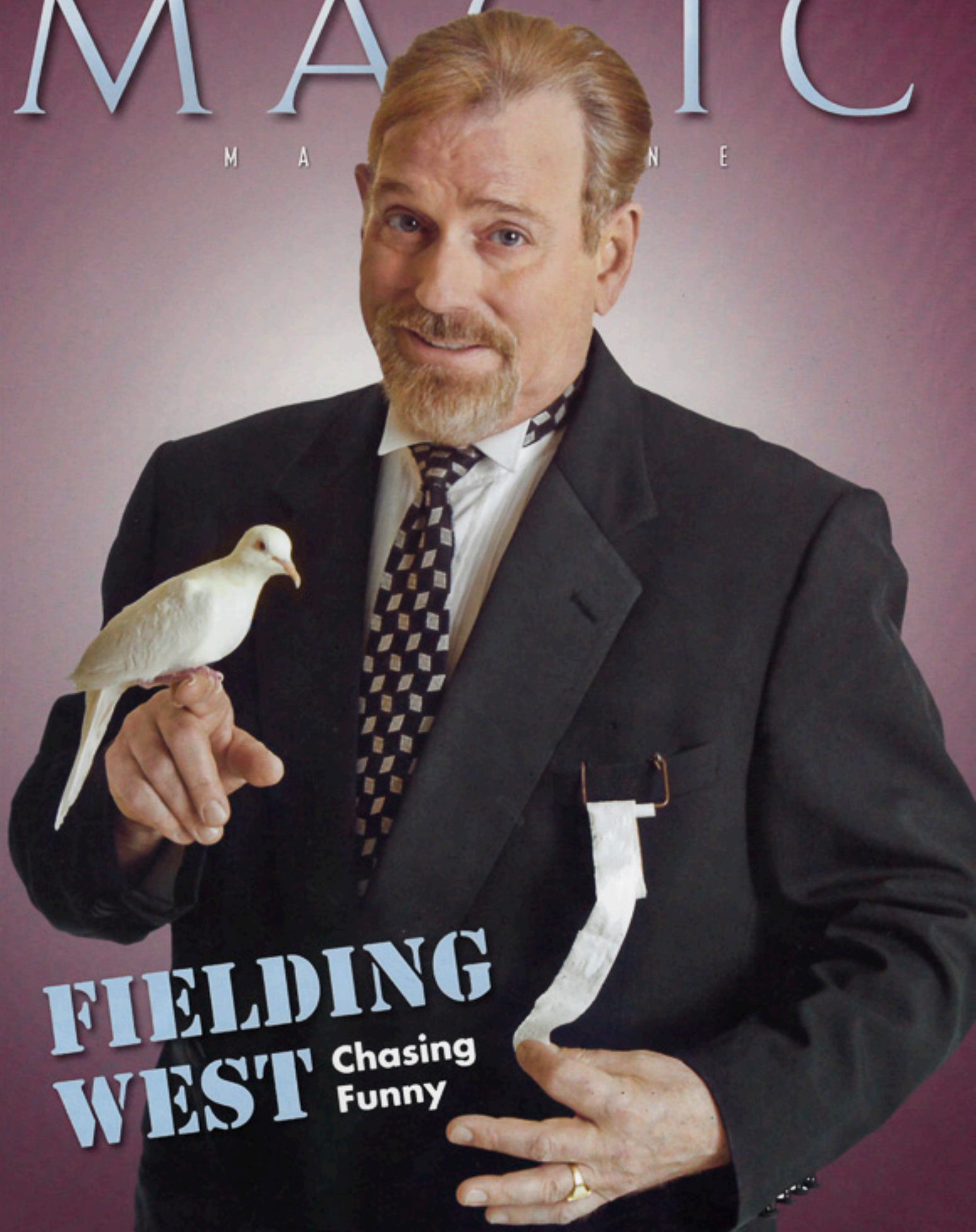


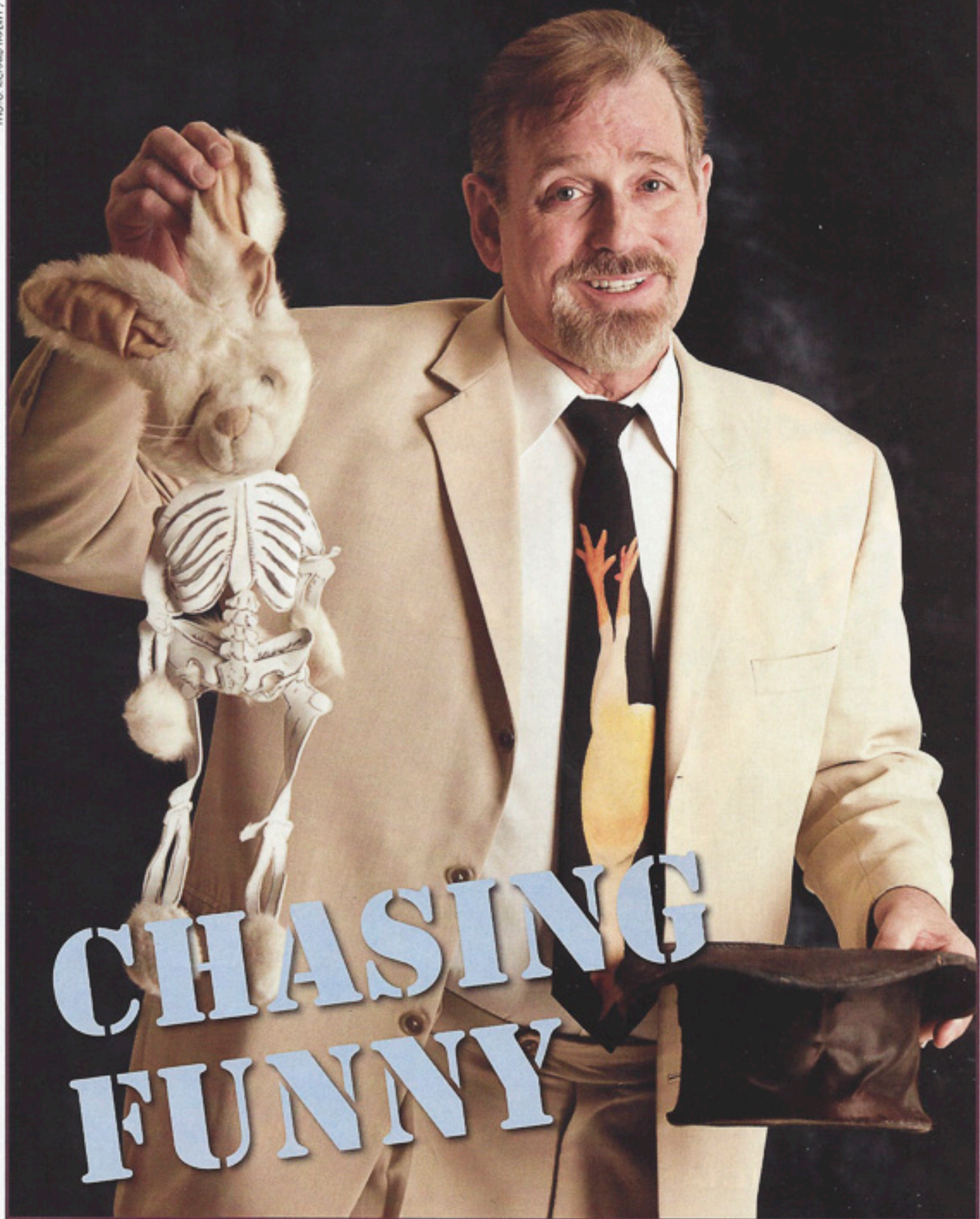
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# MAGIC

M A N E



**FIELDING  
WEST** Chasing  
Funny



# CHASING FUNNY

BY ALAN HOWARD

"I will produce for this audience a 600-pound man-eating Bengal tiger!"

The man onstage covers himself with a cloth. Suddenly, a horrible growling attack is heard. When the cloth is dropped to the floor, the man is again revealed. No tiger is in sight, but the man's clothing has been ripped to shreds.

"That's as close as I'm gonna get," shrugs the tattered Fielding West. But while the giant feline never materializes, plenty of laughs do.

