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Nightlife with a Twist

The night is still young when a slight man with silver streaks in his hair quietly drags his personal bed of swords past the blackjack tables and into the Sound Trax Showroom at Palace Station.

"That's our midnight show, Zamora the Torture King," says magician Jeff McBride matter-of-factly, as he stands in front of the showroom welcoming guests to his new nightclub, Wonderground. "He's a faqir, a Middle Eastern holy man who can transcend the human realm. He was on 'Ripley's Believe it or Not.'"

Later in the evening Zamora removes his silk smoking jacket and plunges a sharp skewer through his bicep to the horror and amazement of those in attendance.

"Did you see that!?" asks an excited McBride jumping up from his seat. "That's not an illusion. That's real. Not a drop of blood! It's mind over matter."

As tempting as it may sound, please do not attempt this stunt at home. This is the kind of thing that's best left to the professionals at Wonderground.

Every Friday and Saturday night following McBride's show, Magic at the Edge, the showroom is transformed into a mystical mecca for the weird, wacky and wonderful. Those thirsty for a diversion from the drunken Las Vegas club scene, gather for a magical evening, where velvet ropes and VIP table service give way to sideshow acts, performance art and close-up magic.

Yes, there's cocktail service, a DJ spinning techno music, scantily clad go-go girls and evanescent flashing lights. But there's also a painter putting her brush to a blank easel to create live art, jugglers skillfully traversing the room and balloon twisters blowing life into enormous multicolored, potentially popping sculptures.

While most Las Vegas clubs are specifically designed to help people forget their reality, McBride says Wonderground is built for those who want to remember.

"Our club is an alternative to alternative nightlife," says McBride, an acclaimed magician and director of McBride's Magic and Mystery School in Las Vegas. "We offer enlightened nightlife."

Wonderground, he adds, is a perfect fit for Las Vegas, the magic capital of the world.

"It's like the Magic Castle, but edgier," he says, referring to the famous, invite-only magic club in Hollywood. "It's the Magic Castle without walls, lists or a dress code."



Wonderground patrons couldn't be happier.

"It's about time," says Las Vegas resident James Dimmare, a magician and two-time recipient of the Siegfried & Roy Golden Lion Head award.

"We've gone from proper nightclub shows to Cirque de Las Vegas ... there's nothing in between. This fills the void. And they have pretty lights."

A dynamic man with contagious energy, McBride has been practicing magic since he was 8 years old. With several coveted magic awards and three Guinness World Records, including "greatest one-handed card scale in a minute," he has performed his unique blend of mime, martial arts, intricate mask-work, Kabuki theatre, sleight of hand and grand illusion all over the world. His first magic shows took place in his basement at a cost of 25 cents.

"I've always created spaces since I was a kid for giving people a magical experience," McBride says. "I guess I'm still doing that."

Over at the close-up magic table, a soft spoken and demure George Millward skillfully makes a half dollar disappear with traditional charm and sense of humor.

"Not bad for an old man," jokes the 59-year-old Las Vegas resident as he successfully produces the 10 of spades, seemingly out of nowhere.

"Las Vegas is saturated with stage magic, these grandiose productions," says Millward. "What I do is more intimate and personal, you can relate with the audience more. The opportunity isn't there in most other venues."

McBride totally agrees. "I really believe that the artist that can create the most art with the least amount of stuff, wins," he says. "Less is more in a

town where more is more."

Suddenly attention shifts to the middle of the showroom, where half-man, half-balloon creature Buster Balloon uses a sawed-off leaf blower to inflate a large, pink balloon and envelop himself inside. On his first try, the balloon cocoon of the former "America's Got Talent" contestant pops. On his second try, he is a success.

Afterwards, illusionist Paul Draper leads a patron in the practice of bending a spoon with her mind.

"The most difficult part is not the bending," quips the mentalist. "The most difficult part is not getting kicked out of Palace Station for bending their silverware."

As it turns out, it's not only the strange and unusual acts that stand out at Wonderground. Sleight-of-hand artist and pickpocket master Apollo Robbins says what's really strange and unusual is to see so many friends from the magic community all in one place in Las Vegas.

"This is a chance to see some underground heroes create magic," he says.

Wonderground is also becoming a stomping ground for famous illusionists, like Criss Angel and Lance Burton. Both have attended the club, and were fully accessible to the crowd.

Comedy magician Joe Monti approaches the table with his hand extended. "This is the only trick I know," Monti says, as he transforms his normal-sized pinky into a weird, stumpy looking finger. He is actually being modest (he is the magic producer for Angel's Mindfreak on A&E).

"I grew up with Jeff, and Jeff was the sh-t," Monti says. "He influenced Criss Angel and tons of people. He has an emotional edge to his magic. He connects in an interesting, different way."

McBride sees his role as that of an alchemist, molding people's experiences, the same way a rough stone is carved into a priceless treasure. He believes a magician is a shaman that transports people to a new world where they can see their greater potential and the limitless possibilities of life.

"My job is to remind people that they're all magicians," he explains. "Everybody is a magician with the power to transform themselves and those around them. It's a very empowering thought."

As for those who don't know where to start ...

"We'll put you on the path," he says with a wide, bewitching grin.

-- By Aleza Freeman