



# Around the World in 50 Years

## WITH A LIGHT BULB... AND A BLOND

**By John Moehring**

Long before there was a Mr. Electric, a Marvyn Roy, and even a Carol, there was a hard-working kid who realized that artistic satisfaction and commercial success with an act often comes to those who dare to be different.

Marvin A. Levy was born on the first day of April in 1925 and, as with many boys growing up in the '30s, first learned of the art from a box of Mysto Magic tricks. Marvin's set was a seventh birthday present from his aunt; however, it would not be until five years later, when his uncle started taking him to PCAM conventions, that the magic world took notice of this new talent.

"Unkie Al" and young Levy attended their first convention in Reno, Nevada in 1937. The following year, in San Jose, California, Marvin entered the youth competition with what he thought was "quite an act." He remembers: "I had three black tables and wore a white suit, and among other things did the '20th Century Silks' with a Mirror Glass. I received two third places and a fourth place."

Of greater significance than the awards was the meeting of Ray Muse, a semi-professional magician from Los Angeles, who would become Marvin's teacher and mentor. "He invited me to his home and asked me to bring a few things. I had a 'Silk Pedestal,' an untying

silk, my '20th Century Silks,' and a 'Phantom Tube,' recently purchased at the convention."

Muse watched the youngster and complimented him on his attraction to silk magic. He then offered a succinct bit of advice that would forever change Marvin's way of thinking about his magic. "Close the catalog... Now open your mind. When you learn to use your imagination, you will become a magician."

Ray Muse enticed the imagination of his 12-year-old student even further. "Just imagine that you are a magical merchant of silk. You come onto the stage as a beggar wearing tattered rags. In your hands you hold an Oriental lamp, your only possession. You rub the lamp as if to polish it. There's a puff of smoke. You're transformed into a Prince of Magic, resplendent in elegant white Persian attire. The lamp vanishes. In your hands is a pearl-colored tube, from which you proceed to fill the stage with a bazaar of colorful silks. One of the silks becomes a cobra. It obeys your commands and dances about..."

Thus, "Marvin, The Magic Silk Merchant" was born. At the '39 PCAM convention in San Francisco, the act won the trophy for "Best Magician Under 21 Years." The following year, it was booked for the Magicians Only Show. In Seattle in 1941, Marvin, who was now 16,



again took the young magician award. And long remembered after the glories of picking up the trophies was the invaluable time spent with Ray Muse.

In 1943, Marvin was inducted into the Army Infantry and was shipped overseas. During an invasion on the bullet-ridden beaches of France, Marvin was shot up. He received the Purple Heart, however, found himself laid-up in an English hospital. While recuperating, he started writing in a little notebook that Ray Muse had encouraged him to keep. Ideas for effects to "produce light bulbs," as well as concepts for entire acts with electrical devices, were recorded.

When discharged from the hospital, he volunteered to go out with an entertainment unit



The award-winning performance of "Marvin, The Magic Silk Merchant" at the 1941 PCAM Convention in Seattle. [Below] Alan Wakeling and Marvyn in 1949 as "The Ringmasters."



Enter longtime friend, Alan Wakeling. Marvyn emphasizes that *anytime* Mr. Roy ever considered a new idea, it was eventually endorsed and/or enhanced by his magical soul mate, the renowned creative genius, Mr. Wakeling.

"Alan and I had worked on acts together before the war. On the day after he got out of the Navy, we decided to put together a team act with a circus theme." They would perform parts in tandem, then have solo segments where each could present his specialties. Alan was creating liquid effects that one day would become part of "The Bar Act." Marvyn was working on tricks to "produce light bulbs."

They staged their little circus extravaganza back in the theater/studio of William Larsen's home, Brookledge, where teen-aged son Milton assisted with rehearsals. He set props, pulled curtains, and cued the records that provided the music. Before "The Ringmasters" became official name, Milt posted his suggestion backstage: "Dancing, Prancing, and Necromancing with Wakeling & Roy."

