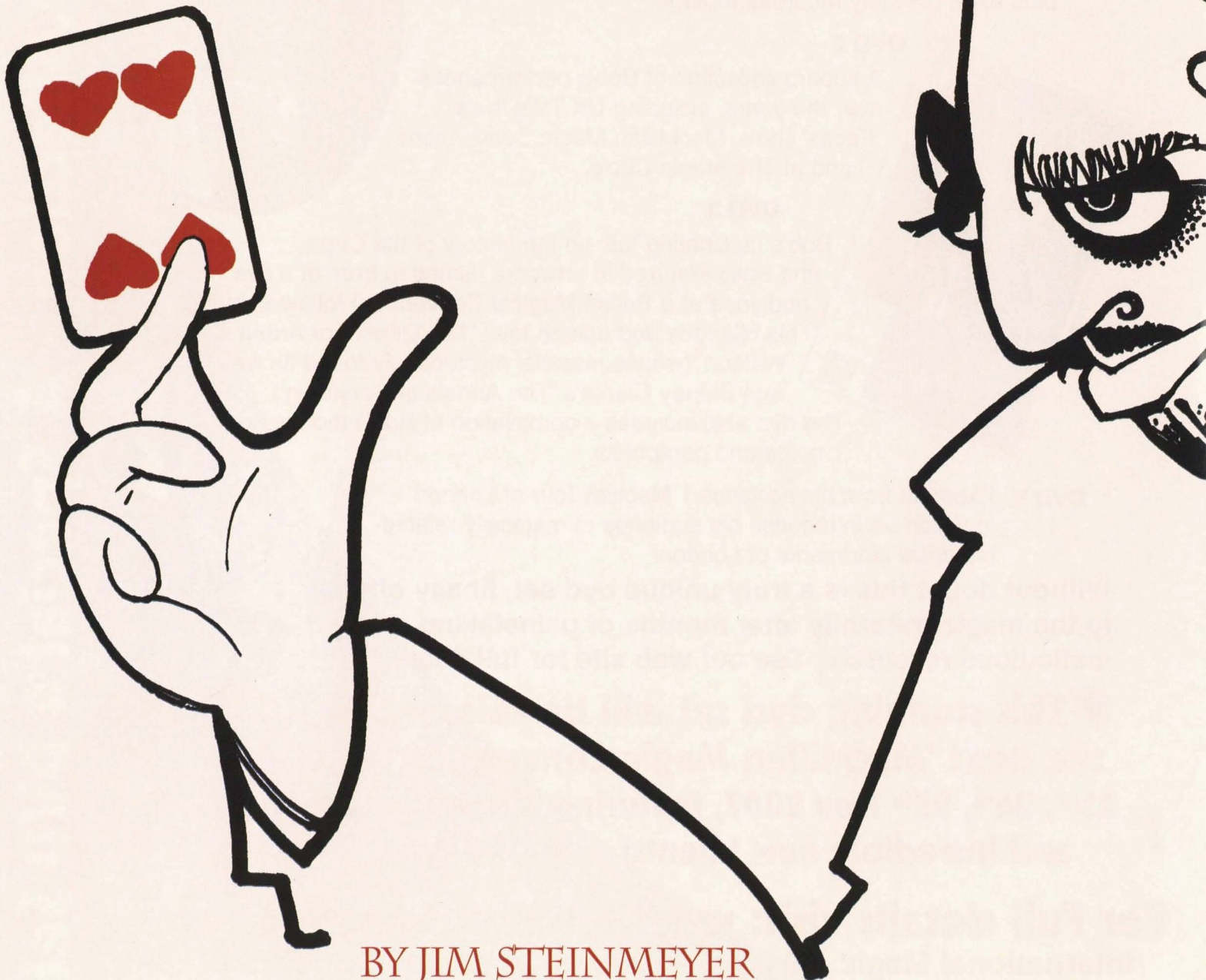
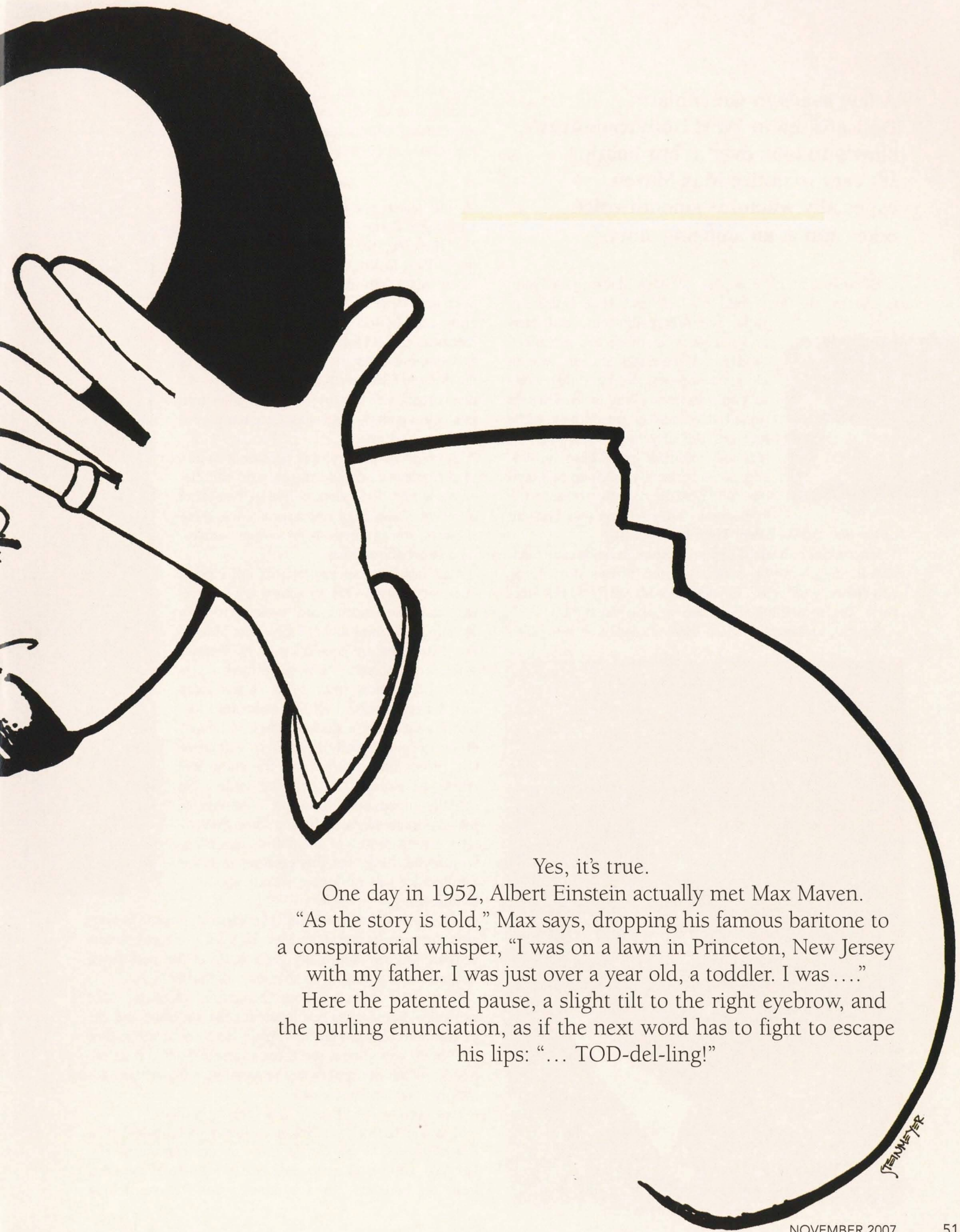


MAX MAVEN

AND THE EVOLUTION OF
A MINDREADER



BY JIM STEINMEYER



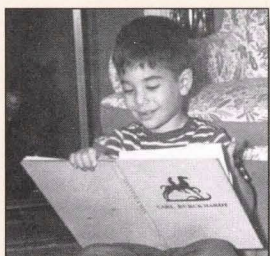
Yes, it's true.

One day in 1952, Albert Einstein actually met Max Maven. "As the story is told," Max says, dropping his famous baritone to a conspiratorial whisper, "I was on a lawn in Princeton, New Jersey with my father. I was just over a year old, a toddler. I was ..."

Here the patented pause, a slight tilt to the right eyebrow, and the purling enunciation, as if the next word has to fight to escape his lips: "... TOD-del-ling!"

