



HE WAS BRASH, ARROGANT, COCKY, GENEROUS, A VIRTUOSO MUSICIAN, FAMOUS ORCHESTRA LEADER, WICKED PRACTICAL JOKER, AND CREATOR AND PROMOTOR OF SOME OF THE MOST BEAUTIFUL AND BAFFLING PROPS THE WORLD OF MAGIC HAS EVER SEEN.

# MAGIC'S MADMAN

By DAVID CHARVET



*Himber wrote ad copy for his "Dancing Can" card trick: "A real entertaining unit, and when the can cavorts, the crowd howls!"*

There was no ignoring Richard Himber in a crowd. Though barely five-foot, five-inches tall, the roly-polly, red-haired Himber was a dynamo. He had boundless energy — whether the subject was music, magic, or setting up someone for a practical joke. Dick approached all with the same zeal. This desire to be *noticed* drove his life and career from the beginning.

Herbert Richard Himber was born February 20, 1900 (he would later claim 1907) in Newark, New Jersey. His father was a butcher, who built his small shop into a chain of stores. The elder Himber parlayed his meat money into real estate where he made a fortune. It was into this privileged lifestyle that young Richard grew as a boy.

His mother was a social butterfly, attending philanthropic parties and fundraising events. She was constantly traveling, leaving Richard and her other three children in the care of their grandmother. There is no doubt that Richard felt abandoned as a child. Once, in an effort to keep his mother at home, he locked her in the hall closet. His grandmother later released her. For his first practical joke, Richard was beat with a belt by his father.

Richard's mother did try to expose him to the finer things in life. He became fascinated with music and, at age five, begged for violin lessons. Within two years, he was considered a prodigy. If his parents thought that music lessons would curb their son's penchant for mischief, they



were wrong. Small for his age, Richard demanded attention, good or bad. One day he hid his violin teacher's black hat and coat in the coal bin. It took hours of searching before they were found. He was later expelled from school when he placed sulphur in a bunson burner and blew up the chemistry lab.

It was during a summer at Coney Island, when he was ten years old, that Richard became enamored with magic. There he saw a pitchman selling DeLand card tricks for a dime each. This was something new to him. "My father never believed in toys. I never had any toys as a child. I never had any friends, outside of two cousins. We didn't play much." Magic offered an escape for young Richard. Here he could be noticed. He could do something the other kids — and his parents — couldn't. That summer at Coney Island he hung out on the midway and a grifter taught him some basic card tricks, including the Si Stebbin System. The magic bug had bitten.

To support his new hobby, Richard took to sneaking out of the house to play ragtime fiddle at Patsy Kline's, a lowbrow Newark night spot. He was paid \$2 a night. Hoping to keep his son from becoming a juvenile delinquent, Richard's father enrolled him in the military academy in Freehold, New Jersey. "I was a good boy at the academy," Himer later jokingly recalled. "The fact that I was on guard duty almost every day was entirely coincidental."

By age 15, he had packed his violin and suitcase to run away to New York. There he was discovered by "The Last of the Red-Hot Mamas," singer Sophie Tucker. She was impressed by his violin playing and made him a part of her band, "The Five Kings of Syncopation." The boy wonder was a sensation. Along the way, on vaudeville bills, Richard befriended many magicians, among them, Jack Merlin, who gave him lessons in sleight of hand.

Himer's big break came in 1927 when he has asked by Rudy Vallee to manage several of his orchestra units. Vallee was a true superstar of the era, his name carried a lot of clout. While Himer took full advantage of it, after five years, he decided it was time to form his own band.

Dick learned the value of being on radio. It was the medium that had catapulted Rudy Vallee to stardom, and Himer felt it could do the same for him. He formed a band with some "pick-up" musicians from around New York and approached the swank Essex House Hotel on Central Park South. They wouldn't pay the band a dime. The only room available for the broadcasts was a storage room in the basement. It didn't matter to Dick, as long as they were on the air. There, among broken chairs and stacks of linen, "Richard Himer & his Essex House Orchestra" broadcast to the nation.

Years later, vocalist Joey Nash recalled those basement broadcasts: "NBC announcers, purring mellifluous hokum, never failed to break up the band with: 'There is a sea of happy faces dining and dancing here in this beautiful dining room overlooking lovely Central Park.' Fans came in droves to see and hear us 'in-person.' Once in the hotel they learned they had been listening nightly to a loudspeaker illusion. A large group of military cadets and their girl friends, learning they were the victims of an airwave hoax, rioted in the lobby, overturning potted palms and furniture and pummeling the desk clerk and a few bell-boys. The band was fired. This was the one and only time I ever knew of a combo being asked to leave because of their popularity."

It was 1934. He convinced the New York Ritz Carlton Hotel to allow him to broadcast from their lush Oval Room. Twenty-two

eral hit songs, most notably, "It Isn't Fair," which became his theme. Himer was a star.

