

Once a Clown because...

By John Moehring

When Stephen Bargatze first started performing a straitjacket stunt, it was strictly for comedy. He appeared as the goofy character of David Coppertone, did 12 minutes of jokes, gags, and slapstick, and he got lots of laughs. Yet he never got out of the straitjacket.

"Then one night, a drunk sitting out there decided to help me," Bargatze recalls. "He yanked on one of the straps. I lost my balance and fell to the floor. When he landed on top of me, well, the audience went wild. So, I started cueing him to help make it fun." As the duo desperately wrestled about the stage, the laughs got louder, and there was a huge ovation when Stephen finally escaped. "I've been doing it that way ever since."

The hilarious routine originated, believe it or not, while Bargatze was still a student at Trevecca Nazarene University in Nashville, Tennessee. Those were the years when, because of a burning desire to complete his education, he had temporarily given up his pursuit of magic. "Actually, it was because it was a Christian school," he says. "They told me magic was evil and I should quit doing it. So, believing that, I stopped... for a while."

Midway through college, Stephen received an offer to perform at a Nashville nightclub, a place called the Mardi Gras. "If the school had known I was even thinking of working there they would have kicked me out." At the Mardi Gras, all the bartenders and waitresses wore crazy costumes and played outrageous characters. "This was around 1984, when I was truly a starving student. I had a wife and kids to support, so I took the job. Ten bucks an hour was a ton of money back then for working in a club. Every night I would dress up (and hide from the college) and do walk-around and stand-up as a comical character."

A couple of years after the evolution of the crazy straitjacket routine, Stephen started developing what he calls his "politically incorrect 'Chop Cup.'" He had always garnered laughs throughout the routine by acting highly irritated whenever a spectator tried to touch the cup. They'd been warned it was a rare drinking vessel belonging to a Civil War veteran in his family. Only the magician, specifically The Amazing Stephen, was allowed pick it up to see if the vanished ball had returned. If a volunteer dared reach for the cup or even looked toward it, Bargatze would shout, "Don't touch the cup!"

One night, the lady who'd been invited to assist with the "Chop Cup" had perhaps enjoyed one drink too many. "She would not stop grabbing at the cup," Stephen says. "It was really aggravating, but since most of my comedy comes from mishaps and mistakes, I tried to make something funny out of the situation. There was a gun on my other table that was used later in the show for the 'Sidekick' trick. When she lifted the cup, I picked up the gun, and slowly said, 'I told you to not touch the cup.' That got a big laugh. So, I started asking myself how could I get her to touch it again? In other words, make her forget that I told her not to touch the cup, so I could use the gun for more laughs."

Eventually, the routine included a watch steal, and Bargatze caused the missing wristwatch to appear under the cup. That happened after the final loads and, since "the trick was over," the spectator would invariably forget and lift the cup to get their watch back. "The gun would come out one more time, and I'd tell her, 'I'm sorry, ma'am, but if I shoot someone tonight this will stop happening.' I'd take her offstage. There would be

