

## A glimpse behind the greasepaint

# LITTLE PEOPLE UNDER THE BIG TOP

by Karen Feld

When you're four-foot six, self-conscious, and a delivery boy for a chicken carry-out, life can be one big joke—on you.

The door opens, the hungry occupant, vision fixed at eye level, looks vainly for his caller, then, idly glancing downward, smiles as he suddenly discovers a diminutive bell ringer.

"Hey, Martha," the callous lout shouts to his wife inside. "You gotta see this, I mean, really see this. The colonel sent us a midget, a real live one. I know we ordered a chicken, but this small fry's still alive."

Funny?

Not very. And not to Jimmy Briscoe of San Diego, the midget in question, who found no delight delivering lip-smackin' fowl after graduating from high school. There had to be something better, and it was then, after butting one too many jokes, that Briscoe decided to turn ridicule to mirth and become a circus clown. At least then, the jokers would be laughing with, rather than at, him. His refuge was the Big Top, his new persona a painted face.

Briscoe hit the road for Venice, Florida, and the clown college of Ringling Brothers and Barnum & Bailey Circus. Today, as

"The Greatest Show on Earth" moves its yearly extravaganza into Sundance country, Jimmy is back home whooping it up with twenty-seven other clowns. He's not any taller—unless you add his better half, circus wife Sandra, who's five-foot six—but he's definitely got his act together.

The mainstay of his routine is ageless. It's David and Goliath and Tom and Jerry all rolled into one. It pits lilliput against giant. As the crowd cheers him on, Briscoe, dressed in a silver lamé jump suit and matching silver crash helmet, mounts a Honda motorcycle to tempt a heavy-footed fate, daringly weaving his tiny two-wheeler between the legs of a mammoth pachyderm, a benign yet clumsy beast.

Where a lesser man might fear to tread, Briscoe zigs and zags with abandon. He may be small, but he's no chicken.

"Aren't you afraid the elephant might step on you?" people ask in awe.

"No way," replies Jimmy. "He's very well-trained in that area. My only fear"—he pauses for effect—"is that he's not housebroken."

Last laugh, exit Briscoe.

Circus people—Ringling travels with a troop of 300 performers representing twenty-two nationalities—join the Big Top for a variety of reasons; but if there's a common element, it partakes of escape, adventure, of living in a world unto itself. Not only for them, of course, but for the millions who watch them perform, many who still reckon time by the annual arrival of Ringling's thirty-six car railroad train.

Take the case of Fresno native Serf Rocha. He had much the same reason for becoming a circus clown as did Briscoe. Maybe a slightly better one. Serf, you see, stands but four-feet five, which makes him an inch shorter than his fellow clown. "People always looked at me funny because I'm a midget," says Serf. "Kids made fun of me. Now I make them laugh with me. The circus is my home."

It's also home to Frosty Little, the white-faced Boss Clown, who hails from Denver. But Frosty didn't beat a path to the Big Top

## “Making it to the big show was my dream.” --Frosty Little, clown

to escape the brickbats of a cruel world. Quite the contrary. He was just your average guy—in height, in age (at the time, 1968, thirty-two), and in job. He was schlepping away as a dutiful civil servant for the U.S. Post Office and the Public Land Survey Office in Colorado, going through your average career mid-life crisis when he flashed back to a navy hospital ward. It was there, years before, that he'd met a circus clown, a man who regaled him with circus lore, taught him to juggle, and fired his imagination with tales of a fun-loving life that defied routine.

“Making it to the big show was my dream,” he says with a satisfied grin. “This is the most fantastic life in the world.”

And that it is. Few people outside Ringling realize it, but the circus is an all-embracing life-style. It's total immersion. It's fifteen, three-hour shows a week, eleven months of the year, not counting traveling days, with a twelfth month, not for rest, but for work on next year's show.

And these shows are as fantastic as the

life-style they engender. Ringling stages the most spectacular show on earth—pardon us, Las Vegas—which is to say, it boasts the aforementioned cast of 300 performers, 200 animals, \$2 million in lavish costumes, and more special equipment—14 million pounds of it according to porters—than any act on earth. Moreover, it is held on the world's largest stage, an arena floor the size of a hockey rink.

At the center of all this bedlam is Kit Haskett, twenty-eight, the show's new singing ringmaster, a one-time ditch-digger and insurance salesman, who claims the distinction of being the first bearded circus barker in more than a quarter of a century.

Whatever the merits of that distinction, Haskett, who played Guy Mann in the new Howdy Doody Show, makes no bones about the physical demands of singing and announcing for three solid hours. “It's worse than digging ditches.”

Not that he's complaining. He loves people, loves to make them laugh, and, of course, loves to sing and blow his ringmas-

ter's whistle. It's all part of the show, and that's all the excuse any actor needs with a crowd to please.