Dick now has the means with which to support his magic habit. In his travels around the country, he took to hanging out at magic shops in the cities where his band played. He was generally dissatisfied with the cheap quality of the equipment available. He had ideas of what he felt would be great magic. And Himer had two advantages over most magic shop owners: plenty of free time to play with his ideas and lots of money.

His most popular early creation was the Himer "Milk Pitcher," in 1941. First released through Bert Wheeler's Hollywood Magic Shop for \$7.50, it created a sensation. Soon magicians everywhere were pouring milk into paper cones and making it disappear. The prop became a standard in hundreds of acts and spawned a host of similar effects. In 1942,



*Little Richard sits at the feet of Sophie Tucker, "Last of the Red Hot Mamas," at Reisenweber's Cafe, a famous New York after-theater gathering place.*

musicians were hired, including such notables as Benny Goodman, Artie Shaw, Tommy Dorsey, and Adrian Rollini — long before they were to gain fame with their own big bands. Himer's weekly payroll was \$4,000, an unheard-of sum during those dark days of the Great Depression. But the gamble paid off. Success came quickly — a 39 week contract for two shows on NBC, an RCA recording contract, and later, on CBS with Himer's *Studebaker Champions Hour*. He penned sev-

Percy Abbott advertised his own "Vanishing Milk Pitcher" for \$3.50. Himer was furious. Karrell Fox remembers: "Dick called Percy and told him to stop selling the pitcher or he would sue. Percy said, 'Go ahead.' So Dick did." While reports in the magic press of the day kept up interest in the lawsuit, by 1945, the matter had been apparently dropped. And Himer continued to be preturbed.

Dick's penchant for practical jokes became legendary in show business circles. He fully



understood the psychology involved. Himber said "To be a good practical joker, you need patience and plenty of it, because there's a time and a place for everything and you have to wait for the right moment and remember that vanity rules the world. You have to take advantage of a person's weakness and what his vanity is, and play up to that. Annoy them, but in a nice way... Of course, you need nerve."

There is no doubt that Himber had nerve. One of his favorite gags was "butter shooting." His usual venue for the stunt was Lindy's restaurant in New York. While dining, Dick would spy someone seated at a table across the room. Placing a pat of butter on the end of his knife, he would snap the knife with deadly aim, sticking the butter on the ceiling directly above his "victim." Himber never missed. After a few minutes, the butter would warm and begin dripping. About the time the victim looked up to see what was dripping, the melted butter would drop from the ceiling with a resounding plop, usually on their head or face. Some of Himber's other regular stunts at Lindy's included spiking the ketchup with Tabasco sauce, placing foaming sugar in the sugar bowls, exploding cigars at the counter, and flash paper in ashtrays on strategic tables.



*Himber fine-tunes the string section of his Pepsi Cola Band, which played in the summer of 1963 in New York's Central Park.*

Other times, Himber's "gags" went a step beyond the basic. Once, the famous news columnist Walter Winchell wrote a comment to the effect that "Himber should stick to music instead of magic." Himber ignored the barb until Winchell's next birthday. Then, Dick had a dead horse delivered to the front lawn of Winchell's Long Island home! Around the neck of the horse was a large red ribbon, inscribed "Happy Birthday From Dick." It was the type of stunt that caused one of Dick's friends to remark: "Himber is really a nice guy. He wouldn't hurt a fly..." Then added, "I wish Himber felt

the same way about human beings as he feels about flies!"

Many times he went to top clothiers and shoe stores in New York and bought hundreds of dollars worth of clothes which he uncerimoniously gave to the underprivileged. He supported many down-and-out musicians and magicians with financial aid, again without the usual Himber bravado or quest for recognition. In 1942, Dick married a fashion model, Nina McDougall. The marriage lasted ten years and produced one son, Robert. They lived quietly in a home at Merrick, Long Island — at least as "quietly" as one could with a man like Dick.

One of Himber's biggest feuds was with mentalist, Joseph Dunninger. When Dunninger's radio show catapulted him to national prominence in 1943, Himber was immediately irritated. Dick felt that he could do everything that "The Master Mind of Modern Mystery" could. And there was no doubt some jealousy as Dick realized that Joe was earning a fortune. Whatever his motivation, Himber did everything he could to make Dunninger's life a living hell. He barged in unannounced during one of the mentalist's broadcasts and shouted "I'll give you \$1,000 if you can read



*[Above] Fun with the Ken Murrays and the Harold Lloyds — and only Himber knows what's on his mischievous mind. [Right] Typical candid ad photography of the wizard showing his wares at his Essex House hotel suite.*



PHOTO: COURTESY OF THE WILLIAM McILHANY COLLECTION





The "Himber Ring" was popularized by the late Al Koran.

my mind!" The perturbed but cool Dunninger shot back, "I'll give you \$10,000 if you can prove you have a mind!" Later, in 1944, Himber wrote a nationally syndicated newspaper series, "Mindreading Is The Bunk," in which he attacked Dunninger's methods. Dick later offered another challenge: "I will give \$10,000 to any charity Dunninger names if he can read a single word in my mind, or anybody else's mind under strict conditions. Not a sen-

tence, just one single little word.... Dunninger is strictly a good sleight-of-hand artist and a wonderful showman, but any magician can do what he does." Dunninger wisely ignored the challenge, as well as Himber.