They searched for a place to break-in the act. A newspaper ad advised of a night club in Hollywood called Gaslights that "Wanted Acts." The venue featured acts between scenes of a melodrama. The Ringmasters visited the club to see how much it paid, and the terms of the "verbal contract" are vividly remembered to this day: "Here's how it works. You get to do your act in front of the oleo curtain. In the melodrama, one of you is the hero, the other

plays the villain. You're here 45 minutes before showtime. There's a lot next door where it costs 50¢ to park. You keep a quarter for each car you park." They made \$5 a night and did it for over a year.

Many elements of the "Artistry in Light" act were developed at Gaslights. "I started by adding tricks with light bulbs to my comedy silk act, 'The Sorcerer's Apprentice.' I'd walk out and produce a lighted bulb. There would be more bulbs, and then I would blow out the last bulb. I'd take out a cigarette, and 'strike' the bulb, as if were a lighter, then use the blinking bulb to light the cigarette. I did a 'Silk in Light Bulb,' vanishing the silk with a Joseph 'Silk Gun.' For a while, there was a self-contained 'Floating Light Bulb.' And early on, the 'Milk in Light Bulb,' used a glass of wine instead of milk."

The potentially dangerous "Lighting of a 300 Watt Bulb" was chosen as the finale for Marvyn's act at Gaslights. For opening night, the dynamic duo had rigged a wire-split, so that the same power used for the "Silk in Light Bulb" would light up Marvyn's hand-held light globe [see "Enlightenment," page 46].

"Well, we'd never done it live... only in rehearsal at Alan's apartment. So, I have to tell you, I was a little nervous." As Mr. Wakeling operated a backstage rheostat, all Mr. Roy had to do was make sure his heels touched the steel plate in the stage floor, and be careful that only the wires in his gloves contacted the metal part of the bulb. "Well, because I was nervous, my hands were perspiring. As the bulb started getting brighter, I was getting a bit of a shock. I had to throw it down on the floor." The trick returned to Marvyn's act after Alan suggested

composed entirely of Purple Heart-decorated talent. The show, called "Laughs, Inc.," they played hospitals and camps on the front, as well as towns and cities in England, Italy, Germany, France, Belgium, and Holland. At this time, Pvt. Levy took on the stage name of Marvin Roy. [The spelling of Marvin with a "y" wouldn't actually be adopted until ten years later, when his name appeared on a French playbill as "Marvyn Roy."]

Upon Marvyn's return to the United States, he attended the University of Southern California, where he majored in dramatic arts, applying much of what he was learning to develop a career as an entertainer. Remembering Ray Muse's sage advice to "do things differently if you want to make a living at it," Marvyn focused on the distinctive ideas in his notebook.



wearing rubber gloves beneath his cotton gloves.

The "Light Bulbs From the Mouth," already in the act, was moved to the last trick. It received a good reaction, yet, when the seven lighted globes were pulled out of his mouth a la "Hindu Needle Trick," he felt it didn't get enough applause to make for a strong closer. Convinced that he needed something that had more punch, Marvyn moved it next to last. "This was when I was developing a new closer, a lighted fountain that was to appear as a total surprise." But the "Fountain Finale" wasn't the answer. When the intricate wiring was completed and the massive Fiberglas structure was filled with water to test the battery-operated pump and lights, it was so heavy it couldn't be lifted or moved.

This led to a re-thinking of the "Bulbs From the Mouth." Marvyn soon realized that anything that followed this strong effect was truly anticlimatic — "Anything except, *more* bulbs!" He went from 7 to 14, then to 20. When that strand of almost two-dozen lighted bulbs was held high, with arms spread wide, it was definitely a finale moment. And, it got the applause he was looking for — at least, for then.

In 1950, as "The Ringmasters" went into their second year at Gaslights, Marvyn received an offer to appear on the bill at the upcoming IBM/SAM Convention in Chicago. "I told Alan I wanted to leave to do it. It was an opportunity to do something different. I suggested that he go, too, but he decided not to."

While Marvyn was in Chicago, at the suggestion of Bill Chaudet, he called Merriel Abbott, a talent buyer who produced shows in the nation's foremost hotels and clubs. An audition was arranged. It went well, and within weeks after he got home, he received his first AGVA contract. "Artistry in Light" was set to open in October in the Empire Room of the Palmer House. After this successful run, Miss Abbott and major theatrical agencies kept Marvyn booked for three solid years. He filled engagements at the Edgewater Beach in Chicago; Statler Hotels in Detroit, Minneapolis, and Cleveland; The Shamrock in Houston; Shoreham in Washington, D.C.; Riverside in Reno, Schroeder in Milwaukee; the Stevens chain; and the Baker Hotel in Dallas.

