

## Herbie Weber & the wire-walkers: The masters of funambulism share wisdom with a fellow artist

By R.W. Bacon ©2010

Even back in the 1970s, as a jazz banjoist/guitarist, uke player, comedy dancer, and juggler – with separate unicycle and rola-bola acts – I had plenty to keep myself busy. However, in the span of just a few months in the 1970s, I worked with two of the *most publicized highwire artists* of all-time, Karl Wallenda (1905-1978) and Philippe Petit (b. 1949) – and Herbie Weber (1914-1991), arguably the *finest tightwire showman* of all-time. (... with no disrespect intended for the legendary Con Colleano (Cornelius Sullivan, 1899-1973), “The Wizard of the Wire.”)

We worked with Herbie often over the next decade, and he in particular inspired me to learn the tightwire, rig one up permanently in the backyard, and work up a modest low-wire repertoire of juggling, hoop-jumping, and comedy.

Once again, I pursued this interest even though I had more than enough to do with my time. But I proceeded with the design of portable rigging with the idea of offering show producers another separate act – until my wife and partner L.J. Newton brought me back to my senses. “We can’t fit another thing in the truck,” she said. “If the tightwire rigging goes in, then there’s no room for me. I’m out.” She was right, and furthermore we didn’t *need* to do the wire act. The tightwire remained in the backyard for fun, challenging exercise only.

Nevertheless, as I look back at those years, Herbie Weber stands out as a role model for excellence. I was fortunate over the course of a decade to spend many hours absorbing the wisdom of this great artist. And shortly after I first met Herbie, I found myself “hanging out” with Karl Wallenda.



At left is **Herbert E. “Herbie” Weber** (1914-1991), the fabulous tightwire showman who worked internationally in nearly every kind of venue – vaudeville, circus, nightclubs, Broadway, and Hollywood – for 60 years. Near the end of his career he may have been the oldest tightwire performer in the world. He was still doing his fake fall off the wire at age 70-plus.



Top left is the **Wallenda Troupe** performing in New York for Ringling Brothers Circus in 1935. On **Karl Wallenda’s** shoulders is his wife, **Helen Wallenda** (1910-1996). Directly above are the Wallendas performing the 7-person pyramid in 1947. At top right is Karl as I remember him in the 1970s.

### Karl Wallenda: Circus Icon

Karl Wallenda (1905-1978) and I were working together at opposite ends of the Eastern States Exposition grounds in 1977 – and one day the public relations department dispatched us to a mountaintop television studio for an appearance on a local morning talk show. We had to wait forever, but for me the bonus was spending time in the “green room” with one of the biggest names in the annals of the circus, a legend ever since he arrived from Germany in 1928. It was just the two of us, and we gabbed away about all aspects of performance, especially about the special nature of concentration and practice common to juggling, balancing, and acrobatic skills. To a young guy like me he was an inspiration – a robust, muscular 72-year-old who was still doing a headstand on the wire. In the 1950s I had seen the seven-person pyramid, before the 1962 fall in Detroit, so I was in proper awe. This was like a rookie baseball player getting to hang out in the locker room with Ted Williams. He vented about the vagaries of the business, and several times uttered to me his oft-quoted quip: “Sometimes you eat the chicken, and

sometimes you eat the feathers.” Karl fell to his death in a skywalk mishap in Puerto Rico about six months later, so this was our only meeting. In later years L.J. & I performed with his grandchildren, also wire artists.

### Philippe Petit: Wire Artist

A few months later I crossed paths with Philippe Petit, an all-around talented young fellow my age who had made his celebrated clandestine walk between the World Trade Center towers in 1974. There would be no chance for an informal gab session, however, as we were both occupied with our individual performance commitments at a tightly-scheduled international theatre festival. I recall joking about the irony that earlier in the year I had a show *inside* at the top of the World Trade Center. (But as yet, there has been no award-winning documentary about *my* performance there.)

