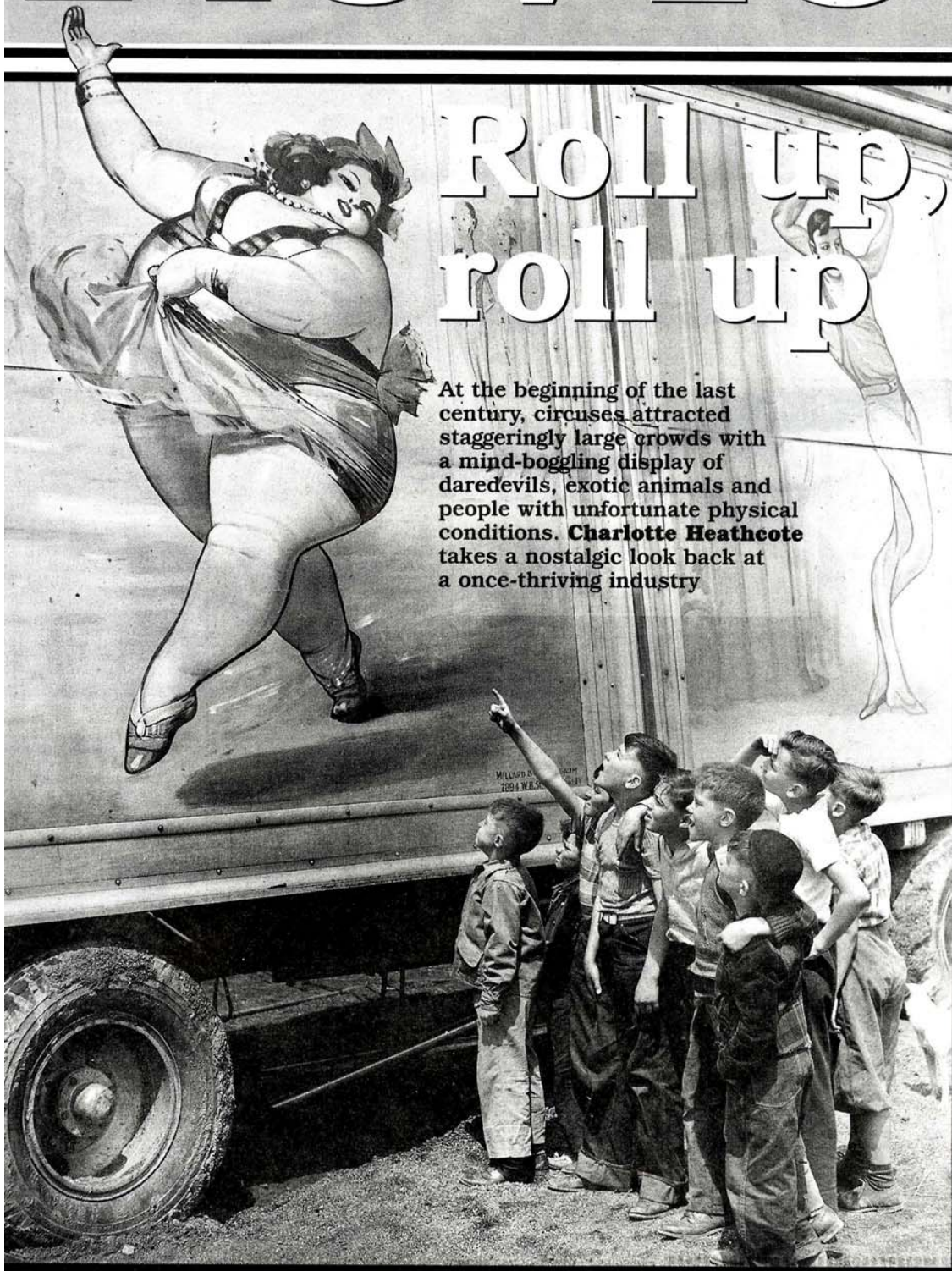


# SUNDAY EXPRESS

# Review



## Roll up, roll up

At the beginning of the last century, circuses attracted staggeringly large crowds with a mind-boggling display of daredevils, exotic animals and people with unfortunate physical conditions. **Charlotte Heathcote** takes a nostalgic look back at a once-thriving industry

### TV



**62 Double top**  
Justin Lee Collins

### Film



**68 Dylan's girls**  
The Edge Of Love

### Theatre



**70 Fiennes show**  
2,000 Feet Away

### Music



**74 Car's the star**  
Neon Neon

### Books



**76 Mine's 9 pints**  
The Hellraisers

Books



ATTRACTION: Bearded Annie Jones married twice

# The time when big top life was king



SPECTACLE: Elephants galore through New York City's Madison Square Garden for a Ringling Brothers and Barnum & Bailey Circus event in 1931

