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Jeff McBride



MCBRIDE

Ten Milestones

By Todd Karr

As millions of readers follow the magical education of Harry Potter through J.K. Rowling's works, the magic community watches the intriguing path of Jeff McBride and Eugene Burger. Like an apprentice and sorcerer, they explore new avenues for performing and teaching the art of magic.

Their latest ventures are the intensive Master Class seminars, and a new show at the Claridge Hotel in Atlantic City, *McBride Magic: The Secret Art*, which runs through December 9. The show melds Jeff and Eugene's talents with the artistry of Jeff's new bride, Abbi Spinner. The spectacle is unlike any ever seen on a casino stage. It's Le Roy, Talma & Bosco for the new millennium: a cross-generation, multi-gendered, insightful magic show.

"We try to break convention as much as we can in our teaching and our shows," says McBride. "We create new contexts in which to experience magic. Eugene and I are always thinking up new ways to create magic, not just for the public but also for the magic community. It keeps it interesting for us."

The wide spectrum of styles in *McBride Magic: The Secret Art* ranges from Jeff's spectacular energy to Abbi's breathtaking escapes to Eugene's intimate theatricality. Interesting textures abound: Burger performs a levitation, McBride gets put through his paces as an apprentice, and Spinner — the show's musical director — plays African drums. In addition to Abbi and Eugene, the current show includes Scott Hitchcock, Jeff's stage assistant and illusion tech for the past ten years. Scott's magic partner, Joan DuKore, plays the role of stage assistant/dancer and both Scott and Joan are excellent close-up magicians. McBride performs his classic routines along with new ones, including a version of the "Artist's Dream," his improved "Light Beam Levitation," and "Guardian Angel," a death-and-resurrection illusion.

The 75-minute show (along with its opening half-hour of close-up) reflects McBride and Burger's continuing explorations of the underlying secrets of magic. McBride says, "I think what makes this show really different is what we've learned from teaching. Magic is a very personal and intimate experience. There's a tendency today to go really big and, at the same time, distance the audience from the magic. In both teaching experiences and live shows, we stress the very human aspects of the art."

How did McBride arrive here?

Born September 11, 1959, McBride has long followed his own road as an artist, trying on many personas including avant-garde artiste, rock opening act, mystical performer, manipulation expert, break dancer, drummer, retreat leader, singer, lecturer, and teacher. I've picked out ten milestones in Jeff McBride's career to glimpse his unfolding as an artist...



Scenes from the October 13 through December 9 run of *McBride Magic: The Secret Art* at the Claridge Hotel in Atlantic City.

I 25¢ Shows for the Neighborhood

Jeff McBride began his performance career like most magicians, with a book at the local library, in his case *The Golden Book of Magic* by The Great Merlini. Already fascinated by masks and drumming, the art of magic captured McBride's imagination and led to neighborhood magic shows and benefits for the local Lions Club and Masonic Lodge in his upstate New York hometown of Goshen.

Even in his early shows, McBride entered in a top hat. As he improved, he performed in the Catskills at children's camps and, at age 12, at the Orange County Fair in nearby Middletown, New York. In 1973, he made his television debut on the quiz show *What's My Line?*; the panelists successfully guessed Jeff's profession but were obviously puzzled by his levitation.

II Japan at 16

McBride's proficiency grew rapidly as a teenager and his talents did not go unnoticed. At one of McBride's Catskills shows, record producer Jerry Masucci saw the 16-year-old's potential and offered a booking in Japan as the opening act for a salsa band.

While in Tokyo, McBride saw his artistic interests in masks and drumming mirrored by the spectacle of Japanese Kabuki theatre. He also perceived how exotic elements like make-up and martial arts (another of his fascinations) could work in the setting of a stage performance.

The 1975 tour filled McBride with inspiration and, upon his return, he began classes at the American Mime Theatre in New York City. Striving to experiment with the art form, he started to transform traditional mime make-up like the Pierrot and the Harlequin into more intense designs reflecting the energy of Kabuki. McBride called it "commando mime."

McBride supplemented his income working at the Flosso-Hornmann magic shop for \$10 a day. More often than not, he'd end up trading his pay for some interesting prop he'd run across in the store; he recalls with a laugh that no matter how beat up or dusty the item, his boss, Jackie Flosso, would inevitably tell McBride that the prop cost \$10, making an even exchange for the daily wages.

A typical New York magic kid, McBride frequented Tannen's and began learning more intricate sleight of hand from local magicians Bobby Baxter and Lou Lancaster, as well as spending time with prominent performers like Milbourne Christopher.



McBride at 16 [above], shortly before signing on as the opening act for the "Fania All Stars" 1975 tour of Japan. [Left] First neighborhood party shows at age ten. [Below] By 13, Jeff was a "Borsch Belt" star, performing evening kid's shows at hotels throughout the Catskills.



