

# CWM Audio 14

## Lee Stevens Interview, August 7, 2015

### INTERVIEW TRANSCRIPT Part 3

Scott O'Donnell: We have that for Connie and Dime. We just finished doing that for them. All the-

David SaLoutos: Oh my goodness.

Scott O'Donnell: I know. Are we back David?

David SaLoutos: Yep. We are back.

Scott O'Donnell: Take three everybody.

Lee Stevens: Day four. I was somewhere. I think I was still at Nordwalk.

Scott O'Donnell: We were at Garden Brothers.

Lee Stevens: Oh Garden.

Scott O'Donnell: Garden Brothers, and I just asked you what was it like to work with Rumpy? Was Rumpy on the show with you?

[00:00:30]

Lee Stevens: Oh, he was fantastic. He was nuts. Funny, funny, funny. Tragic, very tragic person, which made him that much funnier. He loved what he did. He really did, he was just ... it's hard to put into words, somebody like him. He was so dedicated to the show, and he was so confined in a lot of ways by his own demons, you know what I mean?

Scott O'Donnell: Mm-hmm.

[00:01:00]

Lee Stevens: I don't know anybody that didn't like him, and I don't know anybody he wouldn't help. He was just that kind of person, and funny. One year he was, for whatever reason, before the show started, it was just started, and he was in dress and drag as a drum majorette.

I don't know how he did it, he was at the top of the Maple Leaf Gardens in the 14 cent seats that nobody sat in for 35 years.

[00:01:30]

He was up there. And he starts screaming and blowing his whistle, which he had, he worked with a whistle. And the lights hit him, and the band started. He started the band.

And I don't know how he got from there down to the ring. I really don't know how long it took him. It couldn't have been that long, because he wouldn't put up with that long.

[00:02:00] And you piss your pants from the time the lights hit him, because he'd do all this shtick that only we knew, and the audience laughed, because they were stupid. It was a clown. And we were dying, you couldn't work.

You couldn't even come out and do an opening, because everybody was pissing themselves laughing, waiting for him to get down, and he never came down the same way twice.

The buildings were always different, he came down a rope, I mean he did stuff he wasn't able to physically do, he did. He was that kind of guy.

Scott O'Donnell: Yeah, I have a picture of him in his majorette outfit.

Lee Stevens: Do you really?

Scott O'Donnell: I do.

[00:02:30]

Lee Stevens: Oh my God. He was a funny, funny, funny guy. Even when we did the TV show, Ian produced a TV show, quite successful TV show, and it was Circus was the name of it in Canada.

Scott O'Donnell: Cal Dodd and Sherisse Laurence.

Lee Stevens: Yeah. Well even before them.

Scott O'Donnell: Yeah?

Lee Stevens: Mm-hmm.

Scott O'Donnell: Pierre Lalonde and Rumpy.

Lee Stevens: Or maybe he was there, but anyway, and Rumpy became a staple.

Scott O'Donnell: Right.

Lee Stevens: Which was wonderful for him. I mean he just excelled, and glowed, and he was alive when he was in make, he was just alive. We used to do [inaudible 00:03:03] parties. Everybody spoofed each other. He was always Joan Rivers, and Ian always was Johnny Carson.

[00:03:00]

And Ian was also serious about it, and he was funny in his own way, but Ian was very stoic, and not a crease, not a wrinkle, nothing was out of place. He was my idol, he really was. For a long time, he still is, for many reasons.

[00:03:30] But anyway, and Roger [inaudible 00:03:32], and drag by Joan Rivers, and he took it absolute to the max dead serious. It got where Ian couldn't talk, because he was just a funny, funny man. Very tragic life, very sad, very sad.

Like I said, he had his own demons he dealt with. What a good guy, and an outstanding clown. Really, truly was. He really was a funny, funny man.

Scott O'Donnell: Yeah, I agree.

[00:04:00]

Lee Stevens: And it was great for the show, and fortunately for him, in a lot of ways Ian spotlighted him a lot, as far as the logos, and everything was all Rumpy.

So it was nice, it was nice. He had a home there, it was his home. And we were the family. And I empathize with that, because my parents had no clue, they just didn't know what it was.

[00:04:30]

My dad, my dad was a very simple man, so anything I was doing, he was living vicariously through me. He was a guy that was very young, got married very young, had me very young, did a stint in the service, came home.

Worked in Procter and Gamble from when he was 17 years old when he started there, never would be take a promotion of any kind. He wanted to be one of the guys, he didn't want to be a boss.

[00:05:00]

And he knew he'd lose his overtime, and he worked like an animal, he really, truly did. And the more I did, the happier he was, because I was doing something he always wished he could do. And he said that just before he died.

He said, "You lived a life I wish I could have lived." I'm going to cry, but anyway. My mother thought it was all completely ... "How could you do this to our family?" Until I got to Ringling. And when I was inside the ring at Ringling, and she has all the neighborhood there, wasn't so bad.

[00:05:30]

My mother wasn't Jewish or Italian, but she should have been, because she was a stereotype for both, she just was. Anyhow, Garden Brothers was great. I found a home there and a family there. In fact, Mickey, Ian's wife, Mickey [inaudible 00:05:42] he is working here at the museum. His mom his my first born's God mother.

[00:06:00]

Which is a neat story in itself too. I was an altar boy in Staten Island. We had to speak Latin by the way. So if you need a Latin ringmaster, I'm it 'cause the accent goes away.

Scott O'Donnell: There's a big call for that.

Lee Stevens: Well, yeah. My New York accent just fades 'cause it's Latin. Who the hell knows

what it sounds like anyway.

Scott O'Donnell: Yeah.

Lee Stevens: I could get away with murder. Anyhow, our son was born. I couldn't find anybody to baptize him. They want me to join a church, sign a paper, sign ... What are you talking about? Go to Cata ... I was an altar boy for Christ's sake. I was in a Seminary.

[00:06:30] I was in the Seminary folks if you could believe that. When I burnt down a dorm from smoking in it, I was excommunicated from the Catholic Church. Anyhow, true story. We had to climb out a window. So anyway, St. Charles Seminary.

Judy Stevens: You hadn't married me yet.

Lee Stevens: It used to be a nice place. I didn't marry you yet?

Judy Stevens: No.

Lee Stevens: Oh, that's my wife in the background reminding me folks that you two can have perfectly white teeth if you use [inaudible 00:06:53].

Judy Stevens: You got to the point of meeting me.

[00:07:00]

Lee Stevens: Oh, I got to the point of meeting you? Okay, I'm gonna back up. I'll tell you the priest story in a minute. So now, I sweep Judy off her feet with my manhood, my style and charisma, my borderline is he or isn't he, which worked for me to this day. I love it.

[00:07:30] So, anyhow, she follows me on a world wind tour of the Canadian Bee Circuit which is where ... It's pretty much where the Dust Bowl meets the Depression. But we were out there anyway. And it was absolutely horrendous.

We had the semi that I got arrested in. Here about ... Which I will tell you about shortly. On my wedding night, naked by two of Baraboo's finest. One was sober, one was not. The one who was not wanted me to go with him so, yes, it does happen in Baraboo. So, anyway, we get out there, we do this wonderful Bee Circuit.

[00:08:00] The trailer we had, we're going across the deserts of Canada. There is a thing called ... There is a Canadian dessert.

Judy Stevens: It's a prairie.

Lee Stevens: It's a prairie? It's a fucking desert. So, anyway, if you don't like the f bomb folks, tough shit. So, anyhow, it's me. Well, we're driving along and we blow a tire. So we put a spare on. Well, we went through 11 tires. Now we have no more spares, 11

[00:08:30] tires. And we're driving and one goes so I chain up the axle on one side and we keep rolling on five tires.

