

SIMON ARONSON  
Page 36



## Editor's Desk

Michael Close

Way back in the early '70s, I subscribed to *Hierophant* and *Kabbala*, two magazines published by Jon Racherbaumer. Through those magazines, I learned of Simon Aronson, who was part of Ed Marlo's "exclusive coterie." In 1978 I bought a copy of Simon's first book, *The Card Ideas of Simon Aronson*; the book was full of great card magic, including some terrific memorized deck effects, but the trick that caught my eye was a gem called Red See Passover. I went to some trouble and expense to have the necessary gaffed cards made (this was way before the USPCC began printing gaffed cards), and I dropped this atom bomb of a trick on any unsuspecting magician I could find. (At that time I had two magician-slayers in my repertoire: Simon's trick and my own Wild Underground Transposition. I had the advantage of anonymity; no one knew who I was or what I knew. I saved those two tricks for very late night sessions at magic conventions, introducing them with the meek statement, "Here's something that, maybe, you haven't seen." I unleashed one or the other of those tricks and immediately retired for the night, assured that, when I returned the next morning, the other magicians would still be there, thinking about what they had seen.)

If asked about Red See Passover (and many magicians did ask), I did the honorable thing and said it could be found in *The Card Ideas of Simon Aronson*. Simon sold a few books because of this. When Simon and I finally met a few years later, it felt like we were already old friends.

I admire Simon's effects, which are designed to fool the most intelligent and observant spectator. In 1990, when I decided that I would finally break down and learn a memorized deck stack, Simon's stack was the one I learned. And I have never regretted it.

A great benefit of knowing Simon was getting to know his wife Ginny, who is an intelligent, charming, and gracious lady. Ginny is an active participant in Simon's magic life, editing his books and articles, attending magic conventions with him, serving as the "receiver" in their astonishing two-person mindreading act, and surrendering her kitchen for the Saturday meetings of the Chicago Session, which has been gathering at the Aronson home for more than twenty years.

I had the opportunity to chat with Simon and Ginny about their personal stories, their interests outside of magic, and the development of the mindreading act. A portion of this conversa-

tion is our cover story this month. The full conversation ran to 11,000+ words, and it pained me to have to cut it down, because it was all very interesting. I decided to do what Jon Stewart of *The Daily Show* does when an interview goes long: post the full interview on the Web. You'll find it at [www.MagicSAM.com](http://www.MagicSAM.com).

Simon also contributed a card trick to this issue, and I urge you to give it a try. It is well within the abilities of the average card worker, and the trick is representative of Simon's approach to card magic.

George Schindler passed along the following two announcements:

The Parent Assembly 1 of The Society of American Magicians in New York City has set up a Grave Site Restoration Committee to help preserve and/or restore the grave sites of some of the greatest magicians of all time, whose graves are in the tri-state area. Several fundraising shows are planned to support this effort. For more information, contact the chairman at [Richie@RichieMagic.net](mailto:Richie@RichieMagic.net).

The Society of Young Magicians will present the Weekend of Wonder (WOW) on August 10-12, 2012, at the Crown Plaza Hotel in Warwick, Rhode Island. This highly successful, total-immersion weekend event, previously presented in 2008 and 2010, is being repeated and will bring young magicians from around the country under one roof for a weekend of magic studies. In addition to the training, friendships are made and social activities, gifts, and special attention are offered by experts in all fields of magic. For details see the brochure at [www.magicsym.com/wow.asp](http://www.magicsym.com/wow.asp).

With the passing of Tony Giorgio, magic has lost another of its great, unique characters. He had a great "presence," and he certainly knew his craft. Here's more from Michael Perovich:



The Chicago Session – John Bannon, David Solomon, and Simon Aronson

"Actor/magician Tony Giorgio died on February 1, 2012, in Southern California after a long illness. He was reported to be eighty-eight years of age at the time of his passing. Giorgio's swarthy good looks made him ideal for small parts playing hoodlums in such movies as *The Godfather*, *Magnum Force*, and *The Sting II*. He had a nice part as a detective in the James Coburn vehicle, *Harry in Your Pocket*, for which he was also technical advisor. A performer at the Magic Castle since the 1960s, his act included an extended Three Card Monte routine and his own card to matchbox effect. He made good use of

assistants, naming one 'Ruby,' and engaging her in an amusing close-up magical playlet. In later years Tony became embroiled with the Castle over legal issues that were a burden for all concerned. Giorgio had a working knowledge of the methods of advantage play; his DVD *The Ultimate Work* is highly regarded for its inside information on gambling methods. His friend Dai Vernon uniformly praised him, particularly for his knowledge and skill with dice." So long, Tony.★



