



PHOTO: JOSHUA JAY

By Joshua Jay

Simon Aronson typifies one of magic's often-overlooked categories: the serious amateur, the behind-the-scenes creator, the practitioner who's perfectly content with magic as an intense avocation. For over 50 years (his first published effect was in 1959), Simon's been creating his own magic, and learning from and sessioning with some of the most respected names in close-up magic.

Aronson's name is most often linked with his pioneering work on memorized deck magic. He is certainly one of the individuals most responsible for the current craze, and his Aronson Stack (from Simon's *A Stack to Remember*) is one of the most popular memorized stacks in use among card magicians. But Simon's card magic goes far beyond just stacks and memorized decks: he has authored five best-selling volumes of original card material, and his classic effects Red See Passover, Shuffle-bored, and more recently, Side-Swiped have made reputations for the professionals who feature them.

Perhaps most intriguing are Aronson's unique methods, remarkably uncharacteristic of someone so closely associated with Ed Marlo. One of Simon's long-term session mates, Steve Draun, writes, "Who or what inspires Simon is beyond me. Although a member of our group from the beginning, he has taken a different path. His magic leaves no clue with which to uncover its diabolical secret." This may be most typified in the two-person mind reading act Simon performs with his wife Ginny; those who've witnessed it praise it as one of the most natural and deceptive acts of its kind.

A CONVERSATION WITH

Simon Aronson

JOSHUA: You're somewhat of an enigma among magicians. Your name has been well-respected in card magic circles for a long time, your books have been well-reviewed, and many professionals swear by your original material — but few magicians have ever seen you perform. How come?

SIMON: My showing off among magicians is pretty much limited to sessions and for my magic comrades in Chicago. Except for the mind-reading show that Ginny and I performed during the 1970s, I've never performed magic for a living. I'm not in hiding, and I'll perform socially at the drop of a hat, but I rarely perform professionally and lecture only occasionally. I'm just a lifelong, dedicated amateur, who's known for a few neat creations and inventions.

JOSHUA: You're generally regarded as the guy who resurrected the memorized deck from obscurity and popularized it. Why do you think the memorized deck has had such a great appeal recently?

SIMON: I started publishing some of my memorized deck ideas in the '70s, and shortly after, several factors happily converged. First, there was an increasing emphasis on "magician's magic," on fooling the hell out of one's brother magicians. The memorized deck is ideal for this. It's still an arcane tool, and takes a commitment initially to learn, so many magicians won't expend the effort. This rarity also means that most magicians aren't aware of how much can be accomplished with it, how far you can get ahead, how devious its combinations with other principles can be.

Second, gifted performers like Juan Tamariz got inspired, picked up the ball, and ran with it. In my opinion, Juan's creative applications almost single-handedly show how the memorized deck can be a reputation maker. In this country, my good friend Michael Close helped spread the message into the trenches, both in his performances and his teaching. Their jazzing approach awakened cardmen to both the power and the versatility of the memorized deck. And there are many other pros who prefer to remain anonymous.

And third, the memorized deck is a utility tool that brings sophisticated and deceptive card magic within the purview of those who may not be adept at heavy sleight of hand.

JOSHUA: Are you suggesting that the memorized deck is something a beginner can look toward?

SIMON: Well, there are strong memorized deck effects that don't require advanced technical skill, but beginners need to bear in mind two important caveats. First, mental skills are no different than physical techniques: they need solid presentation, careful routining, and even misdirection to cover your thinking. If your thinking shows, it's as bad as if your breaks show.

But second, it's the synergy of a memorized deck combined with sleight of hand that really produces the most powerful effects. All the jazzing that's being done by some of our most advanced performers utilizes culling techniques, peeks, estimation, passes, and a host of other physical techniques. Convincing false shuffles, false cuts, and deck switches take memorized deck work to a whole new level.

JOSHUA: I can attest to that, and the more sleights one can do, the greater the possibilities are.

SIMON: I'm in touch with many of our top sleight-of-hand artists who use a memorized deck, but frankly, they prefer to keep their use a secret.

JOSHUA: Why is that?

SIMON: Because it's still an esoteric tool, and they don't want the "secret" emblazoned on their T-shirt, so to speak. My own reputation, unfortunately, precedes me, and I can't do any card trick without a magician who knows me automatically suspecting a memorized deck.

JOSHUA: In Darwin Ortiz' *Scams and Fantasies with Cards*, Darwin says, "Magicians often ask me what memorized stack I recommend. My advice is always the same. Take a deck, shuffle it, and memorize it." If a magician asked you the same question, what would you say and why?

SIMON: I'd say Darwin stops too soon. His advice should be to keep shuffling it until the cards wind up in Aronson stack order, and then memorize it. More seriously, I don't really care whether someone chooses my stack or another, but using a complete random order is a missed opportunity. If you're going to memorize a stack, and regularly carry it with you, then it might as well serve other tasks, do things beyond memorized deck effects. It can have additional tricks and features built into it, ones that you will actually use. They become an added bonus for you, with no extra effort.

