An Interview by John Bannon
(from Simon Aronson’s *Try the Impossible* (2001), pp. 278 - 288)

**John:** So, now that the book is finished, how do you feel?

**Simon:** Some relief, some trepidation.

**John:** Explain each – briefly.

**Simon:** As you've seen, I'm not good at explaining anything briefly.

**John:** Well, try it. I'll cut it down later anyway.

**Simon:** Relief, because the actual writing is the least fun part of creating a book. I love creating, playing around with possibilities, trying things out on you guys. But once the ideas have gelled and have been tested, improved and polished in our sessions, then trying to put it all down on paper gets to be drudgery after a while. So the relief is simply being glad it's behind me.

**John:** What about the trepidation?

**Simon:** Completing a book is like sending your kid off to college. He's grown up with you, but now he's leaving home, he's on his own, and you wonder how he'll do. I've nurtured the material as best I could, and there's a bit of me in every trick I create. But at some point, you let go and send it off to the outside world. You hope it will be accepted, but from then on it develops on its own, by its contacts with others. Other magicians will play with it, and hopefully use it, personalize it, and enhance it. I guess it's just separation pains. But at the same time, I'm eager to share the stuff and get feedback – and maybe someone will really pick up the ball and make a touchdown with it.

**John:** Does this mean that the material isn't really finished?

**Simon:** It's as finished as I can make it, given my skills and orientation, but one thing our sessions have taught me is there's always room for improvement. Different minds approach things differently, and frequently they add something valuable. For instance, I'm very proud of “Shuffle-bored,” but it was Ali Bongo who came up with the presentation angle of successive, unfolding multiple predictions. That's a strong addition, that helps make that trick. I love it when creative minds bring the stuff further.

**John:** Some of your material requires a fair amount of preparation, or pre-arrangement, or doesn't reset quickly. Do you think that makes it less practical, for the working performer?

**Simon:** There are lots of answers to offer, but I don't want to get into a big debate about what circumstances or conditions constitute the “real world,” or how much effort or preparation a performer should be willing to put forth to entertain and fool his audience. What's “practical” depends on many things, and I completely agree that much of my
material is practical only in certain contexts. In a table-hopping, or cocktail context, I wouldn't recommend doing effects that involve extensive dealing or take a long time.

**John:** So, what would you do in such walk-around contexts?

**Simon:** Of my own material, I regularly perform “Ringleader” and my “Quadruple Spellbound” [from *Sessions*]. With cards, I've been doing the “Head Over Heels Invisible Card” recently; it's quick and visual. I often carry a “Birthday Book” or my “Calendar Card” [from *Simply Simon*] and that's a strong and highly personal effect. I still do “Miss-Mate” and my “Favorite Card Trick” [from *Card Ideas*] and at table-side I'd do “Under the Spell” [from *The Aronson Approach*] or “Prior Commitment.” Then, of course, I carry my memorized stack, so for strict walkaround I'll do “Two Beginnings.” If there's a table handy, then I can do 15 minutes of material just from the “Unpacking the Stack” section, and never depart from stack order.

And let me quickly add that I'm not married to my own material. For laymen, I want to perform good magic, no matter whose it is. I do an Ambitious routine, or a card to pocket, or a host of routines that everyone else does. There's always an extra element of enthusiasm and pride in doing your own stuff, but I'm not that egotistical that I think only my own stuff is worthwhile.

**John:** You're not?

**Simon:** You can cut that remark out later.

**John:** Your writing style is really detailed. How come?

**Simon:** Probably the long-windedness of a lawyer, who gets paid by the hour or by the word. More seriously, I spent a long time [six years] in graduate school in philosophy, and I am truly interested in the thought process, the development steps that we go through with any particular trick. Things happen in layers, and sometimes it's only when you push deeper into the underlying theory of why something's happening that you can see how it relates to other effects or moves. For instance, that's how all the UnDo Influence stuff developed. I was already performing “Twice as Hard,” but it was only after I really understood the inner workings of that single trick that I came up with the other UnDo Influence applications.

**John:** Do you have any special ways you create new effects, any particular things you do to stimulate the creative juices?