Jeff's mastery of cards began under the influence of Jeff Sheridan, renowned for his silent performances in Central Park with little more than a deck of cards and pieces of rope. Sheridan's interest in melding surrealist art with conjuring fueled McBride's passion to take magic into new realms.

All his diverse talents now began synthesizing into an original fusion combining magic and masks with movements derived from mime, martial arts, break dancing, and Kabuki. The resulting style was, and remains, totally unconventional for a magic act.



III Opening Act and Hip Nightclubs

McBride began venturing into new surroundings for his exciting repertoire. Rock-'n'-roll tour promoters offered opening-act spots for Santana, Cheap Trick, and others. The unique style of his act proved captivating enough for jaded concert audiences, yet spectacular enough to fill vast stages and be visible to far-away spectators.

In one early interview, McBride said, "I call it Renaissance Kabuki from Mars. You have to dazzle people, blast their eyes out. Rock audiences won't stand for wimpy portrayals of a dying butterfly."

In 1978, after a year on the road, McBride returned to New York and began developing new effects, honing many of them at cutting-edge nightclubs like Club Ibis, a hot New York nightspot. He performed 13 shows a week for \$150 under difficult conditions, surrounded by boisterous crowds. The busy schedule allowed him to hone his act and stage persona.

The demanding club environment also led McBride to redesign the standard form of the magic show. He had to make his entrance through the customers, so he created a self-contained act in which all props fit into his table. Needing to catch the attention of the noisy patrons, he focused on high-impact, visual magic and used tactics like scaling cards into the audience or threateningly stepping onto nearby tables of talkative spectators. He learned to fill the performance space in as many ways as possible, with objects like streamers, confetti, and ribbons. Often working surrounded, he covered as many parts of the stage as possible, so the maximum amount of customers could see the magic. At times he would paint the insides of his masks like the outside, so that when he magically produced the masks, the spectators in back of him would be able to appreciate the effect.

McBride began to create subtler storylines to frame his effects, including one of his signature pieces, the "Hall of Mirrors," in which he confronted the deeper meanings behind the concept of wearing a mask. Instead of pulling a rabbit out of a hat, he was pulling his face off and his eyes out of their sockets. (Okay, red scarves. As President George H. Bush commented years later after seeing McBride perform at Ford's Theatre, "Very interesting act.")

But the routine also brought the spectators to a place of self-reflection, through the symbols of searching behind one's masks to ultimately be liberated from the bonds of illusion. It was heavy material for a magic show, but McBride succeeded in making it into a theatrically potent number that still could grip the average night-club goer.



After studying at the American Mime Theatre in 1976, Jeff took to the road, touring the East Coast in a van with his first mime and magic act.

During the run at Club Ibis, the artistic directors of Montréal's Crazy Horse attended a show and ended up requesting McBride to develop and star in his own show. The resulting *Fusion Illusion* played to sold-out houses at the Queen Elizabeth Hotel in Montréal for six months.

His career sped forward during an engagement at New York's Café Versailles, where choreographer Tommy Tune introduced McBride to former William Morris agent Bill Barnes. The head of his own firm, representing top talent like playwright Tennessee Williams and Raquel Welch, Barnes had never worked with a magician. Seeing McBride changed that, and the agent quickly signed him and arranged appearances at some of the world's top showrooms, including Caesars in Atlantic City, where he opened for Tina Turner, Arsenio Hall, and Flip Wilson.

Ten Things You Don't Know About Jeff McBride

1. Jeff's first name is John, named after his father John Strong McBride.
2. His confirmation name is Francis, after St. Francis of Assisi.
3. His official Screen Actors Guild name is Jeff Magnus McBride.
4. His name as a guest star on the 1994 *Star Trek: Deep Space Nine* was Joran Belar.
5. He collects boxes that look like books.
6. As singer/songwriter/musician/ drummer, he has performed on three CDs with Abbi Spinner and the group Zingia.
7. He is a champion horseback rider and freestyle skier.
8. He takes his coffee with cream, no sugar.
9. He goes through 500 decks of cards every year in his performances.
10. He has had no incoming television reception since 1976.

IV The Mikado

The run at Club Ibis also led to an offer from Sachiko Konami, owner of the Mikado, for Jeff to headline at Tokyo's top nightclub. Here, McBride deepened his studies of Japanese theatrical techniques. Konami arranged lessons with revered Kabuki master Morihiko-Haniagi, who taught the magician secrets of Kabuki make-up and movement, as well as traditional Kabuki numbers like the famous Lion Dance. McBride studied the art of sword movement with Samurai specialist Oka.

