

DOC SWAN: The Most Interesting Man in the Room

By Marc DeSouza



Doc Swan is truly a one-man variety show. He does magic, mentalism, and escapes. He performs a wide variety of sideshow stunts, including fire-eating, glass-walking, Blockhead, the hand trap, and sword-swallowing. He does chapeaugraphy, hand shadows, stilt-walking, lariat-spinning, and plays the musical saw. Doc is also a painter, a former drummer in a rock band and traveling shows, and he even does balloon animals. He is also one of the funniest performers around. He has an original presentation for everything he does, presentations that have grown out of the character, or characters, he has become. But let's go back to the beginning.

Jaime Swan was born in Philadelphia in the mid 1950s; he continues to make his home in the Philadelphia area. Doc makes particular note of the spelling of his name. His mother specifically spelled Jaime that way as a contraction of the French *Je t'aime* (I love you). He calls her the best mother in the world. She is still his biggest fan. His father was a professional painter who was very skilled in refinishing and painting boats. He had a special technique by which he was able to make metal look like wood. His grandfather was also a professional painter, so it was natural for Doc to take an interest in art. He showed a real aptitude for painting and everyone thought that would be his career path. As time went on, he also believed this would be his path, but painting within the entertainment industry and building props. He still has, and uses, his dad's sign brushes. But his dad gave him something even better. When Doc was three or four years old, his father showed him his first magic trick. It was the transposition of a dime from under one bottle cap to another. This really baffled him; it was a few years before his father told him how it worked.

Doc says growing up in a small town in New Jersey was

great. His parents were both very supportive of whatever he and his older brother did. This became very important, because Doc's path was far different from most. Like many kids, Doc got a magic kit for Christmas when he was eight. He remembers that it was an S.S. Adams set. He learned to do everything in the set, but he was a rather introverted and non-social kid, so he would only show the tricks to his parents. He got *The Golden Book of Magic* by Clayton Rawson and he made many of the props within it. He still didn't want to perform for others, because he thought he couldn't really fool anyone. He also got *Dunninger's Encyclopedia of Magic*, but there wasn't anything from that book that he could do. Bruce Elliott's *Classic Secrets of Magic* was a far more important book for him, which he found at the local library.

At the age of eleven, two important things happened that changed his life. In sixth grade, everyone had to take up a musical instrument. He chose the drums. All through school, Doc played in four-piece cover bands playing top-40 music; they played all of the school dances. By the time he was eighteen, he started playing in bars (for a short period of time, eighteen was the legal drinking age in New Jersey). During this time he played in a band called Arcus, who did original material as well as covers.

At this time, he also found a book someone had left in his house, *Step Right Up* by Dan Mannix. This was a book about life in a carnival sideshow and Doc devoured it. He says that it changed his life. I had also found this book and loved it. I found out from some friends who knew the author that he actually lived less than thirty minutes from where I live. They also told me that one of the characters in the book was based on Jack Chanin. Doc says he wished he could have talked to Mannix to tell him that he had written Doc's biography five years

"Doc Swan is a force of nature. He rocked the Abbott's Get-Together." – Jeff McBride



Clockwise from top left: Doc juggling,

before he was born.

Doc went to any circus that came anywhere near where he lived, but all he wanted to see was the sideshow. He would show up and help them set-up and strike the tents for nothing, just to be around the sideshow performers. This became his education. Doc says he learned ninety-nine percent of what he does on his own. He would watch and absorb what he could. He was most impressed by the fire-eater, so that is what he learned first, followed by learning to swallow swords. He already juggled and did magic. He learned to ride a unicycle and that's how he delivered newspapers on his route. When he was thirteen, he saw a Girl to Gorilla in Atlantic City. He had read about Pepper's Ghost in the Dunninger book, so he went home and built one in his basement. He used an old window from his house as the glass and the lights were from his train set, powered by 110 AC current.

The night he graduated from high school, he and his friends went to a fair. There was a help wanted sign posted that said "must be able to travel and drive a truck." Doc took the job and joined the carnival the next day. He worked setting up, operating rides, tearing down, and driving to the next location. After two months the carnival played in the same town as another carnival that had two grind shows. These were "display" type attractions that had people going through continuously, as opposed to scheduled shows. He talked to the manager of the show and

told him of his interests. That manager told him about a Ten-In-One Show that was playing fairly nearby. He made a beeline for that show, which was managed by Dick Johnson. Now this was a show exactly like Dan Mannix described and Doc wanted to join up. The only job available at that time was as a ticket seller, so he took it.

At this time, Doc's vehicle was a 1956 Cadillac Ambulance and his friends began to refer to him as Doc...the name stuck and that became his stage name. Within three weeks he had learned the acts of the Ten-in-One performers and he spoke to Johnson, who encouraged him to go on stage and try it out. The first few shows were a little rough, but Johnson and the other performers gave him advice on how to improve. He started by doing fire-eating, and then added the Blockhead (hammering a nail into his nose) and sword-swallowing. He also had a natural gift of gab that enabled him to augment his performances. It wasn't long before Johnson had him doing the blow-off to get the people into the tent to pay to see the full show. They would do up to forty shows a day when business was really good. Doc did two seasons with Johnson's show, playing from May to November.

