

MCBRIDE

MAGIC AT THE EDGE

BY MICHAEL CLOSE
PHOTOS BY MARCUSS O'BRIEN

The drive from Las Vegas to Laughlin is unremarkable. Once the sprawl of the ever-expanding Las Vegas suburbs recedes in your rear view mirror, the scenery is constant: lots of dirt, small rocks, scraggly vegetation, and low mountains off in the distance. Laughlin is nestled in a bend of the Colorado River, about 100 miles southeast of Las Vegas. Kingman, Arizona (of *Route 66* fame) lies to the east; Needles and Lake Havasu City are to the south. Interstate 40 allows easy access for traffic from southern California.

Before 1966 there was no Laughlin, Nevada. The area was called South Pointe, being located in the southernmost part of Nevada's Clark County. It developed as a community for those who had worked on the Davis Dam, which was completed in 1953. Most of the housing was located on the Arizona side of the Colorado River. The Nevada side consisted of two clubs, the Riverside Bait Shop and the Bobcat Club, and some fishing camps.

In 1964, Don Laughlin was flying his Cessna over South Pointe. He envisioned the growth of the area as a tourist destination. "From up high you could see Kingman, Bullhead City, Needles. And I thought I could make a casino go here." Laughlin, a Minnesotan, had moved to Las Vegas in the late 1950s when Minnesota authorities made gambling a felony and cracked down on the slot machines he had installed in restaurants, local clubs, and bars. He bought a casino, the 101 Club, which he ran successfully for several years. Against the advice of his friends, Laughlin bought the Riverside Bait Shop, turning it into the Riverside Resort. And Laughlin, Nevada was born. (The city of Laughlin got its name when a U.S. Postal Service inspector asked Laughlin to give a name to the area post office in order to receive mail. Laughlin suggested the name "Riverside and Casino," but the postal inspector in turn suggested "Laughlin" because of their common Irish heritage.)

In the 40 years since its founding, Laughlin, Nevada has grown dramatically. It boasts 11 resorts and casinos, hosts five million visitors a year, and ranks just behind downtown Las Vegas in gaming revenues (\$621.18 million in 2005). Although Laughlin offers a more laid-back vaca-

tion experience than its big sister city to the northwest, it still provides its patrons with top-notch shows featuring "name" entertainment—albeit names that register more with an older crowd (Debbie Reynolds, Bill Cosby, ZZ Top, Kenny Rodgers, Wayne Newton). Happily, magic shows are still a part of casinos' entertainment rosters.

In late 2006, the Edgewater Resort and Casino brought in Jeff McBride and Company (Abbi McBride, Jordan Wright, and Jayson Morrison) for a three-week run in the newly remodeled Kokopelli's Showroom. Titled *McBride: Magic at the Edge*, the show ran six days a week (Thursday was dark), with two performances on Saturday, Sunday, and Monday. (If the two shows on Monday schedule seems odd to you, it was new to McBride as well. The reason for it is that many visitors make their visit to Laughlin into a long weekend, staying over on Monday and returning home on Tuesday.) The show came about through a serendipitous bit of networking. McBride recalls how it happened: "Guy Laliberté from the Cirque brought me up to the opening of one of his shows. I met the general manager of the Edgewater in one of the lounges; Abbi had a drink with his wife. The general manager gave me his business card. A few days later I sent him a kit. About a week later he called me and asked, 'Do you want to do three weeks?' It happened that fast. You can market, you can send press kits out, you can do emails, you can have a web site, but the power of personal contact has been one of the lucky charms in my career."

My wife Lisa and I drove to Laughlin near the end of the run of *Magic at the Edge* and had a chance to watch the show and discuss it with Jeff McBride.

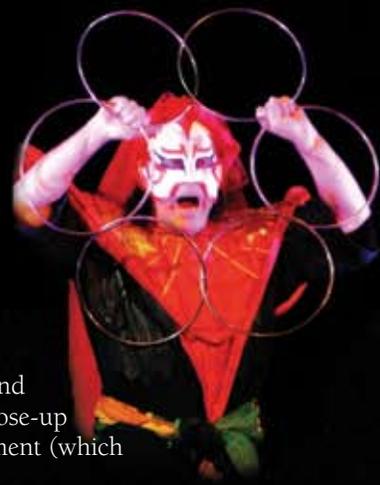
Kokopelli's Showroom in the Edgewater started out as an open-air lounge with a dance floor. Recently, it has been walled in and redecorated. The room seats about 400 people and is functional if not particularly fancy. There are straight-backed chairs arranged and secured into seating rows; a service bar sits in a front corner, and the sound and light booth is in the back, near the entrance door. The stage is small; in fact, it is very small.