However, Dick's eccentricities made it difficult for him to be ignored by others. He convinced the Essex House to give him a free hotel suite for life. He told them he would be the hotel's "musical director." (Another version told of this story is that Dick slipped and fell in the lobby of the Essex House and said he would drop his pending lawsuit if he was given a rent-free suite!) Visitors to the apartment received a first-hand dose of Himber's style. He had his bathroom converted into an office where he could entertain business guests while he showered and shaved. Annoyed at having to pay 20-cents to place a telephone call through the hotel operator, Himber had a pay phone installed in his living room, which only cost a nickel a call.

By 1942, he was operating his magic business, Gimacs Unlimited, out of his hotel suite. Later, in the '60s, he changed the name to Himber's Custombilt Magic. Although everything was indeed custom built, Dick took his ideas away from the mainstream magic builders and went directly to the source. If he needed a part made from gold, he went to a goldsmith. To manufacture his dozens of different magic tables he contacted luggage manufacturers. He would visit them in-person and give them his pitch. If that didn't work he would call... and call... and keep calling until they said "yes." Dick had the tenacity of a bulldog when it came to negotiating the best deal. Most of these craftsmen had no interest in making magic, but just wanted to "get that guy Himber off of their back."

Himber had the knack of taking a simple idea (either his own, or someone else's) and turning it into a unique piece of magic. His output was prolific. It is estimated that he produced and advertised over 200 different tricks and props during his lifetime. Nothing was cheap. Most were of "limited supply." He wrote his magazine ads, and the photographs accompanying the copy always featured Dick and the trick in question with either a beautiful woman or a top celebrity. A master of cross-promotion, Dick cut deals with Pepsi-Cola and Canada Dry. They picked up a part of Himber's production cost and, in return, he featured their products in his tricks and ads. In addition, his elaborate displays at magic conventions always included a "hospitality room," with Pepsi and Canada Dry drinks flowing freely while Dick demonstrated his latest

miracles. And the demonstrations were always laced with superlatives. Maurice Zolotow commented in his profile of Dick in the book, *It Takes All Kinds*: "For all of the smoothness of his sleights and the ingeniousness of some of his equipment... Himber lacks a certain feeling for magic as an art. He presents an effect... as a triumph of his cleverness, rather than an esthetic experience." Regardless of the critics, Himber sold props by the carload.

The famous "Himber Ring" linking finger rings came about when he was shown a special ring that hinged open so it could be easily worn by persons with arthritis. Himber took this concept and adapted it to make a locking "key" ring. Willie Schneider cast the gold; Perci Diaconis routined the effect. Himber's much-advertised "StaggerRing" was a hit — especially after being featured by Al Koran.

Equally popular was the "Himber Wallet," originally marketed as "Bill-Fooled," and later in several variations. Dick took a simple novelty that had previously been made of ribbon and cardboard; instead crafting it from fine Moroccan leather. Always topical, he created a routine called "Polaroid Money," using the wallet to print real money, by "instant photography," from blank slips of paper.

Because Himber's props were produced on such a limited basis, and by top craftsman, they have become desirable collectors items today, bringing hundreds and even thousands of dollars when sold.

"Although he was successful on radio and, later, television," wrote *The New York Times*, "Himber liked best trying his hand at stage production." One of his last was a magical-musical revue, modestly titled *Himberama*, staged in 1953 at Carnegie Hall. The show featured appearances by Henny Youngman, Cardini, Al DeLage, James Reneaux, and a filmed "phone call" from Orson Welles (reprised 40 years later by David Copperfield). *Himberama* received mixed reviews. Bruce Elliott, editor of *The Phoenix* wrote: "We certainly are not going to criticize a show for being anything, when we don't know what it was designed to be." No one was really sure why Dick staged the two-act, 21-scene full-evening show that Himber decided needed two separate programs. But that was Himber. He didn't need a reason.

Himber died suddenly in his apartment on December 11, 1966. Both *bon vivant* and prankster, his life was a mixture of many moods. He was a prolific maker of both music and magic, yet nothing seemed to give him more pleasure than an elaborate practical joke. Richard Himber was truly one of show business' most unusual characters. ♦

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