Fielding West was born 62 years ago in Boise, Idaho, after being conceived in Japan, his parents told him, while his father was stationed there with the US Air Force. In what would become typical of Fielding's career, his interest in magic began in a way that has a slight twist from the ordinary. It was his mother who showed young Fielding his first magic: a card trick when he was seven or eight years old, then a wooden paddle with a peg that jumped from hole to hole. As it turned out, Fielding's mother been taught a few tricks when she was a child herself, including the paddle move, using that paddle, which had been hand-carved for her by her magician father.

Fielding's grandfather, Lewis Young, was the real magic fan in the family, an amateur conjuror who worked as an agent for the Santa Fe Railroad. When Fielding was about ten, around 1959, he went out to stay with his grandparents for a summer in Tulare, California. Young showed Fielding some tricks and promised to take the boy to "the place where magicians keep all their secrets." To preserve the mystery just a bit longer, he blindfolded Fielding as they made their way to the spot.

"It was summer in California," recalls West. "It was boiling hot outside, and I was wearing a blindfold mask." Guided sightless down the street, Fielding remembers walking four or five blocks, then being led into a cool building where he heard fans whirring around him. When the blindfold was removed, he was stunned.

"Grandpa, we're in the library!"

The public library, where they were standing in front of a shelf containing a dozen or more books on magic. "The secrets are kept here," explained Grandpa, "and they are safe here because no one reads." Fielding himself was "not a reader" until that point, but he went through the magic books, his grandfather making him learn all the tricks in one before allowing him to start on another. Fielding studied, then did shows for his grandparents in the evenings.

In 1976, Fielding West, age 27, was the creator and host of *Magic Gang*, a weekly half-hour television program in Jacksonville, Florida.

Around the same time, a trip to Disneyland brought a visit to the magic shop there, and Fielding brought home Peter Rabbit Goes to Town — the multiplying sponge bunnies trick — and a small set of multiplying balls.

He continued playing with magic as his family moved around the country, relocating every few years for his father's military work. "It's a great preparation for show business," says Fielding, "as you learn to have no qualms about picking up and moving on."

By 1963, the family had settled in Albany, Georgia. Fielding was in ninth grade there when Beatlemania hit the US and, like many teens of the time, his interest turned to music, particularly the rock-and-roll of the British Invasion bands. As West says, "I was a kid with thick glasses, pimples, and braces;

I figured the one possible way to get girls to notice me was to join a band."

He talked to fellow classmates about a band in his school, but they already had a guitarist, his first choice. They also had a bass player, so he settled for the drums by default.

While he put magic "on the back burner" for a time, his interest in the mysterious and unusual did not disappear. Fielding became intrigued by hypnotism after seeing a stage hypnotist while in high school. When the James E. Strates Carnival came to the area, West was further fascinated. "There was the hypnotist, the lady with elephantitis, 'the Man with Three Eyes and Two Noses,' 'Mr. Electric' shooting sparks across the stage. And for one dollar extra, you could go and see the hermaphrodite. I thought, *You know what? This is for me!*" Fielding kept return-



ing to the carnival, riding his bicycle nine miles each way between the Air Force base and the carnival lot. The carnies let him see the shows for free if he helped clean up afterward, and Fielding was able to learn such arcane skills as fire eating and sword swallowing. These abilities would prove to be surprisingly useful later in life.

By the time he entered Valdosta State College in the fall of 1967, West was accomplished enough as a drummer to have a regular gig in an R&B band, playing two nights a week in the Officers' Club on the Air Force base. Fielding was paid \$50 per night. "I was rich, by college standards," he says.

The Officers' Club was a good gig, but Fielding was a bit put off by the strict admonition to not play any rock music. That was just a small part of his growing dissatisfaction with the status quo and, like many college students of the late '60s, Fielding joined in with protests to initiate change. He joined

Students for a Democratic Society (SDS) and went on antiwar marches — at the same time that his military father began working directly with President Nixon as an advance security agent on Air Force One. Long-haired, mustachioed Fielding was no longer welcome at home.

