

# MUSICAL

BY STEVE DALY

# chairs

*musical chairs (noun): A party game in which players walk around chairs while music is played, there being one fewer chair than players. Whenever the music stops, the player who fails to find a chair is eliminated.*

Welcome to the party that features the popular Las Vegas magical version of Musical Chairs. It seems like each month the music stops and the current Strip professionals reshuffle with some new up-and-coming starry-eyed magicians, as each lands into a hotel or casino showroom.

Las Vegas is 4.2 miles of bright lights, showgirls, and magicians. *Lots* of magicians, and not so many “chairs” for them to quickly sit down on.

Since the early days of Las Vegas entertainment, magicians have always been featured in a show somewhere on the glittering street of lights and quarter-gobbling slot machines. For approximately ten years, from 1985 to 1995, almost every show on the Strip featured a magician or a complete magic show. Magic was as hot as the 120-degree desert temperatures could get at that time.

Names such as Lance Burton, Kirby Van Burch, and the incredible 31-year veterans of the town, Siegfried & Roy, were all kings of the Las Vegas magic scene long before today’s top pros held court. Shows stayed for many years in one location back then, with long runs and future-building career contracts, such as Lance’s famed \$100 million, thirteen-year deal at the Monte Carlo.

But longevity in Vegas seems the exception rather than the rule; even if a magician can make a long-term stay in town, the show might not always be found in the same location. An example is Rick Thomas. His show has made chessboard jumps up and down the Strip over the last fifteen years, taking him from the Tropicana to the Stardust, to the Orleans, to the Sahara, and to his current stage space at the Saxe Theater in Planet Hollywood. And this recent move is only temporary while his next planned move is to the Riviera’s former *Splash* showroom, which is being remodeled for him into the Rick Thomas Theater, slated to open sometime in September.

While flights of fancy might suggest that Rick Thomas’ show is a curse to vintage Vegas casinos, Thomas isn’t superstitious — even though both the Stardust and the Sahara closed relatively soon after he moved in. “Remember when the Luxor opened?” Thomas asks. That’s right: after a couple of flop production shows — *Imagine* and *Winds of the Gods* — peopled started saying that the place was cursed. “They were saying all these crazy things,” Thomas recalls with a laugh. “I kept saying, ‘If it’s good entertainment, it will draw.’ They just needed a good show in there.” Blue Man Group came along and proved him right.

Thomas’ first chase around the chairs came when he left a solid afternoon berth at the Tropicana in 2005 because he feared it would close. These fears admittedly were grounded by management’s unwillingness



PHOTO: RICHARD FAVERTY - BECKETT STUDIOS

“Oh, there’s stress. There’s always stress. But it’s not the bad news, it’s how you react to it. I will land on my feet as I have before.”

And that’s just one magician’s “moving” story. There’s also the other longtime Vegas magician who features an exotic collection of cats in his show, the private and soft-spoken Dirk Arthur. Dirk’s dance around the chairs has taken him from Bally’s in *Jubilee* and his own one-night-

a-week production called *Catagious*, to the Riviera in the famed *Splash* show, to an off-the-Strip seat at the Silverton with his own spectacular production, then a hop downtown to the Plaza, followed by a skip to the Tropicana to replace Rick Thomas when he departed the showroom, and finally a jump down the street to his current home at O’Sheas. “Have tiger, will travel” might be an appropriate motto for these Vegas players.

The transformational role in Las Vegas magic entertainment went to Siegfried & Roy, who had both the last old-Vegas magic show and the first new one. This they accomplished while playing the chairs game from the Frontier to the Mirage.

*Beyond Belief* was crowned the first Stage Show winner in 1982’s Best of Las Vegas poll after the show opened at the Frontier

in November 1981. The tigers weren’t yet white, but the audience had to keep up with eighty doves, nine exotic cats, one horse, one python, and an elephant.

Those were the ’80s.

When the tempo of the game told the “masters of the impossible” to step it up a notch and move their tiger-striped props around the chairs, it was time for Vegas to do so, too. The revolution came with Steve Wynn’s *Mirage* in 1990 and the duo’s new show there.