There's no one single stack that's perfect for every magician, which is why you need to examine your own individual performing habits: what kinds of effects do *you* do most? Do you have any favorite packet tricks, or tricks that require some set-up? How often do you really start out a performance by opening a brand new deck? When I created the Aronson Stack, I was heavily into gambling demonstrations, so I built in some poker deals, the ten card poker deal with the

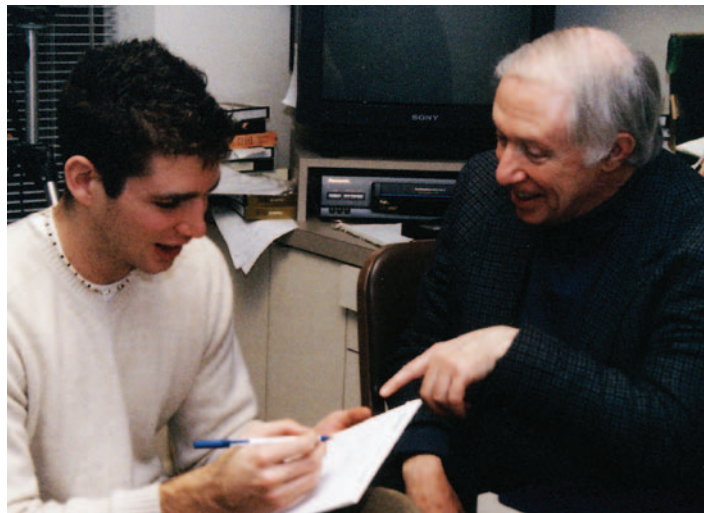
Jonah card, a perfect bridge hand, some four-of-a-kind productions, and a bunch of other features. I still perform the draw poker demo every chance I can, as an apparent impromptu response whenever someone asks about "cheating at cards." I guess, if you dislike all gambling effects, you might prefer to devise your own stack, personalized to suit you. But in any case, once such features are built in, you'll have some extra powerful effects, as a freebie.

JOSHUA: For the record, Darwin is also quoted as saying your stack is, "perhaps the most ingenious of all memorized stacks."

SIMON: I don't disagree with Darwin on everything.

JOSHUA: So should everyone learn the Aronson Stack? I know that I'm glad it's the one I learned.

SIMON: There are distinct advantages to learning a stack that many other magicians also use, and now there's a whole network of magicians creating and sharing new ideas with my stack. I'm glad people find it useful. But this is probably where Darwin was pointing — many of the really good memorized deck effects are stack-independent anyway, so for the most part it won't matter which stack you memorize. A few years ago Juan and I led a private conference on the memorized deck, and for two entire days neither of us ever touched on anything



Last fall, Joshua Jay began a casual interview with Simon Aronson. After flying to Chicago and spending three days (plus two intensive nights) with Simon at his home in Chicago, it was determined the material garnered was of feature-story caliber.

that was stack-specific. The important thing is to bite the bullet, and learn one, any one. I often hear people debating which stack to memorize, and what I detect much of the time is just an excuse to defer learning one.

JOSHUA: With all the fabulous card material available that doesn't involve a stack, many magicians would argue that memorizing an entire deck isn't necessary. What would you say to those magicians?

SIMON: It's not absolutely essential, but except for, perhaps, a Double Lift, what is? But the more tools you have in your arsenal, the more flexible and varied your magic will be. Just look at the memorized deck as an Open Index: imagine having the equivalent of an index of all 52 cards at your fingertips. Every card is instantly but secretly available to you without having to set your pockets or carry envelopes around. That's just one amazing idea that becomes extremely practical and convenient once you start exploring with it.

JOSHUA: Sure. You got me on the bandwagon of memorizing a deck several years ago, and it instantly upgraded my pick-a-card tricks to name-a-card tricks. Even a layperson senses the difference. Any helpful tips for people thinking about memorized deck work?

SIMON: I have a 20-page answer to that question. Can I plug my website? You can get free download of my lecture notes, *Memories are Made of This*, at www.simonaronson.com. It's an introduction to memorized deck magic, and deals with everything a beginner needs to know.

JOSHUA: Are there obstacles or limitations involved with a memorized deck?

SIMON: The only practical limitation is that you need to have a stacked deck with you. This apparently is too much of an inconvenience for some performers. Some magicians dismiss anything that's not totally impromptu. To me, that's shortsighted. You eliminate some of magic's best material with that restriction.

JOSHUA: Don't you think that's your bias, the luxury of being an amateur? I think that having a collection of impromptu routines becomes



PHOTO: ANNE WHITE

Ginny joins Simon for the mind-reading act that's bamboozled magicians and lay-audiences alike. And, even though it's a code, it's still a secret, and there are no plans for tipping it.

a priority when you're performing a lot as a professional.

SIMON: Hey, don't get me wrong. I'm not knocking impromptu pieces. Performing strong magic off the cuff, with a shuffled deck offers important flexibility. But for the greatest audience impact, impromptu needs balance. You also ought to be willing to spend at least two minutes of preparation, like setting up a stacked deck and carrying it with you.

And it's precisely the amateurs who take it as a personal challenge to make everything impromptu, no matter the tradeoff. Virtually every professional's repertoire is balanced, and includes some "special" effect, even if it is a bit more trouble to prepare, ring in, or reset. When you consider magic's strongest close up effects, ones that have stood the test of time, they're generally not impromptu. The Vanishing Cigarette, the \$100 Bill Switch, Signed Card to Wallet or to virtually any impossible location, Sponge Balls — they all

require that the performer at least carry a special prop, or gaff, or something extra with him. My friend Bill Malone could perform cards impromptu all night long, but his signature effect is Sam the Bellhop. Sam would never have received his first two-dollar tip, if Bill had refused to perform anything that takes setup time.

JOSHUA: So you'll carry a stacked deck whenever you go to a party?