### Herbie Weber: The Big Deal

In my view, the big talent on the wire – the crowd-pleaser, the communicator, the fully-engaged showman who could excite the audience to a fever pitch – was Herbie Weber, “The Great Huberto” (1914-1991).

Herbie performed on a tight, springy low-wire eight-feet off the ring surface. He worked with his wife as “Los Latinos,” first with Chatita (“Chata”) Escalante (1911-1985), then his second wife Maricela Sanchez Hernandez, both accomplished wire artists. Herbie was a convincing actor: even though he was born in Ohio to a non-circus family, he went on to play the role of a South American circus artist to the hilt, right down to the distinctive wardrobe, slicked-back hair, and dramatic, hard-driving Latin music.

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At left is **Herbie Weber** at age 30 in 1944. In the early 1940s he spent a few years working for Hollywood movie studios, performing his tightwire stunts for circus-themes movies, and working as a stunt-double for the stars. A few years later he was co-owner, producer, and performer with his own show, *Circo Flamante*, which toured for 12 years.

#### Herbie Weber & the wire-walkers

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He worked at breakneck speed, running back and forth across the wire. He donned a pair of stilts and scampered across the wire. He jumped rope on the wire. A crowd favorite was when he executed a high-kicking dance back-and-forth across the wire with peach baskets on his feet. Maricela presented a dramatic change of the pace, crossing the wire en pointe. The big finish was when Herbie used the springiness of the wire to vault over Maricela's back and maintain his balance on the wire.

Herbie was a master at building up the finish. After a couple false starts, Herbie would jump over Maricela ... and crash to the arena floor! Thousands would scream. Herbie would writhe as the ringmaster rushed to his aid, playing along: "Mr. Latino appears to be hurt!" Herbie would wave off the ringmaster, prop-handlers, and EMTs, and stagger back to the wire. Maricela would shake her head as if to say "no," but it would do no good. With a stern look of grim determination, Herbie would hold up his index finger. "Senor Latino said he would try it one more time!!!" announced the ringmas-



At left are **Herbie Weber** and **Chatita (Chata) Escalante** (1911-1985) dancing on the wire in the 1940s. Billboard of Aug. 16, 1947 reports on a date at the 2400-seat Million Dollar Club in Los Angeles: "Chatita Escalante, an eye-filling senorita, does an amazing contortion act and winds up by doing a back bend while standing on two chairs and picks up a handkerchief with her teeth." Also listed among the eight feature acts was "The Latinos - tightwire."

ter incredulously, as Herbie climbed back on the wire to a crescendo of cheers. Then Herbie would sail over Maricela's back "one more time," hit the landing on the wire perfectly, and then flail and bend like the rubber man as he pretended to struggle for balance. Year after year, show after show, the audience would go nuts.

If that were not enough, in a spectacular move before his dismount, on the way down he would grab the wire with both hands and swing completely around a couple times like the monkey on a child's circus toy. Finally coming forward for his bow, Herbie had a way of squeezing every bit of love from the crowd. Standing ovations were commonplace. He was a joy to watch every time.

Oh yes. Before every show he strategically placed a small dark canvas-covered mat at the landing spot for his fake fall. He dropped himself eight feet to the floor two or three times a day for decades. It was the best fake fall in the business.

Herbie's other crowd-pleasing stunt was the Great Huberto's "Sensational Foot-Slide For Life," in which he slowly walked up an inclined cable to the arena roof, then, still standing, slid down backwards, gaining tremendous speed until he was caught by assistants at the bottom, who at the same time detonated a thunderous gunpowder charge.

Herbie Weber, the real bionic man, was an inspiration who performed his wire act, including his fake fall, well into his 70s.