Concert tours brought the modern world to Vegas, but the standing shows had not yet acknowledged Broadway blockbusters such as *Les Miserables*. Siegfried & Roy sought out that show’s production designer, John Napier, who snickered at everything else he saw on the Strip and proceeded to give Vegas spectacle an automated theatrical update, complete with a mechanical dragon.

Thanks to the magical pair’s way of playing the game, Las Vegas now had a taste of what could be. This paved the way for non-magic production shows such as *Cirque du Soleil’s Mystère* to become staples of Vegas entertainment. Casinos paid millions of dollars to produce these mega-shows.

That was when producers were paid to produce. But such is not the standard anymore.

Times have changed. By the late ’80s, casino showrooms had embraced the term “four-walling,” which irrevocably altered

to offer him more than a month-to-month contract. So he went to the Stardust, which closed instead.

It wasn’t reported this way in 2006, but Thomas now says that when he went into the Stardust, he was told “You know we’re imploding in two years.” He maintains it was still the right decision for him at the time. “The room had some wonderful history. Those classic casinos are important parts of people’s lives.”

Rick Thomas hopes to be a player of magical musical chairs for a long time. “I’ve been blessed. I’ve been in Vegas now for fifteen years. But anybody who gets two months in Vegas should count their blessings.” When talking about trying to move his magic show yet again before the peak summer season and then making another move in the fall, he says,



Rick Thomas



Criss Angel



Dirk Arthur

PHOTO: RICHARD FAVERTY - BECKETT STUDIOS

how the game is played. Instead of the casinos paying for a production to appear in their showroom, producers now foot the bill for the shows by renting the space — the “four walls” of the theater. This includes all the costs involved with the show: advertising, ticket sales, costumes, props, dancers, animals and their care, stagehands, sound people, spotlight crew, lighting board operators, front of house help, box office help. The costs go on and on, all now paid by the occupants of the theater rather than the casino itself.

And there’s one more sticky rule to the game: even though you may four-wall a theater, the casino that owns the theater can still terminate your rental agreement if you are not pulling in enough customers. The casino

makes money from the guests who walk through their game rooms, sprinkling coins into the one-armed bandits on their way to and from an evening’s entertainment. That’s why casinos have shows: to attract that traffic. If the show isn’t pulling in traffic, the four walls disappear.

Some casinos offer a “two-wall” deal. This is the same as four-walling, but the casino participates in paying some of the costs, such as advertising and stagehands.

“Today you can do a reality show on a cable network and have your own showroom,” says David Copperfield, who worked the Las Vegas Hilton in 1981 with Bill Cosby and Tony Orlando. “Back then, it was hard to get in,” he says. Even after three CBS television specials, Copperfield says he was “an unproven ticket

seller. It’s very easy to become a star on TV. But that doesn’t mean you’re going to sell tickets. They didn’t know. I wasn’t proven.”

After working his way onto double bills with the likes of Crystal Gayle and Shecky Greene, Copperfield became a durable part of the landscape. He’s now starring at the MGM Grand forty weeks this year.

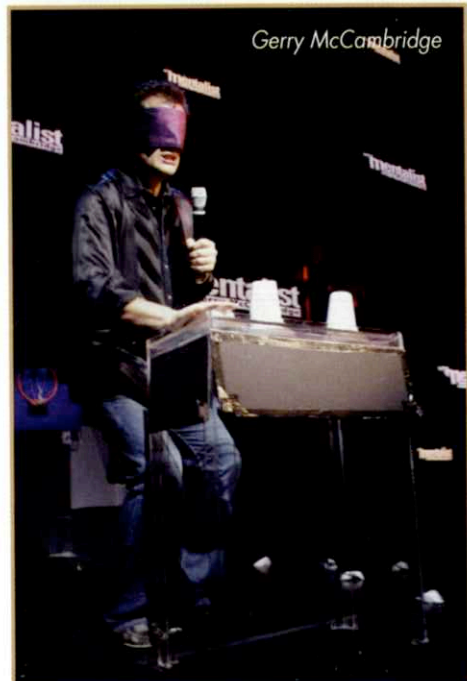
Do you think Gerry McCambridge knew he would sneak into the game by coming to town and working his East Coast mindreading act at a locals’ lounge some ten miles from the Strip? With his show *The Mentalist*, Gerry worked his way from the Rampart Casino lounge to a spot in the Stardust Theater not long before they were to implode it. No one wanted to invest money into advertising for a show that would not be in that location for long. The music played again and with blindfold driving test abilities, Gerry steered his way past the orange shorts of the girls for a lengthy run in the Hooters Hotel lounge/showroom. Like a prediction from his prediction chest, it was plain to see Gerry had a show that would finally land in a legitimate showroom on the Strip; McCambridge now appears nightly at the V Theater in Planet Hollywood.