# FAR MORE THAN MEETS THE EYE

## *A Conversation with Simon and Ginny Aronson*

BY MICHAEL CLOSE

Simon and Ginny Aronson are two of the smartest, nicest people I know. Through his five books (*Bound to Please*, *The Aronson Approach*, *Simply Simon*, *Try the Impossible*, and *Sessions*, co-authored with David Solomon), his marketed effects, and his three-DVD set *Sessions with Simon: The Impossible Magic of Simon Aronson* (L&L Publishing), Simon has established an enviable reputation as one of magic's most thoughtful and thorough creators. Many of his effects, such as Shuffle-bored, Red See Passover, Side-swiped, and Prior Commitment, are in the repertoire of magicians worldwide. He is a pioneer in memorized deck magic, and his Aronson stack is one of the two most popular stacks in use. You can download his free, fifty-three-page introduction, *Memories Are Made of This*, from his website ([www.simonaronson.com/memorizedhome.htm](http://www.simonaronson.com/memorizedhome.htm)). He accomplished all this while pursuing a full-time, twenty-six-year career as an associate and then full-partner at the law firm of Lord, Bissell & Brook. Ginny's thirty-five year, full-time law career at Sidley Austin LLP was even busier. She progressed from associate, to partner, to managing partner (in 1998), and was the first woman to reach the management committee in the 132-year history of the firm. One of her last accomplishments before retirement was supervising the development and design of the firm's new forty-story office building in Chicago.

The Aronsons share many interests, including modern art, ballroom dancing, and piano playing. But it is their collaboration in a two-person mindreading act that is particularly astonishing. Lisa and I experienced this firsthand, in an impromptu setting, during lunch, when Simon borrowed a dollar bill and Ginny, with her back turned, divined the digits and letters of the serial number. Their act is a forty-year work-in-progress, and it is a deep fooler. The depth of detail that Ginny is able to describe is amazing. (You can see an eighteen-minute portion of their act on Volume One of the above DVD set.)

I chatted with both Simon and Ginny via Skype; we talked about their backgrounds, Simon's life in magic, and the development of the two-person mindreading act. —Michael Close



**Michael: Let's start at the beginning.**

**Simon:** I was born in Boston in 1943 (because both my parents' families lived in the Boston area). But my parents resided in Chicago, so I lived in Chicago until age two-and-a-half, at which point we moved to New York State. I lived in Forest Hills until I was about nine, and then we moved to Rye, New York, where we lived until I left for college.

**M: Your father had a very interesting career.**

**S:** My father, Arnold Aronson, was a lobbyist and promoter for all kinds of anti-discrimination programs – mainly nationally, but also locally. Civil rights was his forte. While he was in Chicago, he and A. Phillip Randolph worked to get the first Fair Employment Practices Act passed. He worked with Truman, and with every administration thereafter. He was passionate about civil rights all his life. In fact, not only did he do this for his entire working career, but when he retired in 1976 he moved to Washington, D.C., so he could do more on his own time.

**Ginny:** He was a true civil rights leader. For his work on civil rights he was awarded the Presidential Medal of Freedom (the highest civilian award in the United States) by President Clinton in 1998.

**M: What did your mom do, Simon?**

**S:** My mother was a Radcliffe grad and a social worker, but also



an artist. She was a very dedicated painter, working in various media – oils, watercolors, collage. I developed an appreciation of art from my mother. Whenever I visited home in New York or later Washington D.C., she took me to the various museums. As you know, Ginny and I are collectors, and I'm sure that my appreciation of and desire to be surrounded by modern and abstract art comes from her.

**M: Did the gift of a magic set begin your interest in magic?**

**S:** Yes. My first magic set was a Mandrake set, followed very quickly by a Gilbert Mysto set. My father's cousin was in the toy industry and he brought me little tricks (like the Adams stuff). But when we moved to Rye, just before my ninth birthday, we were just three blocks away from Playland, the second largest amusement park in New York, second only to Coney Island. At that time it was a wonderful amusement park with rides, games, and a very large trick and novelty shop. My father, seeing that I was intrigued by the little junky plastic tricks, took me to the magic store there and we started buying tricks. I remember getting an egg bag, a money maker, and a small set of linking rings; I was just fascinated with everything they had there. It was the Playland magic shop that brought me beyond the normal simple "magic kit" phase, where many kids start and also stop.

Another thing about Playland really intrigued me. Besides its magic shop, Playland also had a real boardwalk with carny games; games that, in retrospect, might not have been completely on the up and up. I was just fascinated by how those games worked. I think that those carny games enhanced my appreciation for the type of deception that goes on in magic – almost a conman thing.

**M: Later you worked at that Playland magic shop?**

**S:** Yes, I actually realized my "dream job." I had been a regular customer for years and the owner got to know me; he enjoyed talking magic with me. When I turned sixteen, he was looking for cheap labor, and since I was home for the summers, he gave me the job managing and operating the shop.