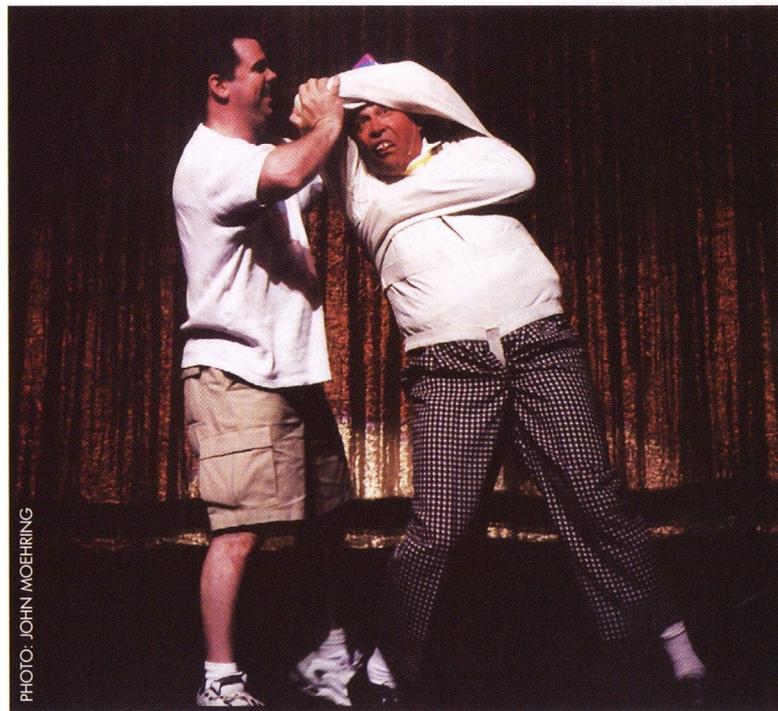
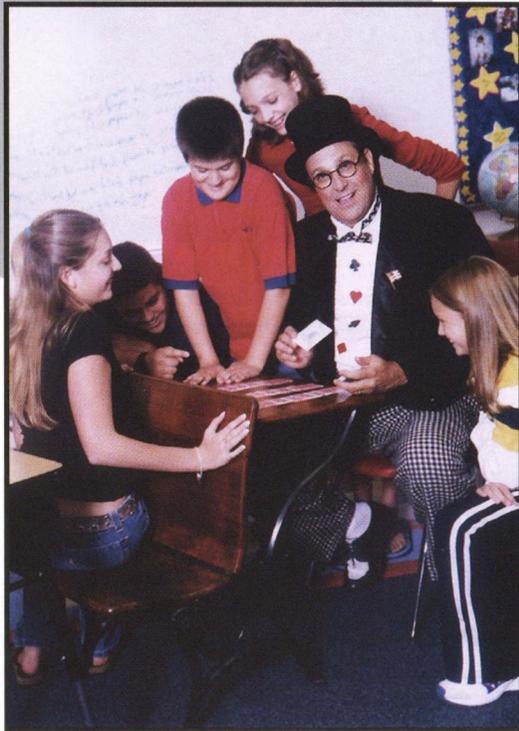
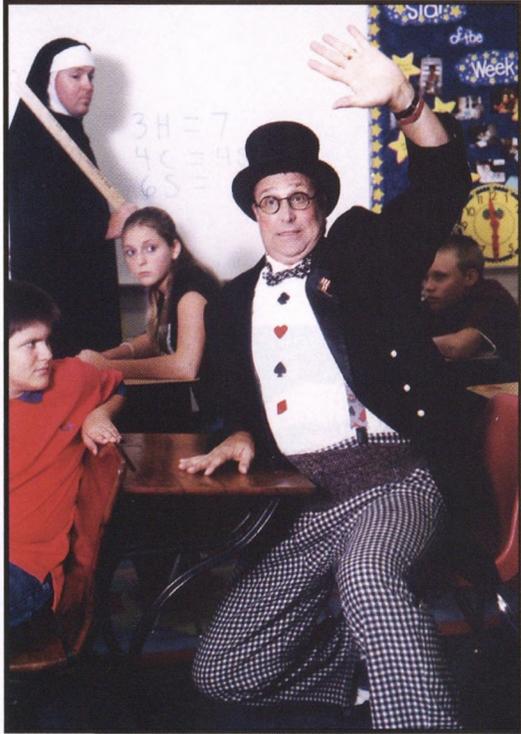


PHOTO: JOHN MOEHRING

Stephen Bargatze, wearing his grotesque David Coppertone rotten dentures, executes his comedy straitjacket escape at the IBM Convention in San Diego this summer.

he's always been the



some scuffling noises and the blank gun would fire a couple of times. Then *she* would walk out with the gun and place it on the table, and say, 'At least I got my watch back.' Nowadays, all that's become politically incorrect... but I still do it."

Long before the magic bug bit Stephen, he was severely bitten in the face by a bulldog. "When I was a baby, my mother, who was a professional bowler, took me along to a tournament. I got a little too close to a guard dog at the bowling alley."

Bargatze's speech impediment, which is often unsettling for his first-time audiences, is the result of that dog tearing off portions of his cheek and lips, as well as a sizeable piece of his tongue. There were six years of re-constructive plastic surgery and what seemed like endless years of speech therapy and special education courses. That was over four decades ago, and there's still a lisp in his speech. Stephen likes to say, "I talk funny."

Today, when Stephen tells an audience of the unfortunate accident, then overwhelms them with his remarkable talents as a magical entertainer, leaving them crying with laughter, some of the people just might believe that Mr. Bargatze possesses an innate sense of comedy that's enabled him to successfully overcome his fate. But folks, his true story is more unbelievable than that. What most don't know or realize is that Stephen Bargatze has prevailed over a tragic lifestyle that had him destined for destruction.