By 1954, Merriel Abbott wanted the act for an ice revue going into a major showroom. This involved not only learning to skate, but being able to present the electrical act atop frozen water. Marvyn signed up for skating lessons.

That June, he went into a show at the Westward Ho in Phoenix, Arizona. Arriving in town the night before his opening, he went to

watch the last performance of an ice show that was leaving the showroom. The next day, out by the swimming pool, he introduced himself to one of the skaters, a blond rope spinner by the name of Carol Williams. Marvyn praised her on her rope-spinning act, then told her that he was a magician, and "I'm learning to skate so I can put my act on ice."

"Ice would probably be the best place for it," she coolly commented. Fazed not the least, Marvyn asked if she had any contacts for jobs in ice shows. "To get rid of him," claims Carol "I told him to call the producer at the Adolphus Hotel in Dallas, because they used magic acts." The determined Mr. Roy picked up the phone and called Texas. By mid-July, he



"Artistry in Light," circa 1956.

was locked into an eight-week run in a skating show at the Adolphus.

Marvyn's persistence paid off. He signed a longterm contract with Miss Abbott to go into a new revue at the Conrad Hilton in Chicago. It was called *Spurs & Skates*. Marvyn did his act costumed as a Western riverboat gambler, right before Carol Williams appeared as a rhinestoned rodeo rope spinner. Yee, hah! They worked together for six months, however, long before the show shut down, Marvyn had lassoed the affections of Carol.

A year later, they managed to take off enough time to get married. A West Coast wedding took place September 7, 1956 in the Larsen's studio/theater at Brookledge, apparently Marvyn's favorite place for launching team acts.

After a three-night stay in the luxurious Lanai Suite of the Hollywood Roosevelt, Marvyn dashed off to fulfill an engagement at the Shoreham in Washington. Within a month, Carol had wrapped up her rope-spinning obligations in a touring ice show and flew to D.C. to join her husband. She shucked the Western wear in favor of glamorous gowns, she re-staged routines to strengthen the assistant's misdirection, and they rehearsed around the clock. The act, that already had style personified, became even classier. It was now "Artistry in Light with Marvyn Roy & Carol."

They headed for New York City to work the posh Versailles. Their first together-as-act reviews, written by the likes of Walter Winchell, Earl Wilson, and Abel Green of *Variety*, were glowing. The "elegant new team with the lights" was simply "wowing the sophisticated city folks nightly."

But the honeymoon was over...

Merriel Abbott had recommended the act for the most famous night club in the world, the Lido of Paris. Totally unexpected, a cablegram arrived: "Make air-travel arrangements immediately. Lido rehearsals in progress. Show premières December 8, 1956."

The new Lido souvenir program had been printed, and it announced the Continental debut of *Monsieur Electrique*. It would only be a matter of time before the rest of the world would also know the act as Mr. Electric. "It was in this show that everything would fall into place," Marvyn reflects. "Most important, it was in an era when only class acts were being booked in the top night clubs in Europe."