With fourteen nightly magic shows currently appearing in town, magic is certainly not dead in Vegas. Some players of the game were able to run right over to a chair and keep their spot, settling in while other shows seem to be continually in transition; *Criss Angel BeLIeVe* debuted at the Luxor and has stayed put. The most successful, long-running magic shows in town presently are the duo of deceit, Penn & Teller at the Rio — although it is not officially on the Strip, their 51-story-high photos plastered on the



Brett Daniels

PHOTO: ANDREW MICHALS



Gerry McCambridge



Jeff Hobson

side of the hotel are clearly visible from the Strip — and the King of “laughternoon” shows and Las Vegas Headliner of the Year, Mac King at Harrah’s. These acts have managed to grab a chair and remain seated while other magicians circle around, dashing for an opening. *America’s Got Talent* magic poster boy Nathan Burton seems to have settled in now at the Flamingo, although he too could be seen performing in various productions up and down the Strip for quite a few years, both with his own show and as an act in other productions.

Vegas used to be filled with lavish revue shows, many of which featured magicians in variety spots. There are few revue shows playing today and fewer magicians in them. Joseph Gabriel and his wife Katalin are pulling strings and tossing birds in *Vegas! The Show* at Planet Hollywood, and baggy-pants comic/magician Tony Douglas is fumbling his way through a pile of props at the female-filled topless *Crazy Girls* show at the Riviera.

Over the years, established names such as Jeff Hobson, Brett Daniels, and Murray have tried their hand at opening their own show in Las Vegas.

Hobson played his own personal game of musical chairs — probably to the theme song of *I Dream of Jeannie* — as he appeared up and down the Strip, first at Bally’s Catch a Rising Star as a comic magician, then into the stage show *Spellbound* at Harrah’s. After a brief hiatus that took him to Reno to share the largest stage in North America with Kalin & Jinger in *Carnival of Wonders*, Jeff returned to Vegas as the most requested emcee/host of productions such as *Worlds Greatest Magic Show* and *V — The Ultimate Variety Show*.

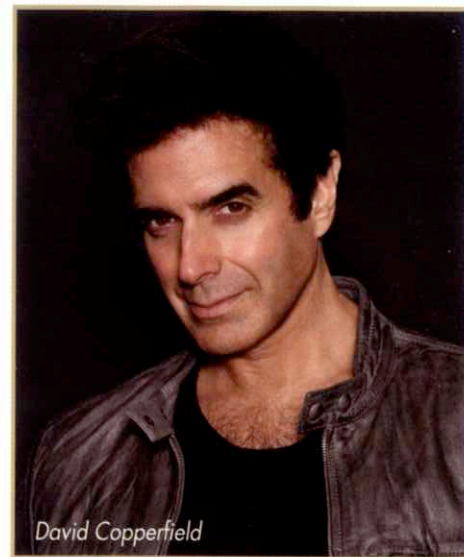
In 2003, Hobson opened his one-man show at the Excalibur. Titled *Money & Madness*, the show featured some impressive manipulation work as well as his staple of hysterical creations and characters. But even running through the mixed-aged audience while throwing handfuls of cash at them could not keep the 400-seat theater filled with the ticket-buying tourists.

“I believed that Las Vegas was overgrown with too many shows over ten years ago,” Hobson says. “When an industry cuts up its profit pie beyond its means, something has to give. Lance Burton’s announcement of closing his show at the Monte Carlo was just another example of necessary cutbacks in our economy.” Hobson no longer plays the Vegas version of the game, opting for corporate appearances and cruise ships.