Born in Louisville, Kentucky in 1955, Stephen is quick to tell you, "I was a troubled kid and I was always in trouble. My family moved around a lot. My father was a baseball player who had a stroke when he was 20, and he became an alcoholic who I never knew sober. I never had a relationship with him. The same is true with my mother who is still alive, so I don't want to say certain things. I wouldn't say I was an abused child, but I was neglected."

Stephen was kept in Catholic schools until he was 15. He admits to failing second grade and being "socially promoted" several times as he was transferred to different Catholic schools. He stuttered in the classroom, but not at home. He was always in a nervous state because his classmates laughed at him, and he was put in special-education classes because of his speech. "I wasn't a good athlete and I was a worse student, so I became a goof-off — the class clown. Because of that I was usually in trouble, and the nuns constantly punished and beat me. But you will do anything for attention when you're young."

By eighth grade, the class clown had been expelled from Catholic school. However, upon enrolling in high school, he quickly found a place to show off, when he discovered that his speech teacher was having difficulties casting a student play. "I had the lowest of low grades in her class, but she desperately needed people for the play. I volunteered and ended up with two roles, two comical parts."

That constant desire for attention soon led to worse consequences. He stole a car and started doing drugs. "I ran with punks and thugs, because being with them was the only place I felt welcome."

At 18, Stephen was kicked out of his parent's house. "I was a freak. I had long hair and wore an earring at a time when guys didn't wear earrings. My mom said, 'I've had enough!' She put my clothes in a garbage bag in the backyard and told me to get out. I left home very angry with my family."

class clown

He overdosed on drugs and attempted suicide. "I think I did it to try to hurt my parents. You know... 'Kick me out and I'll teach you a lesson.'" When he was released from a treatment center, he was sent to talk with a cousin. Stephen didn't know it at the time, but his father had asked his cousin, Ron Bargarze, a Vanderbilt basketball coach who was in Louisville recruiting students, to take this reckless kid out of his life.

Stephen went home with Ron to Nashville in 1976. "One of the conditions he imposed on me was I had to go to church. I hadn't been in a church since I was kicked out of Catholic school." Another prerequisite for this new lease on life was that he get a college education.

When he was sent to take a college admissions test, Bargarze was told he was on a sixth-grade reading level. "There was no way I could get into any college. It was the first time in my life I was actually embarrassed for what I had *not* done. But, the people from the church reached out to help me. It was a Baptist church with all these old people in the congregation, and they gave me boxes and sacks of old books and clothes. That's where I would get the idea for those baggy pants that are still part of my act."

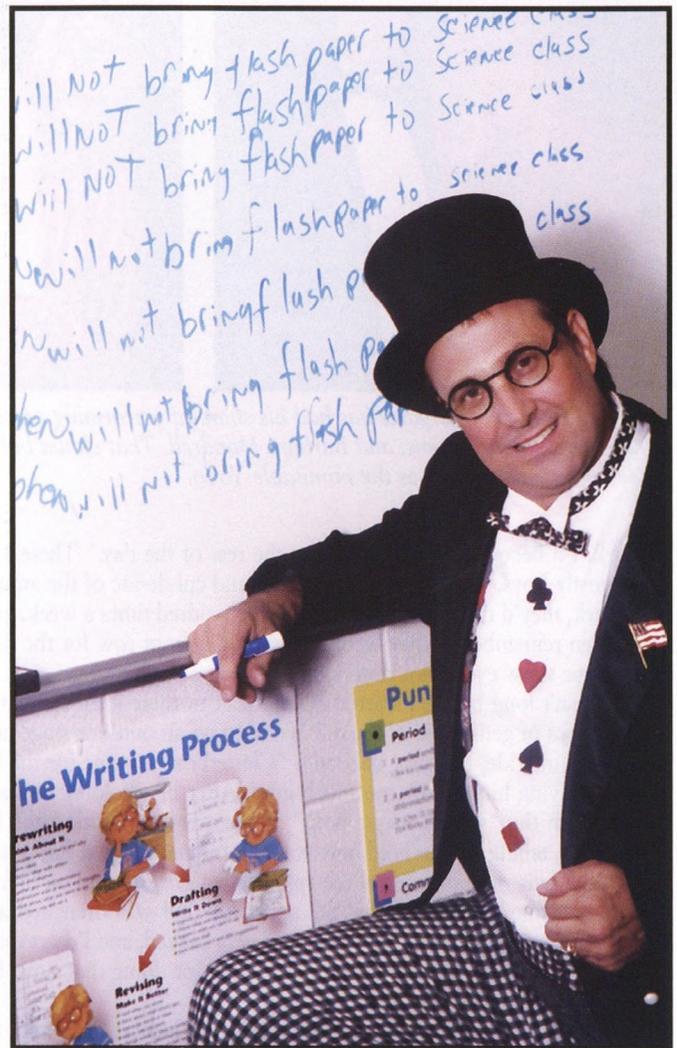
A Sunday school teacher gave him a copy of *The Hobbit*, telling him that learning to read would open all doors and this book was the key. "Well, because I had never finished a book the whole time I was in Catholic school, it took me forever to read *that* book. Then I found out it was the just the starter for the *Lord of the Rings* trilogy." Bargarze claims that, although it took him six years, he learned to read completely on his own. He's also proud to tell that, for the first time, he realized a lot of pretty cool magic could be learned from reading books.