SIMON: Think of the flexibility that just one memorized deck offers. I can perform an entire routine of five or six effects, each quite different. And it's strong magic, quite fooling.

There's even a theoretical argument why non-impromptu magic is often more deceptive. Secret gaffs, set-ups, extras, or duplicates — they all get you ahead of the audience's thinking.

JOSHUA: What do you mean?

SIMON: It concerns how much information an audience has at its disposal, to reconstruct or try to figure out what must have happened. An audience starts watching, starts taking in information, the moment you begin performing. But any performance has three time components: before you begin, the performance itself, and the time afterwards. If you can accomplish at least some portion of the secret during a time period the audience *isn't* privy to, the audience has a harder time considering that feature in its attempt at analysis.

JOSHUA: Give me an example.

SIMON: Pre-show work in mentalism is an obvious one. Multiple outs are another good example of something the audience doesn't ever fully experience. But anything done secretly beforehand, say, bringing a gimmick or ringing in a gaff, or a duplicate, or a prearrangement, gives you an edge, precisely because something occurs outside the bounds of the spectator's experience. If you limit yourself to completely impromptu effects, then by definition the spectator is theoretically exposed to almost everything that's happening.

JOSHUA: Any final tip on the memorized deck?

SIMON: Don't get too wedded to your stack. Some practitioners insist on creating an entire act, based solely on the stack, and never shuffle it. That's too restrictive. My preference is to do a few stack effects that knock somebody over, and finish with one that allows spectator shuffles. At the very least, let the spectator shuffle part of the deck, because lots of strong memorized material only needs a partial stack. Spectator shuffling lends a freedom to the handling, and tends to dispel suspicion of a stack. When I lecture, I discuss ways of structuring routines with stacks, and the final step I call "Creative Destruction." Knowing when to destroy your stack, for a worthwhile effect.

JOSHUA: You actually have had a lot of performing experience, but just not as a magician. I remember when I first saw you perform your mind reading act: it was at the 1997 World Summit in Washington, D.C. It was the absolute hit of the convention. People were buzzing about the act. Entertainment aside, nobody had a clue how your wife, Ginny, was "receiving thoughts" that were sent her way.

SIMON: A lot of the magicians had not seen us before, or even knew that we did a mind reading act. Bob Read came up to me after that performance and told me, "At the end, I felt that the only possible way you could have done it was that I was the only real spectator, and the other 90 people in the room were all stooges!" That was a good show for us and it was just the right audience size.

JOSHUA: Talk a little bit about the act, how it developed, and what you plan to do with it.

SIMON: That act started back in the 1960s, after I saw Eddie Fields and George Martz perform their two-person mind reading. Theirs was definitely *not* a classy stage act. They performed behind the counter and in the aisles at Woolworth's five-and-dime, to build a crowd for their horoscope pitch. Their audience was unsophisticated shoppers, who believed that "Professor" Martz actually had powers. But their demonstration was the most direct, convincing form of mentalism I'd ever witnessed. And totally absorbing, because everyone got into the act.

Eddie and I became friends, and we discussed all forms of magic together. But he didn't divulge his code to me, and I didn't ask. Nor do I blame him. At that time it was their bread and butter. So I decided to create my own system. I researched everything I could find on two-person acts. I bought ancient manuscripts, like the Radio Vision code, Cagliostro, the Zanzig material, and code material nobody had ever heard of. Jay Marshall let me use his library, and I became a student

Flashbacks

When we asked Simon to recall some memorable moments in his magical career, here's what we received:

1955 My first paid birthday show at age 11. My mother drove me, and I charged \$1. I was overwhelmed when the host insisted on doubling my fee.

1959 My first (and only) television appearance, as the week's junior magician on New York's *Magic Clown* show. As a finale I produced a skunk out of a dove pan.

1960 I was a member of the Westchester Talent Unit, a touring troupe performing talent shows each weekend for a different charitable institution, e.g., hospitals, orphanages, nursing homes. Imagine the surreal picture of me tearing paper hats for convicts at Sing Sing... really!

1962 Had my "dream" summer job, as manager and pitchman of the magic and joke shop at Playland amusement park. I squirted over 500 strangers with disappearing ink, and only got slugged twice.

1967 Gained wide publicity with a newspaper headline prediction, "foretelling" that a kidnapped girl would be found. The Chicago police later criticized me for not being more helpful in their investigation.

1970 - '80s All the incredible times at the Marlo Table, learning from and sessioning with Ed, and meeting the legions of visiting great magicians who sat with us.

1978 Published my first real book, *Card Ideas*. It quickly went into additional printings, which is quite understandable since I only printed 300 to start with. Ginny had mixed feelings over my dedication to her, as "the best trick in the book."

1985 My first magic lecture, jointly with Dave Solomon, at the Texas Association of Magicians. I was scared stiff, but it was well received.

1988 Finally fooled Marlo badly with my effect Bait and Switch. I couldn't sleep for days.

1990s The many magic houseguests we've had, that invariably turn into wonderful late-night sessions. I'm so proud and lucky to have such friends from all around the world. I hate to single anyone out, but I guess the most memorable may be Lennart Green performing his entire FISM act in his pajamas, just for Ginny at our breakfast table.

1999 My retirement dinner from my somewhat staid law firm. Management wanted the traditional testimonials and formal speeches. I declined, and instead Ginny and I performed our mind reading act. It was the most unusual and most entertaining retirement party the firm has ever had!

of the subject. And, ultimately, I came to the conclusion that it really wasn't worth anything to me.