Wisconsin-based Brett Daniels has played the game a few times, with “chairs” in Atlantic City, Branson, and Biloxi, as well as numerous tours of China. He managed to get a chair of his own on the Strip in 2008 by

bringing his “thinking outside the box” production called *Wohscigam* to the now-closed Sahara Hotel Casino. His production lasted just a few weeks before disappearing from the massive stage. He experienced enormous problems with the union and the hotel, and *Wohscigam*’s six-month contract lasted a mere 21 days, just one of many shows that cycled through that room.

Daniels picked up his seat cushion and quit the game. “It was a great show,” he proclaims. “As an illusionist, I am still very proud of the show, even though I realize I had bitten off more than I could chew. Folks like Derren Brown have since offered a murder mystery motif with their own productions, but mine was the first. It probably needed a good playwright to make it a little more solid, and if I had been given the entire six months of my contract to work the show’s kinks out, I know it would have lasted a lot longer.” When asked what advice he would give to other magicians who want to play this game, his answer is surprisingly honest. “Heck, I still don’t know how to play the



David Copperfield

game! Watch people like [producer] David Saxe and Nathan Burton; they understand and play the game a lot better than I do!” Brett still has the entire *Wohscigam* show in storage and is simply waiting for his next turn to jump in and play.

## current las vegas magic shows

*Amazing Johnathan*  
Harmon Theater

*Criss Angel BellEve*  
Luxor

*Cashetta — The Extra Large Medium*  
Clarion Hotel & Casino

*David Copperfield*  
MGM Grand

*Dirk Arthur’s Wild Magic*  
O’Sheas Casino

*Illusions* starring Jan Rouven  
Clarion Hotel & Casino

*The Mac King Comedy Magic Show*  
Harrah’s

*The Magic and Tigers of Rick Thomas*  
Saxe Theater, Planet Hollywood

*Magic of Paris* starring Stephane Vanel,  
featuring Mark Kornhauser,  
Paris Las Vegas

*The Mentalist Live* starring Gerry McCambridge  
V Theater, Planet Hollywood

*Mike Hammer Comedy Magic Show*  
Four Queens Hotel & Casino

*Nathan Burton Comedy Magic*  
Flamingo

*Penn & Teller*  
Rio All-Suite Hotel & Casino

*Steve Wyrick — Ultra Magician*  
Las Vegas Hilton

### Productions Shows with Magicians

*Crazy Girls* featuring Tony Douglas,  
Riviera Hotel Casino

*Piano! Las Vegas* featuring comedy magicians,  
V Theater, Planet Hollywood

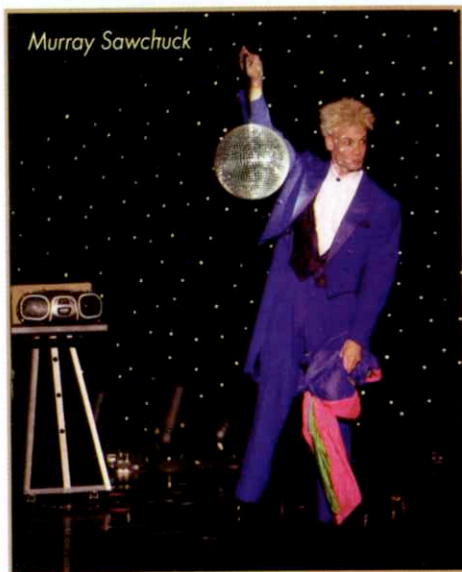
*V, The Ultimate Variety Show* featuring Shimshi  
and other magicians  
V Theater, Planet Hollywood

*Vegas! The Show* featuring Joseph Gabriel,  
Saxe Theater, Planet Hollywood

Listing compiled by David Neubauer

And then there is the guy with the unruly white hair and the hipster glasses who had his own \$12.95 afternoon show at the Frontier in 2002. The music stopped after a four-month run for Murray Sawchuck, which was his first and last run to date as a Vegas headliner. "Here I was headlining at the legendary hotel where Siegfried & Roy had performed many years before, yet I wasn't famous," Murray says. "At the same time, I was seeing these no-name singers go on *American Idol* and within weeks become a household name because of TV exposure."