A few heads in Greenblatt's Delicatessen in West Hollywood turn slowly to look over at our booth. It's easy to notice Max Maven, especially when his smooth voice takes aim at an amusing story.

Of course, in 1952 he was not Max Maven, just Philip Goldstein, the first child of Jack and Nita Goldstein.



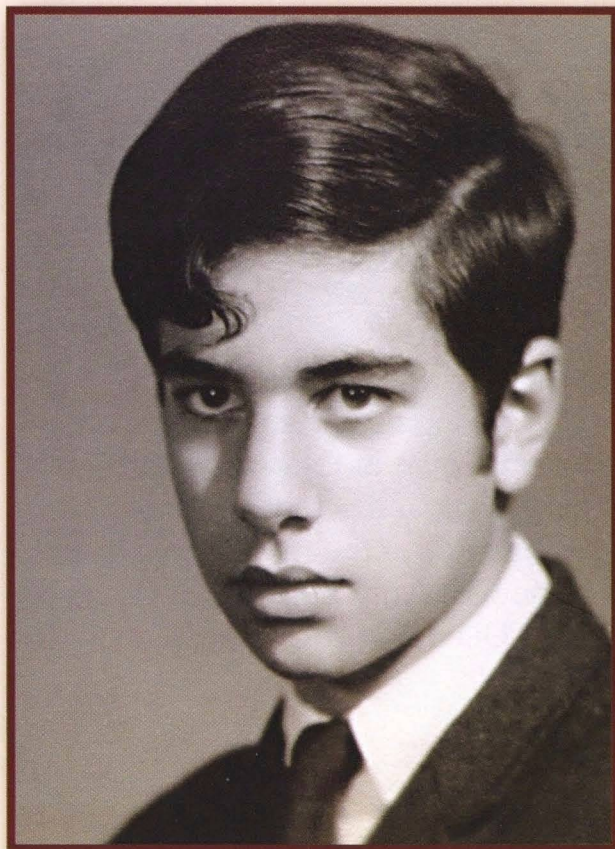
Bibliophile, age 3

Jack, like Albert Einstein, was busy at Princeton's Institute for Advanced Studies. A battered station wagon chugged along the street and then came to a stop in front of the lawn. Einstein poked his head of uncombed white hair out the driver's window; he was famously childlike in his observations, and not surprisingly, stopped to watch the cute little boy stomp through the high grass. "They tell me that Einstein

called out, 'Hallo, baby!' Then he drove on."

Max smiles and lets it sink in. Although he doesn't mention it, there are two curious aspects of this story. First, you can only tell it as, "Einstein met Maven," and not vice-versa. Yes, something about that sounds just right.

Second, technically, when Einstein spoke to him, Max



High School, end of 1966

had nothing to say in response. Even if understandable (he was barely a year old) ... astonishing! Max must still be frustrated by the missed opportunity.

In his latest one-man show, *Max Maven Thinking in Person: An Evening of Knowing and Not Knowing*, the mindreader manages to quote Paul Erdős, the Hungarian mathematician, Macedonio Fernández, the Argentine poet, and Alexander Woollcott, the New York critic and Round Table habitué; Max also discusses the achievements of Pablo Picasso and demonstrates the stylized *mie* poses of the Kabuki Theatre. But even Einstein—his near brush with history—barely makes into this eclectic stew, Max's latest contemplative work on mystery.

"It might surprise people because it's a mix of mentalism and monologue, and the elements at first don't seem to fit together," Max observes. "Instead, I am approaching these subjects, my interests, from oblique angles. It's a show about ideas."

Max has been specializing in full length, one-man shows—his programs of mentalism, card clairvoyance, and eyeless vision—for almost as long as he's been Max Maven. But "Thinking in Person" was, by design, something different. "I've performed a version of this show since 1988. A few years ago, I deconstructed all the elements of it, like taking apart a pocket watch. I looked at every piece, and decided to eliminate any pieces that didn't move the show forward—to sweep them off the table." He actually ended up cutting out a number of his favorite routines, including some particularly strong pieces of mentalism, realizing, with some irony, that this evening with the mindreader was no longer strictly about ... mindreading.

"I really like the new show," Max's friend, Eugene Burger, says. "Less tricks and more Max. He's not just a guy smarter than you are. You really get a sense of the performer, revelations of a person. In that way, it's daring."

"The show is really about the last 30 seconds," Max explains. "But it takes two hours for the audience and me to get there." It's not fair to explain his twist at the end of the show; you should see it for yourself. Suffice it to say that it's all about mystery and perception, and, as Max says simply, "making people care."

He's been making people care for a long time.

"I was a fan of Max Maven before I met him," Lance Burton recalls. "I saw him perform at a convention in the late '70s, and I later performed one of his mental routines, from his booklets, for a summer when I worked at a

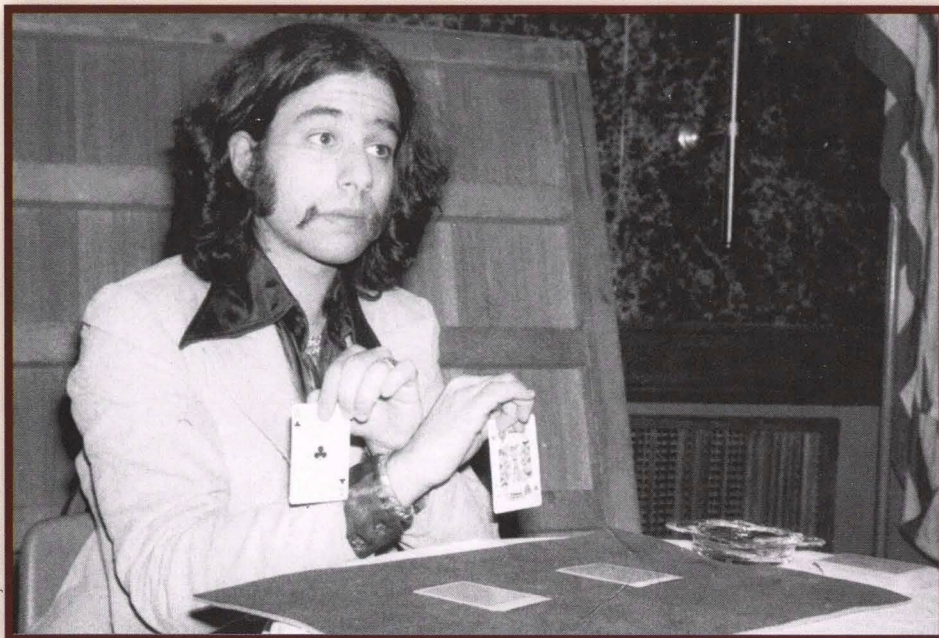


theme park. Later, when I moved to Los Angeles, he was a neighbor in the apartment building in Hollywood, a good friend and an influence on my act. You know, most magicians consider him an expert in mentalism. That's what he performs onstage," Lance explains. "That's not right. He's a brilliant magician. He's interested in all forms of magic, creative in all forms."

Mac King agrees. "Oh, his fingerprints are all over my act," he says. "Tricks, lines, suggestions. With people he likes, or people he sees as having potential, he's extremely generous. Or maybe" Mac stops to think about Max's precise formula, and then laughs. "Well, maybe he's given individual ideas to a lot of people, and if you use the idea, he continues with more suggestions. Maybe he didn't pick me. Maybe I was just smart enough to keep listening."

Philip Thorner Goldstein was born in Ithaca, New York on December 21, 1950. "It's the shortest day of the year," he explains. "The day with the most darkness." Ithaca. Cornell. His parents were both academics. His father, Jack, was an astrophysicist. His mother, Nita, was working on an advanced degree in Chinese Art. Later the family welcomed two younger daughters, Sara and Naomi, both of whom eventually went on to academic careers.

