

Stage

Man of Many Masks

Magician and piper, Jeff McBride turns Vegas into a wonderland of performance and art

By Jaq Greenspon



Better than Hogwarts: Jeff McBride and a few of the Wonderground Players.

Photo Credit: Anthony Mair

Walking into The Olive, a Mediterranean-style lounge on East Sunset Road, is like stepping through Alice's mirror, and the Wonderground on the other side is more magical than Lewis Carroll's rabbit hole and equally overwhelming. On stage, a pair of belly dancers moves rhythmically, mimicking the twirling smoke of sweet flavored tobacco rising from dozens of hookah pipes. Against a wall, illuminated by a single bulb, an artist paints a half-naked woman into a colorful bird. At a nearby table, a man donning an evil grin and a fedora slides a razorblade into a card box and, with a few shakes of his wrist, surgically removes the pips from a four of diamonds—his spectators' selected card. An experimental film is projected on a blank wall; green fairy lights are scattered across the floor, and at the center of it all is the man of many masks himself, Jeff McBride.

McBride is part White Rabbit, part Mad Hatter and part Alice. He's your guide, your host and part of the audience. Not to mention he's an accomplished performer in his own right—McBride has won multiple awards and is famous for combining magic with the Japanese theater style of Kabuki. An hour before showtime, McBride is making decisions about video screens, greeting early guests and ensuring that his creative team wants for nothing.

A monthly performance art spectacular consisting of magic, variety, dance and more, Wonderground got its start more

than 10 years ago when McBride and company built the Wonderdome, a private venue that also housed monthly events for McBride's Magic & Mystery School. It took about eight years for the "dome" to be supplanted by the "ground," first at Palace Station two years ago and now in its permanent home at The Olive.

But the school was the first place McBride began to see his true purpose materialize. "My profession is empowering people and the more I do it the better I get at it," he says. "As a consultant, as a career coach, as a mentor, as a magic teacher, as a motivational speaker, my job is to help other people achieve their dreams. ... For many people, I'm giving them their first Las Vegas stage." As night's first show nears, McBride is once again in motion. He won't be performing until the final show, but since he's just as much a fan as he is anything else, he makes his way around the room, shaking hands and sharing stories.

For Joseph Stanley and Ted Leon, longtime members of the Vegas magic scene, this camaraderie is part of the appeal. "It reminds me of an old-time magic club," says Stanley, who practices magic as a hobby but was taught by the legendary Michael Skinner, house magician for Steve Wynn at the Golden Nugget. "You know, where we can all get together and talk and do stuff for each other."



Leon, who traveled the world doing a mind-reading act as “The Great Leondo,” agrees. “I love what’s going on here. It’s a beautiful venue to have these conversations.”

There is a palpable energy here, a fostering of talent. A professional magician finishes a trick at one table then walks over to another where he becomes a student. For the uninitiated, these sessions become a chance to see some of the greats performing in a setting where they are free to have fun.

In May, the featured performer was Jimmy Fingers, a comedy magician from Texas. June was different, featuring Paul Vigil (who also performs weekends at King Ink at The Mirage) and July will be different yet again. Every month sees new performers coming in to work alongside the core group of “Wonderground Players.” And everyone brings their best game.

“We don’t want someone who’s working on an act,” says Jordan Wright, the Wonderground manager, who is always looking for something fresh.

Fortunately, originality is not a concern. A lot of the big names in magic are starting to plan their trips to Vegas around the third Thursday of the month—and asking if they can perform. “It’s a place where people want to come and share, regardless that it doesn’t pay; regardless that it’s a lot of other magicians,” Wright says. “It’s the fact you can be part of this experience.”

Indeed, the underlying foundation of Wonderground isn’t a business plan; it’s the experience. “We believe the riches of life are not just financially based,” McBride says. “We’re cultural creatives; we make things happen. If we waited for the casinos to do it, it would never happen.”

And it’s not just magicians who are drawing inspiration from this creative energy. In May, a contortionist and a balloon artist primed the crowd before local slam poet champion Sean Critchfield rocked the room. But this is all planned, it’s part of the Wonderground manifesto: “We want to cultivate imagination and creativity.” Whatever form that takes doesn’t matter as long as things are moving forward.

And they are. “The first few months it was just magicians,” says Wright, who also books the acts, with McBride’s approval. “We don’t want it to just be about magic, we want it to be about performance art. We can have tarot card readers, live painters—we had black light statues back in February—we can get different types of entertainment here.”

McBride himself borrows heavily from dynamic group concepts—from modern-day gatherings such as Burning Man to ancient shamanistic rituals—in his approach to making Wonderground a magical experience. The whole presentation is organic, evolving throughout the evening.

There’s no pressure to ever move from your spot. If you don’t want to go into the anteroom for the parlor show, not to worry, soon enough the experience will find you, from the taste and smells of Mediterranean cuisine to the sounds of DJ Leo Diaz.

Wonderground offers top-notch entertainers for less than the price of a Friday night 3-D film. It’s also streamed live on StreetofCards.tv, a magic-themed website with archived performances and live chat. “We have fans all over the world who come to the nightclub every month,” McBride says. “It’s a personal experience because you get to interact with the entertainers.”

Third Thursdays, 7:30-midnight. Admission is free with a two drink minimum at the door. 3850 E. Sunset Road, 451-8805.