



Making Magic

Spellbinding Stars of
Past & Present Fascinate
World with Art of Conjuring

By Jaq Greenspon

The art of conjuring has been around, arguably, since the time of the Ancient Egyptians. Reports exist of the cups and balls engraved in hieroglyphs found on the walls of pyramids and ancient tombs. Certainly, Chinese magicians knew of the cups and balls and, according to *Masters of Illusion: Jewish Magicians of the Golden Age*, a display now on exhibit at the Skirball Cultural Center in Los Angeles, the first Jewish conjuror was Aaron, Moses' brother, who turned his rod into a snake.

Magic, then, can lay a responsible claim on being the second-oldest profession in the world—and, oddly enough, the oldest also incorporates the term “trick.” From the moment playing cards were introduced to Europe in the mid-14th century, someone was being asked to “pick one, memorize it and place it back into the pack.” Even the cards themselves place a certain importance on historical notices, which each of the court cards (jack, queen, king) in each suit (hearts, clubs, spades, diamonds) acting as a representation of some past monarch.





Siegfried & Roy

Magicians have used their effects to tell stories, illustrate solutions to arguments, affect the outcomes of battles and simply entertain everyone from the heads of states to the common man on the street.

Even in Las Vegas, a city known for its sordid treatment of history and its disdain for the past, magical entertainment has endured throughout the last six decades to make the city a dream destination for the practitioners of the art.

"Las Vegas is where every magician, at some point or another, comes to test themselves," explains Kevin Burke, who stars in his own comedy-magic show downtown at the Fitz hotel-casino. "This is where all the best magicians end up at some point, one way or another. Where else is there?"

Where else indeed?

Today, when you think of magic in Las Vegas, there are a half-dozen names that immediately spring to mind: Criss Angel, David Copperfield, Lance Burton, Mac King, Penn & Teller, and Siegfried & Roy. But, in addition to the celebrities, some of whom are no longer even performing, another dozen or so perform regularly in their own shows or in variety spots in larger productions. Today, you can spend a week in Vegas and see two completely different magic shows almost daily. But this wasn't always the case.

"In the early years, there wasn't much magic in Vegas," recalls Johnny Thompson, who has been a Las Vegas resident since 1974. And he would know. Under the name The Great Tompsoni (& Company), Thompson is also one of the foremost performers and creators of magic living today. In the 60s, there were only two 'resident magicians' in town.



Mac King

“Johnny Paul was working at the Showboat as the resident magician and became the talent buyer,” says Thompson with nostalgia. “And Jimmy Grippo worked behind the bar at the Desert Inn. His barboy, who set up the drinks and so forth, was Daniel Cross, who later became the resident magician at the bar there. He understudied Jimmy Grippo.”

The job of the resident magician basically was to be on-call in case someone wanted to see a trick. Usually, the type of magic performed by these entertainers is what is called close-up magic, a more intimate variety of the art. Close-up magic includes card and coin tricks that often are performed right in the spectators’ hands and in front of their eyes. This is the type of magic that a lot of people first experienced, the kind done at a birthday party or by Uncle Charlie when he produced a quarter from behind the ear.

When executed well, it seems near miraculous. And people like Grippo, who moved from the Desert Inn to Caesars Palace in the mid-’60s and stayed there until he died in the 1990s, exemplified the form.

Not to be outdone, Steve Wynn brought in magic legend Mike Skinner to be the resident magician when he took over the Golden Nugget in the 1970s. Wynn actually has been a longtime supporter of magic and currently has Israeli close-up master, Shimshi, performing the resident duties at the Wynn and Encore resorts.

“It’s the opportunity for me to create greatness for myself,” says Shimshi.

Currently, he is one of two close-up magicians working on the Strip; the other is Paul Vigil, who currently does a full close-up show at King Ink tattoo shop and bar room at The Mirage.



Lance Burton

"I really want to show people (the kind of) magic that's take no prisoners, no holds barred, no way out, please watch as close as you can," he says.

But that intimacy of close-up magic is also part of its limited success in Las Vegas. When you have to fill a showroom of 1,500 people, you need something more than a pack of playing cards.