Then the back tire on the other side goes. So I chain that side up. So now we're going on four tires. We can see the Ferris wheel off in the distance when one of the last two tires blew on an oil soaked sandy road.

[00:09:00] And the trailer decided to sink right to the frame and I drug it as far as to pick up without blowing the engine. We drag it and there's still a trench there [inaudible 00:09:01] where the trail had dug a trench.

Judy Stevens: And the sun's going down.

Lee Stevens: The sun was down. Now, what do we do? I don't know. I've got a truck full of monkey's and dogs and everybody's hungry. Well, there's a farmer Billy Bob over there in the field with headlights on his tractor plowing dirt. I don't know what he was doing 'cause nothing would grow out there. Maybe it was peanuts under the ground 'cause there was nothing green.

[00:09:30] So he comes tootling over on his tractor and said, "Y'all look like y'all having trouble, eh." And I said, "Yup. I don't know what we're gonna do." So he looked over the thing over the fence. He said, "I might be able to help you. Would you like some help?"

I said, "That would be wonderful." I said, "We're trying to get to where the Ferris wheel is." "Oh, you people them show people?" "Yes, we are." "Oh, we're comin' out there." And I listened to all the bull shit about him.

[00:10:00] So anyway he comes out with his tractor and he put the bucket under the back of the trailer. It was a semi and he lifted it up off of the ground and I put the truck in neutral and he pushed the trailer which pushed the truck about the four miles till we got to where we had to go.

[00:10:30] And then he just gently laid it down somewhere on the infield where I thought there was gonna be a stage. I didn't know. We have arrived. So, anyway, to make a long story short we had another guy come out. West Coast shows was playing it. Big, beautiful carnival and we were with ... The Kansas City Rockets was the band.

Judy Stevens: They knew one song.

Lee Stevens: Two songs.

Judy Stevens: Two songs.

Lee Stevens: Yeah, it's kind of like Bobby Green on the [inaudible 00:10:45]. You want a fast one or a slow one son? They were there and ... Oh, God. What's his name with the puppet act? What a nice man he was.

[00:11:00] There was old time vaudeville people. Actually, Pat Davidson was there with us and the great Garveckio. Fabulous performer, good friend Gary Slading was there too.

And, anyhow, we had a frame made. The guy went over the frame of the shop, put axles under it, lifted it up so for \$6,000 we were able to get out of Canada.

[00:11:30] Judy, how much money you have left out of that \$3,000? We ain't gonna make it. Anyway, we finished that. Got to the border and now they're not gonna let her back into the states at all.

Judy Stevens: They're not gonna let me leave Canada.

Lee Stevens: Yeah, the Canadian side wasn't gonna let her leave because I was kidnapping her. This dirty carnival person. I said, "No, I'm a circus act." "Oh, that's worse. Yeah, that's worse." So, anyway, they interrogated her for about four hours in Minett.

We came through there 'cause nobody goes through there so you would think you'd just drive through. It's like pulling Gosling Bridge into New Jersey.

[00:12:00] Judy Stevens: They were afraid he was stealing me.

Lee Stevens: I was kidnapping her under duress. She was leaving under duress. White slavery. I said, "I got a trunk full of monkeys and poodles. What are you talking about?" Well, they went on and on. They really did for about four hours. They finally let us go.

I said, "I don't know where we're gonna go. Oh, look Baraboo's on the way." So here we go tootling through to Baraboo, Buckles and Barbara were here. Eyella was here working. He was still doing his low wire.

[00:12:30] Margaret was hanging by a hair. Buckles and Barbara had the elephants naturally. Bill and Trudy had their dalmatian act and their horse act, liberty act. Happy was here, Peter was the ringmaster.

I'm leaving somebody out. I think Lorraine was working, her father Gabby was doing cloud swing. It was a hell of a nice show. All the Rodriguez family was here laying off because one of their family was working here. Therefore, we all parked for free.

[00:13:00] They're fun people too. So, anyway, I knew Barbara and Buckles. I went and said hello. I knew everybody so I went, "Hey, hey. Here we are." And I parked whatever street that is. It used to be a street, with a street name. I pulled in and just parked along the curb which is still there. And the asshole in the house-

Scott O'Donnell: You asked me to marry you.

[00:13:30] Lee Stevens: Oh, I know. I know. Oh, okay. Next to asshole in the house. So now Barbara says, "What are you doing?" "Oh, just passing through. We had a big thing at the border." And where you goin'?" I forgot where we were going. We were going somewhere and she said, "Well, it's pretty boring around here."

[00:14:00] I said, "Well, I wanna ask her to marry me but I don't think she's gonna." "So, ask her again, we need a party." I said, "Really?" She said, "Yeah. Go on." So she came in and they had [inaudible 00:13:55]. So she come in there. So I said, "Will you please marry me. Lets get married." Barbara said, "Yeah, she will." Pretty much that way.

Judy Stevens: I don't even remember.

Lee Stevens: Oh, I know. She said, "Yeah, she will." And that was a-

Judy Stevens: We got married.

Lee Stevens: That was a Friday ... Or a Saturday. That was a Saturday. Sunday we ran to Mount looking for stuff which there's nothing here in Baraboo was open. It's like Mayberry. So Monday we found a set of wedding rings that we still have on. Right here at the jewelry store and she found a little white dress somewhere and she went to Betty Lou's pretty good hair dressings.

[00:14:30]

Judy Stevens: We had to find a minister.

Lee Stevens: Then we had to find somebody to marry us. Catholics wouldn't marry us, Jehovah's Witness wouldn't marry us, the [inaudible 00:14:42] Temple no rabbi to marry us. I was not getting married at City Hall.

That I wasn't gonna do.

Judy Stevens: I wasn't either.

Lee Stevens: And she wasn't either.

Judy Stevens: I wanted a minister.

[00:15:00]

Lee Stevens: Anyhow, we went knocking on the Methodist church door. I wish I remembered his name and I don't. He was fairly young guy back then and he said, "Look. As long as it's not for publicity and there's no TV cameras, nothing you circus people do." He says, "I don't have a problem with it."

Judy Stevens: We had an interview with him.

Lee Stevens: We had an actual sit down interview with him and he was very nice. Well, then we had to go to City Hall to get paperwork, whatever we needed. Opal Costlemyer was the city clerk. She kind of looked like Josephine the Plumber and Lily Tomlin when she was the operator.

[00:15:30]

One ringy dingy. She had the jet black hair, she was older than [inaudible 00:15:46], jet black cold black hair with a pencil in it. With the gold chain around the glasses

on the end of her nose. She was about six foot three and a flowered dress.

[00:16:00] Perfect city clerk for Baraboo. So we walk up and she says, "Can I help you?" "Yes, ma'am, we want to get married." "You're not marrying that little baby. You're robbing the grave, or robbing the cradle. What kind of person you think I'm gonna give you a wedding license. Your parents know where you're at?"

She yelling at Judy. I'm the pretty one. What are you doing? So she got done and she was just playing around.

Judy Stevens: She was funny.

[00:16:30]  
Lee Stevens: We showed all the paperwork. She goes, " Oh, because you're the circus people your special around here. We're just gonna waive all the three day stuff. You don't need nothing."

She just handed me the license and gave us the license. That was Monday ... Tuesday. That was Tuesday morning and we got married Tuesday night between shows. We got married about 6:30. We had an 8:00 show back then.

Judy Stevens: 1985.

[00:17:00]  
Lee Stevens: 1985. In the big top, now where the wagon pavilion is. It was fabulous. We came up and Bill and Judy had a set of horses hooked up to an old Ringling wagon.

