

Magic City

O

NE OF THE BEST SHOWS IN LAS VEGAS

is one that relatively few people know about. It takes place every Wednesday evening at 10, at a restaurant just off the Strip called Pat's Chinese Kitchen. There, in a large room next to the bar, anywhere from a dozen to a couple of hundred people gather to perform magic tricks for one another. The group calls itself the Darwinian Society, after its founder, Gary Darwin, a versatile magician who works as a bellman at the Riviera. The society's motto is *Magicians and humans welcome*. Mostly, the meetings are attended by magic buffs and amateur magicians, some of whom are highly skilled, but every magician who passes through town drops in, and after midnight some of the working pros from the casino shows are likely to show up as well. ¶ Las Vegas has become the magic capital of the world, which is entirely appropriate



Through a rain-speckled windshield, Fremont Street has a mythic look befitting the 1930s birthplace of Vegas gaming.



Las Vegas: world capital of illusion, where the
.....
best sorcerers apprentice BY WILLIAM MURRAY

because the city itself is a grand illusion. It sprang to life out in the middle of the desert as the result of a gangster's fantasy, and it continues to grow, at the rate of some 40,000 new residents a year, in a waterless terrain that normally would sustain a couple of hundred jackrabbits and a coyote or two. Las Vegas is America's theme park, a place where anything seems possible and reality is the last thing anyone wants to face. Magicians have devoted their lives to fooling people and dazzling them with feats beyond the grasp of the imagination. They belong to Las Vegas as if they had conjured the place up out of America's secret yearnings—a lust for the pot of gold at the end of the rainbow, for the quick, dazzling pace of instant gratification, for the mirage of easy riches, beautiful women, and eternal happiness. No wonder the town has become a mecca for every sleight-of-hand artist and illusionist in the world.

The stars in this firmament are the brightest in the world of wizardry. David Copperfield, who has made the Statue of Liberty disappear and become a television star, works regularly here. Siegfried and Roy have become fixtures at the Mirage, where almost nightly they dazzle the public with the biggest, most elaborate illusions ever performed. The essence of their act

remains their symbiotic relationship with their animals, especially the white tigers and other big cats who share the stage with them. Some years ago, when their act was structured entirely around the cats, I visited their home, which turned out to be a private zoo. A full-grown, snow-white tiger named Sitarra was stretched out on the living-room sofa, an enormous lion named Mombasa was basking in the sun of their backyard, and Roy was strolling through the house with a leopard on a leash. Today their show includes an elephant, a horse, and even a vulture and features every major illusion in the repertory of magic, but the heart of their act is still what they do with the cats, most notably their white tigers.

Las Vegas is a noisy town, always trying to top itself in order to attract the public's attention. Many of the shows seem machine driven, deafening and blinding in their

effects. Magic offers a respite from this trend. At the Hacienda a young man named Lance Burton performs the great classic moves of the genre in a refreshingly uncomplicated way. His show also features dancers and high-tech shenanigans, but the essence of the evening is Burton's varied repertoire of illusions, which he performs in his traditional magician's tails and without gimmickry. A native of Kentucky, where he lived on a farm and bought his first set of tails, at the age of 14, Burton has developed a disarming country-boy patter that perfectly complements the stunts. Burton, whom many consider a pro's pro, was recently awarded the Mantle of Magic, which is bestowed by the magicians themselves on the performer who best exemplifies the art's great traditions.

Anything but traditional is the Cirque du Soleil's new show, "Mystère," at the Mirage's Treasure Island. Purportedly a circus, the Cirque du Soleil is essentially one long magic act in which the performers bring to life a universe of mystical effects, most of them achieved through their remarkable physical skills. The show is so strenuous and demanding that it periodically goes on hiatus for a month or so to allow the cast to recuperate and replenish its energies. Nothing in the evening seems faintly