The second type of magic most often seen in the Entertainment Capital of the World—and what Vegas is more famous for—is the full stage-size illusion shows, performances that can be shared by thousands simultaneously. But then again, in Vegas' early days, it didn't take kindly to magicians.

"Showman-wise, there were very few magicians who were working back in the '50s and '60s," says Thompson. "Orson Wells did a magic

act here in the '50s. They were not a popular item here at that time."

It took the French revue shows, with showgirls in feathered head-dresses, to really bring magicians to the forefront—literally. When the *Lido de Paris* began performances at the Stardust in 1958, the opener and first act to step onstage in front of a paying audience was magician Marvyn Roy.

In 1959, the Tropicana opened a competing show, also imported from Paris, called *Folies Bergère* that, in 1967, hosted the two names who changed magic in Las Vegas forever—Siegfried & Roy.

Also during this time, the Dunes featured Johnny Hart in *Casino de Paris*, and the Thunderbird featured former bellhop Gary Darwin in its production show.

"These were the guys who were the early magicians who were



Criss Angel

working in town. Of course, Gary stayed on to start the Magic Club, and it's been running for over 40 years," says Thompson.

Until the 1970s, magicians mostly were relegated to the variety spots in the bigger revue shows and as opening acts for other entertainers. Mac Rooney, the French comedy magician, who was a fixture at the Crazy Horse in Paris, worked the *Lido* in the '60s, as did movie star Channing Pollock, who personified the image of the elegant magician bedecked in tails and top hat.

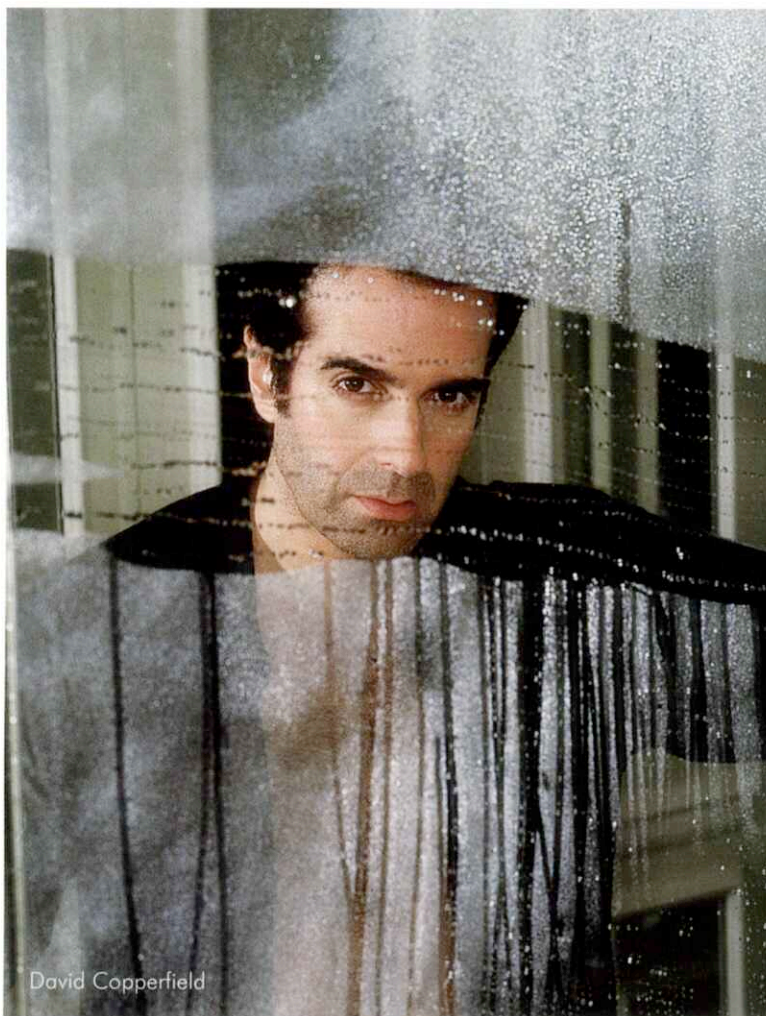
"Periodically Kreskin (who was a world-famous mentalist-mind reader) came into town for a few weeks and worked here and there. Never any long-term engagements," says Thompson, who first performed in Vegas as a magician after moving here.

