd, considering the unprecedented popularity of the uke in both the 1920s (due chiefly to the recording successes of Cliff Edwards a.k.a. "Ukulele Ike" who would later voice Jiminy Cricket in Disney's *Pinocchio*) and again in the 1950s, because of the ceaseless broadcast shilling on behalf of the diminutive instrument by Arthur Godfrey. With the extraordinary amount of music being made in New Orleans, it surely followed that *some* musician would have seized on the popularity of the instrument.

"Lemon Nash," Dick replied, "played everything on ukulele, even the blues."

The history of New Orleans music is full of musicians whose names are today familiar, men like Louis Armstrong, Ferdinand “Jelly Roll” Morton, and Sidney Bechet, all of whom are considered important figures in the development of jazz. But that history is also peppered with musicians who were known in their day, but whose lives and music are mostly forgotten, existing in now only in dimming memories or obscure recordings. Their numbers are legion, and although their lives and careers might not be important in the broad historical sweep of American music, their stories are sometimes no less interesting than those of the jazz legends, and can continue to teach and entertain.

That’s why putting on a pair of headphones and pressing the “play” button on a reel-to-reel tape machine at the Jazz Archive at Tulane can be such a delight. To do so is to enter a time machine of sorts, the spinning reels peeling back years and opening up worlds that no longer exist. People and places long gone are briefly re-animated.

The Nash interviews are but a sliver of the close to 2,000 reels of tape that make up the oral history segment of a collection that also includes an extensive sheet music library, nearly 40,000 music recordings and close to 10,000 images. There are also vertical files holding articles and ephemera regarding the music’s growth and the musicians who played a role in the music’s development and dissemination. Augmenting these materials are a number of special collections, including, for example, the orchestrations of the famed bandleader John Robichaux, which would be exhumed in the early 1970s by a couple of young Swedes, Orange Kellin (no relation to “Lemon”) and Lars Edegran, who would use them as the basis for their popular “New Orleans Ragtime Orchestra.”

Lemon Nash died on December 27, 1969. His recorded output consists of nine songs on a compilation of recordings made at Larry Borenstein's Gallery (the St. Peter Street building that would later gain world renown as "Preservation Hall") in 1960 and released on the English label 504. The vertical file at Tulane contains a single photograph of Nash. In it, his head is cocked slightly to the right, he wears a short-brimmed boater, a dark suit with a skinny tie and a broad smile, his lower teeth prominent. He is holding what looks to be a banjo-ukulele. Also in the file are the typed notes from three interviews, conducted in October, 1959, September, 1960 and June, 1961. A number of people were present at each interview, but Dick Allen served as interlocutor throughout. On the tapes his pleasing Milledgeville, Georgia, lilt is a constant presence.

Through a voice craggy like rocks, its sound and cadence and figures from another age, we learn that Lemon Nash (his given name may have been Lemoine) was born on April 22, 1898 in Lakeland, Louisiana, 100 miles north and west of New Orleans, and was in the Crescent City before he was a year old. He tells us that he picked up music as a teenager, first guitar and later the ukulele.

He recounts the sounds and denizens of the rough-and-tumble saloons and "tonks" of New Orleans in the early part of the last century. "Way back yonder, there were lots of murder in some of those jernts back there in Quarters," he says.

Nash revisits his old and aptly named haunts, such as the Tumble Inn on Tchoupitoulas and Thalia, the Hustler's Saloon on Perdido and Rampart, and Pratt's, where the clientele was "Tougher than tough." He calls the infamous Storyville bordello, Lulu White's, "that big, mysterious racket house," and describes other locales filled with "good time dancers" doing the Grizzly Bear, the Snatch Back, and the Eagle Rock.

“Oh, and they would fight!” he says. “They would fight until the rooster crows.”

The universe he recreates is peopled by friends and colleagues remembered by their colorful nicknames. There's String Bean ("also known as Long Boy"), and Few Clothes Willie, Barrelhouse ("a leading serenader"), Ol' Drive 'Em Down, and Lollipop ("a swell guy"). We meet “Gyp the Blood” and “Battle Ax” who Nash says, “is now a TV repairman.”

Before television, even before movies, traveling entertainments crossed the country by wagon and rail and bus and automobile, bringing amusement to far flung reaches. There were circuses and minstrel companies, medicine shows and vaudeville troupes, and they all needed music. Leaving the city in the late teens, Nash spent the better part of the next few decades traveling mainly throughout the South and Southeast, working on the sideshows of the John Robinson, Downey Brothers, and Sells-Floto Circuses, trouping with carnivals and minstrel outfits. Over the half dozen reels of tape, one's skeletal notions give life and definition to what life might have been like for an itinerant troubadour on these traveling shows in the first third of the last century.

In the early twenties, on the Big Chief Indian and Western Cowboy Medicine Show, Nash made twenty-five dollars a night ("the most money I ever made in my life") by working just about every job on the lot. He was a musician, comedian, and purveyor of Dr. Rawling's Blood Tonic. He then demonstrates how he would call the people over to hear his spiel: “I'm a poet, I'm a poet, I'm a poet of note. If you don't believe that I'm a poet, c'mon over here I'll show it.” They came, he explains, and the skills went to work.

On that show, Nash says he wore blackface, white lips, “and a big ol' Dr. Jeckyll wig.” His voice, gravelly and knowing, rises with excitement as he pieces together his featured act, returning momentarily to nights under canvas with his comedic partner, Pork Chop.

“Man was he funny!” Nash says and then relates the duo’s feature performance.

Coming upon the Lemon and his tiny instrument, Pork Chop would begin the exchange:

Pork Chop: What you got there?

Lemon: A ukulele.

Pork Chop: A uke-a-what?

Lemon: A ukulele.

Pork Chop: A uke-a who?

Lemon: Ukulele.

Pork Chop: Fook-a-dilly?

Lemon: Uke-a-le-le.

Pork Chop: Oh, a ukulele. Can you play “Yankee Doodle”?

(Lemon plays “Yankee Doodle.”)

Pork Chop: That was great. How about playing “My Blue Heaven.”

(Lemon plays “Yankee Doodle.”)

Pork Chop: That was great, that was every bit of “My Blue Heaven.” Can you play “Sweet Georgia Brown”?

(Lemon plays “Yankee Doodle.”)

Pork Chop: (exasperated) You can't fool me, you been yankin' that same old doodle the whole time!

(This is evidently one of the hoariest jokes of the minstrel tradition. In a 1928 recording Moran and Mack, Vaudeville’s “Two Black Crows,” have a similar exchange using a kazoo and the song “Annie Laurie”).

As the interviews go forward, his memory sometimes fails him, or as he puts it: "Funny thing, when you get to a place where you have to think, you can't concentrate on your mind."

Dates don't fit, and some of the jokes have pieces missing, are mis-remembered. He tries to tell one about a shoemaker. He knows the punch line is “She put the last in first” but he gets confused. “Wait a minute,” he says. “How does it go?”



But when Lemon Nash is able to concentrate, the stories are so vivid and interesting that one gets lost in the telling. It's as if you momentarily join him that night in Knoxville, at Pickett's Hall, when a jilted lover confronts the other woman and stabs her in the "jiggler vein."

And of course throughout his narration there is his music, serving as the soundtrack to his life and travels. Nash is a fount of old titles, and on his ukulele he performs popular songs and jazz tunes, folk songs and ballads detailing long-forgotten murders, fragments of pieces lost to history, and those blues that, he says, "make a blind man catch a freight train." "The Big Rock Candy Mountain," tells of a bum's paradise ("the buzzing of the bees in the cigarette trees and the soda water fountain") and spurs his memories of his days hobo-ing throughout the South. That memory leads him to recall yet more obscure tunes, old jokes and tales.