**G:** I think a lot of Simon's humor, fast talk, and ability to get along with people came from this experience. Especially with the Guess Your Weight and Guess Your Age games.

**S:** The magic shop owner also operated those games, so I filled in whenever someone was on break. Running those games was as close as I got to being a carny pitchman. It cost a quarter to play; if the participant won, he got a prize – but the prizes actually cost only a nickel or a dime. They were plastic kewpie dolls and Plaster of Paris statues, but everything cost far less than a quarter. The whole idea was to get the customers to pay the quarter.

**M: At the beginning, you were interested in prop magic.**

**S:** Absolutely. Candidly, there's one other thing that drove my interest in magic. I was an absolutely terrible athlete. I had no sports ability whatsoever. My father recognized that I needed an activity that I could practice and be good at, and he encouraged me. So I took to showing people tricks and doing little shows in the backyard. I eventually bought enough tricks from the Playland shop to do a whole show. I performed shows on the birthday circuit; my first paid show was at age eleven. My mother drove me. I actually charged a full dollar for that show. My mother, with amazing foresight, told me that I should frame that dollar. I still have it. And it's valuable, because it's a Silver Certificate, and they don't make those types of bills anymore. It may even be worth three dollars now.

A few months after my first paid show, the local newspaper sponsored a promotion that let kids run free classified ads. I put in an ad stating that I was available to do magic at birthday parties. The editors picked me to do a story and photo spread on because they thought it would be unusual. That photo of me with the dove pan appeared on the front page of *The Daily Item* on June 18, 1955.



Simon, age 12

**M: What about the photo of you in the top hat?**

**S:** That was taken a few years later by a professional photographer who was one of my clients. I used that top hat in my Die Box routine. The trick ended with the die going to the top hat. The hat was not part of my image. (All laugh.) I was doing birthday parties from age eleven on, easily four or five a month, maybe more. It depended on my mother's tolerance for taking me around. My





Birthday party circuit circa 1959.

birthday show performing was something I continued all through high school and college. In fact, birthday shows were pretty much my sole source of income until I was thirty.

I was very fortunate that my father continued to encourage my interest in magic. We lived near New York City, just a train ride away. My folks were culture buffs and loved to go into the city for theater and musical comedy shows. In 1954 they took me to see Milbourne Christopher do a full evening show at the Longacre Theatre. This was a famous show. After the show my father took me backstage and introduced me to Christopher. He was very encouraging. He told me about one of the tricks he did. (I also saw his *Christopher's Wonders* show at the Maidman Playhouse a few years later.) I started to see New York City as a source of real magic, where the real pros were. I discovered Lou Tannen's shop. From age twelve to fourteen, every Saturday I'd go to New York. Lou Tannen personally took me under his wing. Lou was a good salesman, but he was also a good mentor – guiding me toward the tricks that I could perform and steering me away from things I couldn't handle. He taught me about presentation. He was a very enthusiastic guy.

There's one other important thing I should mention. The New York Department of Parks sponsored a boy's program (magic was sexist in those days) that taught magic. It was called F.A.M.E., Future American Magical Entertainers; it was started by Abraham Hurwitz, Shari

Lewis's father. This club met once a month in the Department of Parks building. As soon as I heard about it, I joined. That's when I got boosted up into more professional-level magic. The other club members were dedicated and creative – my peers in F.A.M.E. included Persi Diaconis and Johnny Benzais. They were already doing pretty advanced card magic.

After the F.A.M.E. meeting let out, I would go over to Tannen's and see every magician who was prominent in New York. On Saturday, Tannen's closed at three p.m. and everybody went right downstairs to the 42<sup>nd</sup> Street cafeteria, which was an early predecessor to Rubin's (where everybody hangs out today). There was a big long table. Dai Vernon would sit at the end, people like Howie Schwartzman and Ken Krenzel would sit near him, and Vernon would hold court. All of us kids would sit at tables around them, trying to listen in on the conversations. We weren't part of the group, but we tried to learn whatever we could see.

**M: At some point you made the transition from props to sleight of hand. Did this happen around this time?**

**S:** It was during my very late high school years and college. The big formative shift was my move to Chicago at age eighteen. Certainly while hanging around the New York guys in 1960 I started playing with cards. But when I started at the University of Chicago in 1961, within the first weeks of my arrival, I headed over to Ireland's Magic Store (which later became Magic, Inc.). Everybody was doing card tricks there. Once I got to Chicago my interest shifted, except that I kept doing the birthday shows to earn spending money.