**Simon:** The primary way is brainstorming in our sessions. One is never aware of his own blinders, but with guys as critical and blunt as you and Dave, I never have to worry about anything being sugar-coated. I've definitely found that the more different substantive projects I have in my mind at once, then the more chance there is for things to “click” together, for some synergies to appear just by chance, or the more I might see a possible connection or combination. So, at any given time I try to be in the middle of reading two or three magic books, and maybe watching a couple of videos, and practicing a few moves, and working with you and Dave on your tricks. Then, connections just pop
Simon: I'm probably overly critical, both of others and myself, and certainly of much of the magic I see or read. But some good ideas actually are generated out of the weaknesses, or lousy things, I see. I cringe first, but then I ask whether there's something that's worth working on, or I ask how would I get around that problem.

I also am willing to be patient, to work on a project or an idea for a long time, sometimes years. You know, you get the kernel of a good idea, but it's only half baked. So, I keep notebooks, and I re-read them, waiting for that certain something that's exactly what's needed to make an idea or an effect all come together. It's the way the three of us work together in our sessions. Something starts one Saturday, and for the next few months we keep tinkering, massaging, polishing, discarding, and then coming back to the theme. Dave has been working on "Oil and Water" routines for over 20 years. You've been working on your triple Ace routine for over a year now. In contrast, I remember one magician coming up to me at a convention telling me, with pride, that he had worked an entire afternoon to create a trick he had just shown me.

Simon: I don't recall exactly. I'm sure with my characteristic delicacy.

Simon: Resoundingly No! I am so impressed with what's coming up the pipeline in magic. Kids now know and can do so much more than when I was starting, and they learn and think quicker. If I'm at a convention I like to sit down on the floor with the younger guys and watch and help and learn with everyone. I just have trouble trying to stand up again.

Simon: Jon wrote that when he reviewed my first book, Card Ideas. I think he meant that I tend to give my audiences a fair amount of credit for being observant and intelligent, so I try not to use methods that are obvious, or even that are easily figured out if one thinks about it. It's a habit that came about because in college and graduate school most of my spectators were my classmates and dormmates.

At the University of Chicago I was surrounded by supersmart, scientific types who stared at me all the time while I performed magic, as though it was a laboratory experiment. If I had attended a school with lots of frat parties and drinking I probably would have wound up doing more fast, quick visual bar magic; as it was, I was surrounded by my fellow academic types who wanted to learn everything, and went crazy if they couldn't understand how something worked. So, I considered it my job, as a magician, to drive them crazy.
**John:** How did you do that? How did that affect the tricks you did?

**Simon:** Well, part of my response was to develop a penchant for “hands off” magic. These guys were waiting for me to do something, watching for something aberrant, so I tried to make it look like I didn't do anything. But one can only watch during a trick, so I gained a healthy respect for using secrets that basically occur before the trick even begins - like stacks and pre-arrangements, or gaffs or duplicates. Or secrets that happen outside the spectator's awareness, like multiple outs. The modus operandi has to occur at some point in time, either during the trick or otherwise. If you pay the price of advance preparation you get the benefit of there being less to catch during the performance. And all this led me more toward the mental methodologies and subtleties, instead of the physical ones.

**John:** One of the best things I've seen you do is the two-person mindreading act you perform with Ginny. How did that come about, and how do you keep it in shape?

**Simon:** Of everything I've ever come up with I consider our two-person act the most deceptive, totally fooling, most “realistic" looking effect I've ever created. I only wish we did it more often, because, you're right, it's hard to keep in practice when you only perform sporadically. But that's one of the true concessions I've had to make, in choosing not to be a professional performer for my career. The only way to really do that two-person act justice, from a speed and presentation perspective, is to perform it all the time. But Ginny's willing to practice it up a few times a year, and until she retires that's the best I can hope for.