He had to leave Arcus when he went on the road with the show. When he came off the road, he would do lighting for the band. He developed a psychedelic light show for them, buying all sorts of equipment for those shows at Edmund Scientific



Company, a veritable wonderland for such geeks and magicians. After those two years with Johnson's show, he joined another Ten-in-One doing his acts and painting rides and props. In 1976, Stuart Miller asked Doc to join his touring illusion show. He did so for two years acting as Miller's assistant, as well as doing a fire-eating spot in the show. In his second season with the show, Doc played drums in Miller's accompanying band. Miller also depended on Doc to keep all of the props in working order and freshly painted.

He left Miller's show in 1978 to work at Great Adventure, an amusement park in Jackson, New Jersey. He did fire-eating and rode a unicycle as a clown; this only lasted one season. The next year he worked for Martin & Downs, a one-ring circus in Canada. He worked their sideshow doing fire-eating, sword-swallowing, Blockhead, and the Electric Chair routine. (This is the stunt in which a girl sat in a chair and the performer could light torches by touching her or have her cause a fluorescent tube to light.) Doc also played drums in the band for the actual circus performances under the big top. This only lasted a year, because an old friend from his neighborhood had started a new venture.

Dave GoWell is a name not known to most magicians, but he had a significant role in magic history. He and his partner Kent Davis were builders of illusions. They worked for Doug Henning for a number of years, up until the late 1970s. In 1978, they left Henning and began building robots, using them to entertain at corporate functions and in shopping malls. They had two very successful units on the road and needed someone to front a third unit. Doc worked for them for two years until he got sick of the robots getting all of the attention. He did, however, learn that there was money to be made in doing performances in shopping malls, so he developed his own show for that market. The first few shows were more serious in nature, but they didn't go over very well, so he switched to a

comedic presentation. He did magic, juggling, and some of his sideshow stunts. He had a female assistant whom he dressed as a gorilla, but then switched her to a showgirl costume. They had seen The Great Tomsoni & Co. and were very influenced by Pam's character, so his assistant became a ditzy blonde. In 1986, Doc left the mall circuit and moved on to doing a one-man comedy/variety show at fairs. This continues to be a large part of his annual work, as well as banquet shows for corporate clients and organizations.

In 1998, he did his first "Fright Fest" type show at Disney World's Pleasure Island. Since then, he has presented his *Psycho Sideshow* every year during the Halloween season at theme parks. He did four years at Spooky World in Massachusetts, and four years in each of five Six Flags Parks. He says that he creates ninety-percent new material each year for these shows. In 2013, he did the summer season at Great Adventure again, which is now a Six Flags park. He did an outdoor show as Mordecai P. Jackson, a slick character from the late 1880s. It was a nineteen-minute show incorporating Linking Rings, his version of Instant Magician, and the Paintball Catch. The management of the park was most amazed that every time they clocked his show, there was no more than ten seconds variation from the nineteen-minute timeslot.

In between all of this, Doc found time to appear as a fire-eater in the film *Wilder Napalm*, which had another magician in it...some guy named Ricky Jay. Penn Jillette regularly tells people "Doc Swan is the man who taught me to eat fire." Doc is a little more modest about the matter. He met Penn when he and Teller had another partner, Weir Chrisemer, and they called themselves The Asparagus Valley Cultural Society. Penn ate fire in the show. Doc spoke to him afterward and offered to help Penn refine his fire-eating. He taught Penn the finesses of the art, for which Penn has been very grateful. They remain good friends today.

Doc also worked in a magic shop for a little while for a guy named Rick Sapphire. Rick tried to get Doc to sell a little more forcefully and encouraged him to pitch the products a little harder. Doc thought he had the right idea when he was questioned by a customer, "How realistic is this fake beer?" Doc replied that he had had a glass a few days before and had to go to the bathroom to take a fake pee. Sapphire told him to tone down the hard sell a bit.

You might ask, why haven't we heard of this guy before? I could tell you that he's just too busy working in the "real world" to attend magic meetings and conventions, but that would be only half the truth. He has only attended five magic conventions, and four of them he was booked to work. Doc is still a pretty quiet guy offstage; he keeps to himself. He does have a few close friends in the magic community, but other than that, he's been pretty much under the radar until the last couple of years. He is also extremely modest and seems to feel that he really didn't have that much to offer the magic community.

I had been hearing about him from mutual friends for the last five or six years, but never saw him perform until he worked the Magician's Alliance of Eastern States convention. I had the same reaction as most magicians have when they see him for the first time: "Wow! Where has this guy been hiding?" I booked him the first opportunity I had, working with Mike Miller and me on a show for my synagogue. This was, obviously, an all laymen audience. To say he killed was an understatement. My fellow congregants still ask about him when they see me. I booked him for my own company's holiday party, and he garnered the same reaction. The audience reacts to him in a way that goes far beyond the routines he performs.

