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SECTIONS

- Popular
- Interviews
- Today Is/Was
- Dining
- Nightlife
- Daily Drink
- Events
- Movies
- Travel
- Oddities
- Holiday Season
- New Year's
- Winter Time

FEATURES

The F Word



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Bindlestiff Family Cirkus Co-Founder Keith Nelson on the Beauty of Circus Acts

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By Corn Mo

[Events](#) — [The Arts](#) — [Nerdicity](#) — [Interviews](#) —

When I lived in Dallas, Tex., I was booked to support the Bindlestiff Family Cirkus at a venue called Club Clearview. I had never seen circus acts performed so earnestly in a club venue and became over-excited to the point of inviting all of them to stay at my place in Denton.



Shari Hatt

Afterward, they invited me to play with them again on a mini-tour of Texas. It was then that [Sxip Shirey](#) encouraged me to take his place as the circus musician of the Bindlestiffs. I took the offer and had the greatest adventures of my life. It was truly the best time I'd ever had on the road. The Bindlestiff Family Cirkus is one of the hardest working sideshows I've ever known and I was proud to be a part of it.



Keith Nelson and Stephanie Monseu co-founded this circus back in 1995 and have kept it going ever since. I got a chance to interview Keith about the circus' past and what he's currently working on now.

What inspired you to do the circus arts?

There were two moments in my youth that set the stage for my future.

1. My parents gave me an [Emmett Kelly ventriloquist doll](#). Now looking back, the idea of a ventriloquist doll of one of the most famous silent clowns is a bit absurd. But so are many of my grandest of notions.

2. My family went to see a mud show (circus that travels every day setting up the tent every morning) in Mocksville NC. The circus publicized the Elephant Dog. For 50 cents you could see the Elephant Dog. A full line of people paid their money to see a shaved fat dog. The fact that you could make money exhibiting a shaved dog imprinted a midway in my future.

And the main fuel happened in my early adulthood.

Upon moving to New York City I became the resident fire eater at the Blue Angel Cabaret, a famed erotic cabaret that used to be located in Tribeca. When I realized that I could make a living living this life, I was hooked.

Which came first: an interest in juggling or the love of the circus?

Although I had a couple early childhood circus experiences that planted the sawdust in my veins, it was learning to juggle that really started the ball rolling. When I was in college I lived next to David Hunt, great friend and first juggling partner, taught me the basics to juggling balls and clubs. We had dreams of dropping out of school to follow a life of street performing.

What is the time line of the acts you've developed?

In 1989 at Hampshire College [David Hunt](#) taught me to juggle.

The next year, also at Hampshire I traded a bottle of whiskey with a group of jugglers. In return, they taught me to eat fire.

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The first time I performed in hopes of getting money, I was devil sticking on street corners and in the parking lots of Grateful Dead shows.

Fire Eating was my first real professional gig. I became the resident fire eater at the Blue Angel Cabaret, a unique erotic cabaret that was located in Tribeca during the late 80's and early 90's.

In 1995 [Stephanie](#) and I created Fireplay, a pyrotic fire eating act.

Stephanie and I are developing a comic drunken balancing act. It is starting to appear in public.

I am currently working on unicycle skills. For fifteen years I owned two unicycles, would try to ride one once a year. Failed, got frustrated, and would not touch the wheel for another year. Three months ago I started working on it 15 to 90 minutes a day. Two days ago a did a 2.5 mile ride.

How many tours have you done?

I am guessing somewhere in the area of 20 tours over 15 years. Fourteen New York City Cabaret seasons. And lots of single gigs everywhere.

How many performers have been in the Bindlestiff Family?

Over 400 variety artists have performed on the Bindlestiff stage during our fifteen year history.

What's your favorite road story?

Oh, there are too many. Saving on details, here are a few headlines:

- Debauchery in Salt Lake City UT.
- My parents coming with us to Burning Man
- Arriving at venues that burned down the night before
- Traveling with watch stealing magicians and kleptomaniacal clowns
- Playing to 10,000 at Bonnaroo
- Banned from Austria
- Van overheats in the middle of the desert
- Taking 14 hours to cross the Canadian border

Where is your favorite venue?

[Spiegel tents](#) are my favorite venues. They provide a magic and beauty that I am unable to find in any other type of performing space.

Second favorite is historic theaters that have a history of vaudeville. It feels good to know that the stage was used 100 years ago by folks juggling, balancing, and flying through the air.

Would you rather perform in a tent or a theater?

A tent offers a certain magic that cannot be found in any other venue. The temporary and nomadic nature of the tent as venue is exciting.

As far as theaters go, I like it when the theater has the feeling of a bar. When we do perform in a theater I enjoy the fact that the venue is made for performance. The addition of the bar provides a more intimate experience for both performer and audience.

What are you currently listening to?

Ever since the advent of iTunes, my listening has veered away from the album concept and every listening session is an incredible spectrum of listening pleasures. Thanks to Pandora and Internet radio, the last hour has included Tiny Tim, Pete Seeger, the Incredible String Band, Loudon Wainwright III, a bit of Bluegrass and Baroque music

What are you currently reading?

Drinking in America: This is a book looking at how drinking and the attitude towards alcohol has changed over the past 250 years. I was pleasantly surprised to learn that the early Pilgrims and Puritans drank most of the day, every day. Liquor was safer than water.

Selected Stories of Chekov: Nothing like some depressing Eastern European stories to make one feel better about their own existence.

What else inspires you?

Walking over the Williamsburg Bridge. Actually walking in general. My longest walk so far was Texas to New York. Seeing circuses always inspires.

What's your perfect Sunday?

Depending on where I am spending the Sunday- Hudson, Brooklyn, or somewhere on the road:

- A walk to the coffee shop.
- Reading the New York Times
- Mowing the lawn, or some similar activity
- 2-3 hours of practice: juggling and unicycle
- A movie or a show with Stephanie
- An hour or two on the computer
- And a single malt scotch from Islay.

Since it is my perfect Sunday I would like to add an hour of concertina practice, I have really been slack in this area.

You can check out Keith at the Bindlestiff's Open Stage Variety Show currently on the first Monday of every month at the [Galapagos Art Space](#) in Brooklyn, NY. Check for updates on [Bindlestiff.org](#) for information on their upcoming Winter Cabaret.

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