**John:** How did you come up with it? Is this someone else's system, that you adopted?

**Simon:** It all started in 1965 when I saw Eddie Fields and George Martz perform, pitching horoscopes at the Woolworth's in downtown Chicago. George was “Professor Martz", and they did a ten minute spiel about twice an hour. I was absolutely captivated by what they could do and convey, and I watched them do their routine, probably 5 or 6 times a day, for several months. All told, I probably saw them do their act maybe 200 times. I basically gave up attending classes, just to hang out at Woolworth's. Possibly the most valuable months I ever spent.

**John:** Did they teach it to you?

**Simon:** Absolutely not. They never offered, and I never asked. But I wouldn't have expected them to. Keep in mind, this was their livelihood, and they did it everywhere, all the time. They weren't going to teach a 22 year old college kid their bread and butter secrets. But we got to be friends, and I've been in touch with Eddie Fields off and on ever since. I was also lucky enough to see King and Zerita perform, and the Tuckers.

**John:** So, how did you develop whatever it is that you do?

**Simon:** I started to read everything I possibly could about two-person code acts, and Jay Marshall was amazingly generous. He made his library available, and lent me old
manuscripts of vaudeville acts, sheets on old, crumbling paper that dated back to the 1920's. I studied everything, I compared systems, and I compiled charts of word usage and objects. At that time I knew virtually everything that had ever been written on code acts. And then I scrapped it all. Most of it was useless. It was devised for a time when performers spoke in a stilted, formal, flowery dialogue – it was so anachronistic. The exact opposite of the way college kids spoke in their normal conversation. You see, there's a major problem with hand-me-down codes, just like hand-me-down clothes. They won't fit you very well, because they were devised for someone else. So I decided to start from scratch, by tailoring my own system to the way I spoke, to the words that actually were natural for me.

John: How long did it take you to finish?

Simon: This kind of act isn't something that's ever finished. Our basic system has been in place for over 30 years, but it's constantly in flux, growing, getting tweaked. And when you describe objects, you need to stay current with the times. We don't get draft cards anymore, but we get a lot of palm computers. Ginny and I will often fine tune things, even now.

John: Ginny's been a real partner in magic for you, hasn't she?

Simon: Absolutely. And she does it both for me and because she really does enjoy good magic. From the first day we started dating, she's been a magic fan, and a critic, and a loyal spectator to try out things, and of course an editor of all my writings, as well as the star of the two-person act.

Over the years we've had a number of great magicians visit and stay with us, and Ginny really gets to see some truly wonderful magic. And afterwards, I'll sometimes suggest to our magic guest, “Ginny does a trick of her own. Would you like to see it?” To be polite, they'll respond yes, thinking they're going to see a simple, cute little nothing – and then Ginny knocks them dead with the mind-reading. It's fun.

John: I've shown many tricks to Ginny. She seems to know a lot of magic.

Simon: She's picked up things over the years, but she really doesn't care about method much. She just cares about how the effect looks, and she really admires great skill and great presentation. I remember when David Roth stayed with us. David did a few things for Ginny, and Ginny turned to me and asked, “Simon, how come your coin stuff doesn't look like that?” What could I do? That's the kind of standards she now has.

John: So she gets along with other magicians?

Simon: A lot better than I do. She smooths down some of my rough edges.

John: You? Rough edges? [laughing] I never noticed. Has Ginny been your longest magic companion?
**Simon:** No – my friendship with Dave [Solomon] predates Ginny. Dave and I met at Magic, Inc. when we were both in college. We formed a friendship over magic that's continued for over 35 years. We started sessioning together, just the two of us; went to lectures, studied the early Marlo texts together, and Dave's been the continuing nucleus of my life with card magic. When we wrote our joint book together, *Sessions*, in 1982, our names were so linked in the minds of many magicians that lots of people didn't know which of us was Dave and which was Simon.

**John:** I've been sessioning with you both for about a dozen years, and I can't imagine that kind of confusion.

**Simon:** I can't either. Especially in our card magic, because Dave and I are so different in our tastes, our skills, and what we choose to work on. But we complement each other well, and we'll criticize the hell out of each other's magic, and then try to improve it. Over the years Dave has made so many improvements to my tricks, pointed out so many weak or blind spots, and helped make my stuff more natural or casual. And I think I've helped him too. My major regret is that I can't convince either you or Dave to memorize a deck.

