Blood and Sawdust

Gerard Soules got hooked on the circus as a child, and from then until his tragic end he lived for it.

Independent on Sunday, October 1992

You can hear the dogs from afar, yapping, shrieking, scratching at the walls, not their usual noise at all. Twelve big poodles in torment: a terrifying squeal, high and frantic, hanging in the dry Las Vegas air, hanging on the heat at two in the morning.

The dogs are in a trailer seven miles north of the city, high enough to see the neon of the Strip. A huge luxury trailer, half for them, half for their master, a 55-year-old man called Gerard Soules.

Thanks to Soules, these dogs were stars. They were 'Les Poodles de Paris', a worldwide attraction, one of the most successful circus acts ever. His act was called unique: a dozen creatures on their hind legs, camped up in feather boas and hats and little sequinned costumes, parading round the big tops dressed as Carmen Miranda or Mae West or Marilyn Monroe. Sometimes they would appear on ice. 'Once seen, never forgotten!' the ringmaster barked, with some authority.

But now, in the early hours of 4 June, the act has reached a grisly climax. The dogs have just seen their master clubbed and stabbed to death. A hundred knife wounds. Blood seeping from his half of the trailer into theirs.

The dogs realise what this means: no master, no Masterpiece of Canine Capers. The people from the Vegas dog pound will be coming later in the day, and they won't much want another dozen mouths to feed. So the squealing and scratching never stops – that nasty, fevered howl; well, they don't look much like Marilyn Monroe or Carmen Miranda *now*.

'It was like in the fairy-tales. When he was five he packed a bag and told his mother he was off to join the circus. He was back home within two hours.' Colleen Anderson, two years Gerard Soules's junior, remembers him as 'the best brother anyone could ever hope to have'. His younger siblings, two sisters and a brother, are tearful on the phone; he was a beautiful person – loyal, generous, talented. 'He never forgot us, or where he came from.'

Gerard Soules was born and brought up in Livonia, Michigan. He was a bright boy, sociable and good at school; but the showbiz stuff got him early. His father, an engineer for a company that made drinks cartons, was a home movie enthusiast. He filmed the usual family things, and dutifully logged all their special outings; one of these captured a visit to the travelling circus. 'Gerard used to watch it and watch it and watch it,' says Max Butler, a long-time British friend. 'He was fascinated by Betty Ruth doing her heel-catching.'

Betty Ruth's trapeze act was regarded as one of the best in the world. She would do the usual back-and-forth stunts 20 feet in the air, but then she'd let go, somersault over the bar, and catch herself by her heels. One slip and her career would be finished. Soules's father built a trapeze for his son, and rigged

it up in the garden. Gerard seemed to be a natural. 'Is this like Betty?' the 10-year-old would ask as he flipped up and down above the grass.

'We used to go to a hospital for polio patients,' his sister remembers. 'I was his assistant, and we used to do shows for people who were all paralysed, attached to machines. He would do his trapeze, his juggling, a bit of plate-spinning.'

When he was 14, Soules's trapeze act won first prize in the Candy Carnival television show, and he was swiftly recruited by the Cristianis/Clyde Betty Cole circus. He gained a reputation as a driven, fearless performer, admired by other acts. He was a quiet man, and a perfectionist. 'Be brave but never reckless,' he told his colleagues.

He was also archly flamboyant: he flashed a cape on his entrance and exit, he preened unashamedly. 'He made the audience feel like they'd been granted an audience with the Pope,' recalls Ronnie Smart, the British circus promoter. Max Butler says: 'His attitude towards the audience was, 'If you don't like me you're crazy. We used to say to people, 'Oh, Gerry's great – and if you don't believe it, just ask him.' And most of the time he was right. He *was* brilliant.'

Max Butler runs Joker, a magic and costume-hire shop in Chiswick, west London. His front room above the shop is a shrine to the circus: books and cuttings, portraits of the greats, stacks of videos. His videos of Gerard Soules date mostly from the early Sixties, when he performed in Europe and the US with Ringlings/Barnum & Bailey, the circus that billed itself as The Greatest Show on Earth. The European promotional material for a Ringlings show in 1963 said of Soules that 'by his supreme artistry he soars to new heights of aerial audacity'.

Now Max Butler has turned towards his television: flickering silver images of a flying bare-chested man in sparkling leotards, and open-mouthed children gaping skywards. Then the crackling theme music and an astonished MC: 'And now Gerard Soules! The Youngest Aerialist in the World!! From Michigan!!! Sixty feet in the air!!!!'