**M: What was your major at the University of Chicago?**

**S:** As an undergraduate I was an economics major. I loved university life. I'm an academic at heart; I love to learn new things. I would always prefer to be a student rather than a teacher. I graduated college in only three years rather than four, receiving my B.A. in 1964, but I wanted to study more. So I moved to the graduate school in the philosophy department, and I stayed there for six more years.





**M: You studied philosophy for six years?**

**S:** Yes, at the graduate level, from 1964 to 1970. I received my M.A. in philosophy in 1965, and then stayed on to work toward my doctorate. I actually taught humanities in the college for two years during that period. But eventually I got tired of philosophy, so I turned part of my thesis into an article and published it in *The Journal of the History of Philosophy* (1972). Since I still didn't want to face the real world, I thought that law school would be a wonderful way to postpone any career decisions for another three years. And that was really my main reason for going to law school.

**G:** The faculty used to joke that Simon was the only student at the University of Chicago who had tenure. (Laughter from all.)

**S:** But Ginny is not far behind me. I ultimately had a total of twelve years at the University of Chicago; Ginny had nine years, counting her undergraduate work, graduate work, and law school. I steadfastly avoided any decision that would be remotely described as going toward a career. I probably had a secret desire to see if I could stay in school until I was ready for retirement.

**M: And during the period that you're a full-time professional student, you're keeping yourself afloat by doing magic shows.**

**S:** It's even more extreme. Because of all my years as a student in economics, philosophy, and law school, I had a lengthy period during which I had no income whatsoever.

But there was very little outgo, either. I qualified for scholarships so my tuition was paid for, and I was a resident head for one of the undergraduate dorms. In return for keeping students under some control, and being a "dorm daddy," the university gave me my room and board at the dorm. My birthday party shows, and later performing mindreading shows, were the only ways I got any money for my hobbies or for dating.

**M: Let's catch up on your background, Ginny. Where were you born?**

**G:** I was born in Bremerton, Washington, a little town across the bay from Seattle. It was a Navy town. My dad worked on the big aircraft carriers in the Puget Sound naval shipyard. He died quite young, when I was nine. My mother remarried and I ended up with a large family. I had an older brother and sister and then acquired two more sisters when my mother remarried.

I left Bremerton when I was eighteen to go to the University of Chicago. I was greatly benefitted by the university. They had a small-town talent search, because they didn't want their entire student body to be just from New York or Chicago. You could consider it a type of "integration" plan. They went to Washington, Oregon, and Montana and chose kids from small towns who had done well. They gave me a full scholarship.

**S:** Let me brag about Ginny: She was one of the few people from her high school to actually travel out-of-state for college. She made it big.

**G:** My first few years were quite a struggle because my high school education did not match up to the education that Chicago and New York students had received. I persevered and did fine and got my B.A. degree in sociology. Then I applied for graduate school and received a National Institute of Health full scholarship to NYU to study sociology. So I went to New York for a year, but I didn't particularly like it; I came back to Chicago in June of 1970.

**S:** It was a wondrously fortuitous thing for me that Ginny didn't like New York and decided to come back to Chicago to continue her graduate degree. We had known each other casually during her undergraduate work, because she dated one of my friends, Bob. They broke up when she left for New York. At the time she returned to Chicago, I had recently been jilted by my girlfriend. I was available and looking, so I called her up and we had our first date.

**G:** And the rest is history. I then did two more years of graduate study at U of C, working part-time at the National Opinion Research Center, to help support that education. Then, after three years of grad work and having finished everything but my PhD dissertation, Simon convinced me to go to law school.



Simon with Bill Malone, Bob Syrup,  
and Ed Marlo - 1980



**M: You were still in law school, Simon?**

**S:** Yes. U of C law is a three-year program; I was in my third year as Ginny started her first.

**M: Ginny, you saw Simon do the mindreading act before you began dating him, didn't you?**

**G:** Yes. Simon had invited my boyfriend Bob and me on a double date. I was totally surprised when we arrived at a Chicago nightclub, and I discovered that the entertainment was none other than Simon himself and his girlfriend, performing an amazing mindreading act! (You have to understand that I was a real small town innocent and had never seen anything remotely like this.) On the drive home, while we all chatted, I actually tried to prevent myself from "thinking" private thoughts for fear that Simon might "read" them.

**S:** I had two mindreading partners prior to Ginny. Ginny should tell you why she started being my mental partner. It was extremely reluctantly.

**G:** I really was a shy, quiet, small town girl; although I admired the mindreading act when I saw Simon do it, the thought of getting up on stage and deceiving people was fairly intimidating to me. My problem was that, even though Simon and I were dating, Simon was continuing to do the act with his then ex-girlfriend (who was quite pretty). So every Saturday night (and sometimes twice a week), they'd go off to nightclubs to do the act, and there I was, his actual girlfriend, sitting alone at home. You can imagine what I was worrying might be going on.

