

BIG BANDS NOW



**JOSEPH RUBIN AND CAST
MADE “EVERYBODY HAPPY”
WITH **TED LEWIS** REVUE**
A SPECIAL REPORT BY
MUSIC LIBRARIAN **CHRISTOPHER POPA**



Former Ted Lewis vocalist Cathy Basic Van, who sang with him from 1955 to 1960, and Joseph Rubin, leader of The New Ted Lewis Orchestra, entertain.

photo courtesy of Linda McDonald

As part of its 40th Anniversary Festival, The Ted Lewis Museum in Circleville, Ohio presented a fast-paced revue at the local high school the evening of June 10, 2017, and the reactions of an estimated 200 people in attendance confirmed that Lewis’ stage persona and music continue to be relatable and enjoyable.

Circleville was Lewis’ hometown; he was born there in 1890. But the multi-day Festival was all the more surprising, considering that, according to Joyce Keller, President of the Museum’s Board of Directors, Lewis himself last appeared with his band in Circleville in 1953 and drew 3,000 people to the Coliseum.

Lewis passed away in 1971, and six years later the Museum was founded in a modest storefront at 133 W. Main St. There, displays including Lewis’ battered top hat, clarinet, photographs, movie posters, and other memorabilia trace the story of his life and career.

Circleville Mayor Don McIlroy called Lewis the city's "favorite son," commenting that "he certainly has been good to Circleville."



Appropriately, the Festival's revue opened with a brief instrumental rendition of Lewis' theme song, *When My Baby Smiles At Me*, which he first recorded in 1920, before 30-year-old Joseph Rubin, a native of Canton, Ohio, and looking immaculate in a classic black tuxedo and top hat, came on stage in the role of the famous bandleader.

Not only did Rubin match the character and mannerisms of Lewis, he effectively replicated Lewis' trademark talking / singing style, as shown by his fine vocals throughout the first half of the program, such as *Music Is Magic*, *Oh! You Beautiful Doll* (which he sang directly to special guest Cathy Basic Van, a genuine link to Lewis' long entertainment career), a medley of *On the Sunny Side of the Street* and *Just Around the Corner*, and *I'm the Leader of the Band*. Each had originally been performed at one time or another by Lewis.

A young scholar of bygone performers and composers, Rubin had discovered what was said to be hundreds of Lewis' original manuscript orchestrations in the basement of the Museum "where they had laid untouched."

After being appointed Curator of the Museum in 2012, he cataloged and restored the music, and formed a new, 11-piece Ted Lewis Orchestra to play those authentic arrangements live.

They sounded good on the 1920s smash *Whispering*, and, just as Lewis showcased the men in his bands of the past, Rubin gave solo moments that night to pianist Stewart Freedman, with the lively *Carle Boogie*; trombonist Jonathan Willis, with a pretty tune called *Amoresque*; and first trumpet Jeffrey S. Huston on several pieces.

Meanwhile, whenever Cathy Basic Van was on-stage, she clearly had the audience in her hands, with songs including *After You've Gone*, *Mr. Wonderful*, *It's a Most Unusual Day*, and an especially-poignant rendition of *Over the Rainbow*.

Also on the bill were award-winning dance team Adam Maynard and Svetlana Balakov; Tara Schlater, who tap danced to a brisk *Cherokee*; baton twirler Rebekah Lynch; and a female vocal trio (Rachel Will, Paige Evans, and Kathleen Kehl), named after a group who worked with Lewis in 1945, the Reed Sisters.

The first half of the revue closed with Cleveland, Ohio native and college student Marvin J. Malone II, who acted as Rubin's "shadow" duplicating his every move on Lewis' hit *Me and My Shadow* (which, just like Lewis had done at one point, they together reprised with a rock and roll rhythm).



A 1940 stage show with Ted Lewis and a young female dancer.
Lewis' original bandstands are visible in the background.

During the second half of the revue, the Orchestra continued the variety of music with several swinging charts: *Anvil Chorus*, from Verdi's 1853 opera, "Il Trovatore"; *Margie*, a pop tune composed in 1920; and the jazz standard *Tiger Rag*.

Malone returned to perform the poem-turned-monologue, *Woodman, Spare That Tree!*.

And Rubin did several more of Lewis' original vocals, namely *Be Yourself, I've Got a Million Wonderful Memories*, and, of course, the classic *When My Baby Smiles At Me*, before concluding the revue with a song that Lewis had first used in the 1920s and continued to feature throughout his career, *Goodnight*.

It may have at first seemed funny that "The Ted Lewis Story," a career summary included in the 40th Anniversary Festival's brochure just as it had been initially printed for Lewis' homecoming on April 25, 1952, stated that, while Lewis' popularity "has never changed, neither has the show he puts on. The High-hatted Tragedian of Song still uses substantially the same methods of entertainment and even still plays some of the same musical selections."

What they meant was that Lewis knew just what the public wanted and gave them that. So it still was in Circleville - Lewis' show biz expertise and legacy continuing to entertain, conducted by keeper of the flame Joseph Rubin.

One of the most satisfying moments of the revue for me came when Cathy Basic Van acknowledged Rubin's dedication and work. "Ted Lewis would be proud of him!," she enthused.

Lewis famously asked, "Is everybody happy"?

Yes, thanks to his... and now Joseph Rubin's talents... they are!