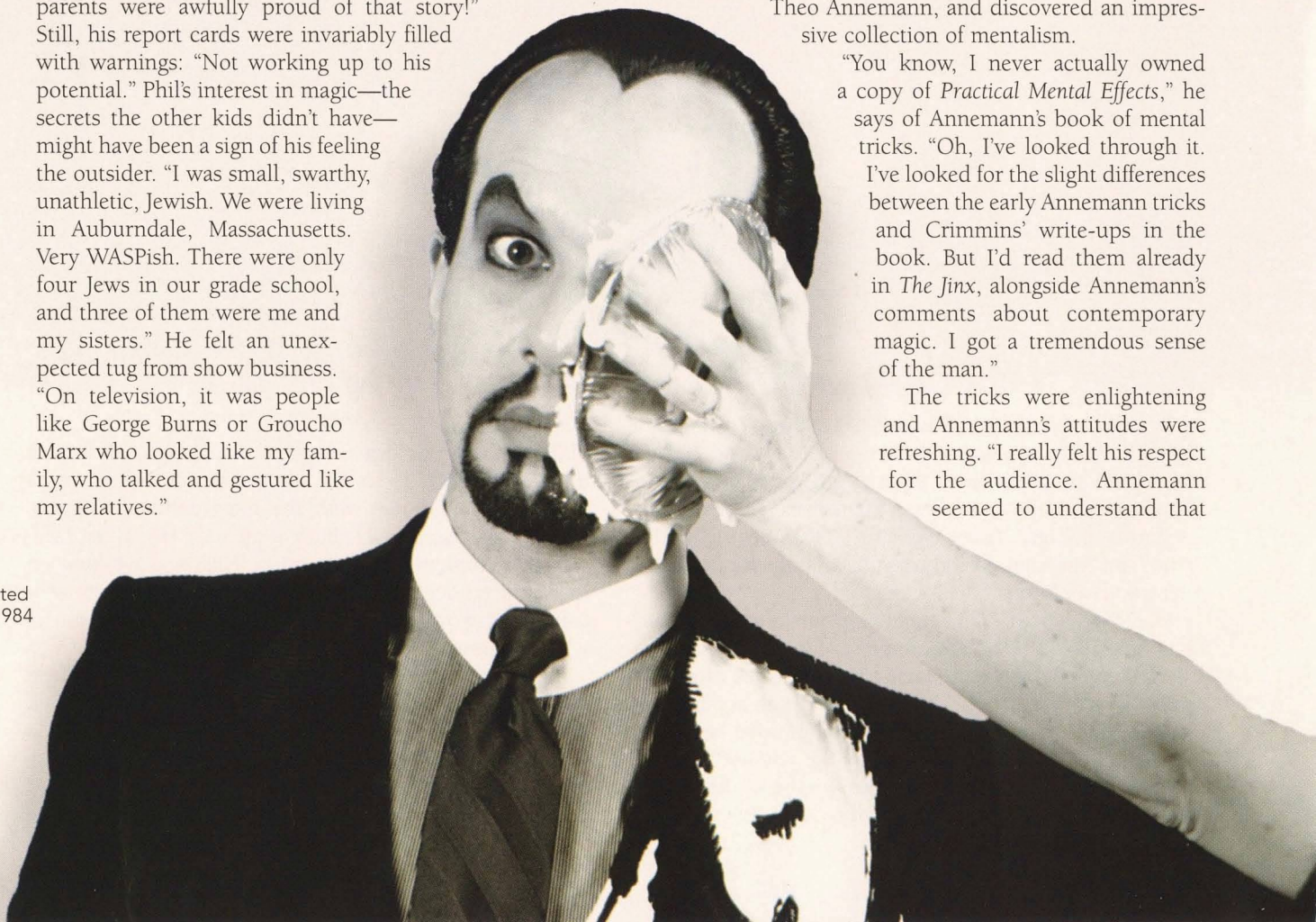
Like many academic families, the Goldsteins moved several times, finally settling outside of Boston, where Jack taught at Brandeis University. Young Philip developed a precocious talent for music, especially piano, and discovered magic when he was seven years old. He was also a curious, if sometimes erratic student. "In third grade, we



Age 22

took a mathematics test, before which we were told that the problems got progressively harder, so we should start at the beginning and work through as many as possible. When the papers were graded, the teacher was surprised to discover that I hadn't answered the first few questions. Asked why, I explained that I'd started at the back of the test. I told her that it seemed to me that I should tackle the harder questions while I was still fresh. My parents were awfully proud of that story! Still, his report cards were invariably filled with warnings: "Not working up to his potential." Phil's interest in magic—the secrets the other kids didn't have—might have been a sign of his feeling the outsider. "I was small, swarthy, unathletic, Jewish. We were living in Auburndale, Massachusetts. Very WASPish. There were only four Jews in our grade school, and three of them were me and my sisters." He felt an unexpected tug from show business. "On television, it was people like George Burns or Groucho Marx who looked like my family, who talked and gestured like my relatives."

Sophisticated
Comedy, 1984



The Goldsteins were supportive of Phil's hobby in an egalitarian way. "I wasn't one of those kids who were given money to buy things at the magic shop. My parents felt, 'It's your hobby. You pay for it.'" The old Holden's shop in Boston was being run by Ronnie Gann, and after paying for the streetcar downtown, Phil's cash was limited. He discovered a box of used magazines. "Ten cents apiece! *Abras* were five cents!" He devoured the magazines, beginning a love of magic literature and magic periodicals, specifically.

"The difference between a book and a magazine is the difference between a painting and a snapshot," Max explains. "I still remember the magic books of my youth. Wilfred Jonson's *Magic Tricks and Card Tricks* was the first book

I owned. Bruce Elliott's *Classic Secrets of Magic* just tore the top of my head off, and that material still stands up today. But a book is polished, finished. It sums up the period. A magazine tells you about that moment. It's thrilling to read, because it puts things in context, in a time frame."

He pawed through the magazine box at Holden's. To him, it was not the "booby prize" for impoverished magicians, but a treasure trove. In *The Jinx*, he met Theo Annemann, and discovered an impressive collection of mentalism.

"You know, I never actually owned a copy of *Practical Mental Effects*," he says of Annemann's book of mental tricks. "Oh, I've looked through it. I've looked for the slight differences between the early Annemann tricks and Crimmins' write-ups in the book. But I'd read them already in *The Jinx*, alongside Annemann's comments about contemporary magic. I got a tremendous sense of the man."

The tricks were enlightening and Annemann's attitudes were refreshing. "I really felt his respect for the audience. Annemann seemed to understand that

what makes magic work is not people's stupidity, but how you guide their intelligence. The work of a mentalist is in understanding what the audience is experiencing."

"I've often felt that I've spent much of my life having conversations with dead people," is how he explains his careful interpretation of magic literature. "To me, Annemann was a valuable teacher, but he was of even more value when I started disagreeing with him." Despite his study of Annemann's material, young Phil, analytical and rational, understood that he was too young to perform mentalism. He concentrated on more standard magic tricks: The Egg Bag, Milk Pitcher, Afghan Bands Billiard Balls, and so on.

In 1969, after his first year of college, Max attended Woodstock. He was living in the moment. "I still have the mud-stained ticket," he says. "Because, of course, no one actually bothered to take your ticket. There were 500,000 of us there." As a musician, the performances he witnessed were remarkable. "I was there listening to the music, not at the orgies in the woods!" He experienced, stunned, Jimi Hendrix's unexpected electric guitar version of the "Star Spangled Banner." "You have to remember that we were the counterculture, denied anything patriotic, any flag waving. Patriotism was the property of the establishment. Then, with this single brilliant, political, artistic performance, Hendrix allowed us to take the flag back. This is ours! We don't have to let them claim it!"

It was a unique example of idealism in performance. "The difference between that generation and the current generation is the ever-increasing need for instant gratification. There's no long-term view of society or creativity. Expecting instant gratification distances you from the creative process," he explains. "Several times, I've been asked if I have any advice for young magicians. And my answer is always the same: 'Slow down!' Expertise can't be instantly attained. It's a process. Our culture is now predicated on the false premise that things like experience and understanding happen immediately. They don't."

When he had started at Brandeis University in 1968—the school where his father taught—he was an active part of the counterculture. "I tried everything ... it was the times. One day I was walking across the campus. At that time I had *really* long hair and a beard in six parts. I was wearing a red cut-glass earring, a green dashiki over a purple shirt, striped bell-bottom trousers with a bandana tied around my knee. One of the university's board of directors strode over to me and put his nose right in my face. 'You are everything that's wrong with this university!'"

In fact, Phil had mastered the style, but wasn't a comfortable fit at Brandeis. He chose to major in American Civilization because he could construct his own curriculum from subjects that interested him: art, film, literature. He minored in Childhood Education—young children from preschool to first grade—and considered becoming a teacher.