It was freezing in Washington, DC, when Fielding joined the SDS in a protest against the Vietnam War. Having arrived from Georgia with an inadequate windbreaker, Fielding was miserable in the cold. While marching with the group through the streets of the nation's capital, he happened to spot Al Cohen's Magic Shop. In an instant, his plans changed, and he abandoned the freezing outdoor protest. "I'll see you guys later," he shouted, then he headed for the warmth of the store.

It was Fielding's first visit to a magic shop since his day at Disneyland many years earlier, and he happened in at the perfect time. "Nobody was in the shop because there were

a million-and-a-half demonstrators marching in the streets outside," West says. Great timing for Fielding, but not so good for author Henning Nelms, who had just released a book he was there to promote. Duke Stern was working in the shop that day, and he sold the young protestor a thumb tip, some scarves, and a dye tube. Then Al Cohen said that he should also buy the new book by his friend Henning. Fielding left the shop with a copy of *Magic and Showmanship* and a new focus "that changed everything" in his life.

West went home and practiced, read, and practiced some more. He began doing magic for friends. Another war protest march meant another trip to DC and Cohen's shop. When he did some informal magic at a party, someone put out a top hat on the floor and convinced the guests that the magician should be earning some tips. The hat filled up with about \$200, and Fielding used the money to buy more props — a Milk Pitcher, a Zombie, and a Flying Carpet illusion — and he was on his way to doing even more tricks at the next party.

He also began doing hypnotism stunts, having learned them basically on his own. "I couldn't get anyone to teach me hypnotism," West recalls, "so I started hanging around all the fairs in the South, watching the acts. And I thought, *Oh, I can do this.*"

While earning a degree in psychology, along with taking as many theater classes as he could, Fielding continued to explore hocus pocus and hokum. Heading south to Tallahassee, Florida, he met up with "Dr. Johnson," a self-proclaimed psychic surgeon. Fielding watched the quack physician perform apparent miracles, thinking, *I can do tricks, but this really is magic!* "I thought it was real," says Fielding. "I bought into it hook, line, and sinker." He soon learned that the "doctor" was actually a con man, although prominent psychic investigators were later taken in by the fraud.

Entering graduate school at Florida State University, West's life changed irrevocably thanks to his FSU roommates. They ran a local club called The Down Under, a coffeehouse type of performance space that featured folk music and a small variety of other acts. Having booked a comedy magician for a weekend in November 1973, they asked Fielding to fetch the act from the airport — not because Fielding was also a magician, but because he was the only one who had his own car. Few people had heard of Steve Martin then, but West shuttled him around and watched all four of his shows that weekend. Fielding was impressed not only with Martin's onstage performance, but his offstage antics immediately after the shows. For instance, Steve brought the whole audience outside, blocking the main road, then



—TIMES-UNION PHOTO BY ALLAN WALKER

## A Crazy Way to Toast Marshmallows

But maybe not so for a man who eats fire, swallows swords and makes things and people disappear. Fielding West Jr. is one of 60 Jacksonville area registered magicians. West, who learned sword swallowing in a phone conversation with a Ringling Brothers, Barnum and Bailey performer, calls himself "a cosmic temple jester." To learn more about West and his magic, see story on Page B-7.



[Facing] The first color photo in the Florida Times-Union, 1976. [Above] Fielding in college, 1973. The cast of *Fielding West & Company*, 1979. Fielding and his wife Pam as the opening act for *Steppenwolf* in the Copa Room at the Sahara in Las Vegas, 1982.

he hailed a stranger's car and hitched a lift back to his hotel. He also did his classic bit of cajoling the audience into an empty swimming pool, then "swimming" across their upraised hands.

When Fielding saw what Martin was able to accomplish, he was inspired to follow in the comedian's "wild and crazy" footsteps. *I don't need to go to graduate school*, West thought. *I'm outta here!* From that point, Fielding began "chasing funny," as he puts it. He left school, began performing more and more, and forced himself to try out new bits and ideas every time.

Fielding worked as a car salesman in Jacksonville, Florida, by day. At night, he was a magician and a performer of strange stunts. He became a member of the local IBM Ring. Uri Geller was big at the time, so Fielding learned to bend spoons. He did a hypnosis act, ate fire, and did sword swallowing with bent coat hangers. The latter became a useful gambit in cadging free meals. He would ask the restaurant manager where he had just

dined: "If I can swallow this coat hanger, will you pick up my tab?" A surprising number said yes, so Fielding would bend the hanger in half and lower it down his throat.