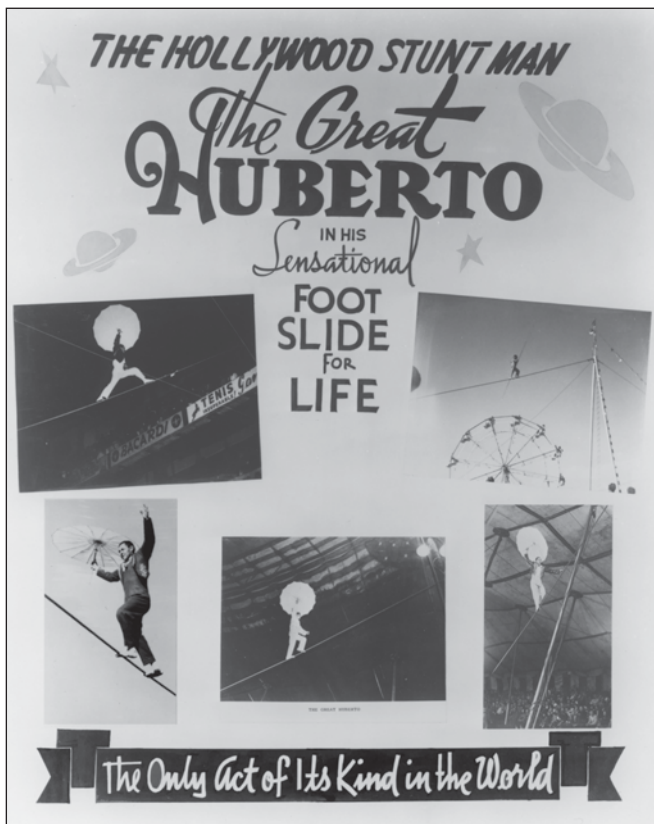
I first met Herbie in the 1970s at an outdoor fair date. When rainy days

cancelled his performance, we had the opportunity to chat backstage. In the ensuing years we crossed paths for about a week each year when we were booked onto the same circus dates. At first, from a safe distance, I observed his irascible tough-guy demeanor that is common among traveling showfolk. But once you broke through to the "real Herbie," and earned his respect, in private he was conversational, intelligent, sharp-witted, and – dare I say it – at times even gentle.

In private, when Herbie didn't feel he had to maintain his customary bluster, he spoke freely about performance, his timing, and the way he orchestrated audience response. His understanding of the performer-audience dynamic was light-years beyond some circus performers for whom the act has become a routine, detached display of technical skill. Herbie would converse thoughtfully about this in the dressing room – until someone else came in. Then he was back to his profanity-laced bluster. The transformation was instant, and comical.

Herbie, for all his elite talent and broad experience, was the ideal "teammate" – he was a worker, always on the move, and

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Above is a publicity composite for **Herbie Weber**'s "Sensational Foot Slide For Life," in which he dramatically ascended the inclined wire to the top of the arena, then slid down backwards like greased lightning. Several prop-handlers caught Herbie as he reached the floor of the arena, his arrival coinciding with a deafening blank shotgun blast.



Above, a news photographer captured **Herbie Weber** in high-contrast while he danced on the wire with baskets on his feet.

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nothing that needed to be done on a show was beneath him. Everyone in the business seems to have a story about Herbie selling popcorn wearing a little white hat, or leading the camels through “spec” in an Arab costume. He viewed swell-headed performers with consternation. Spying just such an individual across the arena in between shows, he would mutter “You see that fellow? There goes a guy who believes his press clippings.”

Since Herbie knew I was interested in stage performance more than the “in-the-round” circus environment, he told me quite a bit about his varied experience and adventures in theatrical world.

Herbie was born in 1914 in the village of Ney, in Defiance County, Ohio, where his father, of German and Czech ancestry, was a storekeeper. When Herbie was eight-years-old, he saw a wire-walker at a circus, decided right then he wanted to be one, and began dedicated practice, teaching himself the skill on his mother’s clothesline. By the time he was 14 he was performing at local celebrations, and was offered a position with a traveling show. Acceding to his parents’ wishes, he turned down the offer and finished high school. The day after he graduated in 1931, he began his lifetime on the road, embarking on an extended tour of vaudeville theatres.