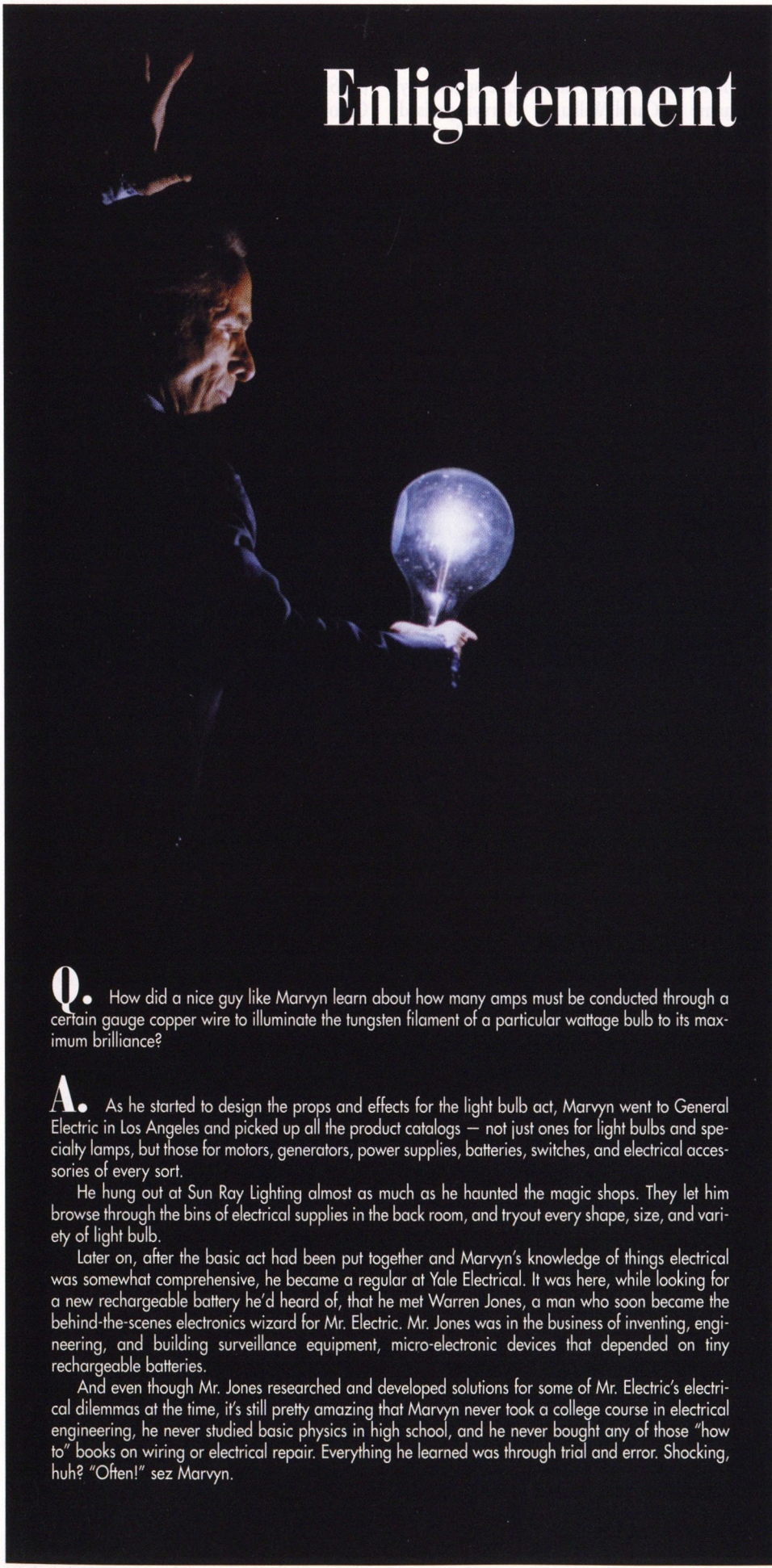
The nightly schedule of the Lido, with its ever-changing international audiences, allowed them to hone to perfection every minute and moment of the act... including their now infamous finale bow.

A week after opening at the Lido, Carol began to notice that when they finished their turn and took their bow, they weren't receiving a tremendous round of applause, as did the other acts. Until then, for the climax of the "Bulbs From the Mouth," Marvyn held up the strand of lighted globes and pretended to blow them out, followed by a stage blackout. "Artistic brilliance, commercial death!" is how Carol later described the ending. When plunged into the dark, the audience didn't applaud or respond. "Any thought of taking a bow was over!"

Carol set out to dramatically alter the finish of the "Bulbs From the Mouth." The tempo of the appearance of the globes was increased, as she pranced the seemingly endless strand across



# Enlightenment



**Q.** How did a nice guy like Marvyn learn about how many amps must be conducted through a certain gauge copper wire to illuminate the tungsten filament of a particular wattage bulb to its maximum brilliance?

**A.** As he started to design the props and effects for the light bulb act, Marvyn went to General Electric in Los Angeles and picked up all the product catalogs — not just ones for light bulbs and specialty lamps, but those for motors, generators, power supplies, batteries, switches, and electrical accessories of every sort.

