

I Ran Away With The Circus!

Angelo Rulli

Oh, to be a kid again and proclaim one's independence, to be free of all the rules and other stuff that society puts on us! So many times we wish for such a chance, and a few of us actually got the chance.

It was 1986 and I was invited to perform as an organ grinder on "A Prairie Home Companion," the National Public Radio program hosted by Garrison Keillor and broadcast from St. Paul, Minnesota, my hometown (Figure 1). Garrison is a long-time fan of mechanical music and when he learned there was a local grinder, I was invited to the show. From that appearance I was invited back three more times; however, this story is what happened after my first appearance.

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At the time I was working full time for the local juvenile justice system and one day at work I took a call from a traveling circus producer. He heard me on the radio and had been frantically looking for an authentic organ grinder for his recreation of a 19th century theater circus that told the story of an Italian immigrant family who came to America and had to learn circus skills in order to stay in this country. It sounded charming and even exciting, and, most importantly, it was my big chance to fulfill



Figure 1. The author on stage at "A Prairie Home Companion" where it all began.

my dream of running away with the circus. The circus was named "Circus Flora" and it was not ordinary in any way. It really was a theater circus, with everyone in 19th century costumes and a ringmaster who told the fable of an Italian family, the Baldinnis, who emigrated from Italy to America and had to find

gainful employment in order to stay in America. It was a story typical of so many who came to the US in that era, told with touches of compassion and humor. The circus was featured in *Time*, *People* and several other magazines and was recognized as a creative and authentic portrayal of circus life in the 19th century.

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Figure 2. Angelo with his Pell crank organ at the entrance to Circus Flora

myself to chasing my dream. I had to say no. He was persistent; calling back the next week, and the week after that, and accusing me of just trying to push up my asking salary. Not true! Finally, a month later, he made me an offer I couldn't refuse. He offered to fly me to Charlestown, South Carolina, for the world-renowned Spoleto Music and Arts Festival, at which Circus Flora would make its world premier. Travel, lodging and related expenses would be paid. When I imagined running away with a circus, I figured I'd be living in a tent and being miserable in the rain, etc. I remember thinking of the many grinders over history who suffered and toiled on the back roads of life trying to eek out a living; and here I was, traveling by plane to Spoleto, and staying in first-class hotels! This was going to be exciting. I later learned the other circus acts weren't amused at my accommodations.

Well, first a dose of reality: I had a custom wood case made for the organ and, in my wisdom, painted a target on the case immediately in front of the pipes with the word "FRAGILE" in large letters. I thought that might protect the pipes from being damaged. When I retrieved the organ there was, smack in the middle of the painted target, a huge hole, apparently put there by a fork lift operator who took target practice with his machine. Miraculously,

no pipes were destroyed, but several were knocked aside. Not a great start. The circus producer wasn't impressed. After first dealing with the airlines and insurance agents (neither of whom had any experience with a crank organ), I was able to get to the task of repairing the organ and preparing for the rehearsals.



Figure 3. A view of the organ with the world-renowned Flying Wallendas on the high wire over 150 feet above the street for the grand promotion of Circus Flora in Charleston, South Carolina.

I was a minor player in the circus, make no mistake. Our headline act was the Flying Wallendas and we were fortunate to have an international cast of performers and characters, each at the top of their respective arts. There also was a five-piece live band; however, I was the “star” musician with a prominent stage and I played the introductory music and the procession music as well as the music for the Wallendas, among others (Figure 3). It was fun—well mostly. I learned that high-wire athletes can be very particular about their music. They wanted to concentrate only on

their act and didn't want to be bothered with anything else. Well, crank organs can be temperamental, i.e. mine didn't appreciate the difference in altitude and humidity from Minnesota to South Carolina. There were a couple days of adjustment when the organ was not cooperative. Ciphers are always fun, especially when it comes along during a performance of the Wallendas on their high wire act as two performers are holding a chair on their shoulders while their sister mounts the chair in a spine-tingling

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act—suffice to say the Wallendas didn't appreciate the cipher. Artisans on that level (and height) tend to notice those little things.

The Spoleto Festival was all it was known to be. It's one of America's premier arts events and is named after the world-renowned Spoleto, Italy, festival, started by Gian Carlo Menotti. I had the chance to meet Signor Menotti and was able to bring greetings from my sister-in-law, the renowned opera star Maria Andreassi, whose Broadway stage career he launched some 35 years earlier. Life does have some interesting coincidences (Figure 4).



Figure 4. Angelo is greeted by Gian Carlo Minotti, creator of the Spoleto Arts Festival and esteemed playwright.