JOSHUA: Why? You mean you just didn't like it?

SIMON: Well, I learned a lot of principles and history, but I realized that for a code to appear completely natural, that is, really so normal that it wouldn't even be noticed, makes it almost impossible to use someone else's code. If a custom-made suit was individually tailored to perfectly fit your father, then if it's handed down, it just can't fit you correctly. Similarly, a verbal code can't be just handed down, because each person's word patterns, intonation, pacing and vocabulary are different.

So, I decided to devise a code the other way around. I studied my own speech patterns, collected my own word usage, and then devised a system based on my own way of speaking. We're still using that code today, or at least a more highly developed version of it.

JOSHUA: In what context did you perform it?

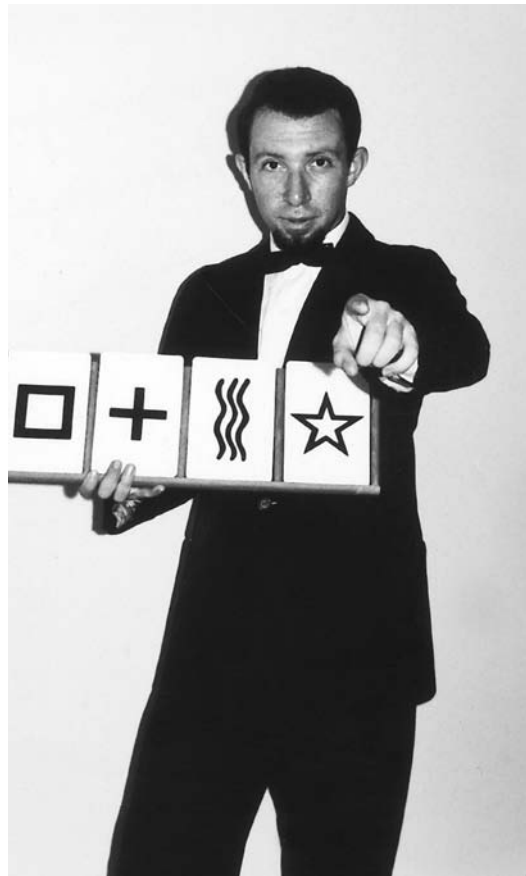
SIMON: We had a one-hour show called *It's the Thought that Counts* and presented it professionally throughout Chicago, from 1966 through 1975. We performed for corporate clients, at nightclubs, and private parties in Chicago's wealthier suburbs. We were the darlings of what T.A. Waters used to call the "Chicken Salad Circuit," which was basically women's luncheons and sweet-sixteen parties. We did lodges, weddings, church and synagogue affairs, pretty much anywhere that would have us.

JOSHUA: Do you prefer close-up or the mind reading?

SIMON: I get a big kick out of doing anything I've created. I think one gets additional personal rewards from doing anything original. I guess it depends on the audience size. For small groups, I prefer doing close-up, because the personal interaction can develop more. The mind reading works great for audiences of 50 to 100. Even with that size group you can still include a majority of the audience.

JOSHUA: When I've seen you do the mind reading you give the feeling that *everyone* gets to participate. You invite everyone to hold an object about their person. So, even though you never tried to "send" my object to Ginny, I remember feeling involved.

SIMON: Sure. Most magicians have no idea what goes on in a code act, quite apart from the coding itself. How the sender can encourage certain objects, or scan ahead, or plan for details, or, conversely, how to avoid certain objects or difficult situations. Or how to cope with dis-



Before Aronson's intense interest in card magic, there was mentalism — as evidenced in this 1966 performance photo of what he calls his "Symbol Simon" ESP test.

tractions, which can really interrupt the method. The mind reading gets intensely personal, and sometimes can give rise to wild reactions.

JOSHUA: Tell me one of the wilder ones?

SIMON: Well, we once performed at a gala family affair, for Dave Solomon's father's 50th birthday. Dave had urged us to purposely incorporate more mistakes, to appear to be more struggling, to make the act more realistic. So, when one lady held up a pearl necklace, Ginny just said the vibrations weren't coming in, that she couldn't get it. The lady insisted that we try harder, but Ginny again feigned difficulty, and we moved on to the next person. The act was very well received, but the next morning Dave called to tell me that it was his aunt whose necklace we had missed, and that she had flushed her pearls down the toilet because she was convinced that they were jinxed!

JOSHUA: I've seen your act, and it can be very convincing. Did you ever worry about the ethics of having people believe Ginny was for real?

SIMON: No [chuckles], I reserved ethics for my law practice. You know, honestly, it's

that edge of believability, that it *might* just possibly be real, that gives mind reading its power, and any performer who doesn't acknowledge that is fooling himself. We didn't take advantage, we didn't give readings, we didn't encourage spectators toward anything other than rational skepticism, but sure, we knew we were a hit when someone started telling us her own personal paranormal experiences.

JOSHUA: Are you ever going to tip your work on the mind reading act?

SIMON: [Hesitantly] Not really sure. Ginny and I keep an updated workbook on the act. It has everything we've developed over 30-plus years. Not just the system itself, but observations and practical tips for special situations, patter lines that we continually pick up, and my ideas on theory. So, it's already somewhat in book form for our working use. But few couples would actually go to the trouble of learning it proficiently. My sense is that it would be much more valuable to hand down to one couple who it would fit, and who would appreciate and use it, rather than publish it just to satisfy curious readers.