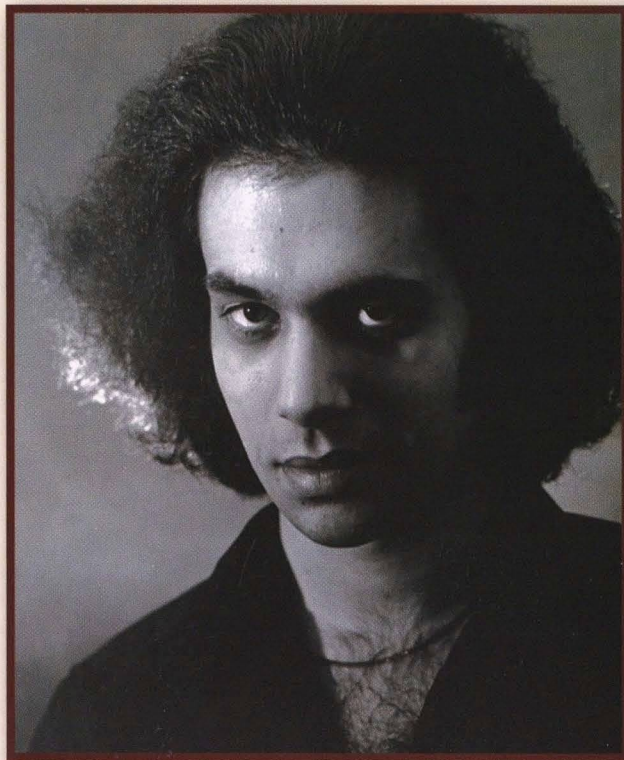
"He would have been a great teacher. He's a born educator," according to Jennifer Sils, Mac King's wife and a longtime friend of Max's. Jennifer has worked as a licensed

marriage and family therapist. "I don't talk to Max about magic, so I've always seen another side to him. He has terrific patience with kids, and knows exactly how to speak to them. My daughter holds him in thrall."

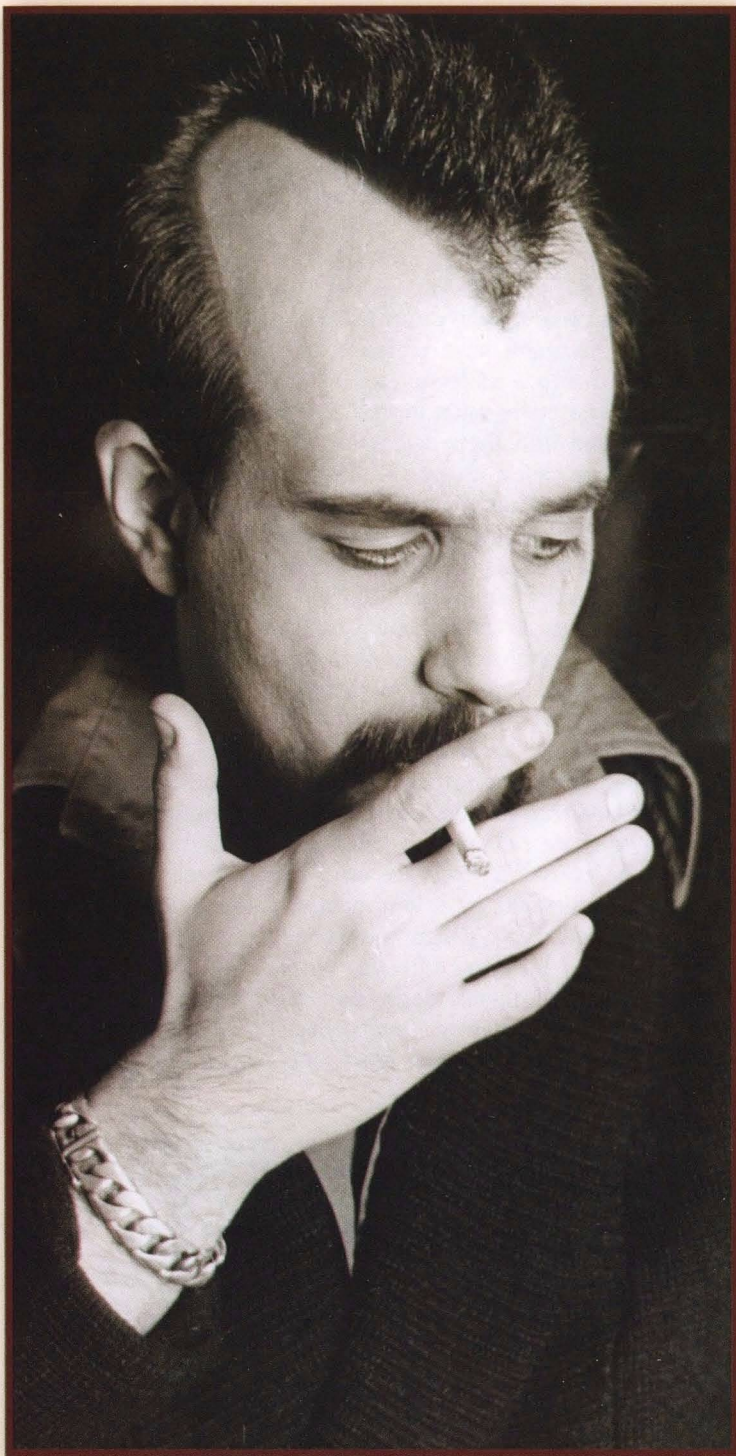
Max now realizes that he wasn't ready for college, and that led to some struggles at Brandeis. "I was too young, too psychologically unstable." But during the Vietnam War, there were different priorities. He entered college earlier than he might have preferred in order to obtain a draft deferment. "I really suffered those first years." As Phil settled into college life, he realized that his discomfort had settled into deep depression. After graduating, he was quickly called up by the local draft board, and went in for his physical. An army therapist diagnosed him as unsuitable for the military. "I remember sitting on a wooden bench with another draftee; we were both being evaluated. A soldier handed each of us a folder. The other fellow opened his file and proudly exclaimed. 'Hey! I'm a Borderline Schizophrenic!' I looked at my file and told him, 'I'm a Chronic Depressive.' We shook hands and went our separate ways."

He was once told that it was clear that his mind "works on more conscious tracks than most people." For example, he has synesthesia—a neurological condition that combines separate elements or sensations. Max tends to instantly see everything in place on a color wheel. The sensation may actually be a key to his creative process, but when he was a young man, these conflicting elements convinced him that he was different.

The diagnosis of clinical depression was a sign of his jumbled, confused identity after college. "I did some graphics, the occasional magic show, and played lounge



Shortly before the transformation...



... shortly after the transformation

piano or fronted a soul band. I didn't really know what I wanted. I was very harsh on myself. I was" Another thoughtful pause. "Vagabondish."

Magic gave him some pleasure. "Although I realized that magic would always be a part of my life, I didn't consider a career as a professional magician. For years I had imagined myself with a job in advertising, or graphic design. Something behind a desk." He was able to postpone his career decisions when he met Hank Lee, just at the time that Hank was considering opening his own magic emporium in near Boston. Phil Goldstein agreed to be part of the operation.

"The famous factory was actually run out of a basement of a house in Medford," he explains. "Hank was a solid businessman and was willing to keep pushing, to exceed his grasp." Phil Goldstein was a demonstrator on the first day that Hank Lee's Magic Factory opened. Phil took charge of finding new tricks for Hank to market (including many of his own effects), he wrote the wry advertising and drew the illustrations, including the bemused caricature of the owner that soon became synonymous with the business. "Hank was the second or third magic dealer to computerize his inventory. And he offered the best mail order service in magic. Period. He built up customer loyalty very quickly."

"At conventions, Hank used to take a double booth. We'd work simultaneously, all day long. I tended to take the card tricks or mental material. Hank did the stage stuff or kid's tricks. There was always a crowd around the booth and lots of excitement." At Tannen's Jubilees, the respected magic dealer, Lou Tannen, took a special fancy to these aggressive young men. As he'd saunter by the booth, he would call out to them. "There they are" Lou would exclaim with a broad smile, "the *demonstrators!*"

He was busy, but no happier. One night when Phil was at a party with some faculty friends, one took him aside and said that he looked like hell. Phil found himself explaining his feelings and heard himself concluding, "I don't think I'm getting the hang of being a human being." The friend recommended several good therapists. That was the right suggestion at the right time. Phil spent the next three and a half years in therapy, twice a week. "It was important to me, and made a big difference in my life. The therapist did very little talking. He led me through the sessions, kept me on track, allowing me to assess my idiosyncrasies, thereby building my self-confidence." During those years—as a sign of that renewed self-confidence—Phil decided to re-invent himself as a professional entertainer.