He hung out at Sun Ray Lighting almost as much as he haunted the magic shops. They let him browse through the bins of electrical supplies in the back room, and tryout every shape, size, and variety of light bulb.

Later on, after the basic act had been put together and Marvyn's knowledge of things electrical was somewhat comprehensive, he became a regular at Yale Electrical. It was here, while looking for a new rechargeable battery he'd heard of, that he met Warren Jones, a man who soon became the behind-the-scenes electronics wizard for Mr. Electric. Mr. Jones was in the business of inventing, engineering, and building surveillance equipment, micro-electronic devices that depended on tiny rechargeable batteries.

And even though Mr. Jones researched and developed solutions for some of Mr. Electric's electrical dilemmas at the time, it's still pretty amazing that Marvyn never took a college course in electrical engineering, he never studied basic physics in high school, and he never bought any of those "how to" books on wiring or electrical repair. Everything he learned was through trial and error. Shocking, huh? "Often!" sez Marvyn.

the entire stage floor. Then, Zap! Stage lights up full brilliance! "Here we stopped! As the French say, 'Et Voila!' ('And there it is!'). Marvyn, with arms out, also just stood still. We looked 'em straight in the eye. It was time to sell." Audiences bought it; they applauded madly.

After a year at the Lido, Marvyn & Carol embarked on a whirlwind tour of leading night clubs of Europe, the Middle East, and Scandinavia. In February 1959, while working at the China Theatre in Stockholm, they got a backstage phone call from France. Plans were being finalized for an edition of the Lido show to debut at the brand-new Stardust in Las Vegas. The producers demanded Mr. Electric be the opening act.

Only a year ago, they had "arrived" on the Continent, as the classy new American import; all of a sudden, they were being exported as the electrifying, "direct from Paris" sensation. This production changed the face of show business in Las Vegas. French extravaganzas would soon be *de rigueur* on The Strip. Within a decade, marquees heralded the arrival of the *Folies Bergere*, *Casino du Paris*, and *Bal du Moulin Rouge*, all spectacular revue shows that utilized the classiest variety, novelty, and magic acts of the world.

