



Courtesy Lance Burton

Lance Burton, the headlining magician at Monte Carlo hotel in Las Vegas, represents the classical, tuxedo wearing magician. It was his boyhood dream to perform in Las Vegas. He first arrived here in 1981 and performed in the "Folies Bergere" at the Tropicana.

Revealing the Las Vegas Magician

BY ALEZA FREEMAN

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He makes people scream and throw their drinks in the air. Sometimes they fall out of their seats. And sometimes they stare at him with sort of a glazed, unemotional look. Then suddenly, the wheels start turning, and their jaw goes slack and drops open.

Those are the moments he lives for, when he gets to create and see those reactions. They help recapture the feeling he had as a kid, the first time a magician pull a silver dollar out from behind his own ear.

"I get to relive that moment vicariously through the audience," says Lance Burton, the headlining magician at Monte Carlo hotel in Las Vegas. "I think I was 5 years old. I didn't really realize it was a trick. I thought it was real magic."

Like most magicians, Burton was "crazy about magic" as a kid, and began to learn the art form not long after his silver dollar encounter in Louisville, Ky. When he was 12, he watched an episode of "The Merv Griffin Show," taped in Las Vegas with magicians Siegfried & Roy. From that point forward, he was determined to end up with his own show on a Vegas stage.

"I kind of got it in my head if you wanted to be a professional magician there was this place called Las Vegas out West somewhere," says Burton. "I wasn't even sure where it was, but that was the place I wanted to go."

Over the past few decades, Las Vegas has grown into a full blown mecca for magic. There are a couple hundred magicians living here, and a couple dozen working regularly.

"You can't turn around on a street corner in Vegas without bumping into a magician," says Teller, the quiet half of the magic duo Penn & Teller, who headline at the Rio hotel. "A certain kind of momentum seems to have grown up here to where this is the place where magicians come."

Even world famous magician David Copperfield, a headliner at MGM Grand, had an early link to Las Vegas.

"When I was 12 years old my parents took me to Caesars Palace. I saw some of the greats at the time at Circus Maximus, which was an amazing theater," says Copperfield. "It was pretty amazing to go there as a kid and then be a headliner there for 15 years."

Magicians close up

A magician walks out onto the stage and says, "I'm going to deceive you."

And then he does.

In that way, he or she distinguishes himself from politicians, car salesman, and all the other people who come out



Courtesy Penn & Teller

Magicians Penn Jillette and Teller, of Penn & Teller, perform at the Rio hotel in Las Vegas.

The origin of the magician

Just as Las Vegas is ever evolving, so is the magician's role. In fact, the perception of magicians has drastically changed throughout history.

For instance, magicians weren't always considered entertainers. During the 16th century, many were tried and hanged as witches.

In 1584, Reginald Scot wrote "The Discoverie of Witchcraft" in which he revealed the methodology behind some common illusions.

"This was done primarily to prove that these people were not supernatural and they were killing people for reasons that were unfounded," says veteran of Vegas magic Johnny Thompson. "They called us alchemists and wizards and seers. Of course, as more people got wise to what was happening, we ended up being entertainers and street performers."

Until the 19th century, magicians primarily wore pointy wizard hats and cloaks, and carried themselves in a Merlin-like way, says Teller, of the magic duo Penn & Teller.

Enter Jean Eugène Robert-Houdin (the magician who Harry Houdini based his name upon). He started

wearing the same clothes the theater goers were wearing.

"He came up with the notion that if you dressed like a normal person in normal theater-going attire that there would be all sorts of interesting qualities that would bring to a show. So he wore a tuxedo and tails," says Teller. "What's weird about that is that as fashions changed, magicians kept wearing that uniform and it turned into the equivalent of a Merlin outfit."

That's why Penn Jillette and Teller, who are celebrating 35 years as a team this month, decided to wear gray suits.

"You can never go wrong with a nicely tailored business suit. It's the most invisible item you can pick," Teller explains. "It doesn't feel like a costume. It just feels like clothes. We're not relying on our costume to impress you or make you think we're different. You will have to find those differences for yourself. It's as near as you can get, without going X-rated, to walking out on stage naked."

Which, of course, they have also done ...

You've just gotta love evolution!

and purport to tell you the truth while telling you lies," says Teller. "It's the most honest form of lying you could possibly want."

Of course, when it comes to magic, things aren't always as they appear. Really there's much more to a magic show than lies and deception.

Teller continues: "Magic is the one area in which you can enjoy making mistakes in that process of distinguishing reality from make-believe. It's the one place where you can safely go into a room and say, 'I will try my best to figure out where reality is here, but if I fail it's just going to be more fun.'"

"A magician's job is essentially to give you a really interesting experience in which your sense of reality gets a little bit twisted. It's like giving your mind a playground."