One day in March 1976, Fielding walked into the offices of the *Florida Times-Union*. He filled his mouth with gas, lit a torch, and stunned the newspaper staff by blowing a stream of fire from his lips. He then announced himself as "The Amazing Fielding," and proceeded to entertain the office with fire eating, coat hanger swallowing, bending spoons and forks, and the Needle Through Arm. A reporter and photographer jumped on the stunts, asking him to repeat his fire-spouting entrance. The resulting photo made the front page and was the first color picture ever printed in the *Times-Union*.

The eye-catching image was seen by a local television producer, who called Fielding in for an interview. As a result, Fielding was hired to write and host a Saturday morning children's show — apparently seeing West's sideshow skills got the station manager think-

ing, *That's good for kids!* But 27-year-old Fielding was up to the task, and for the next two years he was seen each week on Jacksonville TV for half an hour, doing magic, stunts, and wacky gags for kids at home and in the studio audience.

Along with Fred the Bionic Chicken — a sunglasses-wearing rubber chicken that was tossed onto the set with notes attached — Fielding made *Magic Gang* a hit for the CBS affiliate. The show sometimes even beat *Sesame Street* in the local ratings, an occasion that prompted a faux Big Bird to leap out of a box onstage and hit Fielding in the face with a pie.

"I knew there had to be something more to show business than a Saturday morning kids show, but I didn't know how to get to it," Fielding says. He kept hustling as many shows as he could, in as many venues as possible, from the Jacksonville streets to the stages and screens.

While he was only paid \$50 per week for all his work on *Magic Gang*, Fielding

invested the money wisely, using it to buy ad time on the same TV station. Kids would see him on Saturday mornings, but late-night movie viewers would see commercials for Fielding the Magician, and he found himself busy with bookings across the viewing area. At the same time, Fielding was also doing his stage hypnosis act in shopping centers, the high-paying gigs pleasantly offsetting the meager TV salary.

Several rock bands made their homes in Jacksonville — bands such as Lynyrd Skynyrd, 38 Special, and Molly Hatchet, all of whom became nationally known in the late 1970s. The local rockers started bringing

their children into the TV studio to watch *Magic Gang* broadcasts, and then they invited Fielding to work as their opening act in the music clubs. It was in one such venue that an agent saw Fielding's act. He teamed Fielding up with a band that he represented, and sent them out on tour together.

"I resigned from *Magic Gang* and spent a year-and-a-half with the band," says West, "and they hated me because I kept changing things every night." It probably didn't help that the five-person band, formerly known as Profit, came to be known as Fielding West & Company. Fielding became the main attraction, working hard to try out new magic and gags every night. He would go to his local magic shop and get a new illusion, start doing shows with it to pay it off, then go back and get another illusion. Much of his money went back into the props and costumes. He admits that his polyester budget was pretty high in those days.

Costuming played an important role in one of Fielding's most notable illusions. *The Rocky Horror Picture Show* was a favorite cult film of the day, and Fielding thought to briefly emulate the cross-dressing male star by wearing stockings and a bustier, but in a surprising and hilarious manner. He began presenting his *Metamorphosis* with a female assistant roller-skating onstage in the provocative outfit, then getting into the trunk. Fielding then stood atop the trunk and raised the curtain, but "accidentally" let the cloth slip, shockingly revealing that he was dressed in the assistant's lingerie. He quickly brought the cover back up and completed the trick, the girl was freed, and Fielding emerged from the trunk in his normal clothes. The brief "What the...?" moment in the middle brought a huge laugh. West had previously done the gag with a pair of funny boxer shorts under his tear-away suit, but the lingerie made the moment even more outrageous.

