

# Former Ringling Bros. entertainer on the current state of clowning

[LIFE](#) By [Kristin Finan](#) - American-Statesman Staff

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TOM MCCARTHY JR.

Rik Gern, who can be seen around Austin and beyond performing as the clown Bonzo Crunch, has worked as an entertainer for decades, including a couple of stints with Ringling Bros. and Barnum & Bailey Circus. Tom McCarthy Jr. for American-Statesman

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## ***Highlights***

Gern attended Clown College in 1992 and toured with the company's Red Unit from 1993 to 1994.

Life under the Big Top had its challenges, but Gern thrived. It's a tough time to be clown.

Last fall, a rash of nationwide creepy clown sightings turned children's entertainers into the stuff of nightmares for some. Then, last week, the owner of Ringling Bros. and Barnum & Bailey Circus announced that after a 146-year run, ["The Greatest Show on Earth" will close permanently in May.](#)

"I came back from the Austin Symphony and had my email and Facebook page flooded with the news," said Rik Gern, aka Bonzo Crunch, a well-known Austin clown and former employee of Ringling Bros. and Barnum & Bailey. "I cried myself to sleep. It was devastating."

Ringling Bros. and Barnum & Bailey had long been criticized by animal-rights activists and in May officially agreed to remove elephants from its shows. [When the company's Circus XTREME came to the Erwin Center](#) in late August, the show focused primarily on human acrobatics and feats of strength — very few animals were featured. Still, the transformation wasn't enough. "Ringling Bros. ticket sales have been declining, but following the transition of the elephants off the road, we saw an even more dramatic drop," Kenneth Feld, chairman and CEO of Feld Entertainment, producer of Ringling Bros. and Barnum & Bailey, wrote in the announcement about the closing. "This, coupled with high operating costs, made the circus an unsustainable business for the company."

Gern, 59, has a long history with Ringling Bros. He attended Clown College in 1992 and toured with the company's Red Unit

doing contract work with the company for Texas events until he heard last week's announcement.

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“It’s not just a company that went under; it’s a whole community,” Gern said. “It’s like a small town being wiped off the map, and that’s very hard to take.”

A lifelong fan of Charlie Chaplin and Laurel & Hardy, Gern knew he wanted to be a clown by the time he was a teenager.

“I went trick-or-treating as Charlie Chaplin and stayed in character the entire night,” he said. “I discovered a lot of people had grandparents who had seen Chaplin. They’d usher me into some back room and there’d be an old woman in a shawl and they’d say, ‘Look who’s here, Grandma!’ It was so fun. That Halloween triggered something.”

In 1982 he attended Dell’Arte International School of Physical Theatre in California and developed the persona of Bonzo Crunch, “a cross between the Cowardly Lion and Sylvester Stallone’s ‘Rocky’ character, kind of a tough cream puff.” There he met a “cosmic cowboy hippie” who invited him to New Braunfels to perform during the summer at Schlitterbahn, which he did for five seasons.

“When I was at Schlitterbahn we’d come to Austin to get food supplies and hear music,” Gern said. “After traveling with the circus and seeing 95 cities in two years, I still liked Austin the best. ... You can march to your own beat.”

“It was a 24-hour, seven-day-a-week dream,” he said. “The great thing about traveling in a show like that is that your only responsibility is to show up and do your job well. You can be immersed in the world of clowning. I’d be practicing my lasso, somebody else would be practicing their tumbling. It was just great.”

Gern now spends his time appearing at private and community events in the Austin area. In true Austin fashion, he plays an instrument — the ukulele — and is developing two new shows, one that’s focused on music and one that’s focused on magic. In his spare time he enjoys making “digital doodles” in Photoshop at his South Austin (where else?) home.

“It’s been my passion and profession for 40 years,” he said.

“Some people think it’s really cool — even if they wouldn’t want to do it, they think it’s one of those dream-come-true things, which it is. Others will start cracking jokes, like, ‘I always knew you were a clown!’ It sparks an element of fantasy in everybody.”

Still, he admits that sometimes it can be a difficult profession. The creepy clown sightings of last fall didn’t help.

“I have a pretty thick skin. I find Krusty the Clown funny, and I enjoyed the movie ‘Shakes the Clown’ quite a bit actually. But the recent wave was extremely malicious and I really resented it. It was people going out in real life and trying to scare actual children, and I find that contemptible,” he said, adding that he refuses any bookings that involve scaring people.

He said despite the setbacks and hardships the clowning and circus industries are facing right now, he’s making a point to stay positive and keep clowning around.

“After the initial shock of the show closing it made me realize the circus arts are still alive, clowning is still alive, but in different forms,” he said. “I’m very sad, but optimistic. People need to laugh, so there will always be clowns.”

Learn more about Rik Gern, aka Bonzo Crunch, at [bonzocrunch.com](http://bonzocrunch.com).