There appears to be little or no backstage area at all. One of McBride's strengths, however, is the ability to adapt to the venue, scaling his show up or down to fit the size of the stage and the audience. In big venues, he performs his illusion show; for smaller venues (such as the smaller stages in Europe) the show is built around Jeff's famous Commando Act. At the Edgewater the Commando Act is expanded through the addition of three assistants.

Although the small stage imposes many constraints, it seems to have offered some benefits as well, as Jeff mentioned to me. "We can't get the illusions on the stage—I wish we could. Or do what Ray Anderson did in Ester's Follies down in Austin: he had illusions coming down from the ceiling. I wish we could do that. Maybe next time we'll try to figure out a way to put some illusions in, but the people are really enjoying the sleight-of-hand stuff. A lot of them have seen the bigger illusion shows before; they've seen the Sub Trunk, Interlude, the Sword Basket, Origami, or the Shadowbox. But they haven't seen things like Illumination, the Water Bowls, the Miser's Dream, or the Kabuki stuff. This seems really fresh to them. A lot of these people are from Vegas and come here because of the special deals or packages. They just want to get out of Vegas for a while. They're a pretty magic savvy crowd."

Magic at the Edge actually begins 30 minutes before the start time printed on the tickets. As people settle into their seats and cocktail waitresses scurry about taking drink orders, the McBrides, Wright, and Morrison stroll around the showroom, performing close-up magic. This pre-show entertainment (which





also includes mentalism, juggling, and two-person bits of business) is a great idea. It not only warms up the crowd, it also provides the audience a chance to meet, interact, and form a favorable opinion about the cast. The performers get the opportunity to develop and expand their repertoires. "Before every show the company goes over any new routines. So if Abbi is going to put in a new routine we can see if it needs any help, or if I'm putting in a new Egg Bag routine I can run it by everyone to get feedback. This also helps avoid duplication, so we're not all doing the same routine."

Jeff got the idea of interacting with the audience before the show from watching comedian Alan King in the 1980s. King would stand at the *maitre d'* booth at the front of the showroom, with a drink in one hand and a cigar in the other. He welcomed everyone into the room. Jeff recalls, "I would imagine that no one remembered any of the jokes Alan King told that night, but they *all* remembered that he stood there and said hello to them personally. They came there to see *him*, and they know that *he* saw them. And he had a little bit of a conversation with them."

McBride incorporated this pre-show greeting/magic idea in his lectures and in shows in Atlantic City. He also established this procedure in *The Sultan's Palace* at Caesar's Magical Empire. It has proved to be a very successful approach to establishing rapport with an audience. "The longer I'm in the business, and the more I grow, I think the key is being accessible," McBride commented to me. "People like accessibility. Some people may be impressed by star appeal and snob appeal, but I've never been. I've always been most impressed by big stars when they get off their camel in the marketplace and meet the people who put them there."

As people enter Kokopelli's Showroom they see that the room is abuzz with activity. This energy builds right up until show time. Jordan Wright moves on stage and performs an intro-

ductory rope trick, and then the show kicks off with a bang, three major hunks that follow each other in quick succession: *Masks* (a McBride classic), *Voodoo People* (the *Head Twister* and other effects using body parts), and some *Card Manipulations* (card fans). The pacing of these three acts was influenced by Horace Goldin, who would start his show by bombarding his audience with one illusion after another. This approach shoves a lot of energy into the room—in the same way a rock band might do so by playing two songs back-to-back before

talking to the crowd.

Jeff's thoughts on the opening card manipulation segment are enlightening. "I want to do a little bit of manip up front to establish some hand skill; high rollers really like it, magicians want to see that stuff. Quite frankly, I'm playing a little trick on the audience. I want them to think that this is all the card stuff in the show. So by the end of the show they think, 'Gosh, I hope he's going to do his card act.' I want them to crave that, not expect that it's coming, since I do it as a bit of an encore. So I do a little manipulation, and I don't double up on it. It gives me a bit of a breather after the rapid-fire opening routines. I also use it to make a lot of eye contact with the audience, the same way that Mac King uses his opening rope trick. I'm very occupied with the magic during *Masks* and *Voodoo People*. During the opening manip segment I can relax and size up the audience. In fact, in the show you saw, I had a problem spectator, and I identified him early on in the show." (More about this problem spectator a bit later.)

Abbi comes out and plays a drum, accompanying her husband as he performs the *Chinese Sticks* with rap patter. I'm sure this sounds goofy; and truth be told, it is a little goofy. In fact, during this bit 50 Cent



called me and told me to tell Jeff to cut it out. Jeff's thoughts on the bit: "That routine establishes a live music vibe. I prefer live music in the show, and I don't think people expect this type of routine from me. It's funny. They expect me to be spooky Jeff. I like tricks with rhyming patter. I always have."