After he explains his fondness for the key of B-flat, and that he likes to use a felt pick, "especially on the Dixieland numbers," Nash stops to take a drink of whiskey, and to thank Dick Allen for "that high-priced liquor you brought me the other night. All the Big Shots drink Champagne." And then he says, "If you kind to me, I'm like Jimbo the Elephant. I'll never forget ya," and quickly returns to remembering.

"Let me tell you the life of this song," Nash says, regarding the Clarence Williams composition, "Brown Skin, Who You For." "In those days the swells down on Rampart Street, when they see a pretty girl, say, 'Brown skin, who ya for?' Girl says, 'I'm for *you* baby.' But the next time the guy down on Rampart, he say 'Brown Skin who ya for?' she say, 'I'm for your Daddy when your Momma ain't home.'"

The lives of other songs serve to further illustrate Nash's exploits. His days on the railroad are punctuated by his performance of "I Left my Gal in the Mountains," and "Harbor Lights" is recalled in the context of his time as a Merchant Marine. He strums and sings a World War One favorite, "If You Could Fight Like You Could Love" and says, "I made a lot of tips singing that song to young soldiers at the train station."

But what is most musically affecting is Lemon Nash playing the blues. The incongruity of what he describes as "those old-time-way-back-yonder-blues," with their themes of lost love and despair, and the accompanying lightness inherent in the music of the ukulele, creates a compelling combination.

"I went to the gravedigger and fell down upon my knees," Nash exhorts in a sort of moaning parlando. "Asked the gravedigger, 'Give me that gal I love back please.'"

The cultural baggage carried by the ukulele—a moonlight canoe trip in some island paradise paired with the idiosyncratic tuning that gives the instrument its bright voice—creates a strange disconnect when it accompanies the haunting lyrics of the blues. While the underlying tone of the uke suggests that all is not lost, that there will be other loves, Nash's voice is so weary with experience that the sunny rhythmic backing does nothing to diminish the power of the words:

"I ain't never loved but three women in my life," Nash moans, "my mother, my sister and that gal who wrecked my life."

## I Like Ukulele Ike

A measure of the popularity Cliff “Ukulele Ike” Edwards enjoyed in the 1920s can be found at the beginning of Metro Goldwyn Mayer’s *Hollywood Revue of 1929*, that initial movie musical featuring a “Galaxy of Stars,” among them Joan Crawford, Laurel and Hardy, Marion Davies and Buster Keaton. Edwards was also in that number, another constellation in the Hollywood firmament. He first appears onstage while the mostly forgotten leading man, Conrad Nagel, and the wholly forgotten singer Charles King, are making their way through a bit of business regarding introductions.

King asks a large cast of dancers seated on stage, “Who is the greatest interlocutor in the world?” The assembled chorines reply in unison “Conrad Nagel!” while Nagel feigns humility.

Then King asks, “and who is the greatest lover on the screen?”

Edwards, small and effete, enters from stage right with an exaggerated sway and replies, “None other than Little Cliffy.” He assumes an odd, leaning pose while batting his eyes like a starlet and cradling a ukulele.

“Well, hello,” Nagel says, “who are you?”

“Oh, don’t tell me you haven’t heard of Little Cliffy?” Edwards says.

“Well, Cliffy who?” Nagel says, flummoxed.

“You evidently buy lots of phonograph records?” Cliffy asks.

“Yes,” Nagel says.

“All right, listen.” Edwards begins strumming his uke and goes into what he called “effin,” a kind of scat singing, an odd sounding rhythmic vocalization for which he was famous. Nagel smiles and nods in recognition, he looks skyward, his body language saying “Oh, of

course, Little Cliffy.” Nagel puts his arm around Edwards who continues to strum and offer his high-pitched moans.

Nagel’s reaction was understandable. While the twenties roared, the voice of Cliff Edwards sold untold millions of records. He almost single-handedly popularized the ukulele, making it *de rigueur accoutrement* with the raccoon coat set, another symbol of the reckless Jazz Age. He thrilled Vaudeville audiences, and starred on Broadway. “Ike stole the show,” Fred Astaire said, regarding Edwards’ introduction of Gershwin’s “Fascinatin’ Rhythm” in *Lady Be Good*, in 1924.

In the mid-twenties anyone could go to a record shop and buy a statuette of “Ukulele Ike,” in black face strumming a uke while seated on a tree stump. The local music shop carried the P’Mico “Cliff ‘Ukulele Ike’ Edwards” model ukulele. One could buy it and learn to play “That’s That” from *Ukulele Ike’s Comic Song Book Volume Two*, the introduction to which calls Edwards “the master of America’s own beloved instrument, the unassuming ukulele.” His face, too, was familiar, staring from the covers of sheet music hits like “Paddlin’ Madelin’ Home,” and “Who Takes Care of the Caretaker’s Daughter While the Caretaker’s Busy Taking Care?” Later in *Hollywood Revue* he would introduced a little tune that would become a standard, “Singing in the Rain.”

Today, try to talk to someone about Cliff Edwards and initially you’ll receive a Nagelian “Who?” But instead of launching into a wild, scatted chorus of “Hard Hearted Hannah,” say “Jiminy Cricket” and a nod of recognition is likely to follow. While that role alone should have secured him a perch in the lower reaches of our cultural space (his rendering of “When You Wish Upon a Star” won an Academy Award and became Disney’s theme), it is an anonymous sort of fame; most people merely remember the voice of a cartoon insect.

Edwards' accomplishments in the twenties put him on a tier just below Eddie Cantor and Al Jolson, but unlike their work, which can seem far away and tinny to the contemporary ear, Edwards's best records of the twenties still contain a sense of immediacy, a timelessness and resilience that few recordings of the period can muster. Listen to his 1925 recording of "Dinah" with cornetist Red Nichols, for example; it is completely alive. Or his 1928 recording of "Stack-o-Lee" with Joe Venuti and Eddie Lang, where his singing is bluesy and modern.

Although writers have devoted many words to the lives and work of "Banjo Eyes" Cantor and "Jolie" Jolson, an account of Cliff Edwards' career appears in a discography, cheaply typeset on a dot-matrix printer and costing \$80.95, the province of collectors. Yet to view Edwards's career in thumbnail is to read of the rapid rise and terrible fall of one of the twenties biggest stars.

Clifton A. Edwards was born on June 14, 1895 in Hannibal, Missouri. He made hundreds of recordings over the course of his career, all told more than 450 distinct titles. He appeared or was heard in eighty-seven motion pictures and featured regularly in Vaudeville, on Broadway, and on the radio. Edwards even had an early TV show. But his private life, like that of many a celebrity, got the best of him in the end. Edwards made and lost and made and lost again, millions of dollars. Despite his success as Jiminy Cricket in 1940, by the late 1950s he was a recovering alcoholic combing the back lots of the Disney studios looking for fill-in jobs. "Ukulele Ike," died in 1971 of a heart attack while living in a convalescent facility in Los Angeles, his body unclaimed for days.

Ironically, researching the life of Cliff Edwards, despite the hours of recording material and film footage—despite being able to see him sing and joke just as his original audiences did—is a bit like researching the life of someone who never left the stage, a figure who remains

in the recorded world of sound and image, and in the sensational pages of tabloid headlines. Would that he might step down into the audience and flesh himself out, like the old movie star in Woody Allen's *Purple Rose of Cairo*. Instead, all we have been left with, for the most part, is his image—the public persona he created, the Vaudeville clown or the role of Hollywood star that studio press agents delineated in publicity tracts: “Cliff Edwards lives fully every shining hour...Not a dreamer, but a doer, is this fine sensible fellow.” Then there are advertisements for his records, teasers that suggest his popularity, like a quarter pager in the Charleston, West Virginia *Daily Mail* from November 1924 that reads, simply: “Ukulele Ike – Hear these records....That’s all we ask.”