"Re-invent" was the key word. "This was the time that rock bands had stopped wearing sharp suits or coordinated wardrobe, and began wearing their street clothes onstage. You know, T-shirts and jeans. And I never liked that. I always thought there should be a theatricality to the performance." He had admired the appearance of mentalists Annemann or Dunninger, who had distinct styles. Both had sharp widow's peaks, giving them an exotic look onstage. At one point, he read—again, a sign of his fascination with magic journals—that Annemann actually shaved his full, square hairline into a widow's peak. It was a revelation to him that Annemann's appearance had also been an important part of the deception. The information seemed to give Phil license to do the same thing.

With his reclaimed self-confidence and discoveries, Phil realized that becoming a performer was an option to him. He considered a career in music, but realized he could never be more than a good musician. He suspected that he might be a great mentalist.

Phil discussed his decision with his father. "He listened

carefully, and told me that he understood show business was a difficult lifestyle. I should set myself a time limit, like 18 months, and see if I could make it work. If I failed, I'd still be young enough to go into another field," Max says. "I said, 'Yes, Dad,' but I didn't mean it. I realized that I'd rather fail at show business than succeed at anything else."

In later years, he reminded his father about their conversation. "He had forgotten it, but he was shocked, and apologized. He thought he should have been more supportive. I told him that he was exactly right to warn me. And I was exactly right to say, 'Yes, Dad,' and not mean it."

He picked the name Max Maven because he felt Phil Goldstein was "like John Smith, only Jewish." He knew it wasn't memorable. "People would remember me as Paul Greenberg or something like that. Besides, the name Goldstein only went back three generations in my family. It was a name adopted by my great-grandfather when he was escaping Russia. So there was no great family tradition to be upheld." Max was crisp, dynamic name that had fallen out of fashion. Phil thought that the "x" was sharp and distinctive. Maven, of course, is a Yiddish word for a wise expert or a know-it-all; the name contains many clues to Max's identity and background.

And then he followed with the extreme, theatrical grooming: a deep widow's peak, burnished black hair, sharp eyebrows and dark eye shadow, a Mephistophelean goatee, and a pierced ear. He looked like Ming the Merciless from the old Flash Gordon comics. "No one looked like that at the time," he remembers. "And people told me I was crazy to do it. I'd lose work because of it.

Probably, over the years, I have lost some work because of it. In fact, I *know* I have."

But Max knew, instinctively, that it was right. "It was right for me. It was about claiming one's differences. You know, that old saying, 'If you can't hide it, paint it red!' If my show was about exploring dreams and fantasies, then I felt I ought to start with my own." His fantastic appearance was a deliberate manifestation of his talents. "I am the first effect in my show."

At his first week working at The Magic Castle, early in 1977, he performed in the Close-Up Room. Not mentalism, but his own handling of Larry West's "1, 2, 3, 4 Card Trick," an elaborate Ambitious Card routine, and the Endless Chain. As for the Endless Chain—not what you'd expect Max Maven to perform—"that was actually an early favorite of mine." In fact, after a 1975 Dai Vernon lecture in Boston, Walter Gibson pushed Max forward and said, "Hey, Dai, this kid does the best Endless Chain routine I've ever seen!" Max had no choice but to perform it, sweaty palmed, for The Professor, who was nice enough to compliment it.

His close-up act at The Castle made quite an impression. "It was all solid material for me, and on Sunday night two bartenders came in to watch the show. This caused a stir, because the bartenders never came in to see shows, but they explained that they'd never heard so much applause coming from that room. They were wondering what I was doing." Max had analyzed it. He had engineered 21 applause cues in his 18-minute act. At The Castle, he was thrilled to meet Dai Vernon again, who complimented his



Performing a séance for an HBO Special, 1978. To Max's left is the show's host, Bill Bixby.



Flanked by nephews, 1989

act succinctly: "That was excellent, you made everything clear." Max still considers it high praise.

"I saw Max at Abbott's Get-Together in 1978," Mac King says. "He was in the close-up show, doing card tricks." Max was energetic, commanding, and exuding self-confidence about his magic. He was also exotically urban, especially in Colon, Michigan. "His appearance!" Mac remembers. "He was wearing a three-piece suit without a shirt. You know, if the tricks weren't so good, his appearance probably would have made it ridiculous. He was walking a fine line. But the material was devastating. Every trick was fantastic. I was sitting with my pal Lance Burton in the bleachers. We just looked at each other and shrugged. We didn't have a clue what he was doing."

Once in the mid-70s, when he was in New York to do a lecture, Max dropped into Al Flosso's shop. Al was behind the counter, engaged in conversation with a tall,



With the Professor, circa 1990

elderly bearded man. Max started browsing the books. As he turned away, he recognized the tall man's voice. It was Dunninger. "No, I didn't say hello," he says. "I couldn't figure out why he should want to meet me, the justification. I guess all I could have said was, 'Gee, Mr. Dunninger, I'm a mentalist, too'." Unlike his encounter with Einstein, Max could have started a conversation, and probably a great conversation, but a sense of old-world propriety kept him on the far side of Flosso's shop. "Dunninger gathered his things a few minutes later, and walked out the door."



First national television appearance, the Merv Griffin Show, 1977.
Left to right, Oleg Cassini, Max, Merv, and Zsa Zsa Gabor.

Surprisingly, Max had never seen a mentalist perform live, in person, when he decided to become one. "There was virtually no market for mentalism at the time," he recalls. "But there was an interesting thing happening in the college market: universities had decided to have student groups book the performers. And this opened up the market." Gil Eagles, Kreskin, and a bunch of hypnotists found success in the new college circuit.

It was now good to be young, hip, edgy, and unusual, and Max worked the college market. But he'd really longed to be working nightclubs. Fortunately, he was able to crack the Playboy Club chain, just as it was waning, and worked regularly at four of their venues. His success there, plus his initial appearances on national television, allowed him to start as a headliner at the new comedy clubs that were springing up around the country. This became his primary

employment for the next 13 years. Part of his success was due to the fact that he used to change his show every night, adding new pieces, inviting the audience back to see what he would do in the next night's show. They came back, and brought their friends. He built up a "frighteningly large" repertoire of material.

Max moved to Los Angeles in October, 1978. His joke is (pointing to his devilish features), "Hollywood is the only city in which I look normal." In fact, he fit in nicely at The Castle. "I hung out with Vernon a lot. Unlike a lot of the young magicians who spent time with him, I wasn't particularly interested in where to put my little finger during a move, so we talked about other subjects."