JOSHUA: That's great that you had the foresight to write it down.

SIMON: Well, Ginny kept asking me what she should do with it, if I were ever hit by a truck.

JOSHUA: Was she worrying, or threatening?

SIMON: [Laughs] I'm not sure. She may feel a little of both.

JOSHUA: There's a quote that's often cited from your original *Shuffle-bored* manuscript, where you say, "There's a world of difference between a person's not knowing how something is done versus his knowing it can't be done." Can you expand on this?

SIMON: Experiencing magic is quite different from just not knowing how something is done. The latter is simply a confession of ignorance. A spectator might not understand a trick because it's too complicated, or confusing, or because he felt he just didn't see something. That's an *omission*, he missed something. That's not where I'm aiming.

I want the spectator to have a positive conviction, to reach an affirmative conclusion. I want him to feel certain that it *can't* be done. I want him to appreciate that he *did* see everything. He watched me carefully, he understood the procedures, everything was logical, yet what he witnessed just can't be. For me, the appropriate reaction is when the spectator exclaims, "No way!"

JOSHUA: In spending time with you it's apparent that you concern yourself with fooling an audience more than any magician I've ever met. Certainly material of less fiber would amuse an audience, but that's not good enough for you.

SIMON: If the audience isn't brought to that height of deception, then the magician hasn't done his job. But, I go further. To me, that impossibility ought to be the primary thing that gets remembered. And that's where I fault a lot of magicians.

JOSHUA: You have a plea about this in your closing essay in *The Aronson Approach*. You write: "The performance of magic today attempts to accomplish much: entertainment; the creation of beauty; the audience's personal engagement and involvement; the creation of a memorable, unique persona or character; the display of skill, of artistry. All of these are laudable goals. They are certainly necessary if the art of magic is to survive in a competitive, demanding, fast-paced world. But they should not overpower or distract from the illusion of impossibility." It sounds eloquent, but do you really believe such an emphasis, such a priority, is very practical?

SIMON: Hey, I'd rather be magical than practical. And, I guess that's one of the reasons I've remained an amateur. There's an interesting hypothetical that I sometimes pose to people: if you had a choice of doing something that makes your act more entertaining but less deceptive, which do you choose? I know there's no right or wrong response, and in some ways the opposition may not even be real. But one's own answer can help define your own personal goals and priorities.

JOSHUA: You're known for a "hands off" look to your magic. What inspired that?

SIMON: I came to card magic indirectly, from mentalism. One of my earliest childhood magical memories was watching Dunninger on television. Week after week he presented blockbuster miracles, which appeared to be hands off, with incredibly strong effects and direct, clean procedures. That was my inspiration, and I got hooked on mind reading. As a teen-

ager in New York I was a good friend with T. A. Waters. I studied Annemann, who introduced me to the power of stacked decks. My favorite chapters in *Greater Magic* were the ones on mental magic and mnemonics. All this colored my later approach to card magic, how I wanted an effect to look, and the methods I gravitated toward.

JOSHUA: Your major contributions to magic will be your creations. How do you go about inventing such deceptive material?

SIMON: I don't know. Marlo called me a "What If" magician, someone who constantly worries about every contingency. I do have a perfectionist streak that doesn't stop tinkering. I spent many years in a university crowd, so I aim my effects toward an intelligent audience. Sometimes the methods I employ are simple, but they're usually off the beaten path and not what people would consider. I think my most deceptive creations combine multiple, obscure methods that work together intricately. The extra layers prevent any one of them from being obvious. My absolute favorite secrets are methods that are counter-intuitive, where even once you know the method, it still doesn't seem that it should work. The UnDo Influence control [found in *Try the Impossible*] is like that. And, of course, "Shuffle-bored" is a perfect example.

Often the most deceptive methods are ones that demand more work, more preparation, up front, precisely because it never occurs to a spectator that you'd go to such effort to fool them.

JOSHUA: Can you give me an example of that?

SIMON: Well, memorized-deck magic generally is one example. Few would ever imagine that a magician would go to the trouble of memorizing an entire deck just to do card tricks, so if you do, you're way ahead. One of my pet creations is Fate [appears in *Simply Simon*], my favorite presentation for the classic birthday book trick. It appears impossible, because there are over 18,000 possible outcomes, and obviously no one is crazy enough to pursue that route.

JOSHUA: And...

SIMON: Well, I am. I thought about it a lot, and was able to reduce it to only about 4,000 possible outcomes. Most people would think I hadn't made much headway. But let's just say it's quite practical, and worth going to the trouble, to actually cover that many alternatives. But people, both laymen and magicians, have a lazy streak in their thinking. They tend to follow paths of inertia, and quickly dismiss what doesn't initially seem easy or practical.

JOSHUA: You call yourself a perfectionist, and anyone who's waded through your books knows your obsession for detail. You develop an idea, work it to the point of exhaustion, put it aside, then come back, and do it all over. You also are extremely selective — let me say it, even picky. The end product is often wonderful, but the detail, the process, can sometimes be frustrating.

SIMON: Some of it is the lawyer part of me, and certainly part of it is the Marlo influence. But I've learned from sessioning that an effect is constantly open to further improvement, and you never know what might come along to make it just a bit better. So, I don't like to stop.