Indeed, the truest expressions of Cliff Edwards come from the recordings themselves. Listening for clues in the grooves of the old shellac discs, attempting to ferret out something of his personality in the way he phrases a lyric is to find a certain comic sense in his reading of “It Goes Like This That Funny Melody,” improvising a bit about President Coolidge with the line “and Coolidge said,” followed by five seconds of silence, or a baseness in his original compositions “I’m Gonna Give it to Mary with Love,” or “I’m a Bear in a Ladies Boudoir.” Except for a few memorable roles, such as a reporter in *His Girl Friday*, Edwards spent his film career behind a slapstick mask as the effeminate ukulele-toting clown.

Sadly, perhaps the most complete record of his private life appeared in Hearst newspapers. There one can find inch upon yellow-column inch of reporting on Edwards’ personal woes: “Ukulele Ike Poor Provider, Wife Asserts” the headline screams. Below, Nancy Dover (the first Mrs. Edwards) is quoted telling the court “The constant [financial] worry affected my nervous system to such an extent that I required the care of a physician.” More such

headlines, in the grand American tradition of tabloid style celebrity coverage, reek of the gossip surrounding his spiraling fame:

- Ukulele Ike tells of another man in divorce suit
- Ukulele Ike wins point in wife row
- Claim: Ukulele Ike's wife in man's pajamas at party
- Kiss throwing related by Ukulele Ike
- Ukulele Ike's wife tells of Mexican Party
- Ukulele Ike's wife tells of drinks

Edwards “won” the divorce on grounds of cruelty but lost the financial battle. He was ordered to surrender half of his earnings for the rest of his life as alimony. Just two months later his only son lost his legs in a train accident prompting his first wife to ask for more money for prosthetics. He re-married in August of 1932 only to be divorced by October. A few years later he was sued by his accountant, his gardener and, as yet another headline explained, for non-payment of a “Hair Growing Bill.” The *New York Daily News* carried the headline, “Debts: \$25,859 Assets: 2 Ukuleles.”

In a futile attempt to combat his tabloid reputation, Edwards said in a 1936 interview in *Popular Song Magazine*, “The public doesn’t care about my background as long as it can hear me play the ukulele and make funny faces.” Within that reckless personal life, Edwards remains obscure, residing—as he himself admitted—in the realm of caricature.

The ranks of men and women who knew and worked with Cliff Edwards, those who would be able to give a sense of the man behind “Ukulele Ike,” are quickly dwindling. But I searched them out, hoping to put some flesh on the skeleton. A call to Buddy Ebsen (*The Beverly Hillbillies*’ Jed Clampett) who Edwards had starred with in *Girl of the Golden West* in

1938 yielded nothing more than “he was a fine ukulele player” between deep, wheezy moans. Ebsen died two weeks later. Similarly, Disney animator Ward Kimball who was responsible for drawing Jiminy Cricket and had worked closely with Edwards for many years, told me simply “Cliff Edwards-- it’s too late, it’s just too late.” Kimball’s obituary appeared in *The New York Times* within a week of the conversation.

Other veterans of the Disney lot were able to pull back the curtain for me, if ever so slightly. George Probert, who worked in Disney’s music department, played clarinet on Edwards’ final jazz recording in 1958, “Ukulele Ike Sings Again.” He described Edwards as “a real loose character and a real professional.” He explained that another person at Disney, the composer George Bruns, had wanted to do Cliff a favor by having him record. “We went into the studio and did the whole thing in three hours,” Probert told me. “Cliff knew who he was, and he knew exactly what he was doing.”

Probert said that Edwards was friendly, but quiet. “He was pretty desperate for work in the late fifties and early sixties. He would just show up at the studio every day, sit down on a bench on the grounds and just hope for some voice-over work.”

Occasionally his friends on the lot, wanting to help, would get him something on the Mickey Mouse Club. “By that time he was pretty far gone. He always had that quiet blank look of a reformed alcoholic. He had been at the top, but had just lost it.”

Most of the remembrances of Cliff Edwards come from the waning of his career and his time with Disney. Frank Thomas, another Disney man, remembered auditioning Edwards for the role of Jiminy Cricket. “We found him perfect for Jiminy Cricket. His voice had gentleness and strength, it was defiant, he could get mad and be sympathetic. When he meets up with the Blue Fairy he is appropriately overwhelmed by her. My, he did a beautiful job on that voice.”



Thomas sighed in the memory and continued. “The sad thing, though, is that it didn’t bring him a huge amount of publicity or money for that matter. He always hoped that we’d use him all the time, but at Disney everything had to be right and perfect for that particular picture. For *Pinocchio* he was perfect, but when it was through, well it was through.” Thomas said that Edwards was very important to the people at the studio. “I mean the song, ‘When You Wish Upon a Star,’ it identified the studio, it was our theme.”

Like Probert, Thomas recalled Edwards as always being around the Disney lot, hoping for work. “He got a few things, the lead Crow in *Dumbo*, and he worked on the Mouse Club, wrote a few songs for the show.” As the years passed Thomas felt increasingly sorry for him. “I remember him telling a story one time about playing a show, a benefit, and singing ‘Fascinatin’ Rhythm.’ He sang us the whole song right there in the cafeteria: ‘Got a little rhythm, rhythm, rhythm, pitter pats through my brain.’”

Almost in a sort of reverie, Thomas was compelled to sing the whole song to me over the phone. “He was good guy, I guess, such a big shot in the early days, Ziegfeld Follies and all that, but alcohol got the better of him.”

In the mid-1950s the trombonist Don Ingle was playing in his father’s band, Red Ingle and the Natural Seven, when he met Edwards. From Christmas week 1953 through New Years Day 1954, the group had an extended engagement at Louisville’s Iroquois Gardens. “It was a glorified roadhouse passing as a nightclub,” he told me, “an old resort-style place that featured supper shows and dancing.”

That week Red Ingle got a call to go to New York to work on a television special and left his son Don as the leader of the band for the remainder of the engagement. For holiday week, the management put together a small variety show that the band accompanied. It included an

eccentric dancer, a trio of singing girls, and the week's headliner Cliff "Ukulele Ike" Edwards. "I was 22 years old at the time," Don Ingle said, "and, you know, to someone of my age *Pinocchio* was quite a big deal when it came out, Jiminy Cricket, heck, he was our man! So I admit it was a great thrill to be working with him."

Ingle soon found himself in the presence of a master vaudevillian. "I remember that he came into town and we had a single afternoon rehearsal. It probably didn't even last an hour. It's almost fifty years later and I still count it as the easiest rehearsal I ever made. He said, 'Just do your thing, just noodle behind me, I'll be alright.' He was just a marvelous old entertainer. His spiel was very simple, there was nothing elaborate-- just short and sweet little announcements between the songs, little Jazz Age references, like when we played 'My Blue Heaven,' he'd say 'It cost me a lot of money to have someone steal this arrangement from Gene Austin.'"