"Also (comedy magician) Carl Ballentine was spotted around as a

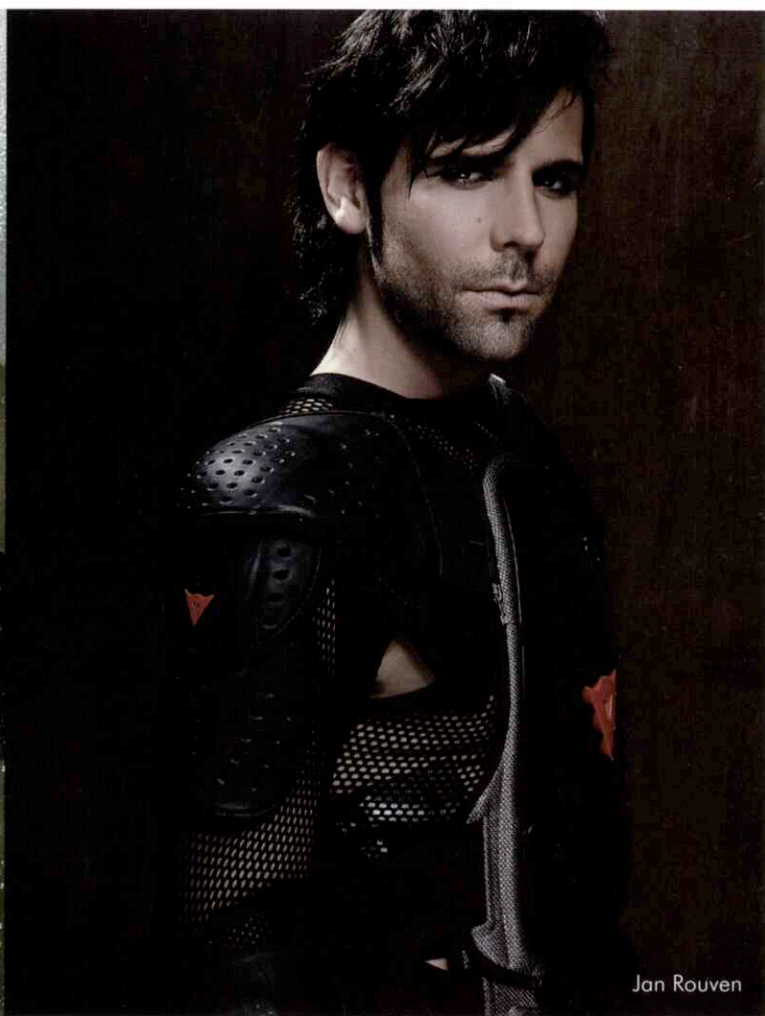
supporting act for several stars during the '50s and '60s. He came in as the middle act when the new *Folies Bergère* opened in 1976. Reveen replaced Carl Ballentine, and then Pam (his wife and the "& Company" in his act) and I replaced him in 1976." Reveen, a first-class performer in his own right who later went on to manage Lance Burton, had "been in town once before as an opening act for Steve (Lawrence) and Eydie (Gorme); that was his first job in town."

In 1974, Siegfried & Roy came back to Las Vegas after a highly successful run in Puerto Rico and headlined *Hallelujah Hollywood* when it opened at the MGM Grand. A big change came in 1978, though, when Siegfried & Roy went back to the *Lido* at the Stardust.

"That was during the Lefty Rosenthal mob years. Siegfried & Roy went from *Hallelujah Hollywood* into the Stardust, and they did 25



David Copperfield



Jan Rouven

minutes in the show instead of the traditional 10-12.”

The tide was shifting. Suddenly, entertainment directors were able to visualize a magic show holding an audience for a full evening performance. It was Siegfried & Roy who again stepped in to make the leap.

