



PHOTOS: RICHARD FAVERY, BECKETT STUDIOS



THE *Many Spaces* OF Jeff McBride



BY RORY JOHNSTON

When Jeff McBride was a child, he turned his bedroom closet into a magical environment by plastering the walls with every magical image he could get his little hands on. He proudly displayed all his magic props within the confines of this customized setting, like a miniature museum, and it was into this unusual space that he would invite his friends, one at a time, to watch his first magic shows.

The years passed. Needing a larger space for his growing audience, he morphed his basement into a magical theater, complete with stage and bed-sheet curtains. He promoted his underground shows by copying images in magic catalogues to create posters, which he stapled to neighborhood trees.

Perhaps it was in his blood: The book that he read at eight years old that had drawn him into this fateful hobby was *The Golden Book of Magic*, whose author, “The Great Merlini,” turned out to be his aunt’s father, Clayton Rawson. In any case, Jeff always instinctively felt that magic should be presented in a setting that was out of the ordinary.

Many more seasons came and went. Jeff grew as a performer, evolving in many ways, but his feeling about performing in extraordinary surroundings persisted. When he decided to share his knowledge with others and become a teacher, a conventional school was out of the question. Instead he invited his students to gothic castles and “enchanted forests” for adventures of learning and in-depth exploration of the art.

According to Jeff, those quests for deeper meaning in the art of magic began rather selfishly.

“I wanted to get Eugene Burger away from a magic convention and sit down with him for four or five days,” he said with a laugh. “So I suggested a retreat for magicians — no telephone, no televisions, no bar, just cabins in the woods where we could sit outside under trees, surrounded by nature, and talk.”

The first group, in 1991, included Lisa Menna, Vito Lupo, Jade, Robert Neale, Patrick Martin, Bryce Kuhlman, and others. There was no dealer’s room or events, just intimate sessions, discussions, and reflection. At night, they presented Adventure Theater, where the participants followed clues on a quest to get to a mysterious location.

“It was fun, and it grew over the years. The people who came to it told us what it was to become.” Jeff paused reflectively. “But it grew too big — over 100 people — and we realized that we didn’t want to do that anymore. We didn’t want to run around to events and shows.”

It was time for a new place. In 2001, McBride went on yet another space odyssey. Like so many other performers, he felt the sultry siren song of Las Vegas, but a glitzy theater



or smoky lounge would never mesh with his unique sensibility and desire for originality, so he created the Wonderdome: an inflatable theater inside a warehouse. It was truly a unique environment and ideal for housing part of The McBride Magic & Mystery School, a mentoring facility for those interested in the magical arts. The school, which also operates out of his home (another unique space known as The McBride House of Mystery), offers two-, three-, five-, and seven-day programs and private coaching. Class size is limited — a two-day class on stage magic ranges from six to fifteen people — to allow for the hands-on approach and attention to detail.

“We’re interested in refining presentation, scripting, costuming, music, and business skills, including marketing and Internet,” said Jeff. “We provide training in close-up, stage, mentalism, story-telling magic, and magic philosophy.”

To do this, he works with a faculty that reads like a who’s who of mystical arts, including Eugene Burger, Alan Ackerman, and Jamy Ian Swiss in the area of close-up; mentalism with Ross Johnson; and even Grand Illusions with the Pendragons.