People want to be transported, adds Copperfield, and it's the magician's responsibility to take their mind on

that journey.

"The audience has the need to be taken away from everyday problems and concerns, and that's my job," he says.

Even with magic shows dotting the Las Vegas Strip, there's really no such thing as a typical Vegas magic act. Copperfield is the iconic magician. Lance Burton is the classic, tuxedo magician. Penn & Teller are the intellectual and political bad boys.

There's also a princess of magic, Cirque du Soleil's take on magic and even a drag queen magician.

"There's kind of a niche for everybody," says Nathan Burton, magic's boy next door, who performs at the Flamingo hotel (and is not related to Lance). "You can see two or three magic shows and see totally different style shows, so that you wouldn't see the same material twice."

Despite all their differences, Lance Burton says there is a common history

and bond among those in the magic community.

"I think all magicians were the dorky kid in school," he says. "That's what's great about magic. You can learn it on your own by reading books and practicing, and then take those things into the world and perform for your friends at school. It's an icebreaker. And suddenly the kid who was the geeky kid now has an identity."

Viva Magic Vegas!

Lance Burton finally made it to Las Vegas in 1981, when he helped veteran of Vegas magic Johnny Thompson drive a U-Haul full of illusions over from Los Angeles.

"I happened to be driving the truck when we arrived in Las Vegas," says Burton. "I was driving down the Strip and I kept looking at all the marquees and lights and I was so enamored with the visual aspect, I actually drove the truck off the road. Johnny said, 'Kid, you better let me drive.'"

Burton has been performing here ever since, although the long-running French revue show which gave him his start, "Folies Bergere" at the Tropicana, is set to close this month.

The magician, as Las Vegas knows it today, didn't start out as the star of the show with his name in lights and his face on a marquee above the Las Vegas Strip. His role actually evolved from review shows like "Folies," where magicians were relegated to a small part of the overall act.

The first magician to perform in Las Vegas was Jack Kodell, who did an act with parakeets called "Fantasy in Birds" in a show at the El Rancho Vegas in 1947, says magician and author Max Maven.

"The second may well have been Jay Marshall, who was part of the third show booked at the Desert Inn after its opening in April 1950," says Maven. "Jay returned to the D.I. the following year to open for Frank Sinatra during the latter's first Las Vegas run."

The third, he says, was Marvyn Roy, also known as Mr. Electric, whose show "Artistry of Light" was at the Last Frontier in 1951.

Copperfield houses a private collection of artifacts from magic history in his International Museum and Library of the Conjuring Arts in Las Vegas. Among the collection are ephemera and artifacts from early Vegas magicians including Kodell and Mr. Electric, (he made his wife appear in a light bulb).

But it wasn't until Siegfried Fischbacher and Roy Horn arrived on the scene more than 30 years ago that magicians moved to the forefront of Vegas entertainment. They debuted as an act in the "Lido de Paris" at the Stardust in 1967, and went on to star in one of the most successful shows in Vegas history.

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— Magician David Copperfield

Siegfried & Roy opened the door for magicians like Penn & Teller, Lance Burton and Copperfield, says Thompson, who has performed in Vegas and around the world along with his wife, Pam, since 1974, as the Great Tomsoni & Company.

"Siegfried & Roy proved magicians could maintain a show in a showroom," says Thompson, who is also a magic consultant for Penn & Teller, Lance Burton and Criss Angel, among others

Copperfield agrees that he and other magicians owe a debt of gratitude to Siegfried & Roy.

"I was a kid at the time," he says, "so I was very lucky that they paved the way."

Teller and magic partner Penn Jillette, meanwhile, have their own theories on why Las Vegas is popular among magicians.

"Penn's theory on this is that currently Las Vegas is one of the few places in the United States you can come and see real live performance," says Teller. "A lot of the people who come to Las Vegas are seeing their very first professional, live show. And magic is the perfect live form."

Also notable, says Teller, are the great many foreign visitors.

"They may prefer to see a show that speaks a kind of an international language," says Teller. "Typically, if you're talking about, 'I show the box empty and then out jumps three women and a tiger,' well, that's something you can comprehend without too much English."

Ultimately, it really isn't all that surprising that a fantasy land like Las Vegas has become the magic capital of the world. Magic is, after all, an entertainment medium filled with fantasy.

"You can suspend disbelief when you see 'Peter Pan' and you see the wires hanging," explains Thompson. "But in a magic show you can't settle for that, you know. If the audience doesn't see any wires, you then have to pass a hoop to prove there aren't any wires."

The finest magicians, he continues, are what they are because they create magic that is believable and enticing to audiences.

"These people," says Thompson, "are really magical."