Butler has worn these tapes thin. He became friends with Soules when he had his poodle act, but he says that the trapeze was Soules's true calling. His first glimpse of him was on British television in 1963. This performance was such a success that he was booked up by Billy Smart's Circus for a London season. 'No one in this country had seen a heel-catch act like it,' Butler remembers. He appeared in two televised Christmas shows and performed a benefit for the NSPCC; Princess Margaret, who attended the charity gala, expressed sincere appreciation when she met Soules in the after-show line up.

'I knew I'd always remember him, and whenever I hear his music I think of him,' Butler says, without taking his eyes from the screen. 'He had so much charisma… now watch, he does one trick on this which is absolutely unique, and he does it in time to the music. He does this on the backswing, and when you fall on the backswing you've got no hope… you just watch this, this is sensational… a forward heel-catch from the knee… isn't that sensational? Nobody ever copied Gerry doing that. They can do it on the frontswing, but not on the back. This… this… what he does here, just no one could copy. On the bloody backswing, you've got nothing to take any judgement from whatsoever.'

Soules never used a safety net. Except in New York City, where state laws demanded that assistants should at least stand underneath with hand-held

nets, solo trapeze acts wouldn't get bookings if they demanded that sort of security. That was the whole point: the act was death-defying, you either caught the bar or caught the concrete.

'He'd tell me he was frightened,' says Kenny Dodd, a former circus clown who became friends with Soules on a winter tour of the US in 1957. 'He was very aware of how dangerous the act was, and he knew that was why he was so much of a draw. People weren't real sure that he wasn't going to get hurt or killed. But it wasn't like he was scared to death every night. He just knew he couldn't continue doing it for the rest of his life.'

But one day in 1964 Gerard Soules just quit cold. He called it his *crise de nerfs*: he explained that all he could see form his trapeze was the ground below.

'He told me that you're okay when you're young,' Max Butler remembers, 'but suddenly when you mature, you do just think, 'What the hell am I doing up here with all that concrete underneath?' If you go, you've gone.'

The circus put out a story that his retirement was caused by a terrible fall. 'But I knew Gerry very well,' Kenny Dodd says on the phone from his home in Sarasota, Florida, 'and I have no recollection of any fall at all. He had a near-fall in Belgium, and that probably shook him.'

There *was* a bad fall, but years earlier. Then, while Soules lay in hospital with a broken back, a friend had bought him a puppy. 'You know,' he told his friend, 'I've always wanted to have a dog act. But I won't be cruel and teach them jumping tricks. I'll do something special.'

Gerard Soules was open about his homosexuality. Max Butler remembers him as 'camp in a showman way, but not really effeminate. There was one time at Ringlings when some man shot another man who was supposed to playing around with his wife. Gerard said, 'I don't know what he was so het up about, because that guy was playing around with me at the time."

He had relationships with women too, including a liaison with Florrie Stephenson, an Irishwoman who worked a dog act and probably inspired his second career. But dogs weren't his first choice. In London in 1965, Soules visited Hamleys to buy marionettes, but his plans for a puppet show never reached an audience. Then he tried a plate-spinning act, but it was a low-paid turn that brought few accolades. He thought about becoming a human cannonball, but doubted whether his nerves could stand it. He had sold his trapeze bar and capes to a young man called Elvin Bale, who took Soules's place as the trapeze with Ringlings, and remembers Soules as an inspiring tutor. But Bale almost met his end long before his mentor.

'Elvin did the cannonball as the big finish at the end of the show,' says Max Butler, who directed Bale's last show in the Far East. 'It was so humid in Hong Kong that ever day he'd test the cannon by putting in a sandbag of the exact weight and firing it so he'd know where to put the airbags for his landing. But one day someone left the sandbag out in a torrential downpour. He knew that the heat would dry it, but unfortunately it only dried the outside and the inside was still wet. So Elvin came in, fired the bag, and it needed a lot of adjusting. So the performance came, and he was fired out of the cannon, but he overshot by about 10 feet – a real fly-past – and landed on concrete. Shattered his vertebrae. Very, very painful. Now he walks with leg braces.'

Soules's dog act took about a year to piece together. Most of the dogs were bought individually, and not all performed well. The idea for the fancy dress

evolved from Soules's love of the musical; he reckoned that what people really wanted from their entertainers was not so much danger as glamour. 'I start training them when they're a year to 14 months, using the 'pork chop' method,' Soules said in a press release. 'By that I mean plenty of rewards like love. Training sessions are more like playing with the dogs than working with them.'