The one that was ... I think it was the one in the Greatest Show on Earth. I could be wrong. The one Betty Hutton and Gloria Grab had that little bitch fight in. It was fabulous.

I don't know who it was that night. It was either Betty or Gloria, I couldn't decide. Probably Gloria Graham. She was bitchier. Now, we came up and I was all dressed in white, sharp gray and pink.

[00:17:30]  
Judy Stevens: That was after you got arrested.

Lee Stevens: Yeah, I got arrested first.

Judy Stevens: Yeah.

Lee Stevens: Three times that day police came and, "You have to move the trailer." "Okay but I'm getting married today so I'll be gone in a few ... In just a little while." The guy came back, "Still got to move this thing. You're illegally parked." La, la, la, la, la. "I'm moving it. I'm getting married."

Finally, they send a detective. Plain clothes guy banging on the door. And I just got



[00:18:00] out of the shower and I look good. The steam is coming off my body. Anyway, some of the clowns came right away see what was going on.

So, anyway, I said, "Look. I'm getting married in about 20 minutes. I'm late. Let me get married and we'll get the hell ... We'll leave town. Just let us get married. All these people are waiting." Blah, blah, blah. "They're planning on this stuff."

[00:18:30] He said, "You really getting married?" I said, "Yes, sir." He says, "I got my divorce papers today. Do you really know what you're doing?" And he walked in and he sat on my sofa. I gave him a beer and he just talked to me while I was shaving and getting ready to go. He says, "You know what? This can all wait until tomorrow."

[00:19:00] But it was the guy in the house that had a semi that always wanted to park there and he couldn't. Bob, or whoever, was running ... I think it was Bob at the time wouldn't let him park there so he was pissed off because I was there and that's where that stemmed from. So he came to arrest me. He didn't actually handcuff me but it was close. And then the deed was done in the tent.

Judy Stevens: It rained.

Lee Stevens: It rained like hell. Oh, my God. We couldn't get married on the worst night. She spent \$30 on the hairdo, it should have cost 12. Buckle's son Shannon was gonna tape the whole thing.

[00:19:30] Shannon was just a kid. I don't know what he was, 12, 13, whatever he was. And he's out there with the big gigantic ... 'Cause nobody really had camcorders. It was all big stuff. He had one but he had no tape in the damn camera. So there's no tape of the whole night. He taped the whole thing but no tape.

Scott O'Donnell: It's kind of like here.

Lee Stevens: Yeah, anyway, I have two pictures of our wedding. That's all I have. I don't know if there's anymore but I have two. That's all there is and I got them from somebody. And then-

Judy Stevens: We went to the East Coast.

[00:20:00]

Lee Stevens: Well, we had Bill and Trudy's dog props was the altar. Margaret and Michelle's hair hang prop. We had all the bells hanging off it. June Sturgess's mother made the wedding cake. We turned the bowl tub over and we had it full of champagne.

I bought two cases of champagne. We filled the ice up with it. We had that. What else? I mean, everybody's props that were in the show was part of the ceremony which was really cool.

[00:20:30] And then we had a roped off section after we got married, the show started, and everybody ... Which was really neat. Made mention of us in their ... Six people in

the audience thought it was great. Hence, our marriage and life began again for me.

Judy Stevens: And that was 30 years ago.

Lee Stevens: 30 years, last Thursday, 30 years.

Scott O'Donnell: Wow.

Lee Stevens: And they said it wouldn't last. Best part is the people that had been divorced three or four times are the ones that said, "It'll never last." But we're still here. We're still here. So, it's great. So, anyway, a whole 'nother thing started up. We went to the East Coast from here.

[00:21:00]

Oh God, you asked me how I got to Ringling. I don't know. We were at Park Safari working. I started telling my story. John Cudio comes to my trailer, knocks on the door. Said, "Mr. Stevens you are to expect a phone call."

[00:21:30]

Scott O'Donnell: We were on Hammond when we rolled the thing. We knew Cudio because we bought the semi from him.

Lee Stevens: Oh, you want that whole tragic story? I'm telling you, it's better than a movie. Better than a movie. We're on the Hammond show. Fabulous, good times. [inaudible 00:21:47] was there, we were there, the Elkon sisters were there. Oh, my God. Mother Clucker was the ... Earl Michaels was the ringmaster.

[00:22:00] Big Band, fabulous. All good stuff. Sotanie was there, Pat and Lauren. Pat Davidson and Lauren Doopski were there. Roy Wells was there. John Cox with the white tigers was there. Voono wearing [inaudible 00:22:17] with his break away pole. Anyway, we were in Oklahoma city. We had the sea lions. This is at the Garden and coming out of Oklahoma City on the way to St. Paul I hit black ice and stuff in Ottawa?

[00:22:30]

Scott O'Donnell: Kansas.

Lee Stevens: Ottawa, Kansas. And we rolled the truck and trailer. Well, the truck rolled about three times and the trailer separated and rolled about four times down an embankment. And there we were on I-35 in the middle of an ice storm. I didn't know where the animals were. I couldn't find them anywhere.

[00:23:00] The truck was completely ... The box of the truck was all over the interstate. Blocked all the ... Had to shut the interstate down. We were trapped ... Alexandria was just several months old. We were upside down in the cab of the truck crushed into the truck and there was people behind us, as it turned out, saw what happened.

[00:23:30] Ran, stopped, pulled up behind us. Ran out and I think we kicked the window out. Broke the window out to get her out in the passenger side and she passed the baby

out first. And they took the baby, wrapped him up, then they got her out.

Then they dug me out. It was horrible, it was horrible, horrible, horrible. It was right at sun down. It was just a big mess.

Judy Stevens: We didn't lose anybody.

Lee Stevens: No, nothing died. And ended up the tank that the sea lions were in fell over into the median with the sea lions still in it. So they just rolled and had a cover over them.

[00:24:00] All the caging for the baboons when the truck rolled bounced and they all went under the pool. So everything was in the median. When they lifted the pool up 'cause it was a 24 by whatever eight foot pool.

Fiberglass pool. When the wrecker came and lifted it all the baboons were intact, they were frightened, but they were all intact. And the three sea lions were just there just looking at the cops lift the thing up.

[00:24:30] So I took some of the pieces of the broken truck and I took a bunch of stuff that was all over the highway and I made a makeshift corral for the sea lions. And then the baboons were okay so we just lifted all the ... I had big wooden boxes for each one. So they really took a pounding obviously.

[00:25:00] And they were all okay. And we got everybody off the highway. Now it's freezing, it's cold. Well, as it turned out there was a brand new animal shelter right across the road on the other side of the interstate up a little drive. It was a big old house.

Big, big house but they converted it into an animal shelter. I don't even think it was open to the public yet. It wasn't open yet. Well, they saw everything that was coming on. The cops said ... He went up and checked it out and they said, "Yeah, bring them all in."

[00:25:30] So they had the little truck come down and I think Judy was putting all the baboons from our cages into the truck. They had those metal cages in the truck and the sea lions we got them up. I had some fish.

I found a couple boxes of fish. It was frozen but nevertheless it was fish and I baited them to come up and they got in the truck. And everything was still on the highway but we went up to this animal place.

Judy Stevens: You didn't go. It was just me.

Lee Stevens: No, no, no, no. 'Cause I was the one that put the stoppers on the floor of the-

Judy Stevens: Oh, okay. Yeah.

Lee Stevens: For whatever reason they did they built this big high walls of tile, ceramic tile. Like showers where these dog runs were. So it was perfect for the sea lions.  
[00:26:00]

It was enough to give them about a foot of water and they could block the water off and they could slosh ... They needed water to go to the bathroom mostly and just to feel comfortable. So they were in there.