The shows with the band opened with Fielding's 45-minute magic act. The band then had their own set, and the evening finished with Fielding's hypnosis show. The audience already knew him as a magician, so the hypnotism was mixed with book tests and other mentalism and bizarre effects, such as making ashes appear on volunteers' palms, thanks to the clever use of a voodoo doll. All of the stunts were done while the participants were onstage, under Fielding's spell. He had a unique way of getting people to volunteer. Taking an idea from comic book super-heroine Wonder Woman and her golden Lasso of Truth, Fielding used a thick gold rope to test people's suggestibility. Tossing the rope into the crowd, he asked people to grab onto it, then told them they could not let go. The ones who were susceptible to his commands found themselves still holding on while they were

After tying up local Las Vegas TV host Tony Sacca, supposedly for an escape stunt on his show in 1986, Fielding then took over, interviewing Lance Burton. West with Siegfried & Roy and the 1987 Desert Seminar bronze award for comedy magic. The Fielding West Show: Comedy, Tricks, & Naked Chicks debuted in 2002 at the Bourbon Street casino in Las Vegas.

slowly pulled from their seats and walked onto the stage. The act concluded with Fielding causing a volunteer to lie rigid between two chairs while he stood on top of the person.

Fielding West & Company made their way across the country, arriving in Las Vegas just after Christmas in 1979. They had been booked into The Mint casino, but it was the last gig for the group. Already unhappy, the band decided to quit the tour after their manager lost all the money from The Mint gig at the craps table. Fielding remained in town, excited by the prospect of doing a showcase at the Sahara Hotel. He pulled out all the stops for his acts, which featured girls, birds, and a pair of Burmese pythons, but the 1 a.m. showcase garnered no interest.

Still, Fielding stuck around Sin City, doing whatever work he could and getting to know the other magicians in town. He took up a post across the street from the Sahara, standing outside the Jolly Trolley, a short-lived establishment that was the only Las Vegas casino with an actual strip club and "adult novelty" store inside. Fielding stood by the front door, making and selling X-rated balloon dogs. He was living in a van that he parked on the Strip, but it was difficult to get any sleep, because police kept waking him up to move the van. Eventually, Carl Beck, a successful Vegas act known as Carlton & Company, let Fielding park in his driveway.

Beck helped Fielding out in other ways, paying him \$100 to write dialogue for his show. He also offered Fielding tickets to the Jimmy Awards at the Tropicana hotel, an event honoring "the Best of Las Vegas," with the awards named after Jimmy Durante. It was March 1980. Siegfried & Roy won Best Specialty Act, Wayland Flowers & Madame was named Best Lounge Act, and Liberace was crowned Las Vegas Star of the Year.

Fielding arrived at the event with plastic bags in his pockets, which he used to steal food from the free buffet. As he was loading his pocket with shrimp, West heard a voice behind him say, "That can't smell good." He turned around to see Liberace watching him, and the two struck up a conversation. Fielding explained that he was a performer, and told of his failed showcase at the Sahara. As a result, Liberace had a phone brought over to him and placed a call, saying he had just met a magician "with a lot of moxie and a pocketful of shrimp." On the strength of the

## SIX THINGS YOU MIGHT NOT WANT TO KNOW ABOUT FIELDING WEST

- 1 Fielding has a blood tattoo on his upper arm that reads "Made In Japan."
- 2 Members of a motorcycle gang once beat up a heckler at Fielding's show, defending the magician who had recently done a benefit for a hospital where one of the bikers' kids was being treated.
- 3 Fielding nearly apprenticed with Dr. Johnson, a psychic surgeon who seemingly performed miracles. The education was cancelled when the FBI began investigating Johnson. The agents were led there because Fielding himself was under surveillance, as his father was working with President Richard Nixon.
- 4 Fielding once built a makeshift dressing room for Steve Martin out of boxes of condiments.
- 5 Bob the Bird was originally named Spot, until some other magicians started using the name for their doves. Watching morning TV host David Letterman talk of his dog, Bob, Fielding thought it was a great name for an animal, and named his bird accordingly.
- 6 Lance Burton was the best man at both of Fielding's weddings. At the second, Lance leaned over and whispered to West, "Hey, buddy. How many times am I gonna have to do this?"



PHOTO: JOHN MOHRING

recommendation by Liberace — “Call me Lee” — another showcase was set up, but with a 9 p.m. start time and a guarantee of an audience filled with agents. Fielding fared much better this time. One week later, he was working across town as the opening act for Chubby Checker. That gig led to a tour throughout Canada and such prestigious US showplaces as the Great Gorge Resort in New Jersey and the famous Playboy Clubs.