**SUNDAY EXPRESS** Reader Offers

## Show pests the Xit!

Now you can rid your home of nasty rodents and pests without using any hazardous chemicals. The powerful **PestXit Ultra** utilises newly developed ultra-sonic technology with powerful piezoceramic transducers to make an environment of 1500sq.ft extremely uncomfortable and uninhabitable for those unwanted pests. The more advanced **PestXit Duo** not only uses this latest ultrasound technology, but also incorporates contemporary electromagnetic technology, protecting your home up to 5000 sq.ft. Utilising the building's wiring, this unit works by sending wave vibrations through the walls directly to where the pests and larvae nest. The sonic pitch and vibration, which are harmless and inaudible to humans and household pets, will drive the pests out of your home. With High/Low frequency selectors and LED status indicators, simply plug in and let PestXit show pests the exit. Suitable for home, office, warehouse and restaurants.

**Only £24.99 inc p&p**

Electro-magnetic frequency indicator  
Powerful piezoceramic transducers  
High/Low frequency selectors

**PestXit**

Now you can protect your family and property from rodents

SAFE - NO TOXINS

Please send me	Code	Qty	Price	Total
PestXit Ultra	0774		£24.99	
PestXit Duo	0771		£49.99	

I enclose my cheque/crossed Postal Order for £ made payable to

**SUNDAY EXPRESS OFFER (ESX2255)**

Title (Mr/Ms/Miss/Ms) Initial

Name

Address

Post Code

Daytime Tel No

Personal Email

Or please debit my Credit/Debit Card with the sum of £

Card No  Expires

Issue No  Valid from

Signature  Date of birth

If you prefer not to receive information and offers from organisations carefully selected by Express Newspapers, please tick HERE. Calls cost 14p plus a 95p loading.

Telephone your order on **0871 521 1667**  
QUOTING REF. ESX2255  
24 hours 7 days a week

Post your orders to:  
Sunday Express offer (ESX2255),  
Euro House, Cremers Road,  
Sittingbourne, Kent ME10 3US.  
Queries to: 0870 777 1237

Reg. London MTHB Express Newspapers, The Northern & Shell Building, No 10 Lower Thames Street, London, EC3R 6LN.  
PLEASE DO NOT SEND CASH. To UK addresses only. Please allow up to 21 days for delivery. Subject to availability. If you are not fully satisfied please return within 7 days for a refund.

For more great offers visit [www.shop.express.co.uk](http://www.shop.express.co.uk)

**N**OWADAYS, "freak show" is a derogatory term. But in the early 20th century, when circuses occupied the central role in popular culture that television occupies today, the freak show was the height of entertainment. Its staples were bizarre-looking people, exotic and dangerous wild beasts and death-defying daredevils.

In 1905, the year when the circus's popularity peaked, it existed on a scale that's barely imaginable to modern punters, with almost 100 circuses touring America alone and attracting audiences of millions. Although the popularity of the circus was slowly eroded, by the time of its decline it had sowed the seeds of popular culture and launched the modern-day advertising industry.

Ancient Egyptian drawings of acrobats and jugglers show that a form of the modern-day circus existed as far back as 3000BC. The Egyptians passed their tradition down to the Greeks, whose influence upon the Romans saw prototype circus entertainment spread across the empire.

During the medieval period, travelling entertainers remained popular, featuring the first-known daredevils rope-dancing above community fairs. Curiously, these early performances had religious undertones. Since performers' feats were seen as a triumph of life over death, the rituals developed as metaphors for survival.

The modern-day circus came into being in London in 1770 during a period when the rise of the British middle classes had seen commercial theatre take the place of courtly entertainment.

Philip Astley had the bright idea of augmenting his famous equestrian shows with the stars of London theatre, including acrobats, rope-dancers and jugglers, while his rival John Hughes, who launched the Royal Circus, was the first to coin the use of the word "circus" in the context of public performance.

Horses paved the way for monkeys, stags and the first circus

elephant appeared in Paris in 1816. Elephants rapidly became one of the highlights of the circus experience, walking on their hind legs, playing football, doing handstands or building pyramids. It wasn't unusual for up to 30 of them to appear at once.

Oriental displays were a popular recurring theme in which elephants were dressed in exotic headpieces or elephant trainer Frank "Cheerful" Gardner would be carried around with his head inside an elephant's mouth. In 1882, when Barnum imported Jumbo into his American circus, the animal became so legendary that his name was used to describe anything enormous.

The elephants' numbers were swelled by hippopotamuses, tigers, zebras, okapi and rhinoceroses, typically purchased from animal dealers and controlled by experienced animal trainers masquerading as courageous performers.