Now these big beautiful parrot cages. All stainless, brand new, lab cages. So we put all the baboons in that. Except two of them which Judy went back to get 'em. They were sitting outside.

Judy Stevens: They opened their cage.

Lee Stevens: they opened their cage 'cause they don't ... And they were sitting outside looking in  
[00:26:30] the window at the sea lions swimming around screaming at the sea lions so we had to chase a couple of monkeys down. But everything got in that building. It was all warm. I had plenty of food. I mean, we found through the rubble I found-

Judy Stevens: Roy stopped. Roy Wells stopped.

Lee Stevens: Roy Wells stopped.

Judy Stevens: And took care of Alexander.

Lee Stevens: Yeah, and took the baby. The people that were behind us were on their way home  
[00:27:00] from a funeral. They just ... Their grandson had just died. He was six months old and they were there to bury him so it was kind of bittersweet that they came and saved him. And then they actually came-

Judy Stevens: To the show.

Lee Stevens: Anyway, the trailer was demolished. Sharron Ward and Butch was her grooming  
partner in the pig act, stopped. She left Butch with us. She went on ahead and we went to the junk yard the next day and we took two by fours and put them along one whole side of the trailer was gone and we stuck two by fours in it.

[00:27:30] And the blue tarps, and duct tape, and duct tape, and duct tape, and duct tape. And rented a Uhaul truck. No, Uhaul wouldn't rent to us 'cause they wouldn't let us put the animals in it. We got one from Ryder with a hitch. And put whatever props were left.

Everything we could get off the highway we just either threw in the trailer or threw  
[00:28:00] in the truck. The sea lions I had portable cages by that time so they were both in their cages. Baboons were all on the floor in their cages. Everybody was okay and we drove from Ottawa, Kansas nonstop to St. Paul.

We got there about 5:30, 5:00, 5:30 in the morning and lucky enough we hit the button and the door opened and we pulled in. Roy Wells and John Cotts had told the Shriners what happened and they went to Sears and they got a pool. A swimming pool out of Sears, which was the middle of winter, but they still had.

[00:28:30] And they took all their empty cat cages from [inaudible 00:28:26] act and circled and hay and made a circle around the pool so at least the sea lions can go in, in the pool. So we roll in and it was horrible. I had the hair on my head was gone. Alexander who was ... I don't know how old he was. Was he-

Judy Stevens: Six months.

Lee Stevens: Yeah, six months. Five, six months old. He had a big huge hematoma on the side of ... Nothing happened that night. You didn't see anything but the next day he had a ... So none of us went to the hospital. We had to take the baby to the hospital. She did, I stayed with the animals.

[00:29:00]  
Judy Stevens: But they came to inspect us.

Lee Stevens: And then the USDA came. And they came, and they came, and I said, "What do you want to inspect?" We just had a ... "Well, you know you can't have it this way." No shit. It's \$116,000 pool and truck is laying on I-35, 700 miles from here.

[00:29:30] "Well, you know we had to ..." And they went on and on and they came every week. Every week, same story. Who do I have to call? What do I have to tell you people? We're doing the best we can. The animals are fine thank God. We had a 10:00 matinee that morning.

[00:30:00] She was at the hospital with Alexander. Lauren, Chandler, Slash, Fairchild, Slash Doosky. God bless Lauren at the time. And Davidson, Slash Davidson. And the Elkon sisters went in the house trailer and cleaned all the Donaka mess, all of that.

Judy Stevens: The rhinestones.

Lee Stevens: And cases, and boxes, and boxes I had of rhinestones. I had more rhinestones on one jacket than the whole fucking Ringling spec let me tell you. So, anyway, they went and they cleaned it where it was inhabitable anyway. Even with the big blue tarp.

[00:30:30] So there was a 10:00 show and Old Man Hammond, George Hammond, "Well am I gonna get what I paid for or not?" Such a wonderful, nice person. Just a heartwarming, enjoyable, human being. So I said, "Absolutely. I've never missed a show yet and I ain't gonna miss one now." So Roy's wife, first wife Elaine Slonan, was my assistant.

[00:31:00] She said, "What are we gonna do?" I said, "Have another drink and don't worry about it. Just stand there." And she did. When I say throw me a ball, pick one up and throw it. I don't care which one it is. Just don't worry about it.

We did the seal act and just before I played the horns, the seals played "How Dry I Am" on a set of horns that came from Fuzzy Plunkett that he had made in Mexico

City in 19 God knows what. He was on the Coals Show.

Judy Stevens: He trained us.

Lee Stevens: It's the '40s. Yeah, and he trained us and trained the sea lions. The first set we had.  
[00:31:30] That's a whole story. I mean, that's another movie by itself. Oh my God, what a trip he was. Fabulous, brilliant, animal trainer.

So underrated, so overlooked but anyway, just before I do, "How Dry I Am"  
[inaudible 00:31:45] "Oh, what's the matter?" But the seals hitting me on the foot. I said, "Oh, you know she wants more applause." And okay fine.

[00:32:00] He said, "By the way, Captain Stevens we have very special guest in the audience." And he turned around and he said, "Ladies and gentleman, not that you would know would but they were just in this horrific ..." He told the whole story. "This horrible accident and the baby's at the hospital with his wife.

This is the elephant trainer's wife helping him and he didn't want to disappoint the people of St. Paul, Minnesota. You were promised a sea lion act and the show must go on." And he said, "And even furthermore, the people that saved their lives and pulled them out of the burning wreck are sitting over here."

[00:32:30] Which was true. And he said, "They just came back from a funeral of burying their grandson so they lost one and they gained another." Oh, my God. I sat on the ring curb and cried. They had to carry me out.

It was one of those things that ... So anyway, that was Hammond Morton. Where are we? Have we got to the '80s yet?

Scott O'Donnell: Head to Ringling.

Lee Stevens: Oh God, so we're in ... To answer your question from before, Cudio let us stay at his ... He said, "I won't give him any money but they're more than welcome to come  
[00:33:00] into the farm and regroup. And whatever I can do to help, I'll help but I don't give nobody no money." Which is fine. We pull into Graves Lake, or whatever, Chicago.

North Chicago ... Where are they? Geneva and anyway we bought a semi we did this, we did that, we did this, we did that. And Cudio was more than generous with his facility and he was very accommodating.

[00:33:30] Another guy that you have to know him to really appreciate the guy. He's not what he appears on the outside. He's just not although Hurter would argue with that. So, anyway, now we're ready to roll.

We're all going back to the Ammy show and I get a phone call from ... Oh, no I had to call George Hammond. We were supposed to play Princeton. The tank wasn't ready, it was still wet. The fiberglass and we enlarged everything. I mean, it was just-

Judy Stevens: It was beautiful.

Lee Stevens: There was nothing for us. It was just an open semi but the two thirds of it was for the sea lions and the baboons was all whoopy do, heaters, and filters, and two filters, and salenators, and all this stuff.

[00:34:00]

[00:34:30] So I said, "We're not gonna make the Princeton." It was two days to Princeton. "That's my alma mater. What are you trying to do to me?" And then, "Mr. Cudio thinks he's gonna sabotage my show." He went off at which point I called him, "You Lebanese sheet wearing such and such." How can I put that kindly.

Speaker 4: You didn't go back to Hammond?

Lee Stevens: Yeah, we did. Anyway, I called him several adjectives. And I hung up on him. We drove an old semi tractor with the new trailer, no windows. Well there was windows but if you rolled it down you couldn't get it up and only one windshield wiper on the passenger side.