He soon began to learn there was more to magic than methods and secrets. He started to learn about the performance of magic. Shortly after he'd moved to Nashville, Stephen had met a gentleman by the name of Tommy Hart, who performed as a Ronald McDonald clown. "Tommy was schoolteacher, an excellent magician who loved both close-up and stand-up, and he was a great guy."

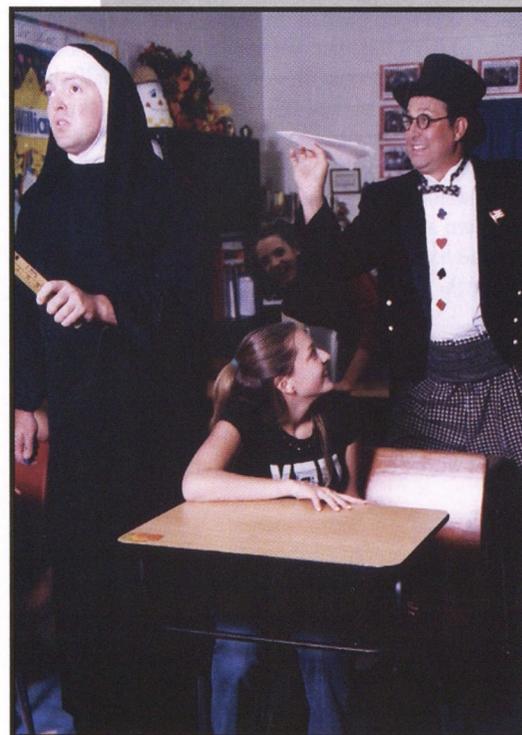
Tommy introduced Stephen to the Nashville Magic Club (IBM Ring 37). Here he met magicians such as Gary Hayes, Richard Street, Tom Gibson, and Charlie Buckner, who started showing him the real work. "Now, when I first started learning sleight of hand, there was no doubt that I wanted to be Lance Burton. But because I looked funny and talked funny, I became a clown."

Greatly influenced by Hart, Bargarze tagged along whenever and wherever Tommy did a Ronald McDonald show. He built an identical prop suitcase and sat beside Tommy as he put on his clown makeup. Before long, Stephen had created his own clown character, YoYo. "My makeup looked exactly like a Ronald, but I did make a wig that was different." There was something else that made YoYo's character distinctive. "Other clowns I met would say, 'You have a great clown voice! How do you do it?' I used to say, 'All you do is find a dog and stick it on your face.' But none of them would try it... they were just not dedicated."

By the early 1980s, Bargarze was hired to work at the Opryland theme park, located just outside of Nashville, where he performed seven shows a day, six days a week. "In the summer when school was out, parents would drop off their kids at the park in the morning, on their way



PHOTOGRAPHS: ROBIN BAKER





Living in Nashville, Bargatzke has had his share of performing on shows with country music stars. From left to right, he's with Dolly Parton, Ray Stevens, and Barbara Mandrell. That clown hiding behind Ray Stevens in the center photo is Stephen, made-up and dressed-up as the inimitable YoYo.

to work. I'd become the babysitter for the rest of the day." These kids were mostly boys. They knew every corner and cul-de-sac of the amusement park, they'd ridden every ride at least a hundred times a week, and, as Stephen remembers, "they were sitting on the front row for the dad-gone magic show every day, rain or shine.