Incorporating more and more of these disciplines into his routines, he became a favorite of the Japanese audiences, leading to further Mikado bookings. McBride's time in Japan also infused him with a love of the classic Asian magic repertoire, including "Linking Rings" and the "Japanese Butterfly" trick, both long-time mainstays of his show.

V Variety Shows

McBride soon began working more on television, amazing such talk-show hosts as Regis Philbin and Merv Griffin. His international stage bookings led to TV guest spots in Europe and Asia, including *The Best of Magic* and the *Paul Daniels Show* in England, *Sebastien C'est Fou* in France, *Magic Andreu* in Spain, as well as programs in Germany, Italy, The Netherlands, and Japan.

These television appearances taught McBride lessons in tailoring his magic to the requirements of the small screen: effects that were sure-fire, visually appealing, and brief enough to keep the short attention span of viewers. Later in his career, McBride applied these experiences to more high-profile TV appearances, which succeeded mainly because of his understanding of how to effectively present magic on television.

VI Headliner

A national-tour opening for Diana Ross (that's "Miss Ross," please, to all backstage) in 1983, brought McBride to Radio City Music Hall. Here, casino mogul Steve Wynn saw the groundbreaking magic act and signed McBride for multiple engagements at the Golden Nugget in Las Vegas.

Rave reviews followed. *Variety* said: "Describing Jeff McBride is like pinning down a whirlwind. McBride reveals magic arts of all ages, from ancient lore to *contempo recondite*



A 1982 appearance at Japan's Mikado night club led to lessons with revered master Morihiko-Haniagi, who taught Jeff traditional Kabuki numbers including the famous Lion dance.



diversity, all wrapped in a highly stylized package. *Sui generis.*"

The magic community started to take notice as well. The New York IBM Ring awarded him its Star of Magic. He closed the Madrid FISM in 1985, and he received the Grand Prix Magiques de Monte Carlo from Prince Rainier and Princess Stephanie.

Still seeking new situations in which to present magic, Jeff teamed up with performance group Triple Vision to form a show combining stilt-dancing and black-art illusions. The group was booked at the Las Vegas Hilton in the *Bal de Moulin Rouge* revue, with McBride billed as the headliner.

VII Desert Transformation

While appearing at the Las Vegas Hilton in 1984, a post-show camping trip in the Nevada desert one night catalyzed a drastic change of direction. The nature around him reminded McBride of the deeper meanings of life and magic. This awakening experience was the first step in a shifting of his priorities, and McBride began to temper his hard-driving show-business urges with a search for an understanding of what a magician is and what the magic show truly represents.

He realized that his magic career had led him to play the role of a magician instead of actually being one. McBride recalls, "Exploring the outer landscape led naturally to exploring the inner landscape. The silence of the desert opened me up to the realm of real magic. I knew I had to examine the possibilities of magic as a genuine, innate truth of nature."

McBride began an intensive study of a variety of forms of magic, not just conjuring, but the writings about myths, customs, and magical beliefs. He investigated the teachings of the ancient shamans and set out to reflect the healing spirit of the medicine man in his own work. McBride also started to study yoga, Sufism, and ritual drumming.

His new sensibilities led him to redefine his performances. Based on his studies, McBride created his first full-evening theatrical show, *Mask of the Mystic*, featuring magical juggler Michael Marlin. The show's theme revolved around Tarot images of the Fool and the Magician, and included routines that explored ancient magical practices. Its run at the off-Broadway cabaret The Ballroom brought a positive review in the *New York Times*, which described the unusual role of the show's star: "Enacting the myth of a sort of wizard-like Everyman, he materializes from the primordial void, discovers and manipulates the four elements, and after mastering the universe, wrestles with his own soul."



The acclaim that Mask, Myth, and Magic received during its 1987 engagement at The Ballroom in New York City led to world tours of the show.

VIII Mask, Myth, and Magic

Ever exploring, McBride brought his magic to ecology-focused gatherings, where he encountered the power of ceremony to transform and motivate a community. These communal events inspired a unique performance piece called *Mask, Myth, and Magic*, a magical, largely autobiographical portrayal of McBride's "vision quest" for real magic. In 1987, a two-month engagement at The Ballroom in New York City brought lavish praise.

Critics grasped the artistry of the daring show. The *New York Post* said: "Calling Jeff McBride's show at The Ballroom a magic act grossly understates its content. *Mask, Myth, and Magic* is a fully developed, gracefully flowing hour of spectacular illusions, visual effects, and dance movement, tied together with a fascinating plot line... You are not only vastly entertained, but considerably enlightened on how the ancients saw the world, and how those precepts still color our own perceptions today."