As Victorian colonialists appropriated far-flung corners of the world, they started importing its more exotic peoples and animals for entertainment and profit. Their success prompted increasing numbers of talent scouts to start scouring the world in search of the most exotic creatures of Africa, Asia and the Amazonian jungle, importing them into the industrialised towns and cities of Europe and America.

Improved transport links during the same period made it easier for circuses to travel from city to city and also facilitated public access. Key players in the development of the circus were PT Barnum and William Cameron Coup, who launched Barnum's Museum, Menagerie and Circus in 1871, the first time anyone had exploited human oddities for entertainment.

Subsequently, Barnum & Bailey's Greatest Show On Earth toured between 1897 and 1902 and was the biggest circus of its kind. Traditional circus performances were forced to adapt to their increasing size, replacing the dialogue and patter of the clown with more physical, visual comedy.

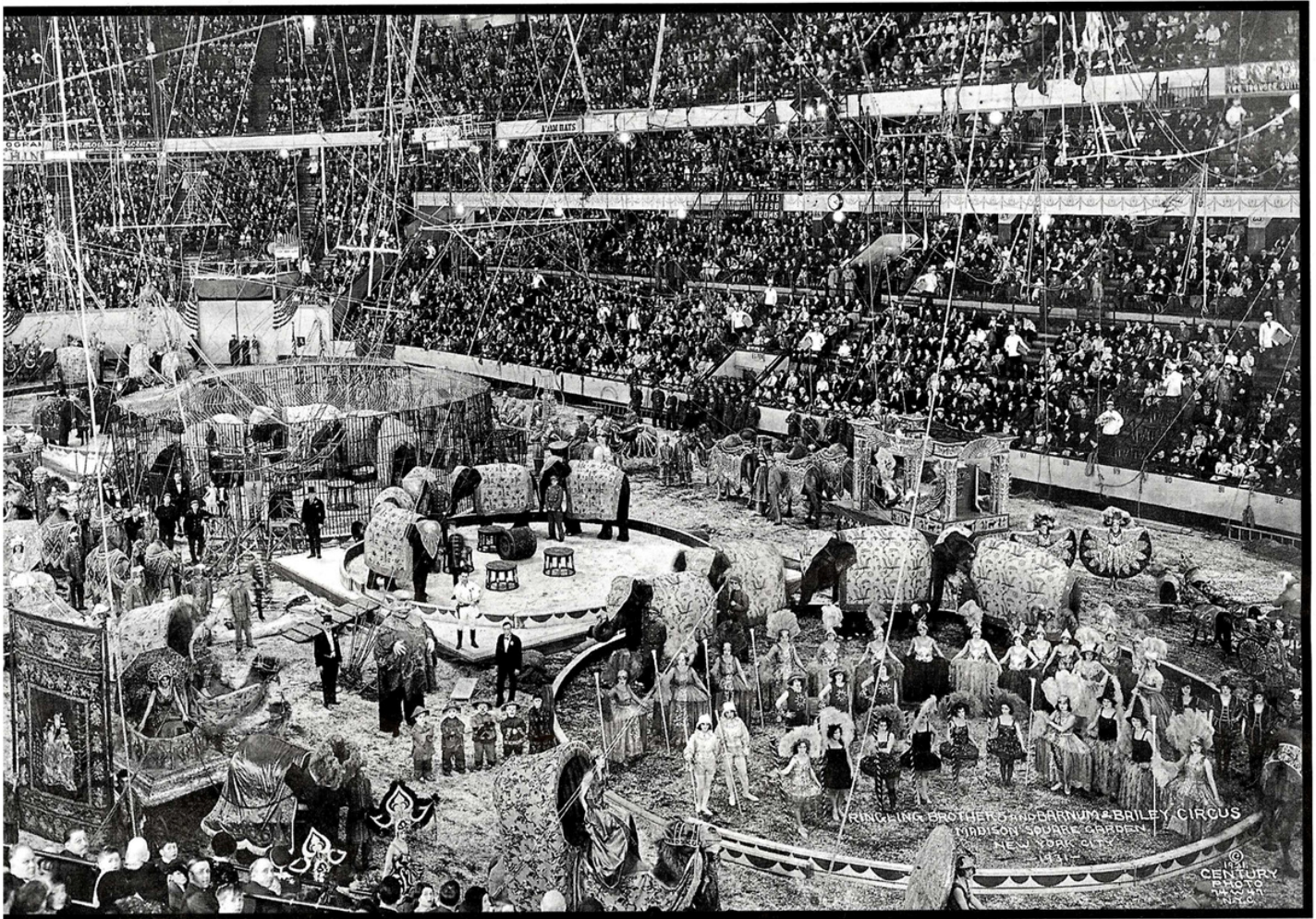
By the end of the century, the most popular circus acts included

aerial ballet involving up to 30 showgirls, scantily clad trapeze artists, jugglers, knife or sword throwers and contortionists. Bareback riders would perform the most dangerous acts, sometimes balancing on one foot on horseback.