I'm a big believer in cross-fertilization, because I've seen many productive ideas come about just because I accidentally happened to be playing around with several different things at the same time. So I like to juggle a lot of magic projects in my head at one time. I'm always working on more than one effect, and try to be in the middle of more than one book and more than one video at a time, just to promote some possible borrowing process. Who knows what combination you might stumble upon? For example, recently I came across a great patter line that fits perfectly with an effect I had 20 years ago.

JOSHUA: Your routines are sometimes much longer than the average card trick and are occasionally criticized as being long-winded. Do you have a response to that?

SIMON: Yes, but my response is long-winded. People's attention spans vary in different contexts, and that's true of magicians as well. My creations are designed for my personal performances, the way I like to perform. I don't do a lot of strolling magic, so much of my stuff isn't suitable for that situation. I do believe that magic can happen too fast: if ten bits of eye candy all occur within the space of a few minutes, you may get an immediate positive reaction, but later it will only be remembered as a blur. I'd rather be remembered clearly, for one blockbuster. Long-winded also depends on how involved the viewer is. I perform a fortune-telling routine that probably is slow for passive onlookers, but the specific spectator who's receiving the reading is enthralled.

JOSHUA: But I would defend that a lot of your work, lately, *is* suitable for the walk-around magician. You've recently published a lot of material that resets instantly, won't destroy a stack, or involves people but not a working surface.

SIMON: Yes, I'm learning, slowly. But my preferred way to perform magic is as a finale to a dinner party. Ginny and I have both practiced law for 30 years, with intelligent, cultured, high-powered corporate clients. One of our favorite forms of both client and social entertainment is hosting a private dinner party. With about ten or twelve guests, we have dinner, discussion, and then after dessert, while everyone is still seated at the table, I'll perform an act. It's something special, the audience is already appreciative, and it's a great way of crowning off an evening. My longer pieces of magic are tailored to that type of performance.

JOSHUA: That setting also brings elegance to the magic.

SIMON: Hopefully. It's magic as a destination performance rather than a distraction or sidebar.



In an early 1970s session, Simon has Ed Marlo pick one. Standing by for the surprise are a younger-and-wilder Bill Malone and Bob Syrup.

JOSHUA: You call yourself a life-long amateur. Did you ever consider performing professionally?

SIMON: I've done my share of occasional paid performances, working my way through school, and now for charitable events, but I never pursued magic as a chosen career. I've always been passionate about magic, ever since I was a kid. Keeping magic as my serious avocation has probably afforded me more opportunity to enjoy it, be more creative, and indulge my passion.

JOSHUA: How so?

SIMON: There are definite tradeoffs between being an amateur or a professional. But, let's be clear: this distinction *isn't* one of beginners versus advanced, or of dilettantes versus serious, dedicated practitioners. Ed Marlo was essentially an amateur all his life. I think one key factor is who gets to call the shots: the professional is, to some degree, subject to the needs, tastes and choices of his client. The amateur is beholden only to himself. But that has both advantages and risks.

JOSHUA: Risks? What are the pros and cons of being an amateur?

SIMON: On the plus side, an amateur can be more selective. You get to choose when and where you'll perform, whom you'll perform for, how long and what material you'll do. When there's no boss, when money isn't governing the situation, if I want to just do ten minutes at a party, it's my call. And there's sometimes more sense of appreciation, because the audience often knows you're doing it voluntarily, as a favor. There's also more freedom to be selective in exploring your own interests: if I want to concentrate on, say, just studying memorized-deck magic, or just rubber bands, nothing's stopping me. I don't have to do rope tricks, regardless of how big they play, or how portable they are.

I think an amateur has more opportunity to play, and that playfulness sometimes results in being more experimental and imaginative, just because you're not tied to limitations of time or logistics: whether it's re-settable, affordable, how a particular audience will respond to it, or when my deadline is. The playful amateur may stumble upon, and take a detour to explore, ideas and avenues that a professional may not have time for. Some of my more creative ideas, like the UnDo Influence control, came about only because I had literally years to freely pursue it.

JOSHUA: I remember the night you first showed it to me. I couldn't sleep, because I couldn't decipher the method, or even come close.

SIMON: That brings up another interesting distinction between amateurs and professionals. There's sometimes a different attitude toward releasing your own material, your creations, to other magicians. As an

amateur, once I publish or market one of my creations, I get a kick out of other magicians using it in their acts. That's my reward, and I feel satisfaction because I'm not competing with them. But with professionals, there's often a different attitude, an understandable tension, toward others performing your material. A professional's creation, his practical experience, can be worth its weight in gold, and the pro justifiably deserves the credit, but at the same time he worries about copycats, bad imitations, and diluting his own act.

JOSHUA: How about the downside of being an amateur?

SIMON: Without the requirements and deadlines of dealing with real-world shows, limited performing conditions, or the pressure to perfect a routine to some external standard, an amateur can easily lose discipline. The professional has a built-in, required testing ground: a constant audience of strangers, who don't owe him any special kindness. The amateur lacks the forced testing and reworking, the rehearsals, the steady improvement in skills and presentation that comes from constantly working over and performing the same material.

JOSHUA: As an amateur, how do you guard against this danger?

SIMON: For over 25 years I practiced law in a large firm, so I made that my testing ground. I'd bug everyone, from other lawyers to secretaries, to the guys in the mailroom, to constantly watch one more! They've seen more of my magic than most magicians. But as an amateur, don't ever think you've given a new effect an adequate trial just because your girlfriend says it's wonderful.

JOSHUA: You mentioned self-discipline. I've seen you at work, and you seem to be one of the most organized and productive people I know.