**John:** Maybe someday. Do you have a recommendation of which particular stack I should learn?

**Simon:** Yes, for you I'd recommend trying to learn new deck order.

**John:** Earlier you mentioned that many of your methods were more cerebral than physical. Do you shy away from sleight of hand?

**Simon:** Not at all. I love to watch someone with great chops. And I'll include any move or sleight in my tricks and my repertoire, as long as I can do it comfortably and well. But by well, I mean that to a layman it has to be invisible. There's nothing better than a move that's never suspected, but nothing worse than a move that telegraphs that something's going on.

There's no way to have spent so much time with Marlo – over 20 years – without having developed an awe and admiration for great sleight of hand. Especially the kind of soft, graceful touch that Ed had. Nothing fast or snappy or flourishy. Just slow, natural hands that were completely disarming. I still remember his palming as the best I've ever seen.

**John:** Did he actually teach you sleights and physical skills?

**Simon:** He would always help, if I asked him to. I remember when I first started palming, I complained that my "windows" revealed the card. Without saying anything, he showed me the back of his hands – he had windows, and yes, you could see the card if you looked – but I had never noticed it before.

**John:** You and Dave spent many years sessioning with Ed?

**Simon:** Absolutely. The Saturday session in Chicago was at "Ed's table," and once
you were invited to sit down and participate, it was a privilege that you'd never want to miss. Our lives were scheduled around that event, every week, for over 20 years. We'd all come home, every Saturday evening, reeking of cigar smoke. Ginny made me change my clothes out in the hall – but that was an easy price to pay for being with Ed.

**John:** What kind of guy was Marlo, personally?

**Simon:** Socially he was somewhat shy. He didn't open up easily around strangers, but once he was among friends, where he felt comfortable, he could be warm, friendly and even joking. I remember the first time he and Muriel visited our home – we live in a high-rise, with a balcony overlooking Lincoln Park, 29 stories up. Somehow we were talking about tossing boomerang cards, and Ed thought it would be fun to try it off the balcony, with the hope, of course, that they'd sail around back to him. So, he started spinning cards off, one after another. He caught a few, but the wind took most of them, and he must have lost about half his deck to the fresh air.

**John:** Was Marlo as good as legend has it?

**Simon:** Technically he was great. Things looked beautiful in his hands. But I was equally impressed with his depth and breadth in all areas of card magic, not just sleights. He was a card maniac, all facets of card magic, all the time, non-stop. He was a master of subtlety and of misdirection. He had a good sense for math and stacks, and wasn't adverse to carrying a briefcase full of gaffed decks. And it was Ed's piece in *Ibidem* No. 8 that first inspired me to work on memorized deck magic.

**John:** Did Marlo actually use a memorized deck?

**Simon:** Yes, he learned the Ireland stack. The memorized deck actually has strong historical roots in Chicago. Bert Allerton used it extensively in his performances. Laurie Ireland had some great material, and since Laurie and Marlo were pals, Ed memorized the Ireland stack. I used to show Ed my early experiments with memorized deck locations, and he got a real kick out of them. I really wish he could have seen "Everybody's Lazy."

**John:** Is the memorized deck work the stuff you're most proud of? You've really started a rebirth.

**Simon:** It's not just me, by a long shot. I may have been one of the first to show how sophisticated it could be with my chapter in *Card Ideas*, but certainly Juan, Mike Close, and other professionals have done more to popularize it and brought its development much further along. But even my stuff was developed standing on the shoulders of old timers like Nikola, Al Baker, and Marlo. And now that it's caught on, a whole new generation is coming up with more ideas.

**John:** It seems to be customary in these kind of interviews to give some sort of biographical sketch, the important dates, and how you got started in magic. Can you give one, again briefly.

**Simon:** Born September 13, 1943. Started in magic at age 8 with a "Mandrake the
Magician" set, then graduated to a Gilbert "Mysto" set. I was a non-athlete and I instantly was bitten by the magic bug. I devoured all the books in the public library, and then discovered Tannen's.