"It wasn't long before I started being mean to these kids. At first, it was in hopes of getting rid of them." Working on an outdoor stage near the Log Flume ride, Bargatzke devised a "Clatterbox" routine for the kid who was giving him a little too much grief. After blindfolding him and handing him the "special magic box," Stephen would position the kid atop a rock, telling him to hold onto the box no matter what happened. "That rock was right in front of the splashdown area of the Log Flume, and by the time the 'Clatterbox' fell apart, the kid was drenched and washed to the ground. He would be completely soaked, and I'd act totally upset that he broke my box. You'd go to jail for doing that now, but in those days I got away with it."

It seems that the meaner Bargatzke got with the kids at Opryland, the funnier and the more popular his show became. Finally, the kids started begging him to be in the show. "What happened, and the audiences at the park never knew about it, was I put them in my show. They bugged me so much I told them we had to work together. We would meet in the morning and every bit was set up. Some kids would do something in the 10:30 show, others knew they'd be part of a trick in the 11:30 show, and so on, throughout the day." He made them all part of his team, establishing a pattern of how Bargatzke always manages to involve people in his magic.

As Stephen got more serious about his sleight of hand, he realized he didn't want to be the clown all the time. "I gradually got away from the clown face. I did keep the hat and the funny pants, but I realized that I could be funnier without the makeup. I eventually became the character of Stephen."

Also by this time, Bargatzke's skills at reading had dramatically improved, and he was admitted to Trevecca Nazarene University. As mentioned earlier, his performing of magic took a backseat to the acquisition of a college degree. "And during my last two years at college I had 4.0 averages. So, I knew I wasn't stupid, even though that's what I'd been told most of my life."

After graduation from college, Steven continued working comedy clubs and started building a list of corporate show clients. He did this for three years, then decided he wanted to teach school.

"Originally, I wanted to be a preacher, but I was told I still talked funny, so I taught mathematics in middle school in Coopertown, Tennessee. Math was what my magician friend, Tommy Hart, had taught and, as you already know, I did whatever Tommy did." Also the

Tennessee Department of Education offered a little better health insurance and benefits plan than did most comedy clubs.

Bargatzke would teach at Coopertown Elementary School for nine years. And when he first reported to work, he stumbled into a classroom situation that, for most of those nine years, made it difficult to classify Stephen as either a full-time pro educator or a part-time pro comedy magician. "Luckily, I filled a teacher's position who had just retired, yet she wanted to continue part-time teaching." This math teacher substituted whenever Stephen was booked for shows or wanted time off to go to a magic convention.

Tommy Hart had taken Stephen to his first magic convention when he was 20 years old, however, it wasn't until after he gained some pro experience, working comedy clubs and party dates, that Stephen became interested in entering magic convention competitions. "Somebody told me you could charge more money and make more money if you'd won a magic contest. So I entered some. In fact, I entered seven and won five."



PHOTO: MONA SANTOV

Arriving late for the stage contest, Stephen walked in and won first place in close-up instead, at the IBM in Buffalo in 2000.

His string of awards started in 1987, when he became a regular contest winner at the annual World of Wizards one-day gatherings in Tennessee. Following three of those, he won contests at a Midwest Jubilee and a Southeastern Association of Magicians Convention.

Bargatzke's magic convention appearances accelerated after attending a Columbus Magi-Fest in the mid 1990s. "Robert Bengal was one of the judges there, and I fooled him pretty badly. When I walked out he said to

himself, 'Oh, no, a retarded magician... we gotta be nice.' Bob became one of my biggest backers." Bengal insisted that Bargatze perform at the Unconventional Convention, the Winter Carnival, and got him an invitation to Fechter's Close-up Convention. "I was told that's a great honor, but it cost me \$1,500 in expenses for my first trip to Fechter's."

He was soon realizing decent fees for doing bigger conventions, such as the Collectors' Workshop Summit in Washington, D.C., and headlining the IBM Convention in Little Rock. But Stephen considers his fairly recent first place win at the IBM in Buffalo in 2000 to be his convention *coupe de grace*. "I went to Buffalo to be in the stage contest. My flight was canceled and rescheduled, and when I finally got to the hotel I found out they had put me in the close-up contest. I wasn't prepared for that, so I decided to just do my 'Chop Cup' routine. Then I found out there were about ten people doing 'Cups and Balls,' so I changed my mind a few minutes before the contest, and I ended up winning the first place award by just doing a couple of tricks I'd been doing for years." One was the "Fred Kaps Eleven Bill Trick," which he'd learned about from his friend, Charlie Buckner, at those early Nashville Magic Club meetings.