Proving that spiritually minded material could still be viable entertainment, the show's success was well rewarded with appearances

on the *Dick Cavett Show* and CNN; bookings in Thailand, France, Germany, India, Hong Kong, Taiwan, and the Barcelona Olympics; runs at the Showboat in Atlantic City and Caesars in Lake Tahoe; and the opening slot in the prestigious London International Mime Festival, during which the *Times* of London called McBride “a conjuror of genius.”

Producer/manager Tobias Beckwith helped McBride move into additional venues like corporate entertainment, an environment that nonetheless embraced McBride’s profound visions.

IX

Mystery School

McBride’s next step was to share his explorations and learning with others. In the spring of 1991, he organized a retreat to explore the adventures of *real* magic. Dubbed Mystery School, the small but powerful event brought together a diverse handful of magical personalities at an ashram in upstate New York for lectures, workshops, dancing, drumming, and performances.

At the time of the initial session, the concept of alternative-minded magicians seriously examining their art was novel. However, Mystery School soon blossomed and expanded, and ran annually for eight years with Eugene Burger as dean and visionary Robert Neale on the permanent faculty. The sessions undoubtedly planted many good seeds for the future development of the art of magic.

Mystery School opened the door to other events McBride and Beckwith organized to bring magic into new settings. These have included the WorldMagics Festival, the FireDance Festival of Music and Dance, the 2000 Mysterium, a retreat which became the successor to Mystery School, and this month’s Legends of Magic Conference at Mt. Charleston, Nevada.

X

The Teacher

McBride began teaching at one of the New York Magic Symposiums of the 1980s with his lecture, “Changing the Face of Magic.” Ensuing lectures, many as long as three hours, combined performances with his theories, low-tech but high-impact effects, and practical advice on real-world shows.

He also started releasing his store of sleight-of-hand knowledge to the magic world with his popular video series. This desire to improve magic through teaching led him into his collaboration with Eugene Burger.

The two magicians understand the path of the student deeply. Burger has documented his beginnings as a Chicago youngster, per-



McBride and Abbi Spinner, who has performed in Jeff’s shows since 1989, were married at the Second Annual FireDance Festival on August 15, 2001.



In 1992, Jeff McBride became the organizer of “The Mystical Alliance of Secret Knowledge Mystery School,” first held at the Ananda Ashram in a country setting about an hour from New York City. Subsequent Mystery Schools were offered through the ’90s, with the last being conducted, in 1999, at Mt. St. Vincent in New York. Mysterium, first staged in the spring of 2000 at Mt. Charleston, 50 miles north of Las Vegas, became the successor to Mystery School.



forming off-the-shelf and catalog magic and studying the work of Don Alan. He earned a master's degree at Yale Divinity School and taught comparative religion before commencing his full-time magic career in his late 30s.

In their Master Class seminars, small groups spend three days at McBride's home studio in Las Vegas, analyzing and fine-tuning their acts using videotape, a working stage, and oral critique. McBride says this emphasis on the personal is key. "Ultimately, it's the one-on-one, hands-on experience that counts, taking the time to focus and work with the individual's talents and needs, onstage and off. It starts with discovering the individual's intention for what they want their magic to be and then setting specific goals, whether it be designing the perfect video or scripting the perfect piece or taking three or four routines and putting the product into a completed show. That's something you can't do with huge groups of hundreds of people at a large magic convention."

Such perspective results from long experience. Both McBride and Burger have taught for over 20 years in settings ranging from weekly private lessons to auditorium lectures.

The sessions bring the wisdom of these two artists to a variety of performers. "There's a misconception that our classes are only for very advanced students," McBride says. "We regularly work with beginners." One attendee, Phillip Kaiser, recently won the junior contest sponsored by Lance Burton at the Las Vegas World Magic Seminar. "Lawrence Khong of Singapore restarted his magic career a few years ago and now has the largest illusion show in Asia. He's playing for 40,000 people this week. He's been to Master Class three times in the last year, working on close-up, manipulations, and illusions."

Their current endeavor *McBride Magic: The Secret Art*, at the Claridge in Atlantic City, explores the world of the magician's secrets, giving the audience a lesson in magic and perception, using many participatory illusions. Before the show, giant screens and live cameras will create a personal, interactive experience for the spectators during close-up performances by McBride, Burger, Spinner, Bryce Kuhlman, and Jenny Pauls.

McBride and Burger are also planning what they call "Secret Sessions" while they are touring. These seminars will take Master Class on the road as they set up three-day intensive groups in such upcoming tour stops as The Netherlands and Belgium. And more exciting creations are soon to follow. The past has shown that just when we think we know all the tricks up McBride's sleeve, the magician pulls out a new mask and amazes us all. ♦

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After the fall engagement at the Claridge in Atlantic City, McBride, Burger, and Spinner plan to tour with an on-the-road Master Class called "Secret Sessions."