His travels would take him around the world, and included engagements with all the leading circuses, including Clyde Beatty-Cole Bros. and Ringling Bros. Barnum & Bailey. In the late 1930s he began a long association with the Escalante Bros. Circus that toured primarily in the Spanish-speaking Southwest. He married into this Mexican-American circus family, and with his wire-artist wife, Chata Escalante, was the owner, producer, and performer for their own show, Circo Flamante, for 12 years.

In the early 1940s Herbie spent several years working for movie studios in Hollywood, performing stunts and providing

Herbie Weber was an aggressive marketer. As a young man he began the practice of sending out postcards when he was booked in South Africa, Hong Kong, or some other faraway locale. His catch-phrase to agents and other performers? “Where were you?” In the 1940s and 50s he made sure the showbusiness press always knew what he was up to – where he was working and what triumph was ahead. At right is a typical image from one of his “Where were you?” cards.



circus atmosphere for a number of circus-themed movies. He would return to movie work several times more in later years.

During WWII Herbie served in the U.S. Army at Fort MacArthur in San Pedro, Calif., enlisting in 1944.

In 1946 Herbie resumed his career by taking his talents to Broadway in Orson Welles’ adaptation of Jules Verne’s novel, *Around the World in 80 Days*. (This fiasco was a story that Herbie delighted in telling, almost as if he had saved it especially for me.) His role was that of a Chinese tightwire artist. This would prove to be a dubious credit – the show closed after 75 performances and has gone down in theatrical history as one of the most monumental flops in the annals of Broadway. (Neither a cast of 70, a train, a circus, and four mechanical elephants on stage – nor a score by Cole Porter – could save the show. In the opinion of the *New York Times* critic, the circus was the best part of the whole evening.

In the late 1940s and early 1950s there was more movie work, with Judy Garland, Frank Sinatra – and as a stunt-double for Donald O’Connor. In the late 1950s Herbie was engaged for several consecutive years with the high-profile Clyde Beatty Circus.

In 1967 he began his 24-year partnership on the wire with his second wife, Maricela Sanchez Hernandez, a talented young artist from a circus family in Mexico. By this time Herbie was so well-known and highly-regarded that he no longer worked full seasons for one circus, but instead was able to book himself independently for more money. His last two decades were filled with engagements at major fairs and limited-run all-star circuses. In his last years he took pride in the unofficial distinction of being the world’s oldest wire-walker. At age 74 he was excited about bookings in Australia and New Zealand, two of the few places in the world he had never visited.

Herbie died in Dallas, Texas, at age 77 in December 1991. He is buried at the Showmen’s Rest section of Mt. Olivet Cemetery in Hugo, Okla. According to his 1991 obituary, he was survived by his wife, Maricela, one son, Herbert Weber, Jr., and two brothers. The shoes he wore for his “Sensational Foot-Slide For Life” are now part of the permanent collection of Circus World Museum in Baraboo, Wis.

Herbie shared with me his insights on performance, but it was his high energy, professionalism, and his remarkable hold on an audience that were truly inspirational. In his last years of performing, underneath his show garb he was wrapped up like a mummy with all manner of braces and wraps holding together a lifetime of lumps. But when he was on the wire before thousands of people, he would always be totally in control. Thanks for everything, Herbie! ■



Herbie Weber is buried in the Showmen’s Rest section of Mt. Olivet Cemetery in Hugo, Oklahoma.

**Author’s Notes:** Most of the above profile of Herbie Weber, completed in January 2010, is based on my recollection of our conversations while “hanging out” between shows whenever we crossed paths between the late 1970s and 1990. Additional details to fill in



gaps were gleaned from *Billboard* magazine (1940s & 50s), a feature article in the *Bryan (Ohio) Times* (July 20, 1988), and Herbie’s obituary in the *Hugo (Okla.) Daily News* (Dec. 11, 1991).

At left is the author juggling on his backyard tightwire – just for fun and exercise, of course – but with rigging inspired by Herbie Weber.



Above is a photo of the Escalante Brothers Circus about 1940. Herbie Weber is holding the sign at the far right.