[00:35:00] No heater and we drove that truck ... I never drove a semi in my life. Johnny Walker and John Cox and Cudios just said get in and put it in third gear and go. And I drove it around the property there and learned how to hit the air brakes and do all this.

Bump, bump, bump, bump, bump, did all that. I put it in third gear. I got it to fifth and never stopped from Grey's Lake to Springfield. I fueled up one time by Pennsylvania line. Never turned off the truck, she had to sit with her foot on the clutch, never took it out of gear.

[00:35:30] Filled it up and I climbed in, put my foot on the clutch, she slid over, and we went. And we didn't stop and we got to the Big E for the Hammond show. Now I had nothing to get the sea lions out so there was two picnic table. I had to put that up against the trailer and make a ramp.

Judy Stevens: We almost froze to death that night.

Lee Stevens: Oh, we almost froze to death. Yeah, we did. Baby was wrapped in a basket rug that we got from Ellian Rose there. It was horrible.

Judy Stevens: So cold.

[00:36:00]

Lee Stevens: Freezing cold. Freezing, freezing cold.

Judy Stevens: And the windows wouldn't go up.

Lee Stevens: No, I rolled it down to pay a toll and it wouldn't go back up.

Judy Stevens: We were in the sleeper.

Lee Stevens: Yeah.

Judy Stevens: 'Cause we didn't have a trailer. It wasn't built.

Lee Stevens: There was no trailer.

Judy Stevens: The semi trailer hadn't been built for us just the animals.

Lee Stevens: I paid my dues. It goes on, and on, and on. I mean, it just does. I mean, I've done ... I did a juggling act, I did an aerial act, I did cloud swing. Laura Harriot, Lauren Fairchild, and Chava on Cross of the Barns taught me cloud swing 'cause I booked a cloud swing before I ever knew what it was 'cause I needed the job.

[00:36:30]

I was good. I was very good. If you needed it, I did it. It was good. Cross of the Barns is fabulous. I was in the blow down ... The tent was a week old. Not even a week, five days old and the tent blew down. Boom. Micro burst, gone, shredded, and it looked like a scene from, The Big Circus with John Wayne.

[00:37:00]

Not The Big Circus. Was it the Big Circus? No, Circus World. When the people came in off the road where the parking lot was, was one end. One round end and one pole. When they came through the marquee into the tent, there was no tent.

[00:37:30]

It was a mud pit. Just a mud pit and I always wore white with the whatever color jacket but I always had white shoes, white pants, all white. White ruffles, white lace, and the circus fan said, "How the hell you gonna work. Don't you have something to wear in the rain?"

[00:38:00]

I said, "This is it." I said, "You didn't pay to see a salesman from JC Penney's did you or Pete the farmer?" "How you gonna keep clean?" I said, "That's my problem." And I never forgot that and I had 17 pairs of white pants, 17 white shirts, four pairs of white shoes. And that's the way it always was. Even on Joyce Big Bell Show.

So I always remembered that stuff. I had no family in the business. I started saying about that, you people became my family and I don't take that lightly. I really don't. I have fantastic memories of so many people. Most of them are dead.

[00:38:30]

I was very lucky that a lot of the old performers like me. They like me because I had the balls to try. I wasn't afraid to take a risk. I wasn't egocentric. I didn't have an ego to worry about.

Ada Smyer, God bless her. First time I ever worked with her, she was watching the show, I happened to be ... And actually there was three rings of dogs. And from that first show on she had her, Bruno, and even Clause stood behind the ring and they watched me work every single show. And then they wanted me ... At one time, she said, "Would you like to work my tigers?" She says, "I just like to watch you work."



[00:39:00] That sounds conceited, I don't mean it that way. I love the business and I didn't learn from other people I learned what not to do from other people. And it was my choice. Not that I didn't respect 'em but that don't look good. Turn this way, turn that way.

[00:39:30] Lot of idiosyncrasies I just picked up by watching what I didn't like people doing. So I just auto corrected myself constantly. I'm very blessed. Very, very, very blessed with my family, my sons, my daughters. I mean it's just I just only scratched the surface, I mean.

Judy Stevens: Ringly.

Lee Stevens: Ringly-

Scott O'Donnell: Well you hold the distinction of being-

Lee Stevens: We haven't got there yet.

Scott O'Donnell: I believe the only act to ever do all three units.

Lee Stevens: Yeah, we're purple people.

Scott O'Donnell: Purple.

Lee Stevens: Julio said, "Mr. Stevens, you're gonna get a call from Mr. Feld and don't leave the trailer till you get the phone call." So immediately I knew they were full of shit. It's Roy Wells, and John, and Cudio all 'cause they knew how desperately all my life that's where I wanted to be.

[00:40:00]

I mean, I expired to that and Las Vegas which I had a chance for that too. But anyway, so the phone rings, "Hello, is Lee Stevens ..." "Yes." "This is June Foresight, Mr. Feld's secretary, would you please hold for Mr. Feld." And I said, "Kiss my ass." Clunk. So whatever time went by.

[00:40:30] Ring, ring, ring. " Mr. Stevens?" "Yes." "This is really June Foresight from Mr. Feld's office. Would you please hold for Mr. Feld." I said, "Roy, stick it up your ass. This ain't funny." And I hung up. So ring, ring, ring.

[00:41:00] Now it's a guy. "Is this Lee Stevens?" "Yes." "This is Kenneth Feld, if you hang up now you're gonna blow a good opportunity. Listen to what I have to say before you hang up then make up your mind."

Scott O'Donnell: Then you almost fainted.

Lee Stevens: I shit myself. I shit myself. I was standing against the wall, I just slid down the wall. How do you prepare for something you waited all your life for? There's no way to prepare for it. I didn't know what to say. I was just babbling. Worst than I am on this tape, just babbling.

[00:41:30] So he said, "How would you like to be part of Greatest Show on Earth?" And I said, "If this really is Mr. Feld, I've waited all my life to hear that." I said, "I hope this isn't a prank."

He said, "I assure you this is not a prank. This is really Mr. Feld. If you'd like to call this number back here's the number in Vienna, Virginia and I'll pick up the phone." And I said, "I don't think there's any need to do that. Thank you sir. I apologize. Please apologize to ..." I didn't know her name at the time.

[00:42:00] I said, "To the lady who called." I said, "I thought it was people were joking and they said you got a call and I didn't believe it." And he said, "Well, it's me." He said, "Well, what's your answer?" I said, "Well, that's a hard question to answer." I said, "There's so many variables. Yes, the answer's yes." He said, "Okay." He said, "We're going to Japan. First I'm taking you to Disneyland, California."

[00:42:30] And then, whatever it was, it was nine or 10, 10 weeks I think, and then Japan for whatever Japan for the first time. I said, "Okay." And he said, "We're very interesting in the sea lions." La, la, la, la. "I know the baboon act is fabulous."

But turned out it had something to do with Michael Jackson and Captain EO at the time at Disneyland. So it was Captain EO Theater. It was all Captain, Captain so it was a natural fit I do the captain thing. Well then Ron Sabaguini got involved. He said, "Well I have one of my associates ..." He didn't say associates. "I'll have somebody call you and get the details." And so on, and so on.

[00:43:00] And I made the financial deal with him which was nice. And I always did. I didn't deal with Tim, or anybody, it was always us and Kenneth. So I grabbed her, immediately had sex, when he hung up the phone. I couldn't perform because I was too excited.

So, anyway, she did though.

Judy Stevens: Stop.

[00:43:30] Lee Stevens: No, I'm just kidding. So they called and it was really convoluted to put this whole deal together. We had the semi, it was gonna be parked at a certain location with Roy's elephants and so on.