Perhaps the anecdote that best captures Cliff Edwards and Ukulele Ike sharing the same stage, is the one Al Cormier told me. I came across Cormier through an essay he wrote (about growing up as an Acadian in New England) that included a brief reference to Edwards. By Cormier's recollection, it was in the mid-1940's, perhaps 1945 or 1946, on 10<sup>th</sup> Street in Leominster, Massachusetts, when he was awakened late one evening by his father. It was so late, in fact, that it was early in the morning. "He woke me and my brother up and said that there was someone downstairs that he wanted us to meet. It was 2:30 in the morning and he had been at his Elks' meeting and then out drinking with his friends."

As Cormier tells the story he laughs, recalling that when he got downstairs all he could see was a small circle of light moving around in the corner. "When my dad turned the light on there was a man standing there, he was in his mid-fifties maybe, and I realized the light was

coming from a bulb that was inside a ukulele. “‘Kids,’ my father said, ‘I’d like you to meet Ukulele Ike.’”

It turns out that Edwards, plying the last vestiges of the Vaudeville circuit, had finished his show in town and didn’t have a place to stay, so the senior Cormier brought him home. “My dad shut the light off and said, ‘Play for us.’ We kids sat there and listened to him sing ‘Toot, Toot, Tootsie Goodbye,’ and ‘I Cried for You.’ I had never heard anything like it.” At the time, Cormier didn’t realize that the man in his house was Jiminy Cricket. He found out at breakfast the next morning, while Edwards slept on the couch. As he walked to school he met up with a friend and excitedly said, “Ukulele Ike is at our house!”

“Who?” his friend said, nonplussed.

“Jiminy Cricket. He’s asleep on our couch.”

## Cliff Edwards: The Tower Transcriptions

In 1943, Cliff “Ukulele Ike” Edwards, benefiting perhaps from a wave of wartime nostalgia for an earlier, easier time, returned to the recording studio. In the twenties, as a bright star, he had helped to provide the soundtrack for the Jazz Age, churning out hit after hit on labels like Columbia and Perfect and Pathe. Headlining at the Orpheum Theatre in Los Angeles in 1929, he was spotted by Metro Goldwyn Mayer’s Irving Thalberg and won a part in “Hollywood Revue of 1929,” introducing “Singing in the Rain,” the tune that would become his theme. In the Thirties he focused on an acting career, making thirty-three films for MGM, working as a minor comic in the Hollywood colony, his career dimming. But with his success as the voice of Jiminy Cricket in Disney’s *Pinocchio* in 1940, he became fodder for a string of newspaper articles that were little more than saccharine reveries about the “good old songs” from the “good old days.” As a result of this renewed interest, however, Edwards began an extensive recording schedule with a variety of what were called “transcription” services.

At the time, the bulk of radio stations across America were affiliates of the major broadcast networks, NBC, ABC, CBS and Mutual. But the networks did not supply a full day's worth of live programming. Transcription services filled the void by offering filler programs to stations throughout the country. Companies like World, Thesaurus, and Standard would produce radio programs in their own studios and then sell them on a subscription basis to these content-starved stations. There were no disc jockeys, as we know them today, but rather more generic staff announcers and the programs (stamped “For Radio Broadcast Only” and unavailable for commercial distribution) were sent on sixteen-inch discs along with a script introducing each selection. So, after “Fibber McGee and Molly,” or “The Jack Benny Show,” you might hear “15 Minutes With The Three Suns” ushered in by their theme “Twilight Time.” That program

might be immediately followed by the strains of “Singin’ in the Rain” heralding “The Cliff Edwards Show.”

Edwards’ initial transcription work was for the CP MacGregor Company, based in Hollywood, where on June 1, 1943, he recorded twelve titles accompanied only by his trusty ukulele. A mere eight days later, and on through late October of 1943, he worked for the Lang-Worth Transcription Service in New York, perhaps the most prestigious of the transcription outfits. Among the bands Lang-Worth assembled at Liederkrantz Hall (the nineteenth-century German beer garden on East 58<sup>th</sup> Street that became New York’s most celebrated recording studio) were those led by the likes of Count Basie, Jimmie Lunceford, and Tony Pastor, whose “girl singer” was a young Rosemary Clooney.

Over the course of those months Edwards would record over fifty titles for Lang-Worth. Some of the selections were performed solo, and on others he was joined by the bass player Joe Tarto, who had first waxed duo sides with Edwards on the Pathe label in 1924 -- including a particularly raucous bit of Jazz Age business, Walter Donaldson’s “My Best Gal.” More than half of the Lang-Worth efforts are available on the Audiophile Compact Disc “Singing in the Rain,” and constitute a delightful romp through the popular music of the early twentieth century, from songs that still hang in the ether -- “Ain’t Misbehavin’” for example, or “Yes, Sir, That’s my Baby” -- to less lustrous nuggets like “Minnie, My Mountain Moocher,” or “Oh! What A Night For Spoonin’.” The final transcription service Edwards recorded for was Tower. In Larry Kiner’s *The Cliff Edwards Discography* those sessions are dated “Circa 1944.”

Will Friedwald, the jazz and pop music writer, took quite a bit of heat for devoting nearly six pages of his 1990 book *Jazz Singing* to Cliff Edwards. Writing in the *New York Times*, Tom

Piazza said that he found Friedwald's choices in the book "arbitrary to the point of perversity," before noting that Edwards, whom he dismisses as "a vaudeville singer of the 1920s" (notwithstanding his selling of a reported 74 million records), was afforded more space than Bessie Smith. Dave Nathan, reviewing Bruce Crowther and Mike Pinfold's *Singing Jazz* in the publication "Jazz News," took another swipe at Friedwald: "Fortunately we are spared a long discourse on Cliff Edwards (Ukulele Ike) whom Will Friedwald seems so enamored with."

In *Jazz Singing*, Friedwald details Edwards's early career, his use of scat singing (what Edwards called "effin") and his tumultuous personal life ("Edwards was an alcoholic, a womanizer, a gambler, a junkie, a chronic debtor . . . .") before he discusses his transcription service work. Of the Tower sessions, Friedwald writes of the performances on the "strictly oldies repertoire" that, "far from having gone downhill, Edwards had actually improved since his glory years." And of the interesting backup instrumentation – bass, piano, xylophone and electric guitar – he says they "could have been fronted by either Benny Goodman or Red Norvo."

Edwards and the quartet recorded thirty programs. Each would begin with a thirty-five second snippet of "Singing in the Rain" followed by five songs. In total, he recorded 150 titles, about a third of which have ever been issued, on long out of print LPs on the Totem label. Others have appeared as part of a broader bootleg survey of his radio career, an eight CD set called *On The Air*, produced by discographer Kiner's son and available solely on ebay.

With their frenetic electric guitar and chiming xylophone, the Tower sessions are musically far removed from the sound of Edwards's heyday, but they capture the recklessness embodied in those early recordings more than anything he had done in the previous fifteen years. He has nothing left to prove and approaches the material with an insouciant air. He displays a compelling sort of confidence as he refashions the repertoire from the context of his early career.

“The Moon is Low,” a ballad he introduced in the Joan Crawford vehicle *Montana Moon* becomes, in this setting, a sort of low-down honky tonk grind, while an encore performance of his 1928 hit “That’s My Weakness Now” includes a bit of call and response interplay -- Edwards shouts “she’s got” and the guitar responds by intimating a wolf whistle. They seem to be having a ball.

“In my mind’s eye I can still see that studio on, I think it was West 40th street. It was a floor above the last floor, kind of a penthouse sort of thing. Oh my, those were great days . . . great days,” studio guitarist Tony Mottola told me over the phone in 2003, the year before he died. Although some writers credit the guitar on the Tower sessions is credited to electric pioneer Les Paul, (in the debut issue of the short-lived journal *The Ukulele Occasional* an interviewer convinced Paul that he played on some of the selections), the guitarist was Tony Mottola. His work with Edwards “Circa 1944” served as a springboard to a career that would take him to the studios of CBS Television as a music director, most notably for the show *Danger* starring Yul Bryner. He then spent fourteen years in the *Tonight Show* orchestra, under the direction of both Skitch Henderson and Doc Severinsen, made many pop recordings with stereo pioneer Enoch Light, and had an eight-year association with Frank Sinatra, who once called him his favorite guitarist.