The 10-minute act was watched with dropped jaws: here were poodles like you'd never seen them. In French gowns, hula skirts and sombreros, the dogs would skip and shimmy to 'Mimi', 'Thank Heaven for Little Girls', and 'The Mexican Hat Dance'. To the accompaniment of the Wedding March, one poodle dressed as the nervous groom stood at the altar while another, the bride, waltzed up the aisle to join him. And then there was the grand finale, in which all 12 dogs high-kicked their way around the ring to the can-can.

'It actually stopped the show,' says Dave Cousans, an ice-skating juggler who saw Soules's act last year as part of the Ice Capades show in Mexico. 'Gerard was on skates, the dogs were on a mat, and he used to skate around and pick them up at the other side of the mat. It was very funny, very pretty. He made all the costumes himself.'

Soules worked Radio City Music Hall, all the big ice shows, and most of the famous cruises. 'He was *there*,' Kenny Dodd says. 'He had a very good salary. There may have been acts that earned more, but none worked so hard. Maybe they worked 20 weeks a year, whereas Gerard worked 50 weeks a year. He could make maybe $1,500 a week in Las Vegas, maybe $1,000 in an amusement park.

He pumped his earnings into running his own small circus, Circus Girard, which disbanded after a few seasons (Max Butler says it was 'too classy, too good for America'). In recent years he had scaled down his ambitions and invested in a vintage carousel, and he devoted much time restoring it. He told a friend, 'Oh, that's for my old age – leasing it out is my pension.' The carousel was also a diversion from the recent death of a longtime lover.

He had met Steve Schumacher, an airline worker, in the early Seventies, and the pair became inseparable. Schumacher had a kidney disorder requiring frequent dialysis and several operations, and Soules stuck with him throughout. He died five years ago. 'Gerard never got over it,' Dodd says. 'It was probably the most devoted friendship I've ever seen.'

'Gerry was a lost soul,' Colleen Anderson remembers. 'He had to do everything alone, a lot of travelling. He used to call me and say, 'Colleen, I've just got nothing to live for. My life is gone.' Steve's family almost disowned him right through his sickness. Before he went in for his operation, he said to Gerry, 'If anything happens to me, I don't want to go back to Memphis. Don't let my family take me. They didn't want me in life, and I don't want to be there in death.''

Nevertheless, the family did bury him in Memphis, and they asked Soules not to attend the funeral. But after a two-year legal battle, Soules succeeded in bringing his body back to Michigan. He held a big memorial service. He bought a headstone that read: 'Welcome Home Steve, We Made It. See you soon.'

Last January, Gerard Soules signed up for a six-month stint in a hotel-casino in Las Vegas called Circus Circus, which had opened in the middle of the Strip in 1968 and achieved notoriety three years later when it featured in Hunter

Thompson's *Fear and Loathing in Las Vegas*. 'The Circus Circus is what the whole hep world would be doing if the Nazis had won the war,' Thompson wrote. 'The ground floor is full of gambling tables, like all the other casinos… but the place is about four storeys high, in the style of a circus tent, and all manner of strange Country Fair/Polish Carnival madness is going on up in this space.'

From 11 o'clock in the morning until midnight, the casino stakes its claim to being the best family joint in town. Circus acts – trapeze, jugglers, slackwires, strongmen and animal acts – appear as a free attraction every 20 minutes above the tables. At the side of the stage there is a merry-go-round bar, at which you sip drinks while revolving; next to this an array of fluffy-prize stalls. It was here that Soules made his final appearances with his dog troupe, performing six days a week up to five times a day. His act was well received, and he seemed happy to be there.

In April came good news and bad. His carousel opened at the zoo in Fort Wayne, Indiana, and was a great success. The owners anticipated it would draw thousands of extra customers every year; at Soules's request, the first of these were non-paying local cancer patients and their families. Soules attended the opening with unconcealed pride. 'He took me to the top of a hill overlooking the carousel,' his sister recalls. 'He said, 'Colleen, you can't imagine how I feel now. I think I'm the happiest I've ever been.' There were tears in his eyes as he took my hand.'

But he came down fast when he returned to Vegas the next day. Circus Circus had refused his requests to keep his dogs in the trailer park at the casino, forcing him to move out to Silver Nugget Camper Land, about 30 miles north. 'The people there liked him,' his sister says, 'and said how quiet he kept the dogs, but he hated not being able to keep the trailer nearby, because he had to keep the dogs in the cages and transport them to and fro in the heat – 105 degrees or something.'