**T**HE INDUSTRIAL Revolution provided material for the human cannonball, catapulting people on to a trapeze, and its most famous proponent was Italian daredevil Edmondo Zaccini, although by the 1890s "looping the loop" on a bicycle was even more popular. Such stunts formed a crucial part of the circus's appeal at a time when television-style trickery was impossible.

Barnum emphasised the value of the circus as family entertainment and education, aware that it needed to appear to be a respectable pastime to achieve widespread success and profit.

Education was his justification for showing the Ubangi Savages, a tribe of plate-lipped women from the Belgian Congo (now near the Ubangi River itself), while the Giraffe-Neck Women of Burma displayed coiled brass



around their elongated necks, representing an emblem of beauty in their tribe. Other well-known attractions included the Wild Men of Borneo, the Aztec Children and the Turtle Boy, who was just 18in tall with misshapen limbs.

The phrase "Siamese twins" comes from the first conjoined twins to become famous through the circus, the Thai brothers Chang and Eng Bunker (Thailand was called Siam until 1939). Barnum's midget, General Tom Thumb, who was 29in tall and weighed just one stone, was presented to Queen Victoria three times from 1844.

Annie Jones was a famous bearded lady with a hormonal condition, exhibited with her mother when she was just 12 months old in 1866. While a one-year-old has no control over its exploitation, Annie's life obviously wasn't as bleak as one might assume: she married twice.

Yet the Skeleton Man was anorexic, the Human Gargoyle suffered from cranial abnormalities; the Albino Family had a lack of pigmentation; and the Davis family were vitiligo sufferers.

Also on show were armless people, leopard-spotted people, dwarves, giants and human pin cushions. They would be paraded

### 'Education was used as justification for showing the Giraffe-Neck Women of Burma'



EXOTIC: Animals were often used in acts

on a platform as onlookers openly gawped and jeered. However the families of people with birth defects would often seek out circus proprietors, taking the view that their relatives were likely to experience less hardship and social exclusion as circus acts than if they tried to lead normal lives or were institutionalised. They also gained financial independence.

Since the 18th century, the circus has also represented a form of liberation for women, offering a career based on talent or ability and financial independence as an alternative to the traditional role of housewife. These impressive tiger trainers, equestriennes and gymnasts arguably paved the way for a more widespread female emancipation.

Some may have welcomed the chance to ditch their corsets and stays to display their bodies and their physicality, creating an often unacknowledged erotic aspect to this supposedly innocent form of family entertainment.

The biggest stars of the circus world were staples of gossip columns, as when bareback rider Harriet Hodgini fell in love and ran away from the circus. Aerial gymnast Lillian Leitzel even did an OK!-style "at home with" shoot. However, their lives were

infinitely more dangerous than today's celebrities. Tragically, Lillian fell to her death in 1931.

For men and women alike, the freedom to travel and see the world held understandable appeal. But circus life proved to be hard work. The fantasy of becoming part of a close-knit community was more glamorous than the cliquey reality and runaways experienced a rude awakening, discovering that it took years of apprenticeship before they could work as circus performers. Tiring travel and homesickness were other potential downsides.

**A**NOTHER legacy of the circus's heyday is the advertising industry. Barnum was nicknamed "the Shakespeare of advertising", investing unprecedented amounts in successful poster campaigns until it developed into a cut-throat industry with one circus pasting over another's billboard ads. As the circus became the main source of printed advertising, printers set up businesses specifically dedicated to churning out their promotional materials.

However, over the course of the 20th century, the supremacy of the circus was challenged by a

succession of cheaper, more convenient forms of entertainment.

During the height of the circus's popularity, the only form of entertainment available in the average home was a piano or a book so the invention of radio impacted negatively on audience numbers. Later, the conscription of men in the First World War took its toll on both cast and crew and, by the Twenties, audiences were more interested in silent films.

Meanwhile, animal rights activists had started to alert circus-goers to the cruelty involved while medical progress reduced the number of people with eye-catching afflictions.

A product of its time, the circus may not have been the most enlightened form of entertainment but the positive, creative and innovative aspects of its powerful legacy deserve to be celebrated.

● To order *The Circus, 1870-1950*, edited by Noel Daniel (Taschen, £120) with free UK delivery, call 0871 521 1302 (calls cost 10p per minute from a BT landline) with credit or debit card details to hand, or send a cheque or PO to *The Sunday Express Bookshop*, PO Box 200, Falmouth TR11 4WJ, or order via the website, [www.expressbookshop.com](http://www.expressbookshop.com).