West's shows were a mixture of mystery and laughs, with stand-up magic and small illusions. He added unusual touches to both the comedy and tricks. After his assistant was seemingly stabbed with swords in the Temple of Benares, she stood up, took a drink, and started spouting water from her body. With his Sword Suspension, Fielding used the upraised swords in a tripod arrangement to support the girl at the start, figuring that placing a body on a straight line of swords looked too suspicious.

Fielding also started working with a cohort named Bob the Bird, a white dove whose role has expanded in West's show over the years. “Instead of doing like most

magicians do,” says Fielding, “and producing a lot of birds, I wanted to use one bird in a unique way.” Bob nightly suffers the indignity of being crushed into Fielding's palm, has his neck stretched and his head snapped off, and ends the show by being shot out of a cannon, caught in Fielding's mouth, and spit back into his cage. “I knew if I opened with something like that, I'd have everybody's attention. It still works.”

After returning from the cross-continent tour with Chubby Checker, Fielding was booked into his first production show, *Bare Magic*, at the Sahara in Reno. The show ran for nine months. Fielding kept jumping in and out of casino shows for the next 25 years, as a variety act, an emcee, a closing act, and finally as the solo star of his own afternoon and evening shows. While some were more successful than others, his show credits are many, ranging from *Bravo Vegas* at the Imperial Palace in 1983, in which he worked as the closing act for the first time, to short-term efforts such as *Burlesque-A-Poppin'* at the Fremont in 1986, where he was billed as “America's most misunderstood magician.”

In the world of magic, Fielding says his real “coming out party” was a show he planned in the spring of 1985 titled *Stars of Magic for Hunger in Africa*. Inspired by the celebrity-studded USA For Africa humanitarian efforts, Fielding and friend Lance Burton planned a gala fund-raising event at the Tropicana Hotel, and coaxed big-name magicians to participate. Harry Blackstone Jr., Max Maven, Jeff McBride, John Thompson, Mark Wilson, and others came together, along with emcee Harry Anderson. Fielding had not planned to perform in the show himself, but Lance talked him into it. He was still unsure until Doug Henning said he had seen Fielding's Sub Trunk routine and insisted West do it on the show — after Doug did his own Metamorphosis act. From that night on, the magic world really took notice of Fielding West, who also performed his routines with Bob the Bird.

The evening was also memorable in that it brought Anderson and Henning together after a bit of a public spat. Harry had recently hosted *Saturday Night Live* and upset Doug with his role in a “Dueling Magi” parody, during which Harry shot Doug — actually SNL



comic Rich Hall. Fielding talked Doug into returning the favor by shooting Harry in the *Stars of Magic* show, using a prop Bang gun, as Henning refused to handle anything that looked or sounded like a real firearm. Henning's bit got a huge reaction from the crowd.

During his early years in Las Vegas, Fielding worked with Pam, his assistant, girlfriend, and eventually his wife. By 1985 they had been married for a couple of years, and Pam decided she wanted out of the act. This prompted a move that pushed Fielding's career into new territory. With Pam out of the show, Fielding could no longer do his signature Sub Trunk routine. Coincidentally, while at Lance Burton's house, he heard a story of a magician's tiger that had attacked someone. Pam thought it would be funny to do an illusion based on that idea, and thus Fielding's tiger trick was born — no tiger necessary, just a sheet and a tear-away costume.

Fielding recounts, "I went from the Sub Trunk clothes changes to the tiger change, all because my wife did not want to be in the act anymore — and because I was too cheap to hire another girl." The tiger bit became a standout piece. West says, "It was really the beginning of my comedy career."

Fielding entered the Comedy Competition at the Desert Magic Seminar in 1987, where the tiger trick was instrumental in Fielding's third-place win, just under Kohl & Co. and Michael Finney. Fielding took home \$1,000 cash and \$10,000 in bookings. He was also awarded a bronze Lions Head trophy, which he had painted gold as a gag when he emceed the Seminar show the next year.