SIMON: Once I start a project, like working on a particular effect, or writing a book, I'm very disciplined, but I'm extremely conscious of active versus passive involvement. It's a question of balance, but passive activities are often less challenging and more seductive. Watching videos, attending lectures, absorbing news from magazines or the Internet are all fun and informative, but if you're not careful, these passive activities can occupy all your time. Without real-world deadlines, an amateur can succumb to these temptations. To grow and develop, you need to stay actively engaged. Physically doing things yourself, like practicing, or actually working through a new trick, or trying to solve a problem or change or improve something, all involve being creative, being active.

Certainly, one of the best ways to stay actively engaged is brainstorming with other magicians.



John Bannon [left] and Dave Solomon [right] join Simon for their regular Saturday sessions, something that is "Much more than a sleight friendship."

JOSHUA: You've become one of the patriarchs of Chicago's magic scene...

SIMON: Whoa, that makes me sound ancient.

JOSHUA: In *Try the Impossible* you write, "Most of the finished effects in this book are the result of continuous testing, reworking, polishing, criticizing, and brainstorming with my two best friends, David Solomon and John Bannon." That's a pretty powerful triumvirate, and it's even more impressive when you consider the

longevity of your weekly session group.

SIMON: Dave and I started meeting together back in 1965, just fresh out of college. Shortly afterwards we met Steve Draun, and then in the late '60s we all started meeting with Marlo. Ed worked during the week, but Saturday afternoon was his regular day to hold court at whatever restaurant would have us. That institution, dubbed "The Marlo Table," continued till Ed's death in 1991. Dave, John, and I simply continue this tradition, at my kitchen table, still meeting every Saturday. Virtually every effect that any of us has ever published or marketed got its start and its development at the Marlo Table or in our weekly session.

JOSHUA: What happens in these sessions?

SIMON: It's open-ended, no set agenda. Over lunch we'll chat about everything new, from the latest magazine to a recent lecture to trying to reconstruct tricks from dealer's ads. After lunch the close-up pads and decks come out, and it's a free-for-all. Someone may demonstrate what he's working on, or pose a problem that's stymied him, or ask for assistance with a move. Sometimes it's a search for a viable presentation, a plausible patter line, some misdirection at a needed point. Once there's a topic or project tossed out, everyone gets involved, sometimes quite heatedly.

JOSHUA: Tell more about the advantages of having a braintrust when developing magic.

SIMON: You don't want to bounce ideas off someone who is a mirror of yourself. One advantage of our sessions is that the three of us are totally dissimilar. In fact, we rarely perform each other's tricks. When I show something to Dave or John, they view it from their own slants, and fill in the gaps with their own strengths. Everything needs testing, and you don't get a critical reaction by just watching yourself on video or working alone.

Everyone has blind spots. You've heard of people blinking when they do a move. Well, you can also blink in your thinking. We really encourage and are pretty free with criticism. "That's crap" is one of

the most common phrases uttered during our sessions. That's a good starting point. I confess to having a strong ego, but it allows me to take criticism without letting it affect me personally.

Psychologically, it's somewhat surprising that we work so well together. Each of us has very strong, and very different, opinions of how we want our magic to look. But I learned very early how much my material improved by getting their feedback. We also try to keep tight with each other's material, which gives us the confidence to share. I don't think a session group should be large, because of the dynamics of the interpersonal relationships. And, of course, the overarching tie is that we're all best friends.

JOSHUA: Does meeting weekly and constantly trying to impress and fool your session mates get in the way of developing "commercial" magic.

SIMON: Fooling each other isn't a high priority. Sure, there has to be a strong deceptive quality, but for me, my target audience is the intelligent, observant layman. I don't care if my fellow magician gets fooled, as long as he appreciates the construction, the efficiency, the presentation, or whatever I've brought to the table. Dave and John have broad backgrounds and high standards, so their judgments are pretty valid. But meeting together regularly provides continuity, and even a body of our collective work. Because of the constancy of our group, we can revisit and tweak each other's ideas over and over, for years on end. David and I have been working on certain routines since the 1970s, and we often go back to them, with new twists.

JOSHUA: You talked about your influences, from Marlo to your session buddies, Bannon and Solomon. There are two different schools of thought on teachers. There are those who advocate having a teacher because they feel there is no substitute for personal instruction. There are also those who oppose the notion of a close mentor because they feel the students become imitations of their teachers. What's your take?

SIMON: I can't think of many great magicians who've made it entirely on their own. I'm not focusing so much on the teacher providing the content, as I am on the inspiration, the discipline, the criticism, the direction, the challenge, the handholding, and the link with tradition. You've got to experience these somehow, and a mentor is the most



Michael Close [the one wearing the grande "S"] is among the many who've enjoyed the non-stop super sessions at Simon's home in Chicago.

direct and most human way of absorbing them. Sure, when a mentor serves as a role model, you've got to be sensitive that you don't become a clone. But that relationship depends upon the individual personalities of the particular student and teacher.

Every student interacts differently, and his own character influences his choices. Bill Malone is a perfect example: he learned so much from Ed, but he's the antithesis of a Marlo clone. Some of the dangers you're worried about may go back to that amateur/professional distinction we

talked about earlier. Marlo wasn't a professional performer, and he didn't have a strong performing style that one could imitate, even if one wanted to. But he sure imbued us with the drive, the problem-solving abilities, the unceasing curiosity, the ability to think outside the box, the desire to study everything there was on the topic, and a host of other intangibles.