**S:** I tried to reassure her that my relationship with my ex-girlfriend was purely business...

**G:** ...yeah, right...

**S:** ...but when you tell that to your girlfriend and you're out until two in the morning with your ex...

**M:** ...and it's not like she could read your mind...

**S:** ...and I loved doing the act, and I honestly needed the money. So I said that the only solution would be for Ginny to learn the act. So she did, and we started performing together by the fall of 1970.

**G:** But the act was a lot simpler then.

**M: Let's give everyone some background on the two-person act. You saw Eddie Fields and George Martz in Chicago doing their dime-store mentalism.**

**S:** Yes, but my very first acquaintance with two-person mindreading goes back way before Eddie Fields. It goes back to when I was still in New York, and I remember this vividly. In 1956, when I was twelve, there was a Broadway show called *The Great Sebastians*; it starred Alfred Lunt and Lynn Fontanne, who were husband and wife. It was a comedy written for them about a vaudeville two-person mindreading team who are travelling around Europe as war is about to break out. The Germans see them, decide that they are real, and take them captive in order to get secret information by having them read minds. It's a comedy about how this vaudeville team tries to escape and convince the Germans that it's not real. But the Germans have been convinced.





My father, knowing that the show was about magic and mindreading, took the whole family to it. What was absolutely captivating, in my recollection, is that the first five minutes or so of the Broadway show opened with them apparently doing their vaudeville mindreading act – in the theater for the real audience! Alfred Lunt went through the first few rows picking out objects, and Lynne Fontanne was on stage, blindfolded, identifying them. That was my first introduction to that kind of act.

Later, in 1965, in Chicago, somebody had mentioned that there was this guy reading minds at Woolworth's, so I trekked from Hyde Park downtown to the Loop and went to Woolworth's. There was somebody billed as the Professor, blindfolded, and he was calling out and describing objects that were held up by people in the store aisles. There was another guy, almost completely nondescript – he looked like a store clerk – who ushered the people together to form an audience and helped them with their various objects. It was Eddie Fields, secretly coding that information to the Professor, George Martz, who was a retired wrestler and boxer who Eddie had trained.

I had very mixed feelings. On the one hand I was completely in awe at what they could accomplish and the audience reaction. There was no doubt that they were being believed completely. I was amazed at the depth of information they could convey. On the other hand, I was stunned by how ungrammatical and awkward Eddie was in terms of speaking – even though it fit him well. His character was someone who would mumble, who would speak in half sentences. He'd start something and then break off and talk to someone else. There was no good grammatical flow. I decided then and there that I wanted to do that kind of act, but I didn't want to sound like him. And that meant I better figure out what goes on in those acts.

For the next four months I basically skipped most of my classes so I could research (mainly in Jay Marshall's library) everything I could find on two-person codes. I accumulated everything I could find – probably fifteen to twenty different codes – and then started putting things together, but in the way I would speak. I thought a lot about what makes the coding in a mindreading act effective but invisible.

**M: So, Simon, you studied all the available information on the subject and then worked out a code to your satisfaction.**

**S:** I wouldn't use the word "satisfaction." The one thing that I can tell you (without going into detail on the method) is that our system is constantly evolving. The basic underlying cues we use are somewhat fixed, those don't change, but how we handle certain situations changes. Even in the early years, even the beginning stuff was very malleable. I don't know how someone could do this type

of act without a lot of experience. You don't realize all the possibilities you'll encounter.

**M: I'm sure that from an intellectual standpoint what you both find fascinating about this type of act is discovering how much you can do with how little you say. But there is also a theatrical aspect; the danger is that once you establish that Ginny can sense these objects, what do you do next? Dramatically, how do you ramp up the procedure? Can you talk about that?**

**S:** I think you're exactly right; if you want to do it as a theatrical act it has to build. Once you've shown what you can do, you want to build suspense. For us, we build suspense by hoping that the objects will become ever more challenging and difficult – at least as the audience perceives it. This act in a sense is ultimate jazzing, because it depends so much on the audience. You'd think we would want a bunch of objects that we're prepared to do – combs, watches, wallets, lipstick – but in fact such commonplace things make for a deadly act, because it's not interesting. The audience can quickly sense that you would be ready for such objects. We love it when we get objects that to the audience seem unlikely and challenging, but we've anticipated them and we're prepared for them. It's a question of how many steps ahead you can plan for.

**G:** One thing that Simon has done is to build a sequence of tests within the act, which the audience perceives to be progressively harder, so it seems to build in difficulty.