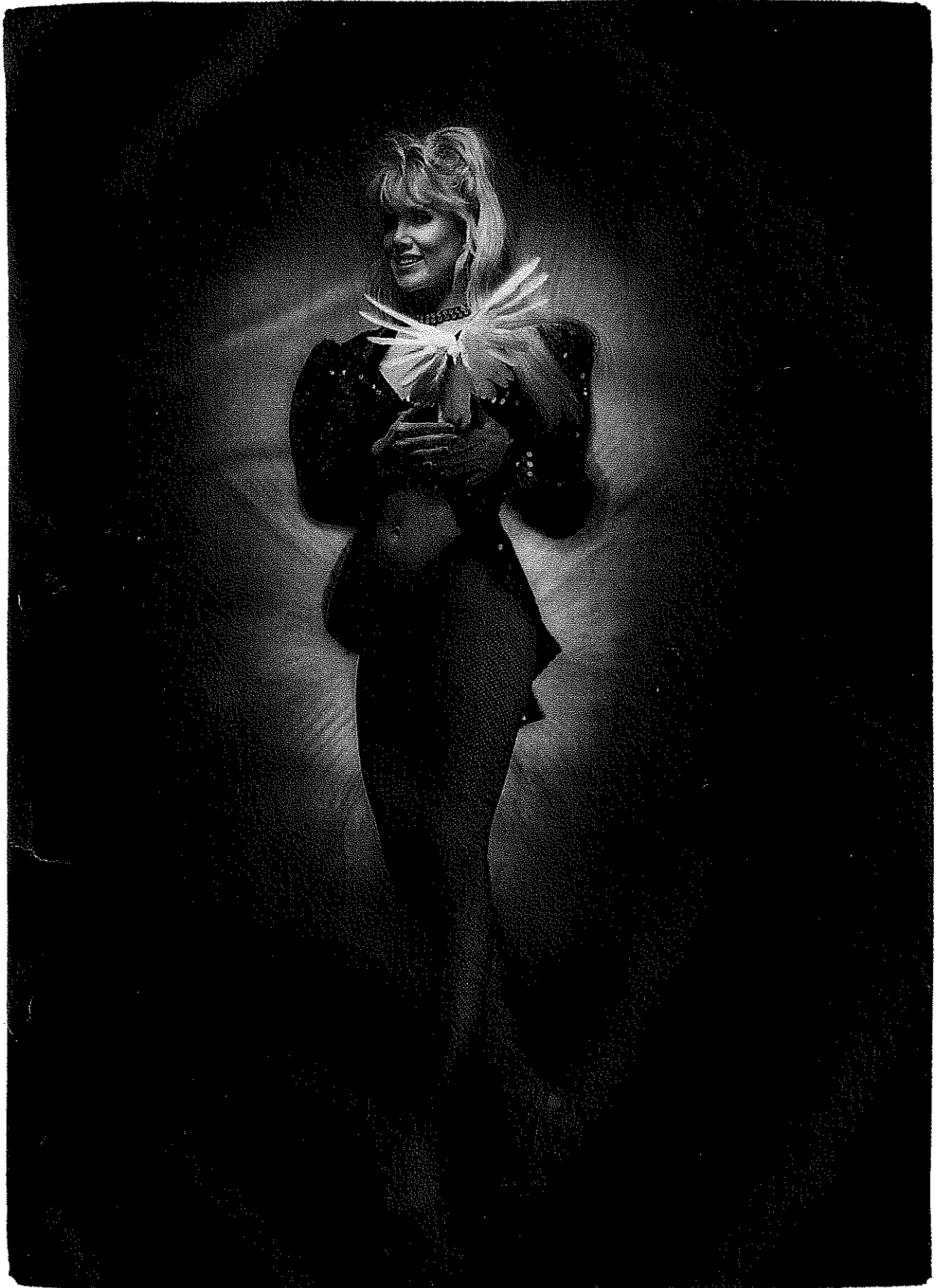
possible, and the effects achieved look superhuman.

Just below the level of these top attractions, Las Vegas provides opportunities and showcases for all sorts of magic acts. On any one day, dozens of conjurers are performing wondrous feats all over town. At Harrah's, a show called "Spellbound" is made up entirely of magic effects and features half a dozen illusionists, one of whom is Sherry Lukas, a very attractive young woman who works with doves, cards, and two poodles. Female magicians are still a rarity in the world of magic, but they are becoming more common. My favorite in the show was a young man named Jeff Hobson, who combs his slick blond hair straight back and grins maniacally at the audience while pulling people up onstage from the front tables to help him through his act. He is the world's most reluctant fire-eater.