The bookings prize turned out to be ten weeks in the Funny Bones comedy club chain, where he had to do a 45-minute act. West did not have that much material that was suitable for comedy clubs, but he managed to work his way up to that time. When he finished the Funny Bones gigs, he was able to book solo shows of his own, but he continued to work in production shows, which paid better than headlining in comedy clubs. It was during a two-year run with Kirby VanBurch in *Abracadabra* at the Aladdin in Las Vegas that Fielding, by then divorced from Pam, met a dancer named Janice, to whom he has now been married for many years.

When he left *Abracadabra* in 1990, Fielding joined Brett Daniels in *Passion* at the Horizon in Lake Tahoe. It was in *Passion* that West was seen by a manager who took him on and got him nearly eighty television appearances over the next few years. Viewing audiences saw Fielding on the last show of *The Smothers Brothers Comedy Hour* and

*Fielding West today — tattered victim of a phantom tiger, swallower of balloons, and confident Southern gentleman.*

the final episode of *Evening at the Improv*. He didn't just appear on shows that then vanished — he had been on *Improv* twice before, and it remained on the air — but he had guest spots on nearly all the stand-up comedy shows that were popular in the 1990s, as well as guest acting roles on television and in film. He worked not only with other comedy acts, but fit in with otherwise straight magic shows as well. In 1994, Fielding appeared on the first of the *World's Greatest Magic* specials, during which he levitated an assistant who then crashed to the ground behind him — a gag routine conceived and given to West by his friend Johnny Thompson.

Johnny and Fielding also worked together with Lance Burton, writing all the dialogue for Lance's six television specials. "I lived with Lance on and off for three years," West says, "so I knew his timing and phrasing, which made it much easier to write for him." Fielding has also crafted lines and ideas for other acts, including David Copperfield, who credited Fielding on two of his television specials. Fielding also starred in his own cable special, *Hocus Pocus, It's Fielding West*, for which Lance Burton served as executive producer.

Onstage, Fielding comes across to the audience with a brash confidence that seems to combine both his sideshow and car salesman backgrounds — which might not be so dissimilar, at that. He seems to be a bit of a wacky pitchman as he fills in the bald spot on the back of his head with hardware-store spray paint or when he swallows a long balloon. But beyond his over-the-top comedy and his "C'mon folks, we're having fun here!" attitude is a serious student of the art of magic — who has now become a teacher.

"For me," he says, "the hardest thing to do is to sit in an audience and watch mistakes. I go to magic conventions and see kids with talent, but they have not learned how to handle their work environment." And so West has begun giving classes in stage technique, taking on just a few students at a time. While he designed the lessons for kids from twelve to seventeen, one of the requirements is that the kids must be accompanied by an adult. After seeing what their children got out of the classes, several of the parents have returned to take the course themselves, even the ones who are not performers.

"The class is called *The First Sixty Seconds*," Fielding touts, "and it covers the basics you should know about stepping out onstage. It's a crash course in

public speaking by a guy who has done it for forty years." West says that audiences respect the control you have onstage — not so much over them, but over yourself; they can feel how comfortable and prepared you are. He passes on tips about speaking louder than normal when onstage, even when you are using a microphone; making sure you stand up straight and look at your audience, making a connection with them; and the importance of knowing intimately not just your opening line, but your whole opening paragraph. He also emphasizes how important it is not to rush through the lines, quoting Bev Bergeron: "The difference between an amateur and a pro is the length of their pauses."

The classes have been successful so far, without any advertising. Word of mouth has been enough, although Fielding plans to make this new career path better known.

And he is still performing himself, from magic convention appearances to private galas to cruise ships, as well as lecturing to local magic clubs; he was nominated for Lecturer of the Year 2010 at the Magic Castle. Fielding acknowledges that the demand for variety acts and emcees has largely dried up in the casino towns where he has worked for years. The market has changed into Cirque du Soleil and similarly styled productions, or low-budget shows that don't pay enough to be worth his time.

Nevertheless, Fielding bears no bitterness toward the change in entertainment trends. He remains as enthusiastic as ever about magic, and he continues looking for the skewed comedy angles that have become his trademark. "My career isn't over," he says. "I love what I do and I'm enjoying myself. You're still in the business until you decide that you're not anymore." **M**



PHOTOS: RICHARD RAVERTY / MICHAEL STODOLSKY