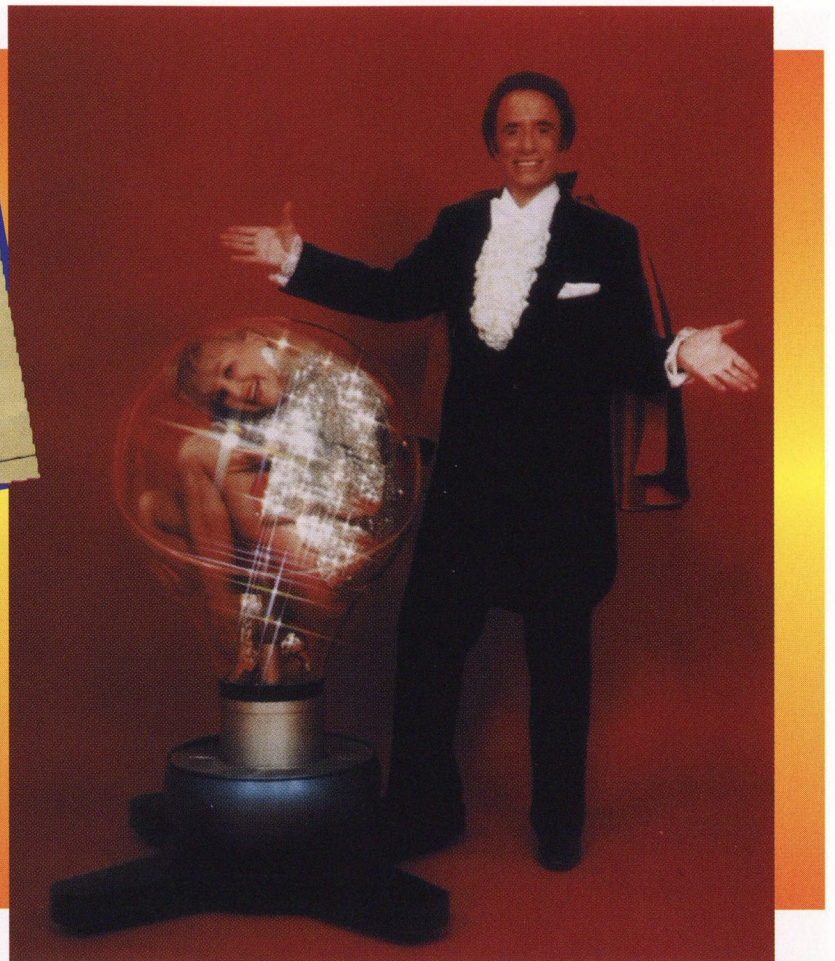
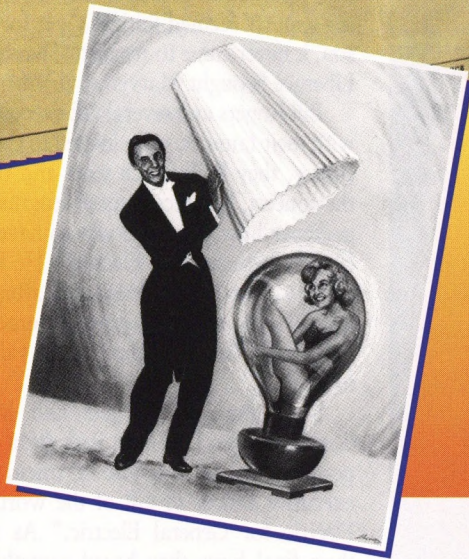
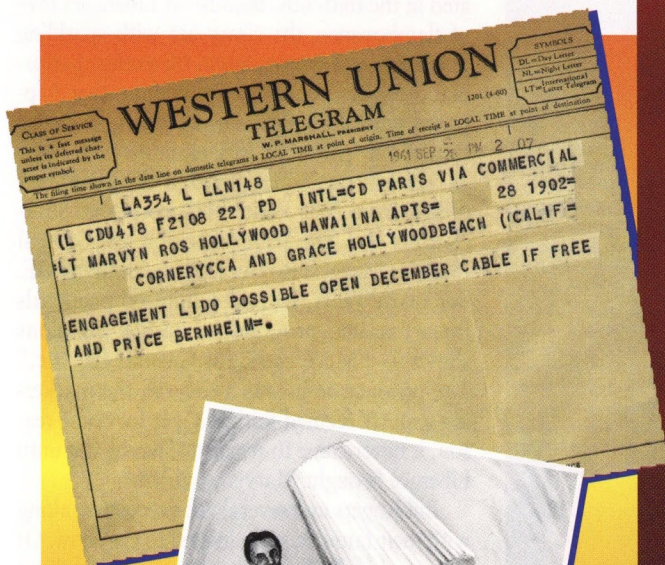
Upon seeing the Lido show, Ed Sullivan was intent on signing "the French magician with the lights" for his TV show. Sullivan's talent consultant, Mark Leddy, came backstage to ask "What kind of money do you want?" Marvyn remembered that a European juggler friend, Eric Brenn, had recently received \$2,500 (at a time when magic acts were paid \$500 to \$800) for an appearance. So without hesitation, Marvyn threw that out as the magic figure. Slightly taken back, Leddy said, "We'll see..."

Because they had pre-signed for the Latin Quarter in New York, they left the Lido show that fall. Marvyn advised Leddy they would soon be in town and available for TV. A telegram came back: "Sullivan agrees to the \$2,500. What Sunday would you like?"

"Everything's Coming Up Roses," the title of a hit song from *Gypsy*, Broadway's 1959 box-office smash, seemed apropos as Marvyn & Carol arrived in The Big Apple. The Sunday afternoon dress rehearsal with Sullivan went fine. But as airtime neared, there came that dreaded knock on the dressing room door. The running time of the show was long. Ed wanted to cut Marvyn's eight-minute spot into two segments. He proposed they shoot the first four minutes that evening, at their agreed upon salary of \$2,500, then have them come back next Sunday to do the last half, and for another \$2,500. Marvyn balked. The act was not structured to be split up. After all, they had one strong closer, not two. Sullivan gave it a second thought. Marvyn got his way.