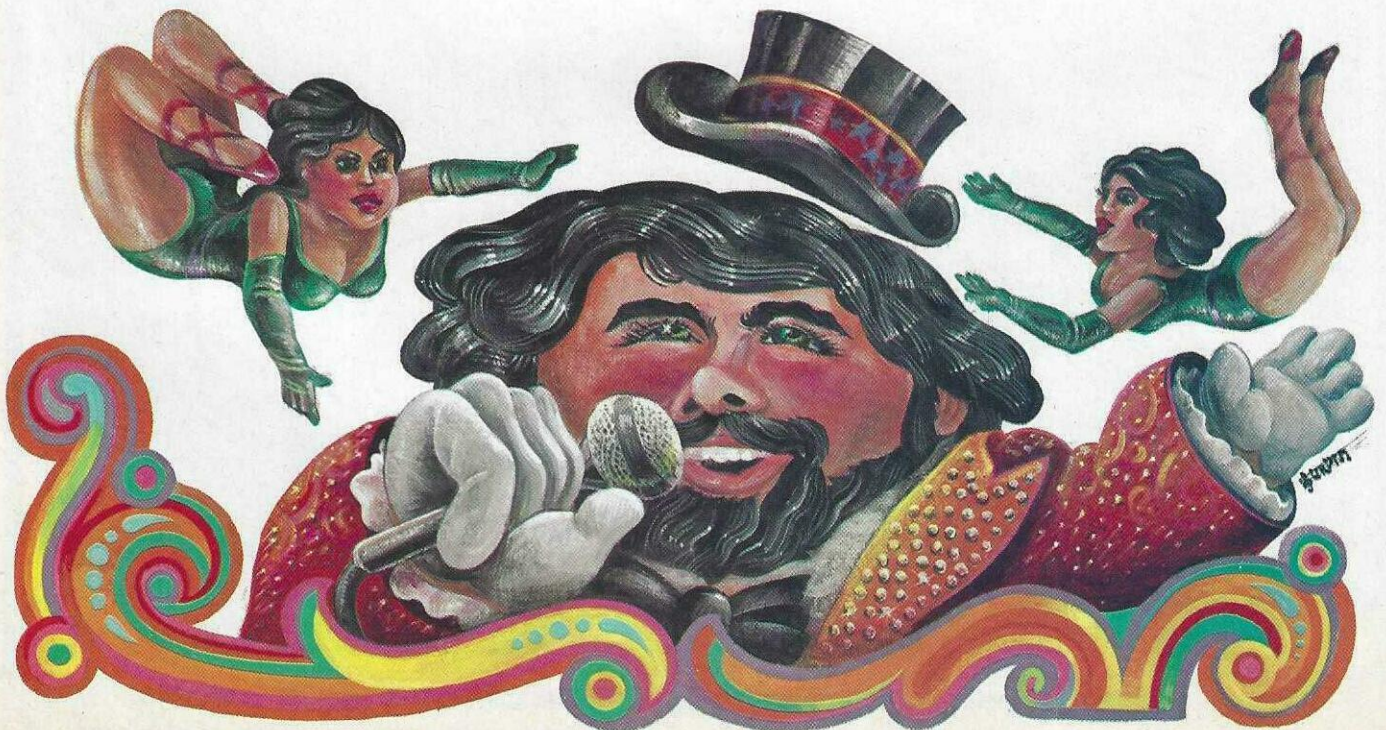
If Haskett has any circus-related problems, it's with his living arrangements. He's not complaining about them either; they're of his own making. Unlike the other performers, he and wife Kit move from city to city in a VW camper instead of aboard the Ringling train.

“The biggest adjustment we've had to make to circus life is learning to work in small areas,” he says, presumably meaning the camper. “Kit's pregnant, and we're still wondering where we'll put the baby.”

He did say that, didn't he?

Well, we know what he means—I think—and who can tell over the roar of the crowd, which is usually going wild just trying to keep up with the action in each of the three rings. It's like trying to watch three track meets at once.

In other entertainment media, audience attention is carefully focused on a single action, but more often than not under the



Big Top, spotlights, drum rolls, and ringmasters' announcements notwithstanding, the viewer is on the verge of sensual overload. The backstage camaraderie for which the circus is legend turns to good-natured competitiveness with acts vying for the crowd's coveted applause.

In one ring, you have Gunther Gebel-Williams, the world's finest animal trainer, making leopards appear from nowhere and pachyderms dance to disco music. Above, you have the great Brunos with their swaypole, the Carillo Brothers defying death on the high wire, and Don Martinez of the Flying Farfans doing a 3½-flying-trapeze somersault. And below—there's always something going on there—clowns abound, teeterboard artists vault to form pyramids, and lovable chimps walk stilts and ride motorcycles.

Had enough? Look again. There are twenty-eight gorillas coming at you from across the arena, pursued by safari hunters. Suddenly, as if by magic, the gorillas transform themselves into beautiful show girls, shed their gorilla costumes and ascend ceiling-length vines in skin-tight leotards to perform an aerial ballet.

It's too much, but there's more. This year's show includes you, if you're a kid. It features a Mardi Gras parade. Two youngsters from the audience are crowned King and Queen of the Mardi Gras, while fifty other children are chosen at random to

ride in the parade itself—in circus "scopes," wheels designed by Ringling, rolled around by clowns in court jester outfits and glamorous ladies in gold and red sequined gowns. All this is going on while a fifty-foot-long, ten-man caterpillar slinks around the hippodrome track. And

Gunther—you remember Gunther, the animal tamer?—is trying to upstage everyone by riding atop a tiger, who stands atop an elephant.

No, you can't top that.

Remember, this is the Big Top. The Greatest Show on Earth. **HW**



## The Circus in Sundance Country

If the youngster in you is crying to get out, or if your children are, here's a rundown on the Big Top's stops in Sundance country this summer.

The 107th edition of Ringling's annual extravaganza opened in Phoenix June 29, but you'll still have time to catch it through July 4.

Other scheduled appearances are: Tucson, July 6-10; San Diego, July 13-17; Inglewood, July 19-August 3; Anaheim, August 4-15; Long Beach, August 17-21; Oakland, August 23-30; San Francisco, September 1-5; Fresno, September 7-12; Portland, September 15-18; Seattle, September 20-25; Salt Lake City, September 28-October 3; and Denver, October 6-16.