Cudio's cats were going as well and then ... Or at least to Disneyland. They had a special truck they were gonna have built to come get the sea lions to carry 'em from my truck which was another holding tank behind the stage and all this under tunnels and all this fa la la. It was really pretty an elaborate set up to get to have me there.

[00:44:00] Well, as it turned out we finished in Parks Safari, got home and low and behold one of my best sea lions died. I drained the pool, I went to Isabell's up the corner, I

don't know if I was buying rock salt or something for the filters and I got home and everybody was in my yard.

[00:44:30] The sea lion was just lying dead at the bottom of the tank. Oh my God, I was beside myself. I didn't know what to do. Don Phillips, God bless his soul came in his pajamas which were not pretty but he was that kind of wonderful, wonderful, wonderful person. And took me over toward Orlando by Sea World to have a necropsy done.

[00:45:00] 'Cause I had to have one done for the USDA and all of that and it was horrible. She had a form of feline leukemia. So, who would think a sea lion would get a feline ... But she did so there was nothing that I did and I was cleared of anything. It was just unfortunate thing.

Well, then I called Kenneth and I said, "Kenneth, I can't come." "What do you mean you can't come?" I said, "One of my sea lions is dead." He said, "Well, you have three." I said, "Yeah, the other one's not really finished." "I don't care."

I said, "Well, I do." He says, "No, no, no. You have a contract. We have a deal." Blah, blah, blah, blah. I said, "Let me tell you something. I'm not coming." He said, "It doesn't matter. Everything's ..." I said, "I've waited all my life to be there."

[00:45:30] This is absolutely what I said, "I wanted all my life to be on that show. I don't want to be anywhere else and I'm not gonna go there with something that's less than what you're paying for. I'm not doing it because in six months, or whatever it is, down the road you're gonna have hard feelings.

You're gonna feel like you've been ripped off. You're gonna feel like I'm not doing my job and I don't want that. I waited too long for this and I'm not coming with a second rate thing." And he said, "Are you serious?"

[00:46:00] I said, "Yup." He said, "Lee, I can't think of anybody that would ever do that. I just can't think of anybody that would just turn it down just like that." I said, "Well, I'm not doing it. I'm not ready to go. It's not the act you're paying for and I'm not coming with second best."

[00:46:30] And he said, "Okay, see what you can do." Well, in the meantime I found another sea lion at Bush Gardens and I started training her. Every day I was going, everyday I was going, everyday I was going. And as it turned out there was another sea lion act in America that lost one of their animals and my sea lion, Claudia, mysteriously disappeared.

[00:47:00] I went there one morning, she was gone and she was in a desert city. And was in the show that night 'cause I broke in the seat warmer. So, that was the end of that. So it was way above me. Too political to get involved in so I just said, "Well, that's the way it is." I called Kenneth back. I said, "No."

I said, "You know the players. If you can change that situation okay, I'll come but

I'm not coming ... I'm back to square one. After all this time I'm back to square one." He said, "Well, I have to admire your fortitude." And he said, "Somehow, some other ..." He said, "You're gonna be part of the Greatest Show on Earth just because of what you've done."

[00:47:30] He says, "I can't believe you're doing it. I don't like it but I promise you." And it wasn't three months later he called back. He said, "You ready to come?" I said, "I'm ready to come." I said, "I don't have any seals." He said, "I just want the baboons." Same money, it was even a better deal so it was very nice.

Judy Stevens: So then we went to Venice.

Lee Stevens: We went to Venice and Uncle Creepy was sitting behind her on a big sofa with a yellow pad. So Judy took out her own yellow pad and they were doing the death eye on each other while I had a conversation with Kenneth.

[00:48:00]

I shouldn't tell this but it came down to, "You really gonna give up the Greatest Show on Earth because you're not getting paid for the CVS television special that they were getting for \$40 million for?"

[00:48:30] I said, "Mr. Feld, I'll do anything for this show. I'll do anything for any show. Absolutely free as long as you're getting it for free. If you're getting paid, I want to be paid. That's only right." And he said, "Really? You would turn it all down. That's the stipulation on this whole deal?"

I said, "Everything's fabulous. I'll do anything for free. If you're not making money then I won't make money. But if you're getting money, I should be paid." He said, "You're serious?" I said, "Mr. Feld, we can go at this all day." I said, "I want to be here more than you. You have no idea how bad."

[00:49:00] This is all deja vu. I went through this whole big thing. I said, "But if your decision is your no, then I have to be ready to walk. I just have to. I just have to." He said, "Okay. If it means that much to you, okay. You're the only one that's ever, ever, ever." Now y'all know. It was a lot of money. Nell Carter was wonderful to my son.

[00:49:30]  
Judy Stevens: Then we went to Mexico ... I mean, Japan.

Lee Stevens: Yeah, I never ... We never asked for anything after that. It was wonderful, wonderful, wonderful, wonderful. The trip to Tokyo, or Osaka, was a complete nightmare.

Judy Stevens: Oh, that's another day.

Lee Stevens: How much more of those chips you got.

Scott O'Donnell: Oh, we're clear now. We can go for long.

[00:50:00]

Lee Stevens: Oh, okay two chips just for my trip to Osaka. No, anyway, it was horrible but we got there. I think we opened on my birthday in Osaka. Yes, and my grandmother died the same night. It was fabulous. I won't go into all the details about King Tuss trying to kill everybody and all that because it's all documented anyway.

[00:50:30]

However, since you brought it up. So there was a bunch of us acts who weren't even in spec because we were very fortunate, very fortunate. All we had to do was the act. No opening, no closing, no finale, nothing.

[00:51:00]

It was great until the day this particular elephant was having issues. And there was several of us highly esteemed entertainers sitting in the seats watching this take place. And me being one of them said, "I'm not even gonna be on the property if they ... If he comes walking out I'm going up to the ginza, I'm not sitting in here."

Well, me and several other people who do sway poles that remain nameless on the motorcycle on the high wire that were in Japan in 1989, didn't realize that there were 25 showgirls and 22 clowns sitting in front of us listening to all this experts in the background.

[00:51:30]

Well all of the sudden that day kind of went by and I'm sitting in one of three house trailers we had. We had it very nice with the whole veranda and the rose garden and all of that. "Hey, Mr. Feld how are ya?" He said, "I'm not doing too good." I said, "Oh." I said, "You look good. What's wrong?" He says, "I don't know." He says, "I have a problem and you have to help me with it."

[00:52:00]

I said, "I'd do anything. I told you that. I'm with it and for it." He said, "I'm glad you said that." He says, "I have 30 showgirls and 25 clowns that just don't want to be in the tent anymore when the animals are in there. They're not gonna be in spec and that's the spec.

[00:52:30]

I mean, how am I gonna do a spec without them?" I said, "I don't know." I said, "What the hell. What happened?" He said, "I don't know. They were listening to some of the acts talking and after all they don't know. Half these people never been on the ... They don't know anything. They're first in maze, they never been around.

They listened to all the experts in the background comp aligning about how frightened they are and all that so I don't know. Do you have any suggestions what I can do to solve that problem?" And I'm thinking oh, shit. Oh, shit. We were ribbing and carrying on, these poor people thing ... Oh, my God.

Judy Stevens:

Well, it was also your nightmare.

[00:53:00]

Lee Stevens: Yeah, I'm deathly afraid of elephants. I had recurring nightmares of being chased by an elephant and no matter where I hid he found me. So, anyway, he didn't get me but he always chased me until I woke up.