“I was about twenty-five, twenty-six, and at the time I was a freelance studio musician. I got a call to be in a little group to back up Cliff Edwards,” Mottola said from his home in New Jersey. “I, of course, had known of him from his records where he did that scatting, what he called his ‘effin’. He was the first guy I had heard do that. So I got this call, it was for a transcription service and I, of course, accepted.”

Joining Edwards and Mottola were Joe Tarto on bass, Irving Brodsky on piano and Terry Snyder on xylophone. The freewheeling nature of the recordings and the off-the-cuff feel were no accident. “We’d get to the studio and probably Cliff and the company had picked out the tunes, and we’d just play. Nothing was planned out before we arrived, just the titles. Basically, we’d just pick a key, decide on an introduction, and then just go.”

They went. The first ten shows, available on the Kiner set, are a revelation, full of racehorse tempos, delirious stop-time choruses and constant surprise. A straight rendering of Hoagy Carmichael’s eternal “Stardust” is followed by the Ahlert and Young evergreen “I’m Gonna Sit Right Down and Write Myself a Letter” essayed with a sort of rollicking boisterousness. They sound fifteen years ahead of their time, and for the most part they eschew Big Band sweetness (although each show seems to give a single and compulsory nod to contemporary schmaltz) for a knowing looseness, all bounce and rock.

“The arrangements, they were just head arrangements, all done on the job, just off the top of your head,” Mottola said. “See, with a little group like that you don’t have charts, there’s no trumpets and trombones or anything.” That freedom is perhaps best exemplified by their singular performance of the Dorothy Fields/Jimmy McHugh standard “I Can’t Give You Anything But Love,” a lament from the stage show “Blackbirds of 1928” that Edwards had introduced on record that same year.

Edwards performs the tune as if it’s part of his anatomy – a scatted introduction followed by a declamatory verse: “Gee, but it’s tough to broke kid, it’s not a joke kid, it’s a curse. My luck is changing it’s gotten, from simply rotten to something worse” And then Edwards, whose string of failed marriages had been the stuff of tabloid headlines and depleted his resources, tosses off



the chorus like a bromide. “I can’t give you anything but love, baby,” he sings. “That’s the only thing I’ve plenty of, baby.”

The lament becomes a knowing walk in the park. “I do remember that he made a lot of jokes about alimony,” Mottola said. “I forget how many wives he had, but if we weren’t getting a tune right he’d say something about trying harder so he could make those payments.”

In the nearly sixty ensuing years, Mottola had not heard the recordings he made with Edwards. “I might have a cassette somewhere with a few things on it,” he said, “but I’d love to hear that stuff again.” So I read him a few of the titles of the tunes from the discography and upon hearing the words “Shakin’ the Blues Away” he began to enthusiastically croon the old tune Irving Berlin had written for Ziegfield’s 1927 Follies:

*Shaking the blues away, unhappy news away  
If you are blue, it's easy to  
Shake off your cares and troubles  
Telling the blues to go, they may refuse to go  
But as a rule, they'll go if you'll  
Shake them away*

Mottola cut himself off before the section about doing “like the darkies do.” And then his voice suddenly rose, the mind alighting on a memory, one not hit upon for decades, one about what he called the “the primitive conditions” of that little “floor above the last floor” studio. “You have to understand, this was an early period in the history of the electric guitar,” he said, “and the quality of the amps, well there was a lot to be desired. Today, you see these rock-and-roll guys, and they have their guitar strapped on and they grab the microphone and, well it’s like they’re having intercourse with the mic. In those days, if you touched a microphone while you were playing guitar you’d get electrocuted. So these recordings with Cliff, they were made before the amplifiers were shielded, and I’ll never forget we were up in that studio recording and

right in the middle of a take, Cliff is singing, and suddenly we're getting police calls through my amp. Man, the amp was picking up the police radio!"

And then, without prompt and in a sort of reverie, he said, " I really cherish my days working with Cliff, he was a very warm man, and outgoing, very sweet to work with. It was just so easy and such a weird sort of honor. And he was just so appreciative of the band. You know, I still keep a photo of him in my office, to remember that break."

He stopped for a moment and then loudly said, "Hey I remember something else. He let me play the ukulele on one number, "Ukulele Lady." Yeah, I took a sixteen bar jazz solo on the uke, a jazzy little sixteen bars. "

That was on show number 20, an all-Hawaiian themed program. Tower Transcriptions, circa 1944. "For Radio Broadcast Only," still unavailable for commercial distribution.

## **The Aftershow: Circus Past and Present**

## Circus Square

After a one-day stand at the Frederick J. Sigur Civic Center in Chalmette, Louisiana, mid September saw the “Stars of the Moscow State Circus” roll into the New Orleans Municipal Auditorium.

Billed as the “Circus of the Future,” the big show featured Ringmaster Crosby Espana (who learned his craft from Count Nicholas, one of the only 33 men to have ever served as Equestrian Director of the Ringling Brothers and Barnum and Bailey Circus), the award-winning equilibrists Nikoli and Anton, and Simone Aristov, who, in addition to a “Spinning Cubes” act, performs “Strongman Comedy.”

If the Stars of the Moscow State Circus is, indeed, the circus of the future, then it follows that in the future the circus will not have animals, as it also bills itself with the upbeat phrase “People Entertaining People” (although the ubiquitous free tickets that showed up around town recently pictured, among other “Stars,” Spiderman and Sponge Bob Squarepants). But the arrival of this “Circus of the Future” in present day Armstrong Park is also an unwitting homage to a little known chapter in the city’s past in the area best known as “Congo Square.”

Any New Orleanian who has spent an afternoon in the French Quarter has overheard our local tour guides leading hapless visitors through a maze of historical fact and fiction. They collectively conjure up a city where ghosts and slaves, voodoo queens and French aristocrats, nuns and murderers lived together in a spooky and decadent corner of the world. Congo Square is inevitably part of the stories they tell, as the site where African and African American slaves gathered in the nineteenth century to practice the dances of their homeland—or some say, to plot

their revenge. Before that hallowed piece of ground was Congo Square, however, it was Circus Square. Henry Castellanos, in his book *New Orleans As It Was*, notes that on that piece of land “Senor Cayetano held high revel with his menagerie of wondrous animals and a retinue of clowns and daring horseman.”

Although a variety of names preceded the use of “Circus Square,” that appellation did indeed stem from Don Cayetano Mariotini, an Italian who began making an annual trek to New Orleans with his “Cuban Circus” in the early 1800s. Within a decade, Cayetano’s equestrian show was a local institution. At the time there was even a popular piece of what Castellanos calls “Creole doggerel” that illustrates the Cayetano’s fame.

*'Tis Monsier Cayetano  
Who comes out of Havana  
With his horses and his monkeys!  
He has a man that dances in a sack;  
He has one who dances on his hands;  
He has another who drinks wine on horseback...*

“Throughout the nineteenth-century the maps go back and forth between calling it ‘Congo Square’ and ‘Circus Square,’” says Jack Stewart, who has researched the Cayetano circus in the context of his explorations of the Cuban influence on New Orleans music.