A large Kabuki-influenced hunk follows, featuring a fan dance, the Linking Rings, and the Snowstorm. In the opening segment of the show, the influence of Japanese culture on Jeff's magic is implied; in this segment it is explicit. The costumes, the masks, the music, and the colorful staging add to the production value of the show, and it was obvious that the audience enjoyed this segment very much.

Next is one of my favorite McBride routines—The Miser's Dream with the kid assistant. There were no children in the show I saw (it was a special show for the Edgewater's premier players), so Jeff had to use an adult. Some of the charm is lost when using an adult, but the routine is still very strong. It was during this routine that the problem spectator mentioned earlier became very vocal and a potential problem for the show. He was not intentionally trying to be a disruption; he was just very drunk and boisterous. Jeff handled the situation very well, shutting the drunk down without heckler stoppers or embarrassment.

[You may not immediately realize how important a lesson in audience management this was. McBride was working for an audience of high rollers. If Jeff had come down hard on the disruptive spectator, it could have come back to haunt him. You don't want to put a casino in a position of choosing between placating an angry high roller or backing the play of a performer who was trying to keep control of the show. Far too often, money wins out and the performer loses.]

After an interlude that features more drumming, rhythmic and percussive fans, a mouth coil, and a dancing spectator, Jeff performs another of my favorite pieces, the Water Bowls. Jeff learned this beautiful and very mysterious production of water from two empty bowls from a magician in France who was originally from Poland. He saw him at the Cirque du Paris in the early 1980s. McBride fell in love with the piece, and he traded the magician the Miser's Dream routine for it, eventually adding the evocative staging and the music cues. In the show I saw, its performance received audible gasps from the crowd.

Abbi comes to the fore in the next part of the show, which features a discussion of Harry Houdini. She normally performs an Arm Twister stunt (with audience participation) and a Straight Jacket Escape. Because her back was bothering her the night I saw the show, the Losander Floating Table was substituted.

The next segment is titled Illumination, and I had never seen it before. It is a knockout, and I am inca-



pable of conveying just how magical it looks. A very clever fellow Jeff refers to as "The Wizard Gary" built the props. Jeff had been working on manipulating tiny lights that would appear on the ends of fans; Gary constructed the fans Jeff uses and also invented a Rainbow Cane (which produces beautiful light effects when spun) and a Vortex Cane (lights appear and disappear as the spectators dictate).

Illumination is a routine McBride has used at the



Burning Man Festival in northern Nevada. The festival is held outdoors, and many of the events are at night. Illumination is perfect for dark venues, like raves. “The great thing about the Rainbow Cane,” Jeff told me, “is that even if you know how it’s done, it’s still so trippy to watch.” And, unlike the Grateful Dead, it’s terrific even if you’re not stoned.

The next-to-closing piece, *The Mask and Mirror*, is a well-known McBride showpiece. Jeff feared that this piece would be too esoteric for Laughlin audiences, but discovered that they really appreciate it. The robot

also like to take another look at the thing that fooled them the last time.”

Jeff McBride: Magic at the Edge is a valuable addition to the entertainment line-up of the booming little town of Laughlin, Nevada. When the general public gets to see a world-class magic show it benefits all of us. And McBride and company certainly put on a world-class show. If you happen to be in the Vegas area and you have access to wheels, you should definitely make the drive down to Laughlin. You won’t be disappointed. •

mask used in the routine has been updated by the Wizard Gary, and is now timed to the music, so every light goes on and off in exact synchronization. If you watch carefully, you can see that all the changes in the music are reflected in the mask.

Magic at the Edge concludes with the remainder of Jeff’s card manipulation act, tied in to the famous Houdini King of Cards poster. Following on the heels of the very dramatic Mask and Mirror piece, these manipulations have the feel of an encore, and the audience responds very enthusiastically. The entire cast meets and greets the audience as they leave the showroom.

The Edgewater Resort plans on bringing Jeff McBride and Company back to Kokopelli’s Showroom, although at the time of this writing no dates have been set. McBride has very smart ideas about keeping the show fresh for return customers: “When I work casinos year after year, I try to vary the repertoire. Here’s one of the ways I do it: I change the front 40 percent of the show. So as the audience is watching, they think, ‘Oh, that’s new. Oh, that’s new. Oh, *that’s* new. Gee, I hope he does coin production with the little boy.’ So most of the new material goes at the beginning. Then when the audience sees something they’ve seen before, they’re happy about it, because they were hoping to see it. The returning audience wants new stuff, but they’d