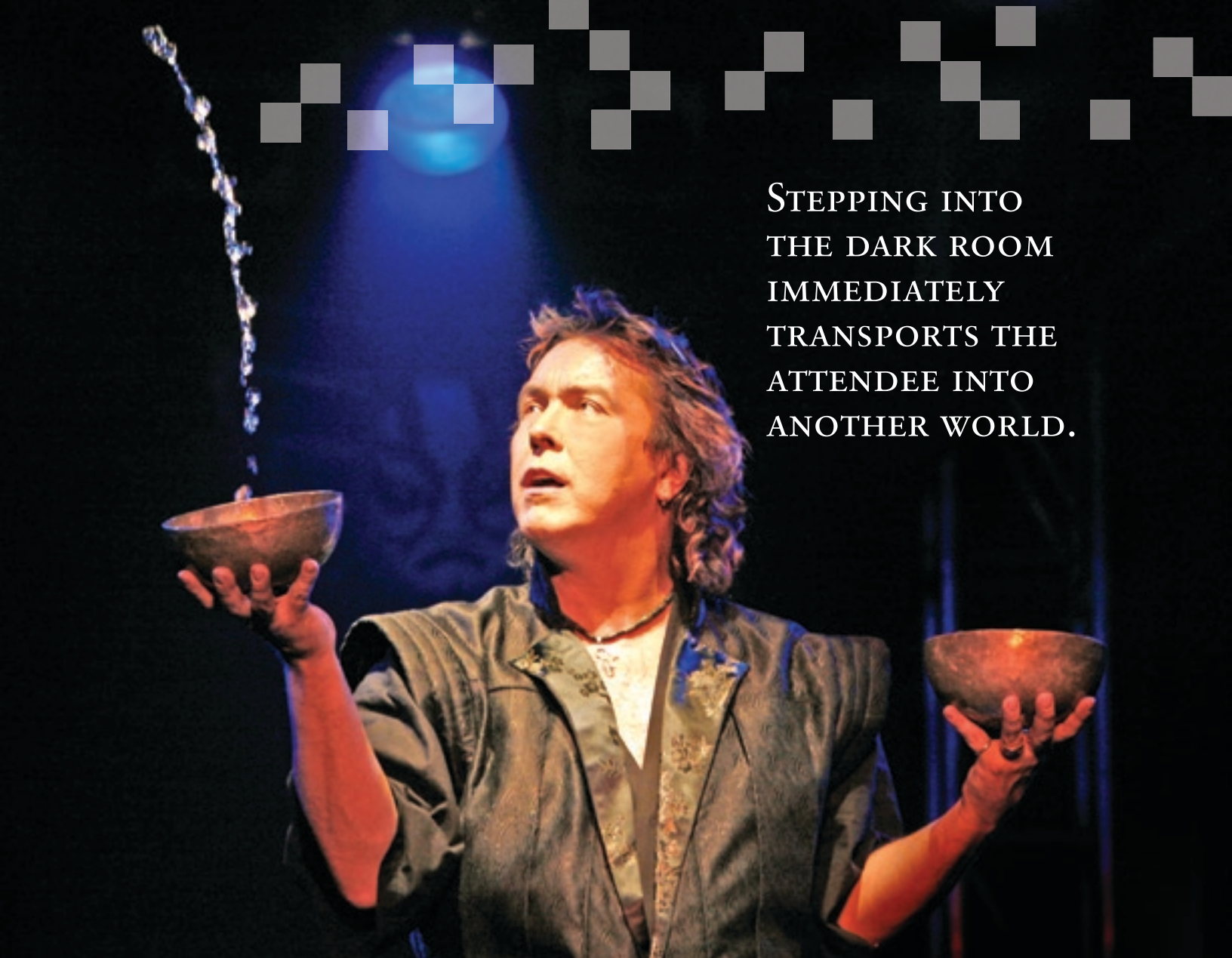
“Most students are non-professional enthusiasts in their thirties and forties, who are getting back into magic. They have successful careers and are either looking to transition into magic or use it as a special hobby or pastime. We work with bright teens who are into magic competitions. We get a lot of women because it’s a very intimate and safe place where they don’t get hit on by a bunch of guys.” Plus there are special classes focusing on women, taught by Abbi Spinner McBride, Jeff’s wife.

The Wonderdome was not only a great place for stage magic classes, but a cool place to party. Add in 360-degree projections, interactive art, live music, and a deejay, and you had a room with a vibe like no other. Jeff is a man who loves to share the good times, so he began producing monthly events. Because of local zoning laws, he was unable to open his gatherings to the general public, limited to a private mailing list, holding them under the radar. It seemed limiting and, after three years, the Wonderdome closed. But what about all those people out there who loved magic and had no place to go to share the wonder with others?