Part of it depends on how impressionable the student is, maybe even his age or maturity. In my own case, my magical goals, priorities and interests were already pre-formed before I ever met Marlo.

JOSHUA: How were your priorities and interests "pre-formed"?

SIMON: My image of how real magic should look is that ideally the magic *just happens*, that the magician apparently *hasn't done anything*. One of the ways you can create that image is to emphasize a hands-off look. The use of stacks, mathematical principles, and gaffs can help achieve that look. It's a venerable tradition of great magic that comes out of Ted Annemann, Charles Jordan, Bob Hummer, Stewart James, Martin Gardner, Alex Elmsley, and others.

JOSHUA: How did this square with Marlo's clear love of sleight of hand?

SIMON: Don't get me wrong. I don't dislike or avoid moves or physical technique. You can't be close to Marlo for over 20 years without gaining the highest admiration for sleight of hand that's well executed. I just don't want my audience to walk away thinking, "Wow, that was great sleight of hand," because, even if they don't understand it, they still think they've got a solution. But as long as it's natural and doesn't call attention to itself, sleight of hand is usually the most efficient method.

Remember, Marlo had the kind of chops and grace that could execute moves that truly went unnoticed, where no one even suspected. But Marlo's genius wasn't limited to technical card magic. He had a

sophisticated mathematical mind, and was perfectly at home with all kinds of methods. In my very first meeting with Ed, I shared an idea I had for the Faro Re-stacking Pack, and he thought it was neat. So from the start, Ed and I often talked about stacks, mathematical principles, and mental-type plots.

JOSHUA: You don't seem to have a burning desire for your methods to reach the masses of magicians. That brings us to your feelings on secrecy in magic.

SIMON: My formative years in magic were as a teenager in New York, when Vernon was still there. Secrecy was paramount. It was hard to learn the esoteric secrets or the little tips of finesse that make things really work. There were backrooms in magic shops, and I was only let in on rare occasions. Publishing was a small, closed business, and secrets were relatively expensive. Because secrets were guarded, they were valued.

Secrecy goes to the very nature of magic — it's the essence of the unknown — the mystery that leads to the fascination and awe. I'd rather not toss methods around lightly, just to satisfy a momentary curiosity, even if it's the curiosity of a fellow magician. You can spoil a magician's fascination just as much as a layman's. Juan Tamariz had all of Chicago buzzing for two years after his first lecture here, just because he left us all fooled. The effects everyone remembered were the one's Juan *didn't* explain.

But if the purpose is to help an individual who will actually use the idea, develop it, present it, and expand magic with it, then that tips the scales for me. I have ego enough to want to get credit for my creations, but I'll generally stay pretty tight with stuff I'm working on, until it's close to publication.

JOSHUA: Are any Simon Aronson DVD's on the horizon?

SIMON: My magic can best be learned from my books. I realize this limits my exposure, because there are a lot of people who just aren't motivated to read books. I'd love to put out a DVD of just performances, so people could sit in their armchair, experience my magic, and hopefully decide, "Hey, I'd like to learn more about that."

JOSHUA: Performances only? No explanations?

SIMON: Right. They'd probably get four times as many effects. But I've talked to producers about a performance-only video, and apparently there are serious marketing problems. I don't have any great desire to



PHOTO: JOSHUA JAY

As an avid note taker, Simon's library includes over 20 notebooks memorializing ideas explored in various sessions going back more than 30 years.

put out a series of DVD's with lengthy explanations of my tricks, that just repeats what's already explained in my books.

JOSHUA: Speaking of your magic that is best learned from the printed word, our readers are going to get a first-hand taste of that right here in this issue. As your now-famous Shuffle-bored effect celebrates its 23rd birthday, I'm excited that you're releasing the latest improved presentation in "Talk About Tricks" [page 81], something you call Random Sample Shuffle-bored.

But let's not get ahead of ourselves. Give us a history of this devilishly clever invention.

SIMON: It all started from a session David Solomon and I had in 1979. Dave showed me a trick out of *The Linking Ring* magazine. The plot was great, but it was a weak trick because it had so many procedural restrictions. It was based on an underlying Bob Hummer idea, and because of my fascination with mathematical principles, David challenged me to eliminate these restrictions.

I published *Shuffle-bored* as a separate 28-page manuscript in 1980, with many variations, alternative procedures, background and theory. It's the only time I've ever felt strongly enough about one of my creations to put out a separate booklet for that single effect. The basic effect of "Shuffle-bored" is that, despite two spectators freely shuffling the deck face up and face down several times, you can immediately tell the audience exactly how many cards are face up. Since then, many others have contributed improvements and variations, and *Shuffle-bored* took on a life of its own.

I think it's fitting to introduce my latest version, Random Sample Shuffle-bored, in *MAGIC Magazine*, because it all came together at the *MAGIC Live!* convention in Las Vegas, from a session I had there with Bob Sheets. In my original manuscript I discussed various prediction presentations, but I basically concluded that a prediction was a weak way to go. My thinking has shifted somewhat, and I now incorporate a prediction, but in a way that keeps the element of surprise intact. The Random Sample theme provides meaning to why the spectators are shuffling the pack, so everything hangs together more tightly. I'm quite happy with it.

JOSHUA: Is Random Sample the definitive version of Shuffle-bored?

SIMON: From everything else I've said, you know I'll never stop tinkering. ♦