**John:** You lived in New York?

**Simon:** Yes, Rye, New York but I'd go into the city every chance I had. On Saturdays I virtually lived at Tannen's on 42nd Street and at Flosso's. I did my first paid birthday show at age 11, and from then on I performed at kid's parties almost every weekend, probably for the next 12 years. My sole television appearance was as a junior magician on the Magic Clown show. During the summers, as a teenager, I had a dream job: I ran the boardwalk magic shop at Playland amusement park, sort of a semi-pitchman of everything from Svengali decks to squirting fountain pens. I got to try out everything, and joked with and performed for hundreds of strangers all day. I even did "Guess Your Weight" and handwriting analysis, because the proprietor owned those booths also.

I joined F.A.M.E., a club in New York city, and there I met a bunch of teens who really started me on close up and card stuff. We had weekly lectures from New York's greats, and put on shows in Central Park. The club had a library – it was a wonderful, stimulating group.

Then, in 1961 I moved to Chicago to attend college, and I've lived here ever since. The first thing I did was seek out Ireland's Magic shop, and I hung out there whenever I could. I met a lot of great Chicago magicians, and they've been very generous in helping me.

**John:** Anyone in particular?

**Simon:** I remember one incident, standing at the counter, when a guy walks in, wearing hip boots and a cock-eyed hat. He spread a deck out and asked me to just think of a card; then he shuffled the deck, dealt and stopped right on my card. That's it, that's exactly how it looked to me. His name was Johnny Thompson, and the effect was Vernon's "Out of Sight, Out of Mind." Johnny introduced me to the "Inner Secret" series, which was brand new at the time, and I was hooked on Vernon's material. Similar inspirations came from watching Harry Riser, and lots of others.

**John:** Did you perform professionally?

**Simon:** Lot's of children's shows, and occasional close-up shows, but nothing I'd call full-time or professional. Except for the mind-reading. Ginny and I did that all over Chicago and the suburbs, clubs and private parties, for six years, from 1970 to 1975.

**John:** Why did you stop?

**Simon:** The pressures and conflicts with trying to be full-time lawyers, at high powered firms, it just got too much. Ginny was uncomfortable when some of her important law clients turned up in our audience. She felt it was a bit strange to be their lawyer by day and their mindreader by night, so we cut back on public shows.
John: You practiced law full-time until recently. How could you keep up with all the magic?

Simon: It wasn’t easy, and that’s one of the main reasons I retired. I got my first and only job right out of law school as a lawyer at one of Chicago's major law firms, and stayed there all my professional life. Time was at a premium, but law is a people business and I constantly had an audience. I’d show new stuff to my fellow lawyers, secretaries, the mailroom guys, everyone. Especially clients. Magic is an immediate icebreaker, and relieves the pressure when negotiations get tense. In my office I used a speakerphone all the time, just so I could shuffle behind the scenes. When I retired in 1999 the firm wanted to throw their traditional luncheon banquet, complete with stuffy speeches. I asked them to skip the talks, and instead Ginny and I performed our mindreading act for a hundred of my partners. They still talk about it, and about how retirement parties will never be the same.

John: I can’t quite picture you in the formal business setting, for over 25 years.

Simon: I can behave myself when necessary, but my typical attitude was somewhat irreverent.

John: Anything else of importance happen in your magic life?

Simon: Yeah, in 1988 a bright, young, rising magical star moved to Chicago. He and I shared a lot in common: U of C law school, both writing our first solo hardbound magic book, both creating new magic, both headstrong – and so Dave and I welcomed another generation into our Saturday session. And you’ve been a central part of it ever since.

John: Thanks. I’m glad you let me in, I think.

Simon: The three of us really are so different in what we bring to the session, but it’s a great fit. To the extent I’ve learned anything about presentation over the past ten years, I owe it to you. And, yes, I acknowledge you have no responsibility for “Rap-Ace-ious,” or for my puns.

John: I agree. Our Saturday get-together is a great testing ground for catching up on what’s new in magic, brainstorming and trying out new ideas and for just getting together to unwind. And thanks for making coffee each week for the past ten years.

Simon: Do you think this interview is already too long?

John: It’s about on par with the rest of your material.

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