**S:** We don't immediately open with objects. We start with a playing card test, to get Ginny warmed up. Then we do our dice demonstration. I have a big fishbowl filled with a hundred different-colored dice. One spectator selects any die, a second person picks another die of a different color; both are a free choice. Ginny, blindfolded, immediately calls out the two colors. When they give them a roll she not only calls out the total, she also tells them how it's made up and which number is on which colored die. And, depending on how long a show it is, we have other tests we can add in also. By the time we get to the objects, the audience has seen a certain growth.

Perceived challenges are what make our act interesting. For example, often a person takes off his shoe and hands it to you. This is a whole different level than watches and keys. The whole audience says, "Wow," because they think this is an offbeat item, one they might not have thought to do. So, for *that* audience a shoe is a clever, novel thing. What they don't know is that we see this in virtually every show. We're ready for shoes – and boots, sneakers, sandals, and even socks!

The interesting part for us is how much we can do with the things that are so far out that we're not ready for them. We sometimes hit an object we can't do, but perhaps Ginny can say what it's made of, or tell a little



about it. And sometimes we get lucky in just winging it. Here's our favorite example, which happened when we performed at *Magic Chicago*. A gentleman held up an object, and I saw immediately that it's nothing we've ever done before, not even remotely. Ginny, blindfolded, says, "I have the impression that this object has something to do with music." So far, so good, and people start nodding that she's correct. Then I threw another cue to her, but I can see that she is puzzled as hell.

**G:** I have no idea of where Simon's heading, but I know what he sent me, a cue for silverware, specifically a fork, so I said, "Does this have something to do with a fork? Like a musical fork?" I was silently thinking, could someone play a musical fork the way they play spoons?

**S:** And I immediately said, "That's exactly right, it's a tuning fork!"

**G:** The audience just died.

**S:** Ginny still didn't know what it was. But when she said "musical fork," I just chimed in, and confirmed, "Yes, exactly, a tuning fork." Those are the challenges we love.

**M:** And as far the audience was concerned, you got it completely right. Simon's comment was an affirmation, not a clarification.

**S:** And when I say the code grows, after every show we add things to our lists, our categories, our experiences.

**M:** And you have to constantly revise those lists to reflect objects that are contemporary. So items will disappear. New items, especially new technology, will be commonplace.

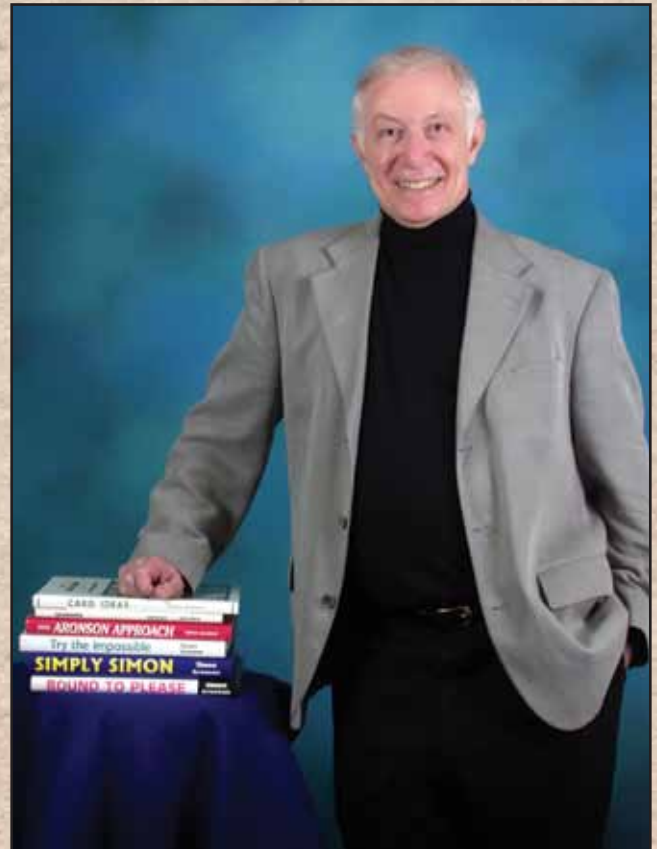
**S:** That's right. We can still do a draft card or a telegram, but they don't really exist anymore. In the past four or five years we've had to get very educated in electronics. We often get thumb drives. Five or six years ago no one would have had one of those.

**G:** Let's go back to Michael's original question, which was how do you keep it entertaining, to make it something beyond just a recitation. There are two things going on. I don't consider myself a naturally funny person, and since I do most of the talking, I've been trying very hard to be amusing or to reveal things in such a way that people laugh. I think that's been working well. So that's one element. We don't try to do a bizarre or mysterious kind of act, in which I'm really reading minds in a serious manner. I'm kind of funny.

Second, even with objects that seem normal, that everyone knows and carries, like a credit card, I will reveal level after level of detail, and this process becomes very interesting. Objects that allow me detailed description provide the audience with a lot of fun. We recently did a show at the University of Chicago, where someone held up a driver's license. The guy then called out, "from where?" Fortunately, Simon had already cued me,

so when I immediately announced it was from Israel, the audience roared!