“Siegfried & Roy left the Stardust and opened their show (*Beyond Belief*) at the Frontier in 1981, and that was the first full magic show that ever hit town,” says Thompson, who had more than the obvious reason to wish his friends success.

“We were the first successful act to replace Siegfried & Roy after they left the Stardust. We opened in 1982, and we stayed until ’84, headlining in the *Lido de Paris*. They tried various acts, but no one was successful until we got in. And then we had a run of the show contract for a couple of years.”

Lance Burton arrived in Las Vegas in 1980 and spent the next nine years opening the *Folies Bergère*. During his tenure there, Burton also won the Grand Prix award at 1982’s *Fédération Internationale des Sociétés Magiques* competition—the Olympics of magic—that eventually led to the opening of his own show at the Hacienda hotel in 1991, making it the second full-length magic show to find a permanent home in a Strip resort.

Also in the early ’80s, Doug Henning, who had made a name for himself through his Broadway show and TV specials, made periodic forays into Vegas, playing exclusively at the Las Vegas Hilton, located just off the Strip.

By this time, however, Siegfried & Roy had left the Frontier and were about to change Las Vegas entertainment again.

“They moved to The Mirage when it opened (in 1980). They put

on the most expensive show ever produced in Vegas, in conjunction with Kenneth Feld and Steve Wynn,” explains Thompson. “When they opened at the Frontier, it was in conjunction with the Felds, they produced it. When they went into The Mirage, it became the biggest show that ever hit this town—and the most expensive. There was about \$29 million onstage, plus the cost of the showroom. They opened the door for Cirque du Soleil, for these spectacular shows.”

Meanwhile, at the other end of the street, Lance Burton finished his run at the Hacienda by signing an unprecedented 13-year contract with the about-to-be-opened Monte Carlo. Coming in on the ground floor, he had the 27 million-dollar Lance Burton Theatre built to his specifications.

The floodgates had been opened. David Copperfield, perhaps the most recognized magician in the world, went from opening act to headliner.

“He moved on to Caesars and did several weeks a year there,” says Thompson, “Then he went from Caesars to the Hollywood Theatre at the MGM Grand. He’s doing 40 weeks a year now there.”

Rumors have long circulated that Copperfield, whose magic warehouse is in Las Vegas, would someday have a permanent home for his show here.

Penn & Teller also started with limited runs and eventually found a niche at the Rio, where, in their eponymous theater, they continue to fill the room after more than 10 years. The same is also true for The Amazing Johnathan, who continues to draw crowds to his unique blend of comedy and magic even though his show has bounced from downtown’s Golden Nugget to the Sa-

hara, Riviera, Flamingo and, now, the Harmon Theater at Planet Hollywood Resort.

Not wanting to compete in the crowded evening market, Mac King brought the full-length afternoon Mac King Show to Harrah's in January of 2000. King originally didn't want to come to Vegas, though.

"I just never thought it was the right spot for my show. I didn't have any dancing girls and wild animals. It was just me and some goldfish. It didn't seem like the right fit," says King.

It took prodding from Burton, King's childhood friend, to convince the Kentucky native to make the leap.

"But it turns out, like in most things, Lance Burton was correct," King says with a smile. His show has since been named one of the best shows and best values in town.

Criss Angel is the most recent big name to grace Las Vegas Boulevard. His show, Believe, originally was produced in conjunction with Cirque du Soleil, but the mixture proved volatile and bad for business.

"Cirque has backed off and let him handle the show, and he's turned it into a magic show," says Thompson, who worked as a consultant on Angel's TV series, *Mindfreak*, for three years. "He's got about 38 effects in the show now, and he's getting good reviews—finally."

There are a number of magic shows in Las Vegas, and the numbers do not look like they are going to decline anytime soon.

Twenty-nine-year-old local acrobat magician Seth Grabel, for instance, recently took his acrobatic magic act to the stage of NBC's *America's Got Talent*, now in its sixth season, in hopes of winning the \$1 million-dollar grand prize and a headlining show on the Las Vegas Strip. Grabel received big applause from the show's audience and was voted on to Vegas by all three judges, so time will tell.