Murray felt frustrated that he had been in magic for at least twenty years and no one knew him. He quickly learned that a big part to sitting on that chair for a long time is playing another game, which he calls the Ticket Game. "Basically, you're a vacuum salesman, going door to door, trying to sell tickets to a show that no one has ever heard of before, and convince them to spend an hour with you, watching your magic." Murray confesses, "I thought just because I won twenty awards, was young, and had some kinda cool tricks that I would work and sell lots of tickets — until I realized I was up against 76 other shows a day on the Strip! All of a sudden, you're not that great anymore." Murray walked away from the Vegas party and now keeps busy with a variety of live shows and television appearances. He may be better

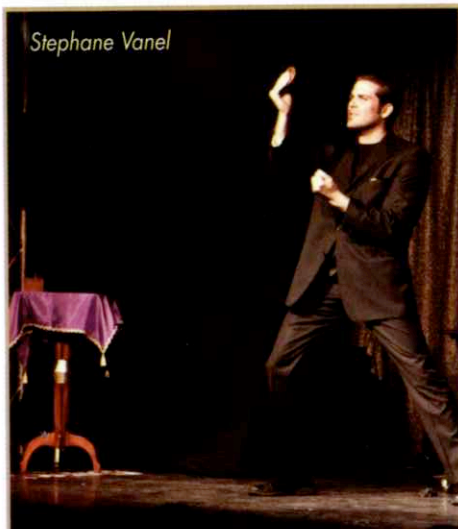


known today than he was nine years ago, when he had his own show on the Strip.

There are newcomers and not-so-newcomers to the traditional party game gone magical, like French transplant Stephane Vanel, German illusionist Jan Rouven, and the Texas tornado of Vegas musical chairs, Steve Wyrick.

Stephane Vanel, a seven-year regular at the *Crazy Horse Paris* show (formerly called *Le Femme*) at the MGM Grand, wielded cards twice nightly in his polished five-minute manipulation spot with the famed French Crazy Horse girls. Now he has opened his own show in the intimate and blandly simple showroom at the Paris Hotel. Stephane's goal of having his own show on the famed Strip has finally come true, if only for the duration of a three-month contract.

Jan Rouven has shipped his big boxes and death-defying contraptions to the Clarion. The out-of-the-way hotel and casino was formerly the Greek Isles, formerly the Wrestling Hall of Fame, formerly the Debbie Reynolds, formerly



the Paddlewheel. It seems like the hotel properties do a musical chairs dance all their own.

With an opening date of July 1, and confidence only a tightrope walker could have, Jan Rouven is excited about performing in his own nightly Las Vegas show. However, this 29-year-old is also well grounded as to how the Vegas game is played. "This is a showcase for me, nothing more. I know the location will be difficult to attract ticket buyers; I certainly don't expect to have thousands of people filling up this room each night," he says with a dry German accent that exudes confidence without being snooty. Rouven says he is well known in Germany but needs to build name recognition in the United States. So why wouldn't a well-known German illusionist simply stay in his own country and be famous? "I needed a new challenge; Germany is a small country — it is limited."

Standing in the theater that Debbie Reynolds originally designed, Jan says "The room has potential. It's a very nice showroom. It just needs the right people." Funny, that's almost exactly what Rick Thomas said about the Luxor and their showroom's previous problems. Maybe this young man from another country has been listening to some of the Vegas veterans? Only time will tell if he has managed to find a winning seat in the game.

And then there is the magician who has jumped chairs several times, each time leaving a fortune in the theater: Steve Wyrick. Hailing from the Lone Star state, Steve arrived in Las Vegas in 1996; a year later he opened



*Sexy Magic* in the former downtown home of *Melinda, the First Lady of Magic*, spending hundreds of thousands of dollars rebuilding the Lady Luck tent/dome theater. Two years later, he had moved on. The next stop was the Sahara in 2000, and another mind-numbing amount was spent as he ripped out the stage that had felt the footsteps of Duke Ellington, Louis Prima, George Burns, Buddy Hackett, Johnny Carson, Barbra Streisand, and many others stars. The ensemble show *World's Greatest Magic* took over the Sahara theater in the fall of 2003, when Wyrick jumped to Planet Hollywood (formerly the Aladdin). Once again, there was an expensive renovation that prepared the upstairs the-

ater to house his mega-illusion show. *Steve Wyrick's Mind-Blowing Magic* played just over a year.