They react to him as a performer *and* a person.

It has been said that if an audience likes you, they will like anything you do. Doc is walking proof of that statement. From the first minute on stage, he can do no wrong. I could list the routines he typically does in a show, but that doesn't really tell you what makes him great. Doc has his own little twists on things that make his routines uniquely his. In fact, when you see him do his signature routines, you can't imagine anyone else doing them. From his Tribute to Houdini (the chain handcuff escape) to the hoary old chapeaugraphy routine, to the funniest glass walk you have ever seen, his persona and humor are indelibly stamped on everything. This is why top pros like Todd Robbins, Fielding West,

and Jeff McBride were so knocked out when they recently saw him perform for the first time. In fact, Bello Nock, the man *Time* magazine called "The World's Best Clown" said, "Doc Swan is the funniest man I know."

In preparation for this article, Doc and I spent a few hours together having dinner and talking. The evening was a delight for me, especially as we compared notes about a number of mutual loves and experiences growing up. When questioned about his favorite magicians he quickly replied Penn & Teller, Tomsoni & Co., and Tom Mullica. He cited Mullica as his major influence and said, "When I am looking to tweak a routine or find a solution to a problem, I ask myself what would Mullica do?" I also asked him to pass on his thoughts and advice for

other performers. He explained, "You should never do anything for money that you wouldn't do for free. Do what you do for a living because you really want to do it. Don't become an entertainer unless you need to." He feels that he is someone whose life's mission is to bring joy to people. "If you can make money at it, then so much the better. We all have our roles to play. Entertainers are very necessary to maintain balance and keep the flow of life moving."

As we finished up, he left me with this: "I don't have to be an entertainer for a living...I can starve to death instead." With Doc's amazing abilities, talents, and personality, I don't think he will ever have to worry about going hungry. ♦

Penn Jillette on Doc Swan

It was the mid 1970s. Teller and I were in a show called *The Asparagus Valley Cultural Society*. We were three people then, with a nutty classical musician, but it was very much a Penn & Teller style show. We had scammed our way into a little upstairs hundred-seat space at the Walnut Street Theater in Philly. You wouldn't call us successful, but we sure thought we were – we were doing great.

The show closed with a pretentious monologue (that's what I do) about the carny, and America, and faith, and free-thinking, and magic, and fire-eating, and lots of other stuff that pretentious monologues often contain. After twelve minutes of chitter-chatter, I ate some fire. We still use this monologue and fire-eating, called "10 in 1," to close our P&T show on the road.

One night, a man, about my age (so I guess by my definition now, a child) came to the show wearing a top hat and a cape. He was also about my size, a tall drink of water. After the show, he introduced himself as Doc Swan, shook my hand, and explained that he was a real carny. He was really with it, for it, and never against it. We talked about Daniel Mannix's life-changing book, *Step Right Up*, and then Doc changed my life.

He said he liked my closing monologue a lot. He said it was smart. He said it was a little funny. I said thanks. I was pretty pleased with myself.

Then he got to the point. He said he thought my monologue about fire-eating would be better if I could fire-eat. He said that my fire-eating wasn't good enough to land all that patter and probably shouldn't close our whole show.

He was right. I had taught myself to fire-eat and I wasn't good. I thought the twelve-minute buildup excused it. It was the opposite. I was wrong. Big buildup, no payoff – not the right formula.

Doc then offered to teach me to be a good fire-eater, if I taught him some juggling tricks. He considered that to be a fair trade.

We made a date to get together the next day. He taught me to be almost as good a fire-eater as he was. I'll never be as good. And he didn't only teach me fire-eating; I still learn from him all the time. Doc is true like ice, like fire. We became close friends in that one afternoon.

So much has changed through the years, but not my love of Doc. I love him so much; I call him "Jaime" in front of his mom, just to make her smile. Keep teaching me, my friend. —**Penn Jillette**



From center clockwise: Melvin Burkhardt, Penn Jillette, Todd Robbins, Jamy Ian Swiss, Doc Swan, Unknown

Fielding West on Doc Swan

I just met Doc Swan at this past Abbott's Get-Together in Colon, Michigan. It was my first time at the Get-Together. I had no idea what to expect, but I went in with an open mind. One of the best parts of my Abbott's experience was meeting Doc Swan and watching him perform.

The first thing anyone who has met Doc will mention is his height. He's a big guy. I was impressed with his soft-spokenness and easy manner. He is truly a gentle soul.

When he stepped on stage, Doc turned into the master of his domain. His choice of material (both magic and sideshow antics) were exactly what the crowd wanted and needed. As a matter of fact, the following day he was presented a special award for best comedy act at the Get-Together. Doc had attended my lecture and found a special place in his act to make a callback to something I had said. It was good hearted and very funny. It is my understanding that he mentored Penn Jillette at one time. How fortunate for Penn and all of us that we have a Doc Swan around. —**Fielding West**