In his exhaustive notes to the compact disc “The Cuban Danzon: Before There was Jazz 1906-1929” (Arhoolie 7032), Stewart uses an alternative spelling to explain that “concurrent with Gayetano’s circus, but at an immediately adjacent site, a Mr. Renualt presented for a short period of time, animal fights in a small arena.” Stewart points out that these two shows “became mixed together in the subsequent folklore as the legendary ‘Signor Gayetano’s Circus from Havana with its wild animals.’”

That fact explains the breathless, and probably apocryphal, description in Herbert Asbury's 1936 book *The French Quarter*, of a summer night in 1817 when a group of flatboat

men, after an evening of revelry in the saloons of Tchoupitoulas Street, swept their way downtown to raid Cayetano's performance. After driving all of the spectators from the tent, the band of ruffians "released all the animals from their cages and destroyed the seats and the apparatus of the circus. Luckily Gaetano possessed but two beasts which might have been dangerous – an ancient tiger and a bison." Both were "slew with a club."

In 1881, the *New York Clipper* published the reminiscences of a gentleman who had seen the Cayetano Circus at a performance in Newburyport, Massachusetts, in 1810. The detailed description gives a sense of the goings on at Circus Square in early nineteenth-century New Orleans. "Mr. Cayetano executed on two horses the laughable farce of 'The Fisherman, or the Metamorphosis.' With a foot on each horse, he rode forward habited as an immensely fat fisherwoman, in a huge bonnet and uncouth garments. Riding around the ring, he divested himself of this and several other suits, ending in making his final bow as an elegant cavalier."

Nearly 200 years later, the "Circus of the Future" still relies on tried and tested circus displays. "The Stars of the Moscow State Circus" show features the "Russian Transformation," a similar act of quick-change artistry, but performed without the benefit of a horse.

## All Out And Over

In October of 1997 I ran away to the circus. Just for a day. I got up before dawn, threw a few necessities in a knapsack and boarded a Greyhound bus at the Union Station in downtown New Orleans for a short ride to Slidell, Louisiana, about 30 miles to the north and east. From the bus depot there, I caught a cab. Rubbing the sleep from my eyes in the backseat I sharpened my focus past the Factory Outlet sign and saw a billowing expanse of canvas with four tattered American flags snapping from atop center poles fifty feet or more above the ground. It could have been 1927. It could have been 1937, or 1947. I had come upon a relic, and it was hard to square with the strip malls that framed it on that particular morning. It was a circus tent, all candy stripes and patriotic stars, serving as an archaic bunting on the post-industrial American landscape, draped in celebration of both an imagined past and a last ditch effort to stave off a bleak future.

When I got out of the cab, the first thing I saw was an elephant wearing a worn and frayed harness, effortlessly dragging a chain of ridiculously heavy gauge. She had just finished her morning chore of raising the Big Top of the Clyde Beatty-Cole Brothers Circus. The tent now served as the town hall of an ephemeral city that had appeared suddenly along the interstate. It was 8 a.m., and I found myself in the circus world's version of the morning rush hour: the squeals of car horns and the belching of buses replaced by the winching of the trapeze and the roaring of the big cats.

Along the right side of the tent were rows of motor homes -- Airstreams, and Avions, Winnebagos and Holiday Ramblers – all neatly arrayed, a bucolic big top Levittown. Past those

wheeled domiciles was a maze of numbered trucks (“#60 Elephant Department,” “#99 Water Wagon”) with bright and fanciful logos painted in reds and yellows and blues, a barrage of color that slaked my giddy thirst for things nostalgic. The curved and serified letters held the same appeal to me as a pair of canvas sneakers or a Bix Beiderbecke solo.

That summer I had been reintroduced to the pleasures of the circus in Austin, Texas, accompanying my brother and his young daughter to a Ringling Brothers and Barnum and Bailey performance at the Frank Erwin Center. And while I was disappointed in the show's pandering to contemporary sensibilities, with its incessant references to the internet and television – the opening clown gag was titled “It’s Clown TV!” -- the animals never failed to delight, whether a half-dozen horses at liberty, or sixteen elephants tethered trunk-to-tail and rumbling around the hippodrome track.

When the Clyde Beatty-Cole Brothers advance men started leaving their coupons and posters around New Orleans in late September of that year, I called their offices in Florida and tried to convince them to let me spend the day on the circus back lot, to observe the workings of this American institution at close proximity. To determine I was not a member of People for the Ethical Treatment of Animals (PETA), who are a constant and nagging presence for the contemporary circus, Bruce Pratt, the show’s Marketing Director, had asked me to write him a letter to explain my purpose. After detailing what I had seen at the Ringling show I wrote, “My feeling is that one goes to the circus because it is, in spirit at least, antithetical to technology. It’s real...I’ve never seen the Clyde Beatty show but am excited by the ad copy, referencing ‘The Real Circus The Way America Remembers.’” Pratt agreed to my request.



I wanted to spend the day with the circus because I wanted to see how it worked. I wanted to see a flyer at rest and a clown without greasepaint. I wanted to smell the animals and watch them eat. I wanted to see what life was like for the vagabond in repose.

So I spent the first hour perched on a grassy slope twenty-five yards from the tent and I watched and I listened. An acrobat slept on a folding beach chair. Young aerialists strolled by arm-in-arm as if traipsing along Main Street. A constant hum of generators combined with the mix of voices of performers from across the globe -- Asia and Eastern Europe, South America and South Dakota -- all mingling together into a delightful, jagged Esperanto. Three kids whizzed by on bicycles, squealing in delight as if playing on some shady street in Anytown, USA.

I approached Brad Jewell, the Elephant Superintendent who was standing calmly next to Conti, the show's most popular elephant, and holding an ankus, the long stick fitted with a sharp metal hook used to keep elephants under control. Since the earliest days of the American Circus, elephants have been the heart of the show, as well as its iconic representation. I wanted to know how one became an elephant trainer.

“You start behind them with a shovel” he said, matter-of-factly, “and then you work your way up.”

Jewell told me the commands he used: “come here,” “get over,” “move over,” “back up.” He said training an elephant wasn’t much different from training a dog. I didn’t believe him. Standing with Jewell, among a half a dozen pachyderms, I said that the ad in the paper promised “Three Herds of Performing Elephants.” He said that two was a herd, so six elephants made three herds. I told him I was pleased that circus press agency had survived.

Jewell let me ride Pete. Her skin was freckly and pinkish, and her spine hard and uncomfortable as she lumbered and lurched in a wobbly loose circle around Ring One.

I found out later that Pete had killed a man in Fishkill, New York, three years earlier, quickly dispatching a young drunk who in the middle of the night decided to hit her with beer bottles and tamp out cigarettes on her skin. Although considered a rogue, Pete fared better than elephants of an earlier age.

After I dismounted from Pete, I looked around the tent, still empty of spectators, and noticed a kind of majesty in the cheery red seats and brightly decorated ring curbs. It was a vacant and weedy suburban lot transformed. Up close, the paint on the seats was chipped and gouged, and the ring rigged together with cheap door hinges. I sat down on a section of the rickety center ring and talked to Khrist Allen, the self-described “Tiger Choreographer,” while he shared what he called “play time” in the big cage with nine Bengal tigers and without so much as a stick. I thought to myself that Clyde Beatty, the show's namesake who developed the American adversarial style of big cat training, was rolling in his grave. While Allen talked, a 500-pound tiger stared at me from 15 inches away, separated only by thin wire mesh. Allen pointed out Ramu and Ceylon, Vanya and Sampson, Tasha and Tobruk.

Tobruk.