One of the unusual features of our two-person act is that we can do it in virtually any venue, at any time. All we need is each other and an audience (that has stuff with them). We can do it in a large auditorium, a small living room – but we've also performed it poolside, and once, on a traveling tour bus (I stood up front, and Simon marched up the aisle). Simon used to joke that for close-up all he needed was a deck of cards; for mindreading, all he needs is a wife (preferably his own).



**M:** Have there been times when people come up to you to answer questions about their personal lives?

**G:** During the '70s a woman came up after a show and said that her son was missing in Vietnam and asked if we could tell her if he was alive or dead. Simon promptly replied that we only dealt with objects. There was another incident after a show (and we make it very clear that what we do is entertainment) when a woman came up to me and said that her mother was at the edge of death; she wanted me to be with her after she died. The clear implication was that I could somehow talk to her mother.

And then there was an incident after a birthday party. Sometimes, just to make it look a little more genuine, I will intentionally miss on an object. And so, when a woman held up her string of pearls, I said I just couldn't receive an impression.



**S:** And keep in mind that a pearl necklace is something we can do easily. We can do many different kinds of necklaces, but Ginny purposely missed the necklace because I had told her to build in a few mistakes.

**G:** The next morning we heard from the host that the woman had flushed her necklace – and they were real pearls – down the toilet because she thought they were jinxed, just because I couldn't sense them. Fortunately, that type of thing hasn't happened recently. But Simon now jokes that any intentional misses should only be on stuff like pencils, not valuables.

**S:** Whether or not to make disclaimers, so you don't mislead people, is an issue in mentalism. But part of the appeal of mentalism is that people aren't sure. What the audience sees seems real, and that captivates and engages them. We always build in a disclaimer at the beginning; "We're not here to convince anybody; we're here to entertain you. But remember that even a skeptic keeps an open mind." That's one of those suitably ambiguous pronouncements that leaves the door open for anyone to think whatever they want.

**G:** But remember, we do the act in an amusing way.

**S:** I enjoy humor, and I'm constitutionally unable not to chuckle and make jokes. We were doing a show in New York recently and a lady handed me a piece of jewelry. Ginny identified it saying, "It's a pin with diamonds in it." The lady said, "Oh, but they're fake." So I replied, "Don't worry, so are we."

**M:** Simon, let's talk for a moment about how you create your effects. I've been performing many of your tricks for more than thirty years; in fact, I established quite a reputation (and sold a few books for you) with Red See Passover. The thing that greatly appeals to me is that your material is designed to fool intelligent spectators.

**S:** I make the assumption that my spectators are thinking people and that they know a lot. Not necessarily that they know a lot about magic, but that they are observant and rational. I don't have absolutist principles about the way I try to create things, but certainly one guideline that I've always used is that whatever the method is, it ought to be counterintuitive. Whatever first thought people might normally have about a possible method, then the actual method ought *not* follow that same direction.

I love to combine methods. Sometimes, by accident, people will fall onto the method. But if you have several things going on – a little bit of sleight of hand, a little bit of mathematics, a little bit of a stack, a bit of subtlety, some misdirection – then even if they get one part of it, it's not enough to discover the whole method.

I've always believed that the more advance preparation you have, and by that I mean anything that happens before the trick begins, then the less there is for the spec-

tators to observe. There's nothing wrong with doing a trick with a borrowed, shuffled deck and starting from scratch. But in a situation in which you start totally impromptu and clean, then any clues to the method are, by definition, in front of the audience and potentially noticeable.

If, however, before you begin you secretly arrange three or four cards – or the full deck – the audience doesn't see that, and they can't reconstruct a method from what they've merely seen, because you did things before the trick started. Triple Play, the trick I contributed to this issue of *M-U-M*, is a good example. Part of what makes that trick a little more deceptive is that you've prearranged some things. They see a shuffled deck, but they're starting at the wrong place. Once you get them starting at the wrong place, it's much harder for them to retrace the method.



Private Gathering, focusing on Memorized Deck Magic 1995 (Plants, Weber, Aronson, Pierce, Gagnon, Krenz, Tamariz, Rioboo, Kalush)

**M:** I'd like to touch for a moment on memorized deck magic, an area of card magic that has become quite popular in the past few years. You mentioned to me one time that the most useful stack anyone will memorize is the *second* one, because until you start working with a stack, you don't really know how you'll utilize it, and you won't know what features you wish were built in. My question is: Is the Aronson stack your *second* stack? Had you learned another one first, like Nicola or Ireland?