This first experience with the circus was so terrific! I was thrilled to be invited to the next city on tour, St. Louis, Missouri. I arranged to get time off work again and off I went. One of the memorable events there was the night the producer asked me to play at ringside. I had a really great seat, so to speak, for all the ring acts. I was excited to see up close how the performers were going to do back flips from one horse to another as the horses pranced around the ring. The horses were trotting and all was well, until they began galloping. Suddenly, these horses are kicking up sawdust and before I knew it, yup, the organ pipes were covered with sawdust. Real fine sawdust, really tiny specks of sawdust all over the pipes and, or course into the windways! Yikes!! You don't want to know what an organ sounds like with sawdust blocking the pipes. The producer wasn't amused. This was a real crisis; we had a week of performances ahead and the organ was in bad shape. I made a call to fellow organ grinder, good friend, and master woodworker Gary Stevenson, who lives in St. Louis. Working overnight, Gary was able to unglue, repair and replace the damaged pipes, something I'll never forget and appreciated beyond words. The next night, the producer didn't invite me to play at ringside.

The third stop on the tour was Denver, Colorado and by then I learned to be a bit cautious about unpacking the organ. While I flew back to Minnesota to return to work for a few weeks, the organ was shipped via the circus semi-truck. It was handled carefully and there was no damage to the case; what a relief that was. I was excited to open the case so it was a disappointment that several pipes fell to the ground when the case was opened. I



Figure 5. Lino Rulli performing at Circus Flora.

couldn't figure out what happened and asked the crew if they had any clues. They thought that maybe parking the trailer in the 90 degree heat of the blazing sun for a week may have caused the organ to be a bit warm. Umm, ok, let's see, is it possible that the dry heat might cause the glue to get a bit dry? Well, that and an obviously rough road trip from South Carolina to Colorado might have been the cause. Then came the fun part. Did I mention all of this occurred on July 4th? Try to find a hardware store in downtown Denver, or any other city, on July 4. I don't remember how it

happened, but I was able to buy a jug of glue and replace the pipes. Of course, the producer was aware of this little episode and by this time was aware he had a unique situation with which to deal. He had to be starting to regret his brainstorm to call this organ grinder in the first place. But he continued to smile. He was a great guy name of Dave Balding and I'll never forget the night that Flora the elephant, after whom the circus was named, fell ill and Dave slept on the ground, overnight, next to Flora, for comfort. That was Dave, for sure.

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The performances in Denver lasted 10 days then I was back home for a few weeks before we met up again in Keystone, Colorado, the world famous ski resort. This was really a spectacular setting for the circus, 10,000 feet up into the Rocky Mountains. It took all of us, especially

the performers, a few day to acclimate to the altitude. Naturally, the organ had another fit adjusting to yet another climate. Fortunately, this organ, made my friend, Alan Pell of England, has the pallet valves and bleed adjusting screws easily accessible from the back. Throughout my time with the circus I had to adjust the screws almost daily because of the extreme altitude and humidity changes. Dave the producer and I sort of became friends, though he HAD more important folks to deal with, he retained his special affection for having a mechanical organ and organ grinder as a touch of authenticity. I know that sometimes he did wonder if it was worth it.

A special treat was having my son, Lino, with me at the New York and Keystone, Colorado, appearances. It was summertime and he was off school, and a teenager who wanted to come along and get some idea what in the world his "Pops" was up to. The highlight for him was being invited to be in the circus parade before the performances by riding or leading Flora, the star elephant (**Figure 5**), while his "Pops" got to play the organ music for the entry parade . . . what memories!

Keystone is high in the Rockies and is an idyllic setting of spectacular nature. We took the ski lift to the mountain tops, where we could see for miles around, then hiked down, which took several hours. At night we were able to enjoy the outdoor hot tubs under the stars with the clean, cool air. Ah, such is the life of a circus organ grinder.

There were other stops along the way—Saratoga Springs, New York, Chicago, Illinois, Washington, DC. I didn't make it to all of them, although Saratoga brings back irreplaceable memories. It's hard to put in words what a crazy and wonderful year it was, traveling as an organ grinder with a really unique circus. The experience was unlike any I could ever have imagined, or replace again. And all because I bumped into Ron Bopp at an organ rally in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania in 1984 and decided to buy a Pell organ, just like his. Interesting how our lives can change because of circumstances that would otherwise seem so innocuous. Within two years of buying the organ, I was able to fulfill the dream of most every kid everywhere—to run away with a circus. And the bonus is I was the organ grinder! It's often said it's not the number of breaths we take, but rather the moments that take our breaths away. The circus never did that; but it did the next best thing—providing me with a lifetime of irreplaceable memories. It's a pleasure to share them with you. Happy cranking!

Photos: Courtesy of the author.

Angelo Rulli is now in his final career, that of real estate. Previously he was a meat cutter, probation officer, program manager, wedding photographer, college instructor, editor/publisher, and, of course, organ grinder.