The novelty of the eight-minute light bulb act registered so well on Sullivan's program,





Concept sketch for the “Girl in the Light Bulb” that turned out to be the “dealmaker” for the return to the Lido in 1962. [Right] The real girl, Carol, still in the bulb some 25 years later. [Below] At the Lido, Carol danced the “Light Bulbs From the Mouth” out to the very edge of the stage.



they were invited back to do the entire act three more times within a year — each time at their unprecedented and now legendary \$2,500 fee.

That summer, Sullivan insisted that Mr. Electric & Carol join the troupe of American variety stars he was taking to the Soviet Union, as part of a cultural exchange program.

In the early '60s, Mr. Electric began a conquest of Great Britain, playing The London

Palladium, The Savoy, and Blackpool's Palace. Then back to America for the popular Christmas show at Radio City Music Hall, and from there into the *Folies Bergere* at the Tropicana in Las Vegas.

Ideas and methods for the “Girl in the Light Bulb” had often appeared in Marvyn's idea notebook. He says it was inspired by Horace Goldin's “Canary in the Light Bulb.” (Desiring

to have a small dog as a pet, Carol once suggested it should be a “Poodle in the Light Bulb.”) Marvyn envisioned the giant-bulb illusion as a new “hook trick” — a miracle that would have audiences and agents abuzz.

He took a step closer to making his dream a reality when he had a concept sketch done. However, he may have been pushing the envelope a bit when he mailed a copy of the drawing — along with a note “New ‘Girl in Light Bulb’ would look great in the show!” — to the Lido booker in Paris. Since it was late September, Marvyn was sure the upcoming show was set, however, it would give them something to think about for next year. A week later, a telegram advised: “Engagement possible. Open December. Cable if free and price.”

Marvyn rushed over to see Carl Owen. The fabrication of the globe posed a problem, but John Daniel, who owned Owen Magic Supreme at the time, suggested a nearby craftsman who built airplane cockpits. He started on the plastic bulb portion, while Carl constructed the base.

While the illusion was being completed, they booked their act into a Las Vegas revue, *Holiday in Rio*, for a month. René Fraday, one of the Lido producers, flew in, hoping to get a “preview” of the new “Girl in Light Bulb” that would soon be in his show. “When René arrived, we had to cover some bases,” Marvyn





*"Mr. Electric for General Electric" in the 1970s and '80s. GE bulbs were magically lighted, then handed out as souvenirs.*

admits. "We told him we were, 'saving it exclusively for the Lido,' thus the reason it wasn't in the act."

There were only a few days to work on a presentation with Alan Wakeling before the illusion had to be air-freighted to France. After excruciating late-night rehearsals and much experimentation with stage lighting on the Lido stage, the "Girl in the Light Bulb" was set. It had become another staple miracle for the Mr. Electric act. In the United States, it was seen on TV on the Milbourne Christopher/Garry Moore *World's Greatest Magicians* special, *Hollywood Palace*, and *The Ed Sullivan Show*.

After the second Lido run, they traveled to South Africa for an extended engagement; they experienced stage successes in Japan, Hong Kong, Australia, New Zealand, and South America; the duo triumphantly returned to the capitals of Europe (including two more runs at the Lido). By the mid '70s, Mr. Electric had

truly played every corner of the globe. Suddenly, they longed to go home.

They were alone in a restaurant at a swanky Italian resort one dreary winter in Alba. "I remember telling Carol that nobody back in America remembered us because we had worked Europe so long." Then and there, they decided to "go back for at least a year."

Marvyn & Carol had hardly unpacked when they got a call from the MGM Grand in Las Vegas. *Hallelujah Hollywood!* producer Donn Arden wanted them to go into the show immediately. In addition, they became the opening act for Dean Martin. Then Liberace called.

They signed to tour the United States and Canada with the Liberace show, which turned out to be a most rewarding seven years of appearances. In addition to the Mr. Electric act, they had the opportunity to present "The Magical Jeweler," an act that Marvyn had cre-

ated in the mid-'60s. Because of Liberace's love of flamboyance, the classy act with sparkling diamonds and jewelry found the perfect performance niche. Yet, it was something that happened with the light bulb act that provided a turn of events for Mr. Electric in America.