Fear not: Jeff McBride has a new space!

In August of 2008, McBride opened a show in Las Vegas at the Palace Station Hotel & Casino. When one goes to see *Magic at the Edge*, he or she is greeted at the door by an eight-foot, masked samurai. Stepping

Scenes from Magic at the Edge: Melanie Cramer transforms, Jordan Wright rubbernecks, a bizarre masked moment, and McBride & Co. prepare to create a snowstorm.



STEPPING INTO
THE DARK ROOM
IMMEDIATELY
TRANSPORTS THE
ATTENDEE INTO
ANOTHER WORLD.

into the dark room immediately transports the attendee into another world. The stage is decorated with kimonos, fans, and other items that suggest a heavy Asian influence. There is a large McBride poster displayed on one side. The walls, floor, tables, and every person in the room are painted with thousands of tiny pinpoints of green laser light. A tall, thin man in a bowler hat wanders about with a parasol that appears to be mutilated. A number of other oddly dressed people populate this place, and with some, it is unclear if they are a calculated part of the preshow ambiance or just a gathering of McBride's eclectic and eccentric followers. Jeff himself works the room, part host and part entertainer, as he performs close-up magic illuminated by a small spotlight embedded in his top hat. New-age music plays, and bubbles float lazily through the air. Lights and rainbows appear at fingertips. It's a fitting mood-setter to what is to follow.

The 75-minute stage show begins at 7:30. For those familiar with the show Jeff presented in Atlantic City, much of this pre-

sentation is similar, but McBride strives to constantly experiment, so any performance of his is a constantly morphing entity. It begins with the introduction of Jordan Wright, who performs a silent water-in-newspaper routine, looking a bit like Stan Laurel befuddled by the lack of a teacup. Jordan then slips into emcee mode and introduces a segment from a documentary film about Jeff. Both film and host make it perfectly clear to those who aren't in the know that they are about to see one of magic's best.

Jeff opens his show with his trademark "Master of Masks" manipulation act. This sequence features the fast-paced production, vanish, color-change of a variety of harlequin masks, concluding with a mask that changes from tragedy to comedy to Jeff himself. Now revealed and smiling, he does a sequence with Jordan and assistant Melanie Cramer, featuring a Head Twister, Torch Through Arm, and a Botania flower production. After a bit of card fanning, two stylized geishas usher us into the world of Japanese kabuki theater,

where Jeff transforms into a samurai who produces ribbons, spider web-like streamers, and the classic snowstorm.

The next portion of the show is Jeff's deceptively simple and remarkably powerful Miser's Dream routine, in which he initiates a young boy from the audience into the world of magic, mentoring him, allowing him to become the star, then passing on the magic — symbolized by the ceremonial presentation of exa magic wand to the honored and thrilled apprentice. One of the highlights of this sequence is what may be the most artistic, gracious, and devious way ever to get a volunteer onstage — all done with a few taps on a silver bucket.

This is followed with a short routine based on martial arts and mind over matter. After a knife is buried into Jeff's arm and pulled out several times without consequences, things get creepy as Jordan talks about dreams — and nightmares. McBride covers his assistant with a black sheet, ties her up, and pierces her with three swords. She is then unwrapped



to reveal an angel, who folds Jeff into her wings, only to change him into Jordan. Jeff reappears in the middle of the audience, blowing a whistle.

We now delve into the world of the shaman and primitive, basic magic that embraces man's relationship to nature, represented by the simple element of water. McBride's vignette of a lone, thirsty man calling to the gods for rain and getting his desire to excess is a simple, theatrically elegant performance piece, the likes of which one would not see any other performer present.

This is followed by Jeff's presentation of a classic Linking Rings routine, set to music and inspired by the Native American hoop dance.