German illusionist Jan Rouven opens his show, *Illusions*, at the Clarion Hotel at the first of this month.

"A show in Las Vegas is the ultimate dream for most performers, and after appearing at Fremont Street Experience for the past two years, I knew a permanent show had to be in the cards," says Rouven with no hint of irony.

"After touring Europe for many years, *Illusions* will allow me to reach a whole new audience, and I am confident that my new show will be a crowd-pleasing production that will leave audiences in awe, and a little frightened."

Also opening a new show is Arian Black, one of the few women to ever have her own show here. But Black started in a similar way that the others did—as a variety spot in the Riviera's water-themed *Splash* production show during the '90s before opening *Secrets* downtown at Fitzgerald's, in the same room now occupied by Burke. On Sept. 1, Black will unveil her *Black's Magic* in the Las Vegas Hilton's 400-seat Giordano Theatre.

And, the exotic animals that Siegfried & Roy popularized in magic still are represented in the shows of current magicians, such as Dirk Arthur, who can be seen at O'Sheas, and Rick Thomas, who performs in the Saxe Theatre at Planet Hollywood Resort.

Las Vegas has come a long way since magicians were the seldom-thought-of fill-in between the dance numbers, and if things continue the way they're going, we're going to see a lot more of them in the future.



Seth Grabel

Houdini & Friends

At this point in history, the idea of Jews being involved in the entertainment industry is such a cliché, there are whole comedy routines devoted to its tropes. But like all clichés, the truth is buried in there somewhere.

With magic, the first Jewish name to come to mind is Harry Houdini, son of a Hungarian rabbi and probably the most famous conjurer in history. Certainly, there were others, before and after him, and the two new exhibits at the Skirball Center in Los Angeles focus on Houdini and a host of other Jewish magicians.

Houdini: Art and Magic, encompasses the personal and professional life of the man who would become the King of Kards. The touring exhibit, which started in New York in October 2010 and will continue in other venues through May 2012, contains more than 150 artifacts, including some of his most famous props—the Water Torture Cell is an exacting reproduction, because most of the original was destroyed in a fire—and posters from his touring shows.

The performance aspect of the exhibit also illustrates Houdini's lasting influence on the art form and the number of magicians who have been inspired by the man's myth. The mystery, however, is kept alive as none of the exhibits reveal the methods of his magic.

On the personal side, photos and postcards written from a young Erich Weiss, Houdini's birth name, after he ran away from home, as well as two journals, have never before been in a public display. This collection, assembled from a number of varied sources, provides a rare, unique look into the life of a man who, during his lifetime, was one of the most famous people on the planet.

In conjunction with this touring show, the Skirball has added *Masters of Illusion: Jewish Magicians of the Golden Age*. Focusing on the period between 1875 and 1948, this is "the first museum exhibition to investigate the contributions of Jewish magicians to the development of modern magic."

Here, Houdini is just one in a list of 30 names, each of whom is legendary to current practitioners of the art form. The exhibit showcases the history and careers of these famed prestidigitators through a selection of playbills, broadsides, costumes, props and film and radio clips.

Also notable—although not specifically within the purview of the exhibit—is the 1584 first edition of Reginald Scot's *Discoverie of Witchcraft*, which is "thought to be the first English language book to distinguish magic as a performance requiring skill and illusion rather than a practice of witchcraft."

The items in the exhibit were culled from the private collections of magicians, magic historians and even family members of the honorees themselves. To add a sense of verisimilitude, the pieces are displayed in "a gallery designed to recall environments where magic was often performed, such as Victorian magic parlors and vaudeville stages."

Masters of Illusion was conceived and created by Skirball curator Erin Clancey, who hopes that "visitors will enjoy the opportunity to view the extraordinary treasures presented in both exhibitions, and that they will come to appreciate the impact Jewish magicians made on entertainment history and on American and European culture, lifestyle and traditions."

Both exhibits run through Sept. 4.