In the hour and fifteen minutes I spoke to Allen, Tobruk, the largest male of the group, fornicated six times with various females. Each time Tobruk began his duty, he would immediately let out a long and guttural moan that was otherworldly. “The penis of a Tiger is barbed,” Allen said clinically, “and it catches inside the female on its way out. The friction stimulates ovulation.” I was amazed by Tobruk’s refraction.

I walked back out into the sunlight, past a mechanic fixing the World's Largest Cannon (that in a few hours would propel a lithe young woman the length of the tent) and towards Clown Alley. I noticed assorted props scattered pell mell about the lot, including a small blue wagon, maybe three feet long and two feet high, emblazoned "Circus Time" in small wooden letters that one might buy at a hardware store.

In the Alley, the Casalino troupe, a trio of Peruvian clowns, talked movingly in broken English about their performing philosophy. Manny said, "If you are able to smile or laugh at something *you* are a clown. *Everybody* is a clown; we are just trained not to be. All we have to do is forget everything we have ever learned about being proper, about laughing too loud, about talking when you are not spoken to. To be a clown is to live that part of life you marveled at when you were a child."

"I am only a little clown," his cousin, Ugo, added, "I want to give a moment to you for laughing."

I talked to roustabouts and a funambulist. I had a conversation with Chris Rawls a fifth-generation circus man. "You ever seen that movie *Greatest Show on Earth*?" he asked. "I got 'sawdust in my veins' just like Chuck Heston."

Rawls served as the Back Lot Manager. He explained that the show had 225 people traveling in 27 semi-trucks and 35 house trailers. He told me how many pieces of sidewall canvas made up the tent and that the show had 14 "candy butchers" to sell concessions in the stands. Then he surveyed his charge and said, "This kind of show is dying."

I bought a Coke and a hot dog and then went back into the tent. There were maybe 275 or so people in the audience, almost one for every employee.

Rawls gave me a seat in the front row and in a moment the Opening Spectacle, as the circus' initial parade is always called, was upon me. In the swell of the music and the rumble of the elephants and the roar of the crowd, I saw that the small wooden wagon, which earlier in the afternoon had been dusty and forlorn, was now wobbling behind a Billy goat, transformed into the stuff of childhood dreams.

As the "Program of Displays" unfolded, I could see that this show was real and visceral and close. The guy who sold me a Coke cheated death on the Wheel of Destiny. Some of the acts were slow to develop. Tobruk seemed sluggish. An aerialist missed a catch and an acrobat missed a landing. The clowns, for all their eloquence, disappointed me with tired versions of tired routines. The pachyderms were ponderous.

The Clyde Beatty - Cole Brothers Circus was imperfect, but there was beauty in its imperfection. This hardscrabble show needed no contemporary trappings to delight its demographic, "children of all ages." It was an historic American amusement, people and animals working together under canvas. At the end of the show, when all of the performers returned for a final circuit around the hippodrome track, waving to a small but appreciative audience, the Ringmaster intoned the traditional final flourish, "All out and over!"

Nine years later, the Ringling Brothers Barnum and Bailey Circus continues apace, its three shows setting up in arenas large and small all over the country. From its earliest days more than a century ago, Ringling has been known as Big Bertha among show people. Today it continues to so outdistance in size and scope anything else that is called a circus that on some level it is a wholly different experience. A few years ago, I attended its 136<sup>th</sup> Edition, when it opened its two-year tour at Madison Square Garden in New York, and it was the antithesis of

the Clyde Beatty-Cole Brothers Circus. There were clowns, four times as many, and they performed well rehearsed, prop-heavy sketches. Pies were thrown, and buckets of confetti. Triple the number of elephants wore capes of brocade and velvet. There were tigers and acrobats.

While the Ringling show had so great a precision and perfection, it was seemed less a circus than a Las Vegas revue. The human aspects, those moments of physical beauty and derring-do, were overwhelmed by remote control clown shoe cars circling the track, an arena rock light show and a crude and cloying sing-a-long soundtrack -- “Jump on board and come along, Dive right in and sing the song!” Some in the crowd, more than 15,000 strong, did as they were told. They sang, and then they joined the clowns in the silly exercise routines of the “Let’s Get Circus Fit!” production.

But in the eyes of the kids, the candy and souvenir vendors making their way up and down the aisles were just as important an element in the show as the mixed horse and zebra act. “Hey, program!” the father sitting across from me shouted to one of the thousands of concessionaires. \$15.00. “Hey, coke!” he said moments later. \$5.00 in a commemorative cup. “Hey, snow cone!” he shouted. \$7.00 in a special Tiger mug. It was all I could do to keep from yelling “Hey, Rube!”

If Beatty-Cole was a small town five-and-dime, where you might call the woman behind the counter “babe,” Ringling was Wal-Mart, huge and impersonal.

In the years since I visited it in Slidell, the Clyde Beatty Cole Brother’s Circus is diminished. It not only has lost half of its historic name – it is now known as the Cole Brothers Circus – but it has also lost half of its historic soul. For its latest tour, the Cole Brothers Circus has signed a licensing agreement with Marvel Comics and this year’s show is called “Super-

heroes of the Circus,” as if there is nothing heroic, by itself, in entering the big cage, or being shot out of a cannon. The cannon, that “World’s Largest Cannon,” is about all that’s left from the show I saw in 1997. The elephant and tiger acts have succumbed to PETA protests and rising insurance premiums, and in their stead crowds are offered *Purrrrrfectly Performing Pussycats: Soviet Sorceress Maya Panfilova presents her impressive pride of domestic housecats in an astonishing series of superkitty stunts*, and the *Circus Festival of Golden Lions: Chinese Lion Dancers and the Cole Bros. Aerial Ladder Ballet* are combined in this celebrated pageant of the *Orient transcendent*.

From “Three Herds of Performing Elephants” and nine Bengal tigers to a clutch of housecats and performers in lion costumes. It seems Chris Rawls was right, the traveling tent show, a bulwark of American entertainment, is near gone. While the Cole Brothers Circus still wends its way across the country, pitching the big top from small town to small town, it is reduced to center ring displays by Spiderman and the Incredible Hulk, a sad burlesque of what was once a sprawling entertainment featuring man and beast, the “Real American Circus” reduced to memory. Last year in Florida, Ringling Brothers and Barnum and Bailey unveiled its all new 137<sup>th</sup> edition. It doesn’t have rings.

## Notes on Sources

### Ring One / Clowns

For general information on clowning, see John H. Towson, Clowns (New York, 1976). I am still trying to trace all references to Oakley in Detroit newspapers, many of which have been compiled (undated) by Pat Cashin on his website Clown Alley clownalley.net. This site crashed on April 21, and its archive is inaccessible at present. The Buster Keaton interview appeared in The New York Times on August 15, 1948. The photo of "Slivers" Oakley and Alex Seabert is printed in Mark Sloan, Wild, Weird, and Wonderful: The American Circus 1901-1927 (New York, 2003). "Slivers: Rag Eccentric" was printed as sheet music (St. Louis, 1909). The reference to Oakley as "Chalkface" and the obituary narrating the baseball routine comes from the Clown Alley clippings. Keaton performed his version of the baseball routine in The Cameraman (1928). Clips of this routine are available on YouTube. See, for instance, <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=tz7FVY0qitc>. Studs Terkel's words about "the Banana man" were recorded in the documentary Vaudeville (1997). The article "Mr. Slivers on the Serious Business of Being a Clown," appeared in The New York Times, March 24, 1907. For the March 8, 1916 item reporting Oakley's death see the Fort Wayne Sentinal, Fort Wayne, Indiana. The article "Slivers, Clown Suicide for a Girl" appeared in The New York Times March 9, 1916.