Jeff wants his show to be illuminating and now it is — literally. He presents a d'lightful act featuring the manipulation of light bulbs — appearing, vanishing, floating, swallowed, and strung. This high-tech sequence is an extreme departure from his earthy character of only moments before, but it is — flashy.

McBride made his name as the Master of Masks and, as happens to so many performers with a signature character, he found himself put into a creative box early in his career. Being seen as "the guy with the masks" was both a blessing and a curse. No performer wants to be pigeonholed, especially not one as diverse and constantly exploring as Jeff. His final routine, Transformation, is introduced as "autobiographical." In this mini-drama he finds himself trapped in a box that is invisible to others but very real to him. He fights to escape the confines of his self-made prison, but when he does and looks in a mirror he sees only a man in a white-face mask staring back at him. When he wipes away the mask, it leaves behind only a blank personality — a nobody. He tries to cover the mask, but it has a mind of its own and will not stay subdued. He fights it, pushes it away, but it flies back to him, stronger than he. He tries to remove the covering, peeling it away, only to reveal another mask beneath. He desperately tears that one off, and another, and another, until all that remains is a grinning skull. Tormented by this vision in the mirror, the man tears out his eyes and digs even deeper below the surface, finally revealing a robot, mechanically going through the motions. The mask and robot are torn from deep within him (represented by a Mylar mouth coil). At the conclusion, the desperate man shatters the mirror. Does that solve the problem or simply allow him to avoid confrontation with it? The answer isn't provided. Perhaps we need to look at Jeff's life for the answer. Perhaps we need to look at our own.

Scott Hitchcock, Jeff and Chris Randall, Tarot card-reader Morganne, Eugene Burger, Jeff with drop-in Robin Leach, deejay Leo Diaz, and Johnny Thompson at the close-up table.



[Back row] Paul Draper, William Raymond as Foo-Dog the Samurai, Zamora the Torture King; [middle row] George Millward, Johnny Thompson, Scott Hitchcock, Jeff McBride, Melanie Cramer, maitre'd Christian Doleshall, production manager Tony Lizzio, Chris Randall; [front row] Buster Balloon, Jordan Wright, deejay Leo Diaz, Tommy Wind.

Jeff's encore demonstrates why he is listed in *Guinness World Records* three times, including for "The World's Fastest Hands." Cards appear, vanish, bounce off the floor, and fly into the air with enough skill to amaze any audience and drive magicians in the house to their feet with appreciation.

But the show is not over, not by a long shot. You see, it's time to introduce yet another new Jeff McBride space: a magical nightclub dubbed The Wonderground. As soon as the *Magic At the Edge* show concludes on Friday and Saturday nights, Jeff shifts from headliner to host, inviting the audience to stick around for a unique magical experience. As he moves outside the theater entrance to greet new fans and sign autographs, a section of the audience seating is quickly cleared away to form a dance floor. Close-up tables on either side at the front of the stage are illuminated, with one of them enhanced by big-screen video projection. A movie screen drops down center stage while an animated film comes alive with swirling images. A deejay begins to set up on one side of the stage and soon intelligent lights swirl about the room while a mix of '80s and techno music gently pulses the air. Two young ladies in lingerie — the "Mojo-a-Go-

Go Girls" — dance on the stage overlooking the dance floor. A balloon artist takes up one area at the rear of the theater and twists latex into massive sculptures. A tarot card reader spreads out her embroidered tablecloth, lights a candle, and deals out fortunes, transforming one of the booths into her own private reading room. An artist sets up an easel, produces a canvas, and begins to paint — a tree. A bar opens in the rear of the room, and within ten minutes the space has transformed from theater to nightclub.