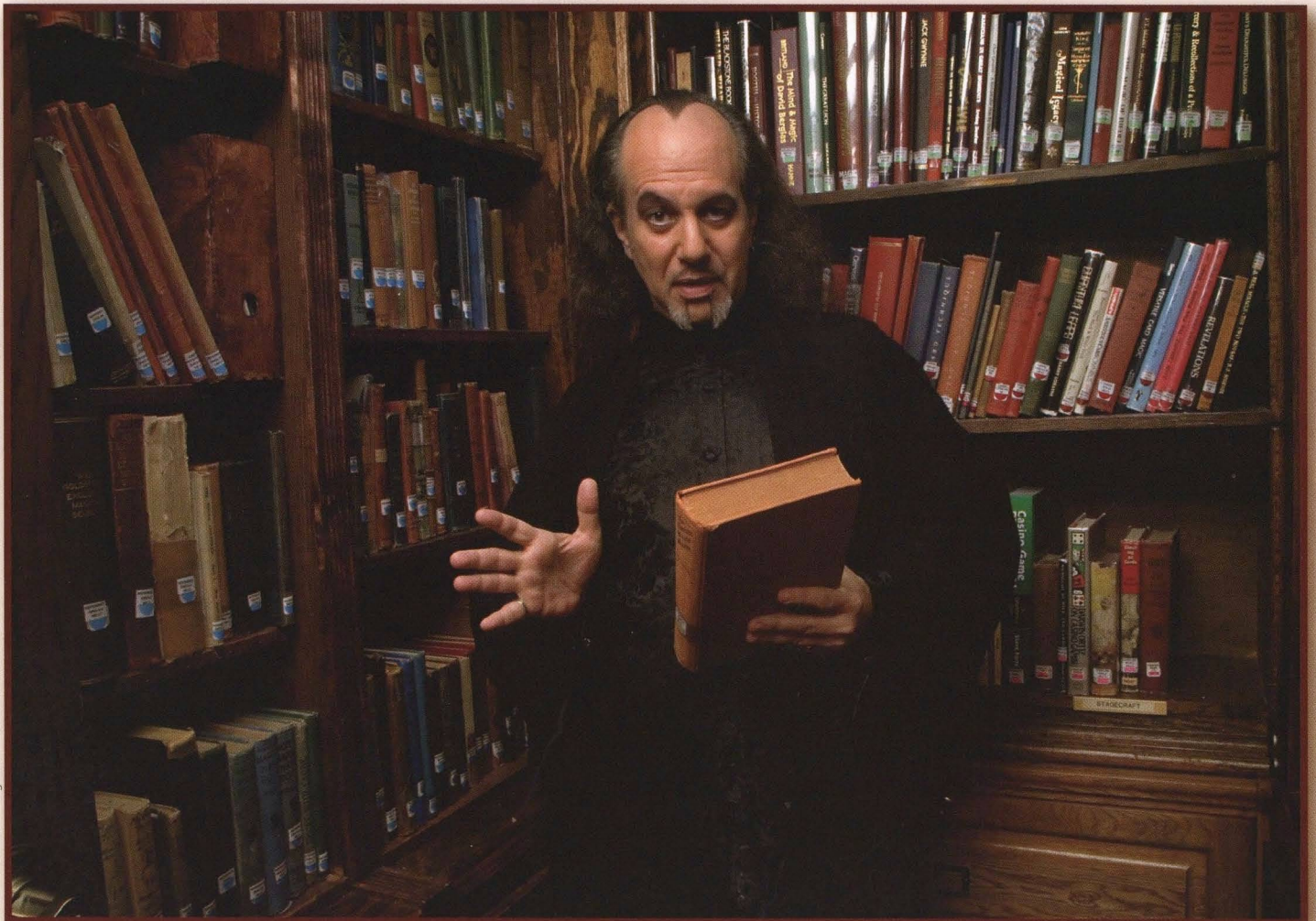
Max had noticed that Vernon carried a list of names of his many friends who had died—he would often unfold the list of 250 names and discuss it with folks at The Castle. "But when Joe Cossari died, I thought Vernon seemed to be especially uprooted. He used to spend a lot of time with Joe playing Klobiosh in the library." It's a two-handed card game, according to Max, that "used to be played by eastern-European Jews in show business." Max got out his copy of Hoyle and learned the rules. "It isn't really much of a game," he admits. "It's made to be

played while you're talking, schmoozing." The next night, Max surprised Vernon by asking, "You want to go up to the library and play some Klob, Professor?" Vernon's eyes brightened: "You can play Klob?" Max answered, "I think so," and they escaped to the library for the first of many nights of Klob.

Vernon's observations, of performers, personalities, politics, culture and historical events, were fascinating to Max, and further convinced him that great magic doesn't exist in a vacuum, but is part of the society that surrounds it. One evening, sitting on the little sofa—Vernon's famous corner outside the Close-Up Room, The Professor leaned over to Max and surprised him by saying, "You know, Max, I like you. You're a *good* guy." There was something grand and comforting in Vernon's simple praise. Max, so long the outsider, felt tears well up in his eyes.

"I actually think that Max has channeled his depression and made it work in his life," says Jennifer Sils. "That's not an easy thing to do, but to some extent, creativity is the other side of depression."

Max retained the name Phil Goldstein to accompany



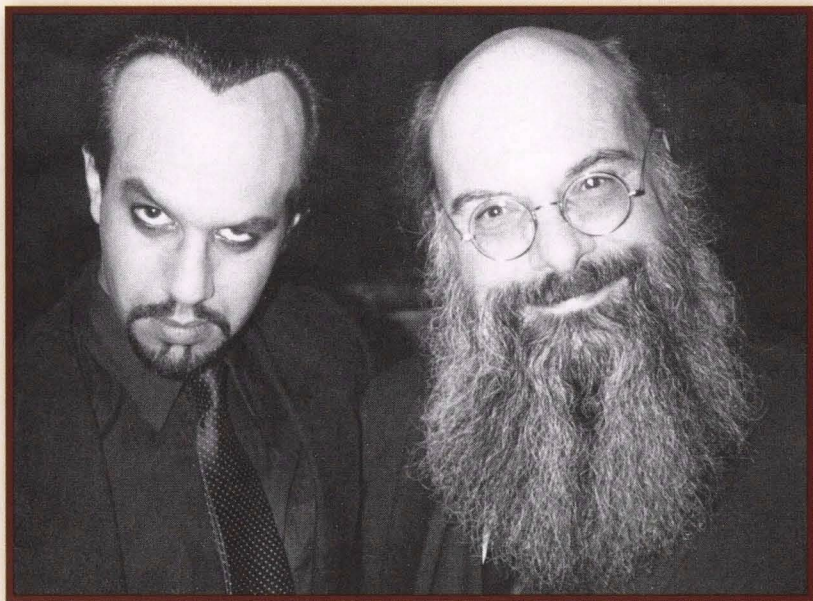
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all of his published tricks. “I didn’t want to deny the supposed ‘body of work’ that I’d published under the name Goldstein since the 1960s.” At that age, 10 years seemed like a very long time. He realizes now that it was a “foolish perspective.” It turns out those first few dozen tricks that Phil Goldstein had contributed to magazines or Hank Lee’s catalog would be the mere drip, drips before the veritable tsunami of Max Maven material.

By last count—and Max can only estimate now—he’s contributed over 2,000 items to journals, books, and dealer’s catalogs. A number of these were packet tricks: a few neatly printed playing cards gathered into a folded 8½ by 11-inch sheet of paper with instructions and Max’s distinctive line drawings. Today the genre has met with some disdain—it’s easy to say that tiny collections of cards that only do only “one thing” are inartistic. But Max’s packet tricks—he collected a number of his favorites in the 1990 book, *Focus*—have been celebrated for their cleverness and innovations, earning him fans around the world.

Other tricks have ranged from mathematical to mental to sleight-of-hand. “Every trick is a different experience. One, I remember, was invented in several seconds. I just saw the whole thing very quickly. Others have been in development for 15 years or even longer.” Some tricks are just amusements—something cute, or a novelty. Others are more substantial mysteries. “There’s a joy to inventing, and the process itself has value,” he says. Max sees his constant creativity as “priming the pump,” maintaining a creative flow of ideas. “I push myself to invent tricks, and the more you do it, the more it flows.” And then there’s the original material that Max been using in his performances—hours and hours of material.

“He finds magic endlessly intriguing, all aspects of it,” according to Eugene Burger. “He’s like a little kid in many ways. Awed by magic, fascinated by it.”



Max with his spiritual adviser, early 1980s

“A lot of mentalism tends to be boring,” Max acknowledges. “The only interesting part is the ending, when the effect reaches a climax and there’s a revelation. It might take 5, 10, 20 minutes before you get to the good stuff.” Mentalists of the 1960s, such as Al Koran and David Hoy, had tried to solve the problem by picking up the pace. But Max felt that they also stripped the process down to the bone. Perhaps, he felt, they had sacrificed some of its inherent theatricality.

Max has sought to upend this formula by increasing the theatricality in each performance, and keeping every step interesting. He calls it “Process Mentalism,” in which the process itself is intriguing. It can be a daunting challenge, but his carefully arranged effects have been built around this ideal. He likens it to a football player carrying the ball down the field. Even if he gets tackled just a few yards from the goal line, it’s the run that’s exciting and daring. The crowd cheers, even if the play doesn’t result in a touchdown.

Today there’s a new fashion for mentalism, which means that Max’s ideas have been front and center. “To some extent, mentalism is the new packet magic,” Max notes with chagrin. “Apparently when I die, I’m going to hell twice.” It’s a typical Maven comment—teasing the world of magic and teasing himself for success. It’s also essentially ironic: Max is actually proud of those accomplishments, and is gratified that many mentalists working today, including Michael Weber, Tim Conover, and Mark Salem, have been gracious in crediting his influence. It’s impossible to imagine a mentalist working today who can ignore his material or sensibilities. For example, Max was the first mentalist Derren Brown ever saw, on television, when Derren was 12 years old. Max Maven has become the doyen of modern mentalism.