Soules searched for someone to help him ferry the dogs and help with their costume changes during the show. Often he chose a person working with the circus in another capacity, but for much of his Circus Circus stint he relied on a man called Frederick Steese. According to his sister, Soules just went into a poor part of town and offered 31-year-old Steese the job. 'He bought him clothes and food and started to teach him the act. He was always doing things like that, trying to help people less fortunate. I don't know whether they had a sexual relationship or not, but they were certainly friends.'

At the end of May, Circus Circus tried to get Steese – who preferred to be known as Fred Burke – a card to secure his employment. They discovered he had a criminal record. Soules resolved to have nothing more to do with him, and on 3 June he broke the news to his sister. She asked him, 'Did he leave on his own, or did you ask him to leave?' Soules said he had asked him. 'He sounded upset. I could tell by his voice that he was worried.'

On the same evening, Soules also called his younger sister, Cathy. 'I've been exercising and I feel great,' he said. 'It was my day off so I went into town to join an organisation that goes and talks to people dying of Aids, and this afternoon I spent two hours with a boy who has it. I'm going back later the week to take him to lunch. It made me feel good to be able to help.' Later in the conversation he said, 'I'm really tired, I'm going to go to bed early tonight.' That was the last they heard from him.

It was a beautiful, expensive trailer. As you walked into the living room it was all mirrors, candles and wood cabinets. Soules had pictures of Steve Schumacher on display throughout. On one side was the kitchen and bathroom, on the other side the sofas and what he called his entertainment centre. And then you went upstairs to the bedroom: plush but elegant, with more framed photographs and candles. Lots to steal, if you were so inclined.

Soules had two sets of keys, and the police believe the murderer must have taken a set; certainly there was no sign of a break-in. He got in, the police say, while Soules was asleep, but he probably woke the dogs, who in turn woke their master.

My brother was attacked in the bedroom upstairs,' Colleen Anderson says. 'You could see what had happened. There were two huge pools of blood on the bed – I'd say a foot and a half around. One pillow was totally soaked.

'His head was crushed. I think the man left him for dead then. I think that Gerry must have come to, seen the loss of blood, and he couldn't have known exactly what he was doing, so he got up – I could see where his head had smeared blood on the walls going down the stairs. He was trying to go through to the bathroom to see his head, and that's when the man realised he wasn't dead, and grabbed a great big butcher's knife off the counter, and he proceeded to kill Gerry. I could see where he held him against the mirror in the bathroom because I could see the blood from the back of his head, and you could see where he held his head and stabbed him over a hundred times.'

His body was found lying on its side in the doorway between the bathroom and kitchen. The site keeper discovered him, and called Mike Hartzell, the entertainments director at Circus Circus. Hartzell had seen Soules's act many times, but could hardly recognise his mutilated body.

'We're not having a whole lot of luck at this point,' Sergeant Larry Bradley, a North Las Vegas homicide detective, said two weeks after the murder. And then, after two more days, came a lucky break: Frederick Steese was pulled up near Alamo by the Nevada Highway Patrol on a speeding charge. As he was being booked, a trooper found an address book containing Soules's name and phone number. The trooper, who had heard of the murder on the news, called the homicide bureau.

Steese is being held in custody, awaiting trial. He admitted to the murder after four hours of questioning, although he said he did not go to the trailer to kill Soules. Two days later he retracted his admission of guilt.

They buried George Soules near his love. His family didn't get his body back to Livonia for over a week. 'It was a beautiful funeral,' Colleen Anderson says. 'About 75 baskets of flowers were sent from ice-shows and circuses and friends all over. I couldn't believe how many performers sent people to represent them. We had the same thing as he had for Steve – a tent over the grave. My son, the first violinist at the University of East Michigan orchestra, as they brought Gerry in, played the song that Gerry and Steve loved, 'All I Ask of You' from *Phantom of the Opera*. That tore everyone up.

'After the service at the graveside my brother Jim stood up and said, 'Gerry lived for applause – let's give him one final send-off'. So we all stood up and applauded for 10 minutes.

'There were some people working at the cemetery who couldn't understand it. They came over and said, 'Was that person so bad that you were that happy to get rid of him?"

The dogs are quiet now. The pound never got them. When Kenny Dodd heard the news of his friend's death, he called Soules's agent Ava Williams. He said, 'We've lost Gerry – we certainly can't lose the dogs, too.'
Williams made several calls to find them a new home. The small Circus Corona in the Midwest took the poodles, but early reports of their professional progress are not good. Their new masters have studied videotapes of the act, and they play the familiar music, but those little mutts won't play ball: Carmen Miranda's fruit keeps slipping from her head; Mae West won't wiggle like she used to.
'They miss poor Gerard terribly,' Dodd says. 'As do we all.'