Like a cruise director at a Middle Earth convention, Jeff reenters his new space, greeting his guests and ultimately calling attention to one of the close-up tables. Enthusiastically, he introduces one of the evening's special guests. In the first few weeks of the club's young life, these have included Johnny Thompson, Armando Lucero, Eugene Burger, Scott Hitchcock, Chris Kenner, Chris Randall, Jason England, Paul Draper, Steve Dacri, and other recognizable names. The atmosphere is amazingly casual, as if friends had simply dropped by and been urged to pull out a pocket illusion or two — which is exactly the situation. These are, for the most part, not paid performers, just friends of McBride who like the idea of a magical place to hang

out and are willing to support the notion with an occasional display of their rare talent.

There is no cover charge for those who paid to see McBride's stage show; they are invited to stay for free. "It's an add-on to build our early crowd," he explained, "because for any nightclub that's a challenge. The stage show guarantees that we will have 50 to 100 people in the room to build that crowd. They are welcome to stay as we change over the room, or get a hand stamp and come and go as they please." Others pay a ten-dollar admission to the club, with that fee cut in half if they wear a costume.

A few hours in the club will most assuredly give any patron numerous chances to meet a variety of real-life working magicians. The official maitre'd, Christian Doleshall, is dressed in a smoking jacket. His wife, Erin, is draped in a glittered gown, reminiscent of the Copacabana Club's ill-fated Lola. Together they wander about the room, greeting guests and adding to the off-kilter atmosphere. Later, as The Dymonds, the couple performs a campy stage show and some comedy with what has to be the most expensive close-up trick ever designed, utilizing a large number of multiplying hundred-dollar bills. It's a kind of family show — Erin is also



[From right] Jeff McBride, Abbi Spinner-McBride, and Eugene Burger teach a Master Class at the McBride home in Las Vegas, August 2008.

the company graphic designer, Jordan is the company manager and the editor of many of the avant-garde films shown on the screen, deejay Leo Diaz is also a magician who can be seen manipulating CDs throughout the evening, and Paul Draper and Scott Hitchcock are equally comfortable in front of an audience or working as backstage support. All are readily available and easily approachable — they clearly enjoy making new friends from both near and far. Scott, who has been working with Jeff on and off for over fifteen years, says, “We’re hoping it becomes not only a destination for local magicians, but also for the thousands of magicians and magic enthusiasts who visit Vegas. They’re not only a target market, but a talent base to draw from. It’s a venue where the roster of performers is selected by a knowledgeable magician, not by corporate executives or casino management who may not be qualified to judge the value of the acts.”

The idea of a place for magicians to play and work together thrills McBride. “It’s not about me; there’s a community of magicians who are co-creating this. I’m setting up this playground of opportunity, and it’s they who are making it work. I finally got my own show open in town, and it came with this wonderful venue. So, let’s keep this party going and make opportunities for other people!” In other words, *share* the space.

Some of those who share the space are from the master class at The McBride Mystery School. The students are observed while working the room and later evaluated by

their mentors on such areas as approach, engaging the audience, technique, and more. “In this way,” McBride explained, “we’re creating a laboratory: live, boots-on-the-ground, real-world experience. And we’re doing that with all of our different classes.”

There are plans for a number of Wonderground theme weekends based on those classes. “We’re featuring ‘Magic and Martial Arts’ with FISM winner Aaron Crow’s samurai act; Tom Meseroll, the author of *Magus, Master of Martial Magic*; Bryce Kuhlman, a magician and Kung Fu expert; and a demonstration by the Shaolin Kung Fu School,” Jeff says, excitedly. “We’re also doing ‘Magic and Medicine,’ which is doctors, healers, occupational therapists, counselors, psychiatrists, and other people in the medical industry who use magic in their practice or as an accent to their speaking engagements. A mentalism weekend will feature Ross Johnson, Eugene Burger, and Luke Jermy.”

The Wonderground’s “Street Magic” theme is scheduled to be held on the same weekend as the Las Vegas Renaissance Faire. “We’ll take our magicians into that environment to do in-period busking, then we shift to the Wonderground to do high-tech ultralounge magic, thereby traveling from the past to the present and future.”