In 2005, he officially stopped using the name Phil Goldstein because he felt it was too confusing holding onto two identities. There was no point balancing two names for contracts, passports, or bank accounts. Besides, 30 years after his original decision, he really *was* Max Maven.

Especially within the world of magicians, Max can be infamous for his flinty exterior: an icy remark or a condescending observation. He is quick to acknowledge that he “comes across as a cad onstage,” and it’s a pose that’s been calculated. At one time, he seemed to feature this “knock this block off my shoulder” attitude in his performances, as if trying to alienate the audience so that he could work, double-time, to overcome the challenge. “Early on, for some months, I made a deliberate experiment to never smile onstage. I thought that someone who reads minds should create a disturbing atmosphere. It was a good idea—in theory . . .” Maybe the experiments in attitude came with performing mentalism—quite literally outthinking them. Maybe it was an offshoot of his “Beelzebub-ian” appearance: the patent leather

hair and dark eyes. "This is not a mask, I look like this *all the time*," he explained to his audience, as if daring them to like him.

Surprisingly, they did. "I work best in long-form," Max explains it. With 45 minutes, 60 minutes, 90 minutes, he invariably managed to twist around all the audience's perceptions, leaving them amazed and amused—gleefully hurtling down the roller coaster that had first seemed to be a daunting climb. There's lots of genuine laughter in a Max Maven performance, and a gradual thaw; the threatening stranger who becomes deeply human and perplexingly friendly. Even funny: "funny ha-ha and funny strange," as one of his advertising fliers explained it.

"A lot of magicians perceive him as the character he plays onstage," according to Eugene Burger. "That's confusing the act with the person. And, of course, sometimes Max did things to encourage that. You have to realize that there was quite a mountain between the performer and the audience. He used to enjoy it, and those were conscious decisions."

Eugene remembers watching Max do a full show for a Blue Cross banquet, a corporate performance in Chicago. "You could feel it. It took at least 20 minutes. They were thinking, 'This guy is really weird.' Then they realized that he was pretty interesting. At the end of an hour, they'd given him a standing ovation."

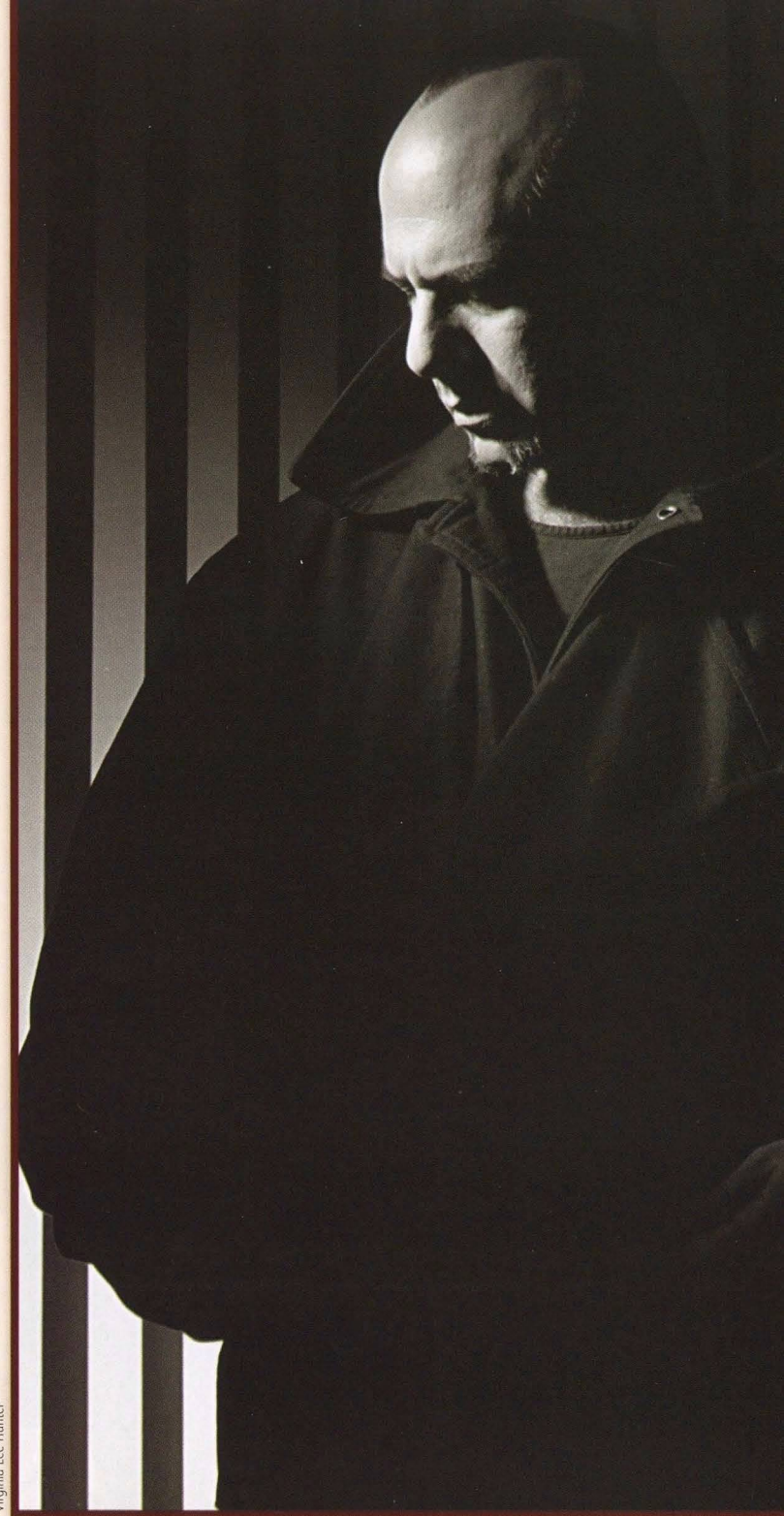
"Oh, yes, the hard shell thing," Lance Burton laughs. "I know that's the way a lot of magicians see Max Maven. But I must say, I've never seen that. Because I've known him as a friend for so many years. To me, Max is a teddy bear. Very compassionate and thoughtful."

Jennifer Sils says, "The genius of Max is that he has no patience for people he doesn't respect, and endless patience for those he does. He's the most non-materialistic person I know. Extremely generous."

Max winces when I dare to categorize him as "warm and fuzzy." Those words aren't quite part of his vocabulary. But there's no question Max's onstage personality has softened. Grey hair in his goatee. A more mature face. And as his widow's peak has chased his hairline up his forehead, his middle-age features seem a good fit. His performance style has followed suit. In *Thinking in Person*, he teases his own reputation as a pedant. Standing before the audience, he starts one story, "You remember J.B.S. Haldane," and then pauses—shocked that this British geneticist hasn't invited knowing nods from his crowd. A few nervous titters. We understand that he's still waiting for a response. A solid laugh.

"We were thrilled to see his new show," Jennifer Sils explains. "As a good friend of his, I wasn't sure whether I was enjoying it because I knew Max so well. But then Mac and I listened for the audience response—rapt silence, listening closely, laughter, and a standing ovation at the end. It's exciting because it really is another side to him: Max's world of ideas, exploring different subjects, and wondering about things. There's something very vulnerable and soulful beneath the image of 'The Maven' who knows it all."

"Oh, it's a very clever show, because he's made it so much easier for his audience," according to Eugene Burger. "You



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know, he has press quotes about himself in the program, and one of those is, 'Serpent-like humor.' Well, now the audience gets it. And when he starts, they know where he's coming from. Then he tells you so much about himself. It softens his image."

"I used to never leave the house without a deck of cards. I was always ready to perform," Max says. "Then, years ago, I made it a point to *not* carry cards. Of course, I can always do something, something impromptu, if it's absolutely necessary." But he no longer feels the need to prove anything. "For a long time, when I was working clubs, I'd

be introduced to strangers as a mindreader. 'Tell me my name,' they'd say. That's the sort of thing you always hear. I had a very good answer. I used to explain, 'Well, I could spend 15 or 20 minutes working with you on this, asking you what you do for a living, things like that, and I'd probably have pretty good odds of eventually getting your name. But why go through all that? Tell me your name and let's have a conversation!'"