### Center Ring / Elephants

Much of "The Dead Rogue" is based on articles published in The New York Times between May 3, 1894, and May 12, 1994 and accessed from their online archive at [www.nytimes.com](http://www.nytimes.com). On the history of elephants in America, see Shana Alexander's The Astonishing Elephant (New York, 2000). For information on "rogue" elephants, see George Lewis' Elephant Tramp (New York,

1959). For a full account of the hanging of Mary in Tennessee, see Charles Price's The Day They Hung the Elephant (Johnson City, TN, 1992.). Edison's film, "Executing an Elephant," can be found online in varying degrees of quality. See, for example, <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=RkBU3aYsf0Q>. Video of Tyke's rampage can be viewed at <http://www.archive.org/details/ElephantRampageHawaii1994>. For other accounts of elephant executions, see Alexander's chapter "The Disappearance," in The Astonishing Elephant. Information on musth can be found in Gods in Chains (New Delhi, 2005), by Rheah Ghosh.

The photo of Black Diamond that opens "Kenedy Texas, October 1929" appears in I Loved Rogues, (Seattle, 1978), by George Lewis. The lynching photograph described in this essay and, sadly, many others can be found at [www.withoutsanctuary.org](http://www.withoutsanctuary.org). On the natural and cultural history of Asian elephants, see Stephen Alter's Elephas Maximus: A Portrait of the Indian Elephant (New York, 2004) and Eric Scigliano's Love, War and Circuses (New York, 2002). On the history of the American Circus, see Janet Davis, The Circus Age: Culture and Society Under the American Big Top (Chapel Hill, 2002). Many of the accounts of Donohoo's death and Black Diamond's execution can be found at [www.newspaperarchive.com](http://www.newspaperarchive.com). See, for example "Maddened Elephant Kills One," Los Angeles Times, October 14, 1929; "Giant Elephant is Executed for Killing Woman," Chicago Daily News, October 17, 1929; "Gangster's Machine Gun Sends 'Black Diamond' to his Grave," Brownsville (TX) Herald, October 18, 1929; and "Why They Condemned the Circus Pet To Die Like A Spy," Fresno Bee, November 24, 1929. For the speculation on proposed methods of killing Black Diamond, see "Elephant to be Executed," Los Angeles Times, October 16, 1929. Other accounts can be found in Dave Robeson's Al G. Barnes: Master Showman (Caldwell, Idaho, 1935), and the aforementioned I Loved Rogues. The information on, and the photograph of, Carmack Watkins, as well as the text



of Eva Donohoo's grave marker, appear in the article “Killing Rampage: Man Marks 70th Anniversary of Circus Elephant's Wild Run,” Corsicana Daily Sun October 13, 1999. Invaluable background and assistance regarding Black Diamond and circus elephants was provided by Buckles Woodcock and the readers of his web log, www.bucklesw.blogspot.com. For example, for information on elephants on “mud shows,” see comments to the October 12, 2005 post by Woodcock, “L. Clark Circus c.1919 – Ned and Mena.” The article “The Story of Black Diamond,” provided much background, especially on Diamond’s mud show days. It was published in Bandwagon, (May, 1959) and accessed at the website of the Circus Historical Society, www.circushistory.org. Much of my understanding of elephants and their care comes from innumerable hours spent with Joseph Ratliff IV, Elephant Manager at the Audubon Zoo, in New Orleans, as well as his charges, Panya and Jean.

### **Ring Three / Music and Minstrels**

The interviews with Lemon Nash, were conducted by Richard B. Allen, on October 3, 1959, September 28, 1960, and June 20, 1961. They are housed in the William Ransom Hogan Jazz Archive at Tulane University, where one of Nash's ukuleles is on display. His extant recordings are found on “Noon Johnson, Lemon Nash – 1960: The Larry Borenstein Collection,” released by the English label 504 as part of a series documenting early activity at Borenstein's art gallery (which would later become Preservation Hall). The “Two Black Crows” kazoo routine can be heard on the 1928 recording “The Two Black Crows, Part Six.” This recording can be heard, along with their other ten sides, at www.archive.org.

Hollywood Revue of 1929, was directed by Charles Reisner, and has yet to be released on DVD. Estimates on the number of records Edwards sold varies anywhere from 60 to 90 million. Most, though, estimate the number at 74 million. See, for example, William Ruhlmann in The All Music Guide to Jazz (New York, 2002) or an account of Edwards's funeral in the Los Angeles Herald- Examiner, July 29, 1971. A photograph of the "Ukulele Ike" statuette can be viewed at <http://www.jazzage1920s.com>. Ukulele Ike's Comic Songbook was published by Robins-Engel (New York, 1924). Discographical information as well as photographs of much of the sheet music, can be found in Ralph Kiner's The Cliff Edwards Discography (New York, 1987). The advertisement described appeared in the Charleston, West Virginia Daily Mail, November 21, 1924, and was placed by Lopin's Music Shop. The dates and publication information for the litany of headlines on Edwards' personal problems are printed in Kiner's discography. Information about Nancy Dover's ill health appeared in the Bismarck Tribune, October 21, 1930. An undated copy of the Popular Song article, "Meet Ukulele Ike!" is in the author's collection. The author conducted interviews with Buddy Ebsen, Ward Kimball, George Provert, Frank Thomas, Don Ingle, and Al Cormier in 2002 and 2003. Al Cormier's essay "Growing up Acadian in Leominster" appeared on an Acadian heritage website no longer extant. A selected filmography and discography is printed below.

For the essay on the Tower transcriptions, George H. Buck's expertise was invaluable in explaining the workings of 1940s radio. For information on Liederkranz Hall see "Liederkranz Hall--The World's Best Recording Studio?" by Bernhard Behncke, [www.vjm.biz/new\\_page\\_3.htm](http://www.vjm.biz/new_page_3.htm). Tom Piazza's review of Will Friedwald's Jazz Singing appeared in the New York Times Book Review on August 19, 1990. Dave Nathan's review of

Singing Jazz can be accessed at [jazzsingers.com](http://jazzsingers.com). Marc Weidenbaum interviewed Les Paul for the debut issue for The Ukulele Occasional, 2002. This publication folded with the following issue. The author, through the assistance of Lars Edgran and Bucky Pizzarelli, interviewed Mr. Mottola, by phone, in early 2003. The Mottola-Edwards recordings are found on the eight-disc set “Cliff Edwards on the Air,” an out-of-print bootleg collection, without any copyright information, but recording dates can be found in Kiner.

### **The Aftershow**

For a general circus history, including information on equestrian acts, see the electronic edition of Step Right Up: The Adventures of Circus in America by LaVahn G. Hoh and William H. Rough (Charlottesville, 2003) available at [circusinamerica.org](http://circusinamerica.org). On Congo Square, see Jerah Johnson, “New Orleans's Congo Square: An Urban Setting for Early Afro-American Culture Formation,” *Louisiana History* Vol. 32, No. 2 (Spring, 1991). Information about Cayetano’s circus is in New Orleans As It Was (New Orleans, 1905, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed.). Jack Stewart’s essay “Cuban Influences on New Orleans Music,” appeared as liner notes to “The Cuban Danzon: Before There Was Jazz 1906-1929” (Arhoolie, CD 7032). A new edition of Herbert Asbury’s The French Quarter: An Informal History of the New Orleans Underworld was published by Thunder’s Mouth Press in 2003. For the full New York Clipper article “Reminiscences of a Circus by One Who Saw it Seventy-One Years Ago,” dated April 2, 1881, see [www.circushistory.org](http://www.circushistory.org).

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