

PEOPLE AND PLACES IN VEGAS:

Wonderground brings the magic — for two more weeks

By Melissa Arseniuk

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Ten dollars doesn't go far in a town like Las Vegas, but the all-you-can-eat buffet of magic and mysticism at Jeff McBride's Wonderground makes the standard casino \$9.99 steak, salad, baked potato and draft beer deal almost look like a rip-off.

The club's low cover and magical offerings make the magic-themed nightclub one of the best entertainment deals in town.

Walking into Wonderground is like stepping into a parallel universe where mysticism is the currency and magicians reign supreme. Green lasers dart across the dark room and a pair of curvaceous belly dancers perform onstage while a fortuneteller reads Hindu tarot cards and magicians from around the world work the room.

"This is the only place in town that you can see close-up magic. No smoke and mirrors, just talent," McBride says.

A collection of magicians – good magicians, at that – perform illusions from 9:30 p.m. until 2 a.m. every Friday and Saturday night. Other artists and performers also showcase their crafts at the club; you can even have your tarot cards read.

About a dozen magicians perform at Wonderground on a typical Friday or Saturday night.

"And that's the ones who were booked," McBride says.

The club is more than a showcase for magicians; it's a microscope. Most of the illusions are so-called "sleight of hand" demonstrations performed up-close and personal.

Audiences huddle around the tables set up across what might otherwise be used as a dance floor to witness magic as it's performed before their eyes.

The small club transports visitors from the stale surrounds of the Palace Station casino floor to a place where high rollers don't play cards; they do tricks with them.

Make no mistake, this is not your typical Vegas nightclub.

Forget the latest designer clubwear – monochromatic black is the latest and only fashion at Wonderground.

The club replaces go-go dancers with belly dancers and while there is a DJ spinning all night long -- he's a magician, too, and works a few illusions into his techno-trace set.

Wonderground is a refuge for magicians and magic fans. Aspiring illusionists get to watch as some of the best up-and-comers and industry legends perform side-by-side. Strip headliners like Lance Burton, Criss Angel and Keith Barry have unwound at Wonderground after their own magic shows let out.

The club is rarely packed and it usually doesn't take long to get a drink. While the music is high-energy, it isn't so loud that you can't hear yourself think.

McBride says the local magician community is still largely underground and while Wonderground provides a venue for industry insiders to gather and hone their craft, it's hardly a high-profile place.

Yet the low-key, pretention-free vibe is a part of the club's appeal. Performers mix and mingle with the crowd and there's a fair chance that the person standing next to you will take the stage at some point in the night. (The odds increase if he or she is dressed in monochromatic black, a.k.a. the international magician's uniform.)

Wonderground opens at 9:30 p.m. Friday and Saturday nights after McBride's show, "Magic on the Edge," clears out.

McBride hosts his post-show party. Dressed in a long, crushed velvet overcoat and zany top hat, the magician resembles a mystical Willy Wonka as he weaves through the crowd.

Videocameras capture the scene and stream live over the Internet at www.streetofcards.tv for out of town magic fans' viewing pleasure.

Online audiences can provide feedback and converse in a special chat room that is projected onto a big screen for all to see.

McBride says people from 17 countries regularly log in to the Webcast and chat.

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