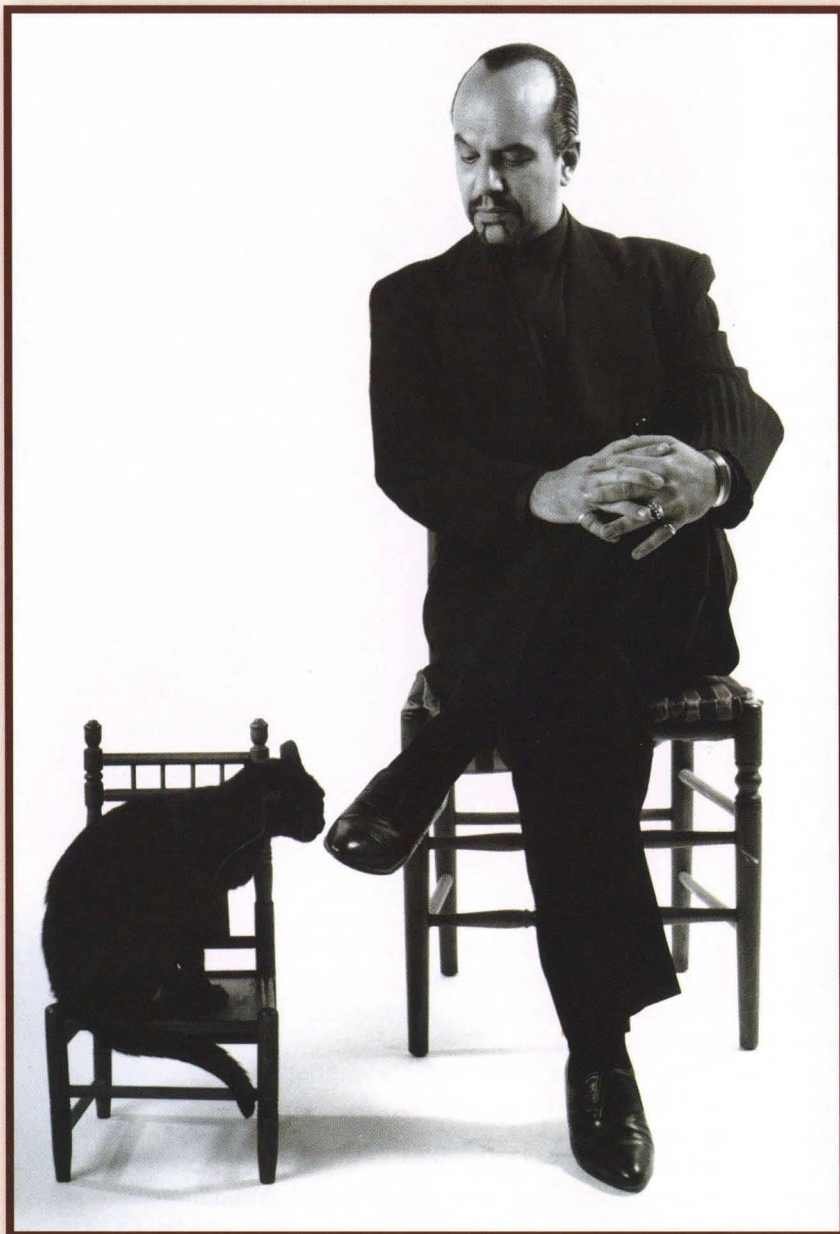
Max has evolved a more succinct response. "Now I just say, 'Oh, I'm not that good.' Honest, self-effacing. It gets a laugh and it's over." The perfect answer, but it's hard to imagine the young, devilishly coiffed Max Maven—so very much out to prove something—giving up so easily.

"I always told him that, as he got older, his character would work for him, more and more," Eugene Burger says. "I mean, I don't mind listening to someone smarter than myself ... but it's tougher if that person is 30!"

Eugene thinks about it for a moment and laughs. "Now his character is so real, and he's showing us so many sides of himself."

"Some years ago, I worked a comedy club in Boston," Max starts a story. "I don't work many comedy clubs anymore. But this was a good booking, and it gave me a chance to see my family back in Boston, so I did it." At each performance, Max was surprised to see clusters of Goth kids, huddled against the back wall, nervously fingering their drinks—dressed in black, studded with piercings, sporting spiked hair and dark eye makeup. "They'd seen me on television, and I was a kind of hero to them now, an inspiration. A sort of Godfather of Goth."

Max is a little bit more ordinary now; his audience is a lot stranger. And we're all meeting in the middle.



"I admire Max because he tells you the truth," according to Lance Burton. "And usually he's spot on. Of course, in this business, when we ask for the truth, most people don't really want to hear it. Often, we don't really want to tell it. But you can depend on Max for the truth."

In the spring of this year, Max was troubled by chest pains, and went to see a specialist. He was immediately checked into the hospital and underwent triple-bypass surgery. The health scares have left him contemplative. "Actually, when I turned 50, a few years ago, I started thinking seriously about my career. Of course, I'm hoping to work for another 25 years. I should be able to do it. But when we're young, starting in the business, we imagine what we'll achieve—the stardom, success, and fame ahead of us. And I've had a bit of that, popularity and recognition. I'm pleased with my accomplishments. But I also realized, at 50, that this *might be* as far as I go, that I've reached my limit of success. So I asked myself, 'Can you accept that?'"

Max pauses, gazing into space, still mulling the question in his mind. "My answer was yes. Yes. Because now I realize, it's all about the work. I'm excited by the work, by moving forward. That's its own reward. I don't need other validation." His career has taken him in unexpected directions. "I'm not sure I'm really a mentalist anymore. Perhaps that category no longer applies. To me, I'm just an artist whose primary medium is mystery."

His surgery went well, and his doctors have offered a cautious bill of health. His voice has every bit of the familiar verve and modulation. He's surprised himself with how quickly his energy returned after the operation. "The other night, I did a presentation at The Magic Castle. Not actually performing, mind you, but almost two hours of storytelling. And I felt good afterward. A little tired, but I felt good." He's



scheduled weekend performances of *Thinking in Person* for a Hollywood theater later this fall.

"Kafka said that the meaning of life is that it stops," Max says. "I think that's a profound definition. And if we accept that, then we are each forced to invent our own meanings while we're here. We look for reasons to do the things we do, our interests, well-being, and interactions with others. And magic encompasses so many of the things in life that I find interesting. Even elements like politics, mathematics, aesthetics, design, humor, science, show business, literature, sociology, theology You know, magic is a nexus of *all* these things."

I suggest to him that maybe it's a chicken-and-egg situation. These things interest him because of his interest in magic. "Maybe," he considers for a moment as he finishes off the last cup of coffee at Greenblatt's. "It's hard to tell. Once, after a workshop in Italy, someone asked me, 'Why did you choose magic?' And I had to answer, 'I'm not sure. Maybe magic chose me.' You know, magicians let me down all the time. But magic has never let me down."

He's genuinely excited discussing his magic: about the next show and the next trick. Even more, he brings unabashed nobility to the subject.

And then you begin to understand. Rather than obliterating Philip Thorner Goldstein—who once considered himself troubled and different—the creation of Max Maven celebrated those differences. It also helped to preserve the young man: always excited about magic and brimming

with new ideas. It's as if Goldstein has been shielded from the disappointments and contretemps of show business.

As he talks, Max is no longer a 56-year-old seasoned pro, but offers flashes of that kid—reading, analyzing, experimenting, or on the verge of a new discovery. Beneath the famously knowing, nuanced observations, he can't help but sound a bit innocent and idealistic. "People say that we're not curing cancer here. You know, we're just magicians. But magic is actually important, really important. I think that a life without mystery might not be worth living," he says. "It might not be something we technically need to survive, like food or air, but a sense of mystery enhances our life. And magicians should be proud to provide mystery to a society that's lost touch with mystery. It has tremendous value. In some ways, *it is* as important as curing cancer."

I remind him of Einstein's quote. Not "Hallo, baby!" but: "The most beautiful experience we can have is the mysterious. It is the fundamental emotion which stands at the cradle of true art and true science."

"Yes, I've used that quote for years," Max says, "and then I get to say, on that basis, I must be doing . . ." The slight pause. His voice lowers to a resonant purr. "... A beautiful show!"

AS WE LEAVE Greenblatt's Delicatessen, a young waitress follows close behind. "Excuse me," she calls after us. "I'm really sorry. I don't want to be rude, but don't I know you from somewhere? Can I ask who you are?" This is