**S:** No. When I first got turned on to memorized deck magic in 1969, it came through Marlo, who had published a large section of great memorized deck tricks in *Ibidem*. That turned me on, and I decided I'd memorize a stack. It's the same as with the mindreading act; when I decide to do something that will require a lot of memory, I do a lot of research before I settle on what to memorize. Marlo was using the Ireland stack. He had been turned on to memorized deck work from Laurie Ireland. I was



immediately faced with Ireland or Nicola. Given that I had the opportunity, I thought I should think about what was built into the stack. At the time I was doing a lot of gambling and poker tricks, because I had recently read Rusduck's publications, so I put a lot of Rusduck's and Michael Zen's material into my stack.

If I were ever to do it again, there are definitely things I would change in my stack, but I don't think that those changes are strong enough to warrant a whole new stack. I'd probably change the Aces around a bit to make them more accessible for productions. But candidly, so much of what I'm finding is that the best memorized deck magic is the stuff that is stack independent. It's based on the performer's facility with the stack, rather than how the stack is constructed.

**M: You're both retired now and the two-person mindreading act is coming to the fore; I assume that you'll be performing it as often as you are able.**

**S:** We have more shows booked for this year. Making money is not the goal; it's for fun, for friends. We look forward to doing it. Certainly at some point, I don't want to say when, I would love to put all our experience and thoughts and methodologies on the mindreading act into print. It's kind of written, because we have a highly detailed notebook that we use to refresh our memories. It needs to be fleshed out in more of a descriptive form. I think that forty-five years of experience doing it has some value. Too many people have put out material that ends up being bare-bones lists. That's not where the details are. The details are: how do you size up an audience; what do you do beforehand; how do you do scanning of a room; how do you avoid objects? There are millions of things you can do to enhance your performance, and these are just some of things we have learned over the years.

**G:** The problem is that Simon doesn't want to put it out while we're still performing it.

**M: That is certainly understandable.**

**S:** When we do the mindreading, and (assuming people don't believe) the spectators are trying to figure out how we do it, the very first thing that crosses their mind is that we're communicating through some kind of code. So that's the one method we try to dispel. In my card magic I want them to say, "He didn't *do* anything." In the mindreading act I want them to say, "He didn't *say* anything."

**G:** And people say that all the time.

**S:** People come up with all sorts of crazy explanations and they won't stop. The one explanation that I love and Ginny hates is: "I know how you do it. Simon's a great ventriloquist and she's the dummy." I wish that was the method; it would save us a lot of work. ★

## Living with Simon (or, Try the Impossible)

By Ginny Aronson

**S**imon and I could not be more different. Simon lives in his imagination, gets totally involved in his passions, and is addicted to whatever he's doing at the moment. I'm the practical one, rooted in the real world; it's a good thing he has me to bring him back to earth.

Simon and I share deeply in whatever the other does. I love to cook, and he loves magic. So Simon gets to eat gourmet food, and I get to select playing cards. Somehow, I think he got the better of that deal. I've been his loyal partner in all aspects of his magic, from editing every one of Simon's books and articles, to spending our vacations at magic conventions around the world (where I get to see our magical friends), from hosting magicians visiting Chicago (Michael Close was one of our earliest sleepover guests), to sharing my kitchen every Saturday so that the Chicago Session can brainstorm. For over twenty-five years I put up with Ed Marlo's cigars (but after he'd had a session with Ed, I made Simon change his clothes before I'd let him back into our home).

Don't get me wrong – it's been a unique, fascinating, eye-opening life. I have seen David Roth push coins through my kitchen table, ironed Guy Hollingworth's shirt so he could look impeccable for his lecture, and had Boris Wild soulfully perform his romantic Kiss Act, complete with music, just for me, with red paper kisses fluttering around my dining room at the climax. One morning, before I left home for work, Lennart Green stumbled out of our guest room, still in his pajamas, and performed his entire FISM act for me over breakfast!

Simon can be critical, and he isn't afraid to offer his opinions. While I was initially shy and retiring, over the years my law career and my performing persona as a mindreader have made me pretty discerning and blunt on my own, and I'm not hesitant to tell Simon when his latest creation isn't up to snuff, or when a move flashes, or when a plot is confusing. I enjoy good magic, but don't have much tolerance for weak performances. Simon feels the same way, but doesn't hesitate to help youngsters who are just starting out in this amazing hobby. At conventions, he'll be accosted by some kid who wants to ask a question or show him something; Simon plunks himself down on the floor with him, and he'll patiently spend time demonstrating, explaining, or trading ideas. (Simon says he's forever grateful to his early mentors, and he just wants to pay it forward. Simon's problem is, now, once he's down on the floor he has a hard time physically getting up!)

All in all, our life in magic has been one more, all-encompassing bond that's brought us even closer together. It's almost as if we can read each other's mind. ★