The Liberace tour opened in Cleveland, not too far from Nela Park, Ohio, corporate headquarters for the Lamp Division of General Electric. Marvyn Roy was no stranger to GE. For many years, he had submitted proposals for a master program of public relations shows — "Mr. Electric for General Electric." The product tie-in was a natural, the marketing aspects seemed limitless, yet for some reason, it never came to fruition. That is, not until Liberace brought Marvyn to town.

Bill Rogers and several GE executives, along with their families, were invited to the show. Of course, they had choice seats and throughout the concert, Liberace went to lengths to tell the audience how proud he was to have "General Electric here for Mr. Electric." He invited the party back to the dressing room after the show, where, amidst the toasting, Liberace said, "I believe Mr. Electric could be of value to you folks."

Sometime later, Rogers had Marvyn & Carol come back to Nela Park for a 45-minute performance to convince a (then) top chief executive officer of GE of the worth of "Mr. Electric for General Electric." As they took their final bow, they heard something they'd much rather hear than applause. The C.E.O.







[Above and lower left] The act often played in the round during the seven years touring with the *Liberace* show.

stood and said, "I assume we have him under contract!" The promotional-performance agreement continued well into the '80s. And countless are the GE bulbs that Mr. Electric has magically illuminated, then handed to amazed audiences as souvenirs. Miracles "to go" — that's different.

It's been five decades since Marvyn first imagined how formidable it would be to illuminate an ordinary light bulb, something everybody had at home, with his bare hands. He took the effect from the tiny stage of *Gaslights* to the prestigious floor of the Lido in Paris (ironically the "City of Light"), where it became more than the just a "hook trick" for a class act. It generated a tagline — "The Man who Lights a 1,000 Watt Light Bulb with His Bare Hand" — a powerful statement that had boundless parameters for the promotion of Mr. Electric's miracle making.

"The 1,000 Watt," as Marvyn refers to it, comes full circle in a recent performance of the '90s. The Roys had settled — not retired! — in beautiful Palm Springs, California in January of 1997. During the summers, they were enjoying performing at magic conventions across the country; from November through May of 1997 and 1998, they were starring in *The Fabulous Palm Springs Follies*, where on one particular night, Mr. Electric was literally hot!

Backstage there was a distinct smell of

smoke. One performer asked if there was a fire extinguisher around. Another said don't panic, just dial 911. The stage manager yelled, "It's his shirt that's smoking!" Three costumed chorines pushed Mr. Electric to the floor and pummeled him with feather boas. "Now you've done it!" shouted one of the acts. "The smoke's coming outta his pants!" No flames were visible, but the costume was smoldering. Luckily, Mr. Electric made a "disconnect" seconds before he was doused with a champagne bucket full of ice water.

"It's not funny to think about the number of times over the years that I've been burned by 'The 1,000 Watt.'" But Marvyn had to laugh, when Carol reminded how *Follies* producer Riff Markowitz capitalized on the incident. After the show, when he stepped out for the traditional curtain calls, he brought back Mr. Electric — not as "The Man Who Lights a 1,000 Watt Bulb With His Bare Hand," instead as "The Man Who Sets Himself and His Butt on Fire Nightly."

No wonder the Mr. Electric act hasn't been ripped-off, copied, and cloned. It's too damn dangerous. It takes a daredevil to be that different.

"It hasn't been stolen because it's too much trouble," says Marvyn. "The act takes all day to set-up, it requires constant repair and maintenance, and there's *always* the chance of things shorting-out the moment you step on stage." The Mr. Electric act was extremely expensive to develop. It's doubtful, even if anybody could afford the act, they would ever go to the enormous effort to practice, rehearse, and then haul it all over the world to perform it.

What began over a half-century ago, with a simple notebook entry "produce light bulbs," evolved to the most innovative themed magic act of the 20th century. And Marvyn's simplistic statement of the accomplishments and achievements of Mr. Electric, "Around the world in 50 years with a light bulb... and a blond," expresses a milestone that is genuine gold. ♦



Ultimate Mr. Electric — "Lighting a 5,000 Watt Lighthouse Lamp with His Bare Hands."