So I had this phobia about this elephant and I didn't like that elephant anyway. I never did. In 40 years I been around it, he never did nothing I just didn't like him 'cause he always looked at me with an evil eye. Even from across the building he always found me in my mind.

[00:53:30] Well, anyway, I said ... He said, "You know maybe if those people that were concerned were out there it would give the courage to the other people to know that it's okay." So I said, "Judy, I think he wants you in spec."

[00:54:00] Jim Hols was behind him shaking his head. Mike Falls just shaking their heads. And he said, "It would be better if you were out there. Maybe you should go out there." And I said, "I don't know Mr. Feld, I gotta dress the monkeys."

He said, "I don't know, we could change that program. I can do anything I want here. I think you need to be there." I said, "Are you serious?" He said, "Yeah, I'm serious." And he said, "It's on you." And I said, "I understand. I understand." And where did they put me?

[00:54:30] The elephant and me holding the God damn trainer the elephant. So no matter where the bastard went he was gonna kill me. I was six feet from four in a half feet of tusk and a four and a half oink jay between his legs.

[00:55:00] It was horrifying, terrifying but I looked good. I will tell you, I looked fabulous. When I came out, the spotlights hit that elephant I just leaned a little bit into the light and I looked good. It got me through. It was horrible, absolutely horrible.

Judy Stevens: You did every single show.

Lee Stevens: Until the elephant decided-

Judy Stevens: It didn't want to be in spec.

Lee Stevens: I think I'm gonna kill 27 showgirls and 12 clowns in one swipe. And I said ... I let go of the thing and I turned and I ran and grabbed my children and locked ourselves in the building and prayed to God the elephant didn't see me.

[00:55:30] And I threw the costume in the dumpster, broke all the bugle beads, ripped all the feathers, stomped on it, threw it in the dumpster. You can take this shit and shove it up your ass. Where's that little bastard with the afro, I'll kill him.

[00:56:00] Where's that fat son of a bitch. He wasn't funny as a clown. Where's that son of a bitch. He wasn't funny as a clown, where's that son of a bitch. Oh, I went nuts. So I think it was Roy Wells and Johnny Walker and them guys kind of grabbed me and gagged me. Literally put their hands over my mouth.

Judy Stevens: You were kind of panicking.

Lee Stevens: Yeah, I was ready for ... I was done. Get me a plane, find me a helicopter, I'm leaving. I only think that one other time. That was in Mexico, we were on a cruise and I was leaving. Call me a helicopter, get me out of here.

[00:56:30] It doesn't work that way. Didn't work that way in Japan either. However, I ended up doing it anyway. I had to save face until on the blanket of King Tuss, the star of the show, we had a pie car over there by the elephant department.

We had the pie car and in comes King Tuss and [inaudible 00:56:43] sing, "King Tuss" and these 50 spotlights come on. The tent seated 12,000 people. It was spectacular.

[00:57:00] Unbelievable set up and the curtain opens up and Jolly Baboons standing there, "Okay, bring 'em in." And in comes King Tuss with Johnny Walker and Gary ... Forgive me. His brother just died.

Scott O'Donnell: Thomas. Thomas.

Lee Stevens: Yeah. Gary Thomas is in the sheet dragging, walked us behind him. And on a big blanket painted in red spray paint. On the side of King Tuss, in Tokyo, today's pie car special, southern fried chicken, \$4.00.

[00:57:30] And it went past Charlie Bowman and he's standing and he's looking, and then he reads it and then he thinks about it for a minute and then he looks at the back door, he looks at me, he looks at the band. And I've never seen a fat man run so fast.

He ran, his elephant was getting ready to go back into the ring, second center ring, and he grabs it. Trying to pull it off the elephant. Oh, my God. We were on the floor dying. We did a lot of that in Japan.

[00:58:00] We were American acts who didn't give a shit. We're not going back to Communist land, we're going back home. What are you going to do? We had a good time. We had a lot of fun. I brought one monkey in Tokyo. We had to bring 16 home to get to one.

They're very good business people apparently. A lot better than I was. We had an orangutan we were gonna bring back, we didn't do that. It was an international scandal. I was held three weeks against my will.

[00:58:30] I was the first person to get out under machine gun cover. It was amazing. The CIA met me in Kennedy Airport. Three black limousines, men in black with sunglasses on, set up a flight. They put me in the back of a race horse, big beautiful race horse trailer.

[00:59:00] Me, the washing machine, all the baboons, everything. Get it in, get it out, get it off the property by six. You've never been here, you didn't go, you didn't leave, you didn't arrive. You were gone.

Judy Stevens: It was scary.

Lee Stevens: Very scary. My kids are both Canadian and Americans. They're American citizens. Canadian by birth. She couldn't get them in ... One was three years old and they were both turning three and turning one in Tokyo.

[00:59:30] She got back finally to the states after the 27 hour trip through Taipei, and Hong Kong, and Bangladesh. The customs, or the immigration, they wanted one kid to go to Canada and the other kid to ... Where did he want to go, back to Korea. They're one and three, anyway. She went through that nightmare.

Scott O'Donnell: You came back from Japan and went to one unit?

Lee Stevens: Blue.

Scott O'Donnell: Blue first.

Judy Stevens: The greatest two years.

[01:00:00]

Lee Stevens: Wonderful, wonderful. I think mostly because, you can tell by the tape, I don't take myself so seriously. I do for nine minutes at a time. Don't play with me in spec, don't play with me in my act, and I take that very serious.

I don't take myself very serious because I used to hear other acts, older acts, "I am the greatest. I am the ..." This or that. Who said you were other than you? You know what I mean? If other people say, "Wow, you did this. Wow, you did that."

[01:00:30] Then it means something. I don't like to blow my own horn because it sounds like those people to me and I don't want to sound like that. So if I'm appreciated and I was liked, it's a blessing. It was wonderful. It was wonderful.

Just don't mess with my act, don't mess with spec. Whatever I had to do. In front of the public don't mess. Backstage I'm sarcastic and it's all tongue in cheek and I do it out of fun. Life's too short.

Judy Stevens: We've made wonderful friends on the Blue Show.

[01:01:00]

Lee Stevens: Oh, my God. Fantastic friends. Fantastic, Charlie Bowman was wonderful to us. He just was. He was the most despised man by most. They didn't know him 'cause he was the same way. He was the same way.

He could be crude, he could be very cruel but you had either prompt it, or take it, and after you took it for a while and it didn't affect you, you were all right with him. I mean, the first ... Oh, God.



[01:01:30] The first week we were in Tokyo, they got a huge big swimming pool which was in case of a fire it was a water source. Charlie Bowman's wife Eraselly, comes strutting in. Looks like something out of a movie.

All in turquoise with white and turquoise shoes, white and turquoise jewelry, hair is all done. She looked like a million dollars. Me and Roy Wells picked her ass up and threw her in the pool. Bam, she kicked and screamed all the way and I was, "You know what? Who the hell are you?"

[01:02:00] Boom, in the pool. Everybody went in at one point so why shouldn't she. Well, she said, "Whatever you do ..." She could not ... She was all makeup ... Let me tell Charlie, let me tell Charlie. Nobody say nothing. Let me tell Charlie. Well, she did and I still have the bruises on my back where he slapped me every time he walked by me.

[01:02:30] Either on the back of the head or just he knocked the wind out of you. He was a big man and you just take it 'cause you knew he had to save face somehow. And it was fine, it was fine. I had a discussion with him privately, more or less, told him what I really thought about him.

How much I emulated him and I did and he couldn't have been nicer. And it wasn't me kissing his ass it was just telling him the truth and I was just ... Don't show your ass to me. Don't ruin my image I have of you. All my life I wanted to be you, I watch you, everything.

