



INTERNATIONAL

# TROMBONE

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ASSOCIATION JOURNAL



**International Trombone  
Festival 2022** Another year,  
**another huge success**



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Steve Davis, Charlie Halloran, Michael Dease, Ido Meshulam and Delfeayo Marsalis.  
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# The Trombone-Playing “Queen of Rock ‘n’ Roll”

# LILLIAN BRIGGS

2022  
ITA Legacy Circle Award  
Recipient

By Douglas Yeo



Lillian Briggs, New York Coliseum, 1965

Since the International Trombone Association established its Legacy Circle Award in 2007, recipients have included some of the most influential classical music players (including Joannès Rochut, Maise Ringham Wiggins, and Dorothy Ziegler), jazz players (including Melba Liston, J. J. Johnson, and Juan Tizol), and college professors (including Keith Brown, André Lafosse, and Vladislav Blazhevich). However, in 2022, the ITA broke new ground by recognizing a pioneering rock ‘n’ roll singer and trombonist, Lillian “Tiger Lil” Briggs.

Rock ‘n’ roll emerged from a melting pot of musical and social influences including rhythm and blues, boogie-woogie, gospel, and folk, and it represented a radical departure from the big band era where the trombone was represented by men like Tommy Dorsey and Glenn Miller. In 1951, disc jockey Alan Freed popularized the term rock ‘n’ roll to describe this new kind of music that transcended the traditional Black and white color lines that informed so much of American society at the time. It was into this rapidly changing face of popular music

that Lillian Briggs emerged as one of rock ‘n’ roll’s early stars.

Lillian Biggs was born in Allentown, Pennsylvania, on June 3, 1933. Her mother, Mary Vari, was born in Hungary, and Lillian’s father, James, worked in a steel mill. In her youth, Lillian studied piano and violin before switching to trombone as a student at Allentown’s Central Catholic High School. The decision to play trombone was a pragmatic one. She told *TIME* magazine (September 19, 1955) that she figured if she played in the school band, she could get into football games for free. It turned out that switching to trombone so she could watch touchdowns was a life-altering decision. During her senior year in high school (1952), Lillian formed her own band in Allentown, The Downbeats, and she supported herself and funded the band by driving a truck for Hudsco Cleaners in Castasauqua, Pennsylvania.

In 1953, Lillian joined Joy Cayler’s All-Girl Orchestra. During a 1954 engagement in New York City’s Arcadia Ballroom, each member of Cayler’s orchestra (the group





Top left: Lillian Briggs as a child, Allentown, Pennsylvania, 1936

Top right: Lillian Briggs (back row, far right) with Joy Cayler's Orchestra, 1953

At left: Alan Freed and Lillian Briggs, 1955

At right: Lillian Briggs, RKO Palace Theater, New York City, 1956

was better described as a big band) played a solo, but while performing "Shake, Rattle, and Roll," Lillian put down her trombone and spontaneously began singing in an unbridled style that was a dramatic contrast to her prim and proper appearance.

The crowd went wild. Talent scout Jack Petrill heard the uproar from his office above the ballroom and, thinking a fight had broken out, ran down the stairs in time to hear Lillian thrilling the audience. After the performance, Petrill met with Lillian and promptly signed her to a seven-year contract. She left Joy Cayler's orchestra, changed her name from Biggs to Briggs, and adopted her signature platinum blonde hair and sequined dresses. Within a year, she was introduced to Alan Freed who promoted her concerts and appearances. Lillian signed a contract with Epic Records, and she appeared on *Tonight Starring Steve Allen* where she sang and played trombone. It was the first of her over 100 television appearances. Lillian's single, John Hendrick's "I Want You To

Be My Baby," rocketed to number 20 on *Billboard's* Popularity Charts (September 17, 1955). It sold over a million copies and, by the age of 23, Lillian was a millionaire.

Lillian's trombone was always at her side and reviews of her performances spoke of her playing in lavish terms. After playing at Alan Freed's First Anniversary Rock 'n' Roll Party at Brooklyn's Paramount Theater (September 1955), *Cashbox* gushed that Lillian, "belted out her big hit and had the house in an uproar when she let loose with a wild trombone solo. She stopped the show and had to come back for repeat choruses."

In 1956, while touring Australia with Nat King Cole, Lillian was dubbed "The Queen of Rock 'n' Roll" (*Sydney Morning Herald*, February 8, 1956), a name that stuck with her throughout her career. Her good friend, Lucille Ball, dubbed her "Tiger 'Lil," and Lillian gave concerts from coast to coast and around the world in venues both big and small. Yet Lillian never forgot her humble roots, and she took time to sing and play trombone at state fairs and local variety



Above: Lillian Briggs in *The Ladies Man*, 1961



At right: Lillian Briggs (center) with Madlyn Rhue and Jerry Lewis in *The Ladies Man*, 1961

shows. In 1960, she recorded a bluesy song, "Not a Soul," for the Marlon Brando film, *The Fugitive Kind*. In addition, she had a featured role in the 1961 Jerry Lewis movie, *The Ladies Man*, where she played trombone to begin the movie's big production number, and also tried to teach Lewis how to play the trombone ... unsuccessfully, to no one's surprise.

Lillian Briggs recorded dozens of singles for Epic, Sunbeam, Paramount, and other labels, and while she never recorded an album, her recordings were highly influential in both the rock 'n' roll and rockabilly worlds. She had the unique ability to sing tongue-twisting lyrics at a blistering speed, a technique that was rarely used by rock 'n' roll singers. In 1965, she appeared on the television show, "What's My Line?" Lillian was the mystery guest for actress Arlene Francis. Francis had needed to learn to play Turner Layton's "After You're Gone" on the trombone for her role in the play, "Mrs. Dally Has a Lover," and she turned to her friend, Lillian, to show her how it's done.

Lillian married Leonard Winograd, a successful stockbroker, in 1965 (they were divorced in 1983) and by 1970, she retired from show business. Spending 40 weeks a year on the road was grueling, and after she and her husband spent five years in Westbury, New York, she found success as a real estate developer in Florida where she lived the energetic, extravagant life of a socialite, driving around in her Rolls Royce and playing golf with her friends and many celebrities. She continued to sing from time to time at her country club but, she said, "My lip is shot. I couldn't play a note on the trombone now if you paid me \$100,000!" (as reported to the *Allentown Morning Call*, July 6, 1980).

Lillian, always the life of a party, died in 1998, and is buried in Whitehall, Pennsylvania next to her mother, where her nickname, "Tiger 'Lil," is engraved on her headstone.

In 2013, Jasmine Records issued a compilation of 33 of her singles which brought her back to prominence as a pioneering female rock 'n' roll singer who always had





Left and center: Lillian Briggs, Monte Carlo, 1965



At right: Lillian Briggs on the golf links in Florida, 1986

a trombone in her hand. Today, as the first rock ‘n’ roll trombonist to be honored with one of the International Trombone Association’s prestigious awards, Lillian Briggs is back. And she’s still making us smile. “Lillian likes that trombone,” *TIME* magazine wrote in 1955.

**“Boy,”** she said, with her signature wit, **“it really can moo!”**

Yes, Lillian, it sure can.

Douglas Yeo was bass trombonist of the Boston Symphony Orchestra from 1985 to 2012, and now teaches trombone at Wheaton College and, for 2022–2023, University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign. A frequent contributor to the *ITA Journal*, he received the ITA Award in 2014. Special thanks to Lee Schiller for providing many photos of Lillian Briggs.