Maybe tired of playing with other people's chairs and following the path of Vegas' most successful and youngest show producer, David Saxe, Steve bought his own spot in the Miracle Mile (formerly the Desert Passage) shopping center connected to the Planet Hollywood Hotel. Reportedly with investors' cash, Wyrick designed and built an impressive theater and nightclub that opened in the spring of 2007. Two-and-a-half years and \$54 million later, he was forced out of his namesake theater and was thought to be out of the game altogether. The Steve Wyrick Theater is now the David Saxe Theater, where audiences can see, among other productions, *Vegas! The Show*, featuring Joseph Gabriel in a variety spot.

Suddenly, the music shifts and Steve Wyrick is back again! The premiere of *Steve Wyrick: Ultra Magician* at the Las Vegas Hilton was pushed back past his long-touted opening date of June 29 because of the finessing of some new illusions. Tickets are now on sale for a July 27 opening.

Steve is not the first to grace the Hilton's famed showroom — home of Elvis Presley at the height of his Vegas tenure — with a big-budget, high-profile magic show. Cruise ship magicians Larry & Rafael took a turn with *Triumph*, which appeared in late 2010 and played a little more than three months. Much like Broadway's *Spider-Man* musical, *Triumph* was always in the tweaking stages of previews, but it never officially opened.

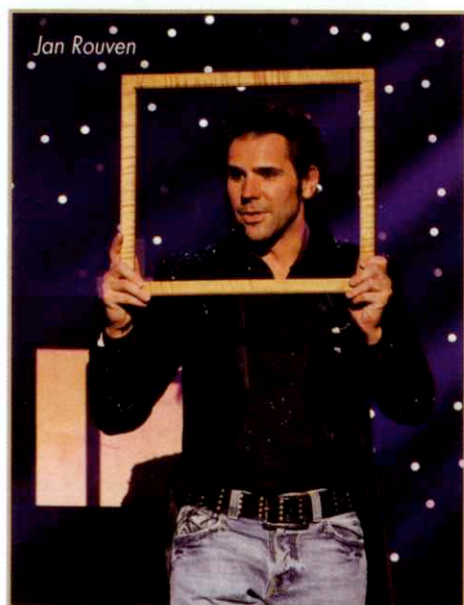
When “the show that never opened” eventually closed, the illusionist stars indicated they were looking for another chair to drop into, but there has been no word.

And the music plays on.

Two words come to mind: “show business,” with the biggest part of that two-word noun being “business.” And business is the name of the song being cranked out as the players do the dance around the chairs. That is what drives them all to play the game. Some play the game very well. Others do not.

Like the merry-go-round fun of playing this game, the party guests (magicians) will all arrive, the music (show business) will play, and the chairs (Las Vegas showrooms) will be lined up as Vegas Magical Musical Chairs is played over and over again. **M**

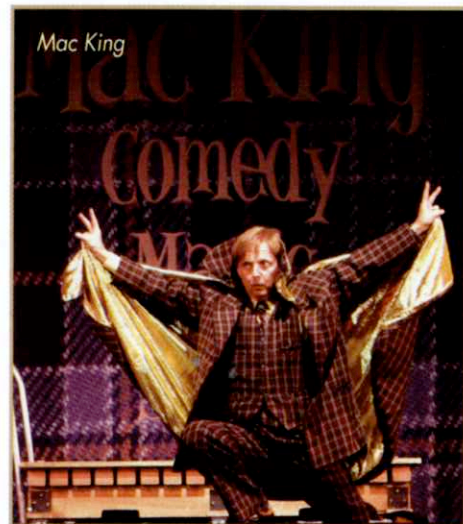
*After more than twenty years of performing in Las Vegas, Steve Daly personally has no desire to play the game — at least, not until the game features couches.*



Jan Rouven



Penn & Teller



Mac King



Nathan Burton