The best-known magician in town is Melinda, who, with

A big, snow-white tiger
dozed on the living-room
sofa, while Roy strolled
through the house lead-
ing a leopard on a leash.

PHOTOGRAPHED BY EDWARD GAJDEL



Melinda (née Melinda Saxe) grew up in Las Vegas as a showgirl's daughter and is now the top female magician.

a beautiful figure and long blond hair, looks more like a showgirl or a beauty contestant but who in fact is mistress of all the traditional moves. Melinda grew up in Las Vegas, where her mother danced at the Tropicana. At 16, she began determinedly practicing magic tricks for 10 hours a day. She now stars at the Lady Luck, downtown, in an atmosphere bordering on the seedy that she redeems by the flash and glitter of her moves.

Victor, a tall, elegant black man who works in silence with his handsome female partner, Diamond, produces parakeets from tiny eggs. He also changes one of his fluttering doves into a big white rabbit, which he picks up off the table and carries toward the audience, and then suddenly splits the bunny into two identical animals.

One of the finest magicians around is an artist named John Hamilton, who moved to Las Vegas with his wife about two years ago. As a child, Hamilton battled his way out of a Cleveland slum; in 1979 he became the first black magician to represent the United States at the Grand Prix of Magic, in Brussels. His magic is geared largely to inspire and motivate children, so he spends much of the year on the road performing and lecturing before auditoriums full of kids of all ages. Hamilton was a combat photographer in Viet Nam and then gave up photography to study magic with Neil Foster, a great black sage of the profession. "He taught me that magic is more than just fooling people," Hamilton recalls. "I learned how to sell it onstage, and he gave me confidence in myself."

Hamilton begins his act by establishing the wonder of magic for his young audiences and then gradually begins to work his basic themes into the proceedings. "You live in the greatest country in the world," he tells them; then he shows them what magic can do to open up their lives to the possibilities around them. "You can do anything, become anything you want to be," he tells them, and then he proves it by doing the seemingly impossible before their very eyes. "Some of these kids have never seen anything but TV," Hamilton says. "They don't even know how to applaud a live act."

William Murray, a New Yorker staff writer, has conjured up 24 books, including Now You See Her, Now You Don't.

"Wonder" is the name of the game in magic, and it can be a relatively simple effect that creates it. In an otherwise noisy, overly busy show called "Splash," which I caught one night, a magician named Kevin James appears onstage with a chair and a small paper napkin. He begins to fold up the napkin while tearing off a piece at a time to form a snowflake; he then explains to the people, who may have never seen one, what a snowstorm looks like. By the end of his spiel a great cloud of flakes has begun to pour out from between his hands over the mesmerized audience, too startled at first even to applaud. Simplicity and a moment of pure enchantment.

Scholars and buffs may spend several pleasurable hours inside the Magic and Movie Hall of Fame, a brand-new permanent exhibit, recently opened at O'Sheas Hilton

Casino, on the Strip. The dream baby of a Swiss magician named Retonio, the exhibit occupies about 20,000 square feet and features all sorts of memorabilia, including the Water Torture Cell (made famous by Houdini), costumes, props, mechanical musical instruments, automatons, and famous ventriloquist's dummies—most notably the sinister Fats from the movie *Magic*, starring Anthony Hopkins. Retonio has been collecting since he was

16 and living in London to learn English. "I collect things that enhance magic in life," he explains. "It doesn't have to be magic per se, but it must have a magical quality about it." Not the least of the exhibit's attractions are the live magic shows put on hourly and the mystical revue "That's Magic," performed twice nightly. The Hall of Fame has become Las Vegas's showcase for magic and provides employment for as many as six magicians at a time.

Magic as an art may be divided into two basic categories. There are, first of all, the elaborate stage acts that feature the big illusions. Then there are the sleight-of-hand artists who perform only in intimate settings. The latter are the virtuosi of the profession, for what they do takes an infinite amount of pure skill developed after many hours of practice. Go watch any gathering of prestidigitators, and you will see them perform seemingly impossible feats no more than a few feet from your eyes.

At a recent such gathering I watched David Neighbors, introduced as "a fine young coin man from Denver," move

A fine young coin man
from Denver moved half
dollars from knuckle to
knuckle across the backs
of his limber hands.