A good example of this valuable and unique mentoring process took place the second weekend when Eduardo, an elegant young performer from Spain, took the stage and wowed the crowd with flawless card manipulation. There are many performers

whose egos would never permit someone to share their stage if the guest did anything remotely similar to what they themselves featured. Not so McBride. Not only was he not intimidated by any comparisons anyone might make, he was excited to be able to give one of his students a unique opportunity.

“For somebody like Eduardo to step onstage in Las Vegas and perform for laymen and magicians was a thrill of his lifetime,” said Jeff, clearly pleased by the enthusiastic ovation that followed the performance. “It’s a dream for some of our students to be able to say, ‘I was good enough to play Vegas!’ Because we don’t let people hit the floor unless they’re good enough.”

As the night goes on, a continuing parade of magicians does “hit the floor,” as small battery-operated spotlights are clipped to the edges of close-up-matted tables and flashlights held aloft by spectators illuminate one-handed cuts in miniature pools of light. *Guests* begin to produce decks of cards, and the next thing you know, the place looks eerily like a magic convention late at night, small crowds gathered here and there gasping and applauding with wonder at impromptu artists.

Jeff loves all this, of course. He has hopes that the Wonderground will become *the* place for magicians — both local and out-of-town visitors — to hang out. “Lance Burton came by the other night and is bringing his cast back. Criss Angel was here and intends to come back with his entire posse. We’re going to host an after-party for the cast of *Bite*, which stars a student of mine, Anthony Restivo.”

Paul Draper, who had just finished entertaining a group of fifty or so at the close-up table, added, "We all go to magic clubs, but this is the dream club! The stars of magic come out to perform and hang out. But not only magicians; I'm amazed at how much buzz this is receiving from artists all over the strip. In our first five nights, we've had cast members from *Phantom of the Opera*, *Le Reve*, gondoliers from the Venetian, and even Star Trek the Experience crew members." Of course the latter could show up in full costume and blend right in with this crowd.

One of the aspects of the club this writer appreciated is that the music was not pumped up to the point that a conversation was impossible, like in many dance venues. As I stood in the back of the room talking to Scott Hitchcock, he told me he believes that, if successful, this will be the most unique magic experience Las Vegas has seen since Caesars Magical Empire. He then led me to a close-up table in one corner of the room that was cordoned off by velvet ropes. This, he explained, was the "Magicians Only" area, where secrets may be shared and young students can try out new routines without stressing about revealing sleight of hand to laypeople. In order to get into this area, I was asked to show my pass. Puzzled, I glanced over at Scott. I held no special pass. Then I got it. Taking the deck of cards the host was holding, I did a classic pass. Nodding, Scott unclipped the rope and removed the barrier, acknowledging that I was, indeed, a magician. A few feet away, McBride grinned gleefully, clearly tickled by this little inside joke, then moved across the room again, twirling his cane, boogying across the dance floor, and greeting more guests.

"I'm the master of ceremonies," he said to me later in a quiet moment. "M-C-Bride. I take that role more seriously than most people. I know that each evening when those doors open up, it is an initiation for people. First-timers are very disoriented. It's my job to orient them and to make elegant transitions between the astounding variety of activities. I am both host and emcee." And with a smile, he hits the stage like a ringmaster stepping into the center ring, grabs the crowds attention and introduces tonight's midnight stage-show guest: Zamora, the Torture King!

Party on, magicians! ♦

Jeff McBride — Magic at the Edge plays nightly at Sound Trax nightclub, Palace Station Hotel & Casino at 7:30 p.m. The show runs Wednesdays through Mondays, until Thanksgiving. Tickets are \$49.95. Jeff McBride's Wonderground opens immediately after the show on Friday and Saturday, and the party continues until 2 a.m. Cover charge for the Wonderground is free with show tickets or \$10 without. 



WE ALL GO TO MAGIC
CLUBS, BUT THIS IS
THE DREAM CLUB.
STARS OF MAGIC
COME TO PERFORM
AND HANG OUT.