[01:03:00] You're like Tuskanini with the cat. Everything's beautiful, everything about you is beautiful. Don't destroy that. He got all welled up and cried. I got all welled up and cried. We cried on each other's shoulder.

We had breakfast and lunch every day after that. He was a pretty bad diabetic. I always had orange juice and candy bars in our house. We were closest to the back door if he needed something right away. Or if he couldn't get to his dressing room.

[01:03:30] Or if Eraselly, she worked for the [inaudible 01:03:25] so she wasn't there. She was always in the office counting money. So we looked out for him and he was very vain. Nobody really wanted to know that. He didn't want nobody to know that.

We were very lucky. All the management was wonderful. We didn't ask for nothing. I did my think when I had to do it. I was very professional and like I said I had no reverence for anything after that. I did, I just see how far I could push the envelope and it was wonderful.

[01:04:00] It was great and those people are still around to this day and it's just we have very close bonds and that doesn't go away. You just not see 'em for 10 years but you walk in, it's like us coming back in here.

Judy Stevens: After the Blue Show we came here.

Lee Stevens: After the Blue Show we came here. It was fabulous. We had a great time here. Really had a good time here. Everything was new. I think the tent was still new. Everything was new, it was wonderful, it was great.

Judy Stevens: We trained the miniature horse act.

[01:04:30]

Lee Stevens: Yeah, we brought the horses, the ponies, with us. We brought six up or eight?

Judy Stevens: Eight.

Lee Stevens: It might have been eight. And we started breaking the act for the new Red Show, which was Children of the Rainbow. It was all kids, kids, kids so our kids was gonna do the pony drills, which worked out fun.

Judy Stevens: Then we went to the Red Show.

Lee Stevens: And then we went to the Red Show.

Judy Stevens: With Gunther.

Lee Stevens: And I kept my truck cleaner than Gunther kept his bus therefore Gunther liked me. It was nothing intentional. Gunther's Gunther. People have all their own opinions of Gunther. I knew Gunther without being Gunther.

[01:05:00]

I knew Gunther when his hair was a mess. I knew Gunther when he couldn't walk. You know what I mean? And Sigfruid too. We saw a side that most people don't see and it was great. I loved my boys. He loved ... She loved them.

[01:05:30]

They would go in the bus with them. Overland on the bus. They still talk about her potato pancakes, and the soup, and the sandwiches, and laughing 'cause Gunther was ... Actually, he was legally blind driving a big \$700,000 Prevos bus. "Oh, it's going on the yellow line. It's going on the yellow line." They had a wonderful time with him and her and Buffy who was-

Judy Stevens: Our youngest.

Lee Stevens: Yeah, and Sebastian back then was four doing the elephant walks. So we had all the Ringling drag on. You know, the big vest and the hats but it was all super sized. So the vest was down behind his ankles and Gunther made him his own hook. Which he still has on his wall, he cherishes that.

[01:06:00]

And he's been working elephants second in command up in African Line Safari for nine years. He trains all the babies. They've had six now since he's been there. So all goes back to that. And they're memories of growing up there.

[01:06:30]

All there formible years was going there. They were chased by tigers that got loose in one building. Sebastian was mauled by a wolf in another building and we didn't

sue the show as much as people said, "Oh, tomorrow it's gonna say Lee Stevens presents Ringling Brothers ..." And I'm sure I would have had a great lawsuit.

[01:07:00] We didn't do any of that. It was fabulous and it was still the Ringling Show that most of us either remember or wish it was again. And unfortunately, business is business and times change and people's priorities change so it's not the same.

It won't be the same and in some ways it's too bad because it's a piece of Americana that's now gonna be gone. It just is. The little small 10 shows that are out there, God bless all of them and some of the had horrible, horrible things happen the other day. At least they're trying to keep it alive. Their dream, what they think it should be.

[01:07:30] And it's like being here, it's what it should be. And then when they go down it's over. This is over and it's gonna be because of this place and these kind of memories of it of all and the dozens of circus fans that have either footage, or soundbites, or photos, or programs.

And nobody believed that it even moved. Like we don't believe how it moved on the train in a tent 'cause to most of us it's impossible. 1,600 people, it's impossible but it did happen and those people didn't like the changes that came.

[01:08:00] They didn't like the buildings, they didn't like this, or they didn't like the Feldeer. Feldeer was spectacular. It just was. I mean, Ringling was Ringling, and Norths was Norths, but the Feldeers, the Matel era, all of that was mind boggling, mind boggling.

[01:08:30] You realize that the stones and sequence that are on one coat in one of those specs on a minion, not even a key player is more than the whole show has collectively today. It truly is. There's more feathers on a clown's hat from the early '80s than the whole show, or any show combined.

It was the greatest show on earth. Why they're losing sight of that, I understand, economics and so on and so on. It's just they're losing their identity and it's a shame. And I know they're trying to create a new one.

[01:09:00] Okay, it's working in other fields and other endeavors but the circus is the circus. Even if it is the stepchild now. You know Kenneth Felds mouth to my ears, "Lee, there was a time where they couldn't have my circus unless they took Disney on Ice. That's my baby, it was my thought, it was my deal."

[01:09:30] And it was, God Bless him. A fantastic deal but you couldn't have the circus unless you booked that too. Now it's anything they can do to get the circus. Madison Square Garden, what is it? Four days. We were there it was 11 weeks.

Judy Stevens: First time.

Lee Stevens: Yeah, used to be three months. There was that many people came. Then you had

the metal heads, and you had NASA, you had all these other buildings I understand all that but Madison Square Garden or the Boston Garden.

[01:10:00] I mean, there was a picture not long ago of the ramp back behind the old Boston Garden. And the original ramp that was still there when the Ringling's owned it, it was still the same ramp that we went up.

And my trailer was parked right at the bottom of it. Neat as hell. And you think how many elephants, how many people, how many stars, how many performers, how much stuff went through that building.

Unbelievable and I was lucky enough to be old enough and young enough. It's a curse either way to be right in the middle of the end and that's what I thought. I was in the middle of the end.

[01:10:30] There was still fabulous star performers that was still on their last legs but still held up and there was a whole wave of new people where you can go to a little mud show like I did and you graduate and you had a place to work. You perform here, learn your craft, move up. Oh my God, you're gonna work a Shrine date.

[01:11:00] Even if it's a shitty little Shine date in Puducka, Kentucky it's still a Shrine. "Oh, wow. I'm not in a tent, I'm in a building. Oh, I'm not on that Shrine date. I go to this guy, I go to that guy." It was a whole eshalance that you could move to.

There's none of that no more. What is a young kid that wants to run away from home and join the circus, what is he doing? Where could a kid do what I did? Many people have done it and I'm also proud of the fact Gunther, not born in the circus. Charlie Bowman, not born in the circus.

[01:11:30] Many people that became ... Harold Elzana, not born in the circus. Lots of people that really excelled were not born in the cirucs. Generations doesn't mean you have talent. It means you have a family tree and I'm lucky to be in that group. And if there's a legacy I can leave it's just I hope people enjoyed what I did.

I hope they liked my flamboyance with the colors that I had, and I hoped they like me as a person, and I hope they thought I gave back to the business what it gave me. That's pretty much it. I don't know.

[01:12:00]  
Scott O'Donnell: That's a great note to end on.

Lee Stevens: Yes.

Scott O'Donnell: Thank you.

Lee Stevens: Thank you. What time tomorrow?

David SaLoutos: That gets us to 1989.

Scott O'Donnell: Yeah.

Lee Stevens: We haven't even scratched the fair units, the five ...