50-cent pieces from knuckle to knuckle across the backs of his hands. A comedian named Bizarre Burton put out his cigarette by pressing it into the clenched fist of his left hand; a man named Geno Munari produced an endless flow of cards from his seemingly empty pockets and made them vanish into the air. Allan Ackerman shuffled a deck of cards, asked a spectator to cut it into four packets, and then turned over the top cards on each one to uncover the aces. And I found the beauty and grace of magic exemplified in the work of an elderly Japanese named Shigeo Takagi, who made a delicate ceremony out of connecting and disconnecting large silver rings.

Best of all, Las Vegas is home to Michael Skinner, one of the finest close-up artists in the history of the craft. He works at the restaurants in the Golden Nugget, downtown, where he strolls from table to table offering to entertain people as part of their dinner fare. The first time I met him, he asked to borrow my pen, a gold-plated Cross, and then persuaded my wife, Alice, to lend him her wedding ring. "Don't worry, I won't make it disappear," he assured her, smiling. "In fact, I'm going to give it back to you in a way you'll never forget." He handed Alice my pen and instructed her to hold it horizontally out in front of her while clasping it tightly in her fists at both ends. "Watch," he said. "Ring on a stick." As we all focused on

my pen, the magician held up Alice's ring and then made a swift pass that, Alice told me later, felt like a small breeze passing over the backs of her hands. Her ring now dangled from the center of the pen.

Skinner has more than 2,000 such moves at his fingertips. He's a pleasant-looking, sandy-haired man of about 50, who wears thick glasses and seems like just the sort of citizen you'd be likely to get into a friendly game of poker with. That would be a mistake. There is nothing Michael Skinner cannot do with a deck of cards, including dealing them so that every player receives exactly the hand Michael wants him to have. In his early years, when he was supporting himself by working in magic shops, card sharks often invited him to use those skills in big-money games, but he wisely refused. He felt it would have been a betrayal of his skills. "Close-up is so fragile," another magician has said about his work. "What you don't see is what accomplishes the effect. When I first saw Skinner perform, it changed my whole style of magic. He made me appreciate the physical aesthetics of every move."

How appropriate that this most graceful of the arts should have found a permanent home in Las Vegas, where all is illusion and anything seems possible, from the most fevered of your fantasies to those small, quiet moments when dreams are allowed to flower in the desert air. ●

But How'd He Do That?

I have six dollar tokens," Michael Skinner says, displaying the coins. "I'll remove my finger ring as well."

He places the ring next to the coins. "Watch closely now, because the closer you watch, the less you see, and the less you see, the better for me."

He places the ring in his right hand, along with three tokens. "That's three dollars and a ring in my right and three in the left." The ring and the coins are hidden in his clenched fists, which he holds thumbs up, well out in front of his body, hands apart. "Watch—three coins in my left, and what's in the right? Three and the ring. Don't forget the ring. Now, as long as I keep my hands apart, nothing can happen unless I move my thumbs"—he wiggles them several times—

"and they go from here...all the way over here." He opens his hands. The three tokens in his left hand now nestle with the other three and the ring, in his right one.

"Now, they say lightning doesn't strike twice in the same place, but occasionally it does, with perhaps a twist to the ending." Another wiggle of the thumbs, and the three wandering coins have returned to his left hand. "We'll try it again. The ring in the right hand along with three dollars...and in my left hand just three. Is that correct? But are you sure? I'm not sure, so let me check again. Yes, we have three coins in the left, but what's over here?" He holds his right hand out. "Three, and don't forget the ring." He opens his hand and then closes it. "Now, as I keep the hands far apart, nothing can

happen unless I move my thumbs like that—" He wiggles them again and then opens his hands, to reveal that all the coins and the ring are in his left hand. Another close, another wiggle, and the coins and the ring move from left to right. He places them all down on the table before him. "By the way," he continues, "if you walk through a slot-machine area of any casino, you seldom see people smiling." He slips his ring back on and then pushes up his sleeves to his elbows. "I'll pull these back, so it's easy on the eyes." He picks up the coins again, three in each hand, and makes two fists. "The reason they don't smile is, when they pull the handles, only one in ten pays off." He opens his hands, and the coins have vanished.—*W.M.*