One Sunday in 1997, Stephen shared his experiences of growing up as a special-ed student with a youth group at his church in Nashville. "The wife of the director of the Tennessee Secondary Schools Athletic Association (TSSAA) was there and asked if I would be willing to talk to other youth groups and high school students." He had already done magic shows for the last five years for their "Right Team" summer camp programs. "Now that they had heard 'my story' they wanted me to come work for them full time."

Stephen signed with TSSAA that fall. The first year he took his show out to high schools and church groups, he spoke to 35,000 kids. Last year, he played to 59,000 students. A typical program is 20 minutes of Stephen recounting his struggles while growing up, addressing drug and alcohol abuse, teen-age drinking-and-driving problems, and encouraging positive thinking, and there's 20 minutes of his comedy magic.

Right up front, knowing that the kids are saying to themselves, "He sure talks strange," Stephen tells them about the dog bite. "I let them know I had the kind of plastic surgery that makes you real, real handsome. The doctors took skin from other parts of my body and build it onto my face, and after the six years of re-constructive surgery, I can honestly say most of my face is my butt."

In telling about his unhappy life with alcoholic parents, he convinces the kids that he's not bitter about it, but thankful it eventually made him a better person. "When I talk about why they should stay in school, I tell them to just go do it! Quit blaming others!" Stephen relates how he was punished in Catholic school just because he was left-handed. If a nun saw him pick up anything with his left hand, he had to stand in front of the

class while the nun hit the back of his hand with a ruler ten times. He was forced to learn to write, eat, and drink with his right hand. "But I let the kids know that I'm over that, and today, I'm ten times a better magician because I can do sleight of hand with both hands. So, I let them know that I could cry about it or say, 'Thank you, nuns.'"

Often, Bargatze shifts the focus of his program to the importance of respecting others, which gives him the opportunity to tell of his supportive family. "I tell the kids how I didn't have many friends growing up in school. I only had one girl friend, and I didn't meet her until the eighth grade. I used to write little notes that asked, 'Do you like me?' It took about 17 of them, but it worked. She's now my wife." Carol and Stephen have been married 26 years, and have three children. "The youngest is a

daughter named Abigail, who's 14 and a freshman in high school. A son named Derek is 19 and doing everything I wanted to do — he's studying to go into the ministry and be a Christian psychologist. And our oldest son, Nathan, is 22 and is in the Second City comedy group in Chicago. He's very funny, funnier than I am.

Recently, Bargatze hired Matthew Grover, a magician from West Virginia who he met at a Columbus Magi-Fest, to be his manager. "When we set up the schedules for the TSSAA programs, there are numerous meetings with school principals and athletic directors in September and October, but by November, the year is booked. Matt is the one who coordinates all that.

"This year, our contract is not with TSSAA, but it's with the Tennessee Department of Health. I remember when I asked for this particular grant, I originally wrote it for \$80,000. Then they told me that they had \$150,000. So, I said, 'Okay, we can do that.' All that for doing some 120 magic shows and sharing my story with these kids." As long as the shows are in the state of Tennessee, Steven Bargatze's show is "free" to any school, public or private, that wants to book it. "Those 120 shows a school year

may seem like a lot, but when you're crisscrossing the state, sometimes doing three or four a day, they fly by."

In addition to his state-sponsored programs, Stephen performs numerous shows for Students Against Destructive Decisions and the National Federation of High Schools. And he's always getting on a plane to go do sales meetings and conference shows for his steady corporate clients such as Sprint, American General Contractors, Gaylord Entertainment, Bateville Casket Company, and the Country Music Association.

When asked about his plans for the future, Bargatze tells of his goal to settle down and perform in a venue where people would come specifically to see his show. "It could be a theater in Branson or in a theme park like Dollywood or, heck, a showroom in Las Vegas. There would be some other acts in the show, like my ventriloquist friend, Stephen Knowles, and crazy, banjo-playing Todd Charles. But it would be at a place where people would say, 'We've come here to have a good time and laugh and play with Stephen Bargatze and his fun friends.'" ♦



PHOTO: ROBIN BAKER