

# Masters of magic

For centuries, Jewish magicians have enjoyed popularity as masters of grand illusions. And the tradition continues to grow, reports **Simi Horwitz**.

**W**HILE Jews make up less than three per cent of the American population, nearly 20 per cent of American magicians are Jews, headed by David Copperfield, Ricky Jay and David Blaine, the endurance artist who sports several controversial tattoos, including the numbers that were branded on Primo Levi's arm at Auschwitz.

Magic has always been popular with Jewish performers, says magician Peter Samelson.

"Magic involves study and appeals to intellectuals who appreciate book learning and the historical," he says. "Even though the world today is run by the internet, a huge library of books on magic exists, and you continue to need a master and to find a book or secret text that will teach you. That's very Jewish."

Samelson, 64, who majored in physics at Stanford University, turned to magic in the 1960s, at a time of growing public opposition to America's involvement in the Vietnam War.

"It wasn't my goal in life to teach people to enjoy being fooled," he says. "I wanted people to understand more about the world, not less. The government was doing a good enough job of it. Magic needed another role."

Well-known Jewish magicians existed as far back as the 18th century, but didn't really come into their own until the mid-19th century.

Aside from Houdini, prominent Jewish magicians of the past included Horace Goldin (a stage illusionist who worked at lightning speed); Alexander Herrmann (who perfected the comic satanic look on stage); Nate Leipzig (a vaudevillian and pioneer in minimalist magic); Emil Jarow (a headliner in vaudeville whose signature piece involved dollar bills disappearing into lemons); and Tobias Bamberg (who created the much-copied Japanese persona Okito as his onstage alter ego).

Max Maven, an authority on Jews in magic, maintains that Jews celebrate intellectual achievement, and as such have been traditionally drawn to magic along with stand-up comedy.

"And mentalism is even more intellectual," he says, noting that here too Jews are major players. Noted Jewish mentalists include Marc Salem and the Israeli-born Uri Geller, an alleged master of telekinetic spoon-bending.

Maven says that Jewish magicians have been unified by their sense of themselves as outsiders, which is not unlike the sensibility they brought to comedy and literature.

"They admired verbal skills and incorporated wit and an arch sense of humour into their magic, and that still exists. They made speaking throughout their acts commonplace among all magicians," he says.

Maven says many magicians see themselves as the cultural heirs of

earlier Jewish magicians including Houdini.

"Did it play well to Jews?" Maven asks. "Sure, but I don't think there's an aesthetic connection between Houdini and Jewish magicians today. Still, he showed that Jews could be physical, visceral and take off their clothes in front of an audience."

He was also a rationalist and a sceptic, and he disbelieved in paranormal phenomena in general and seances in particular, which were popular in his time.

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Author

For the brainy sleight-of-hand star Jamy Ian Swiss, that intellectualism makes Houdini a defining figure for Jewish magicians whose performance does not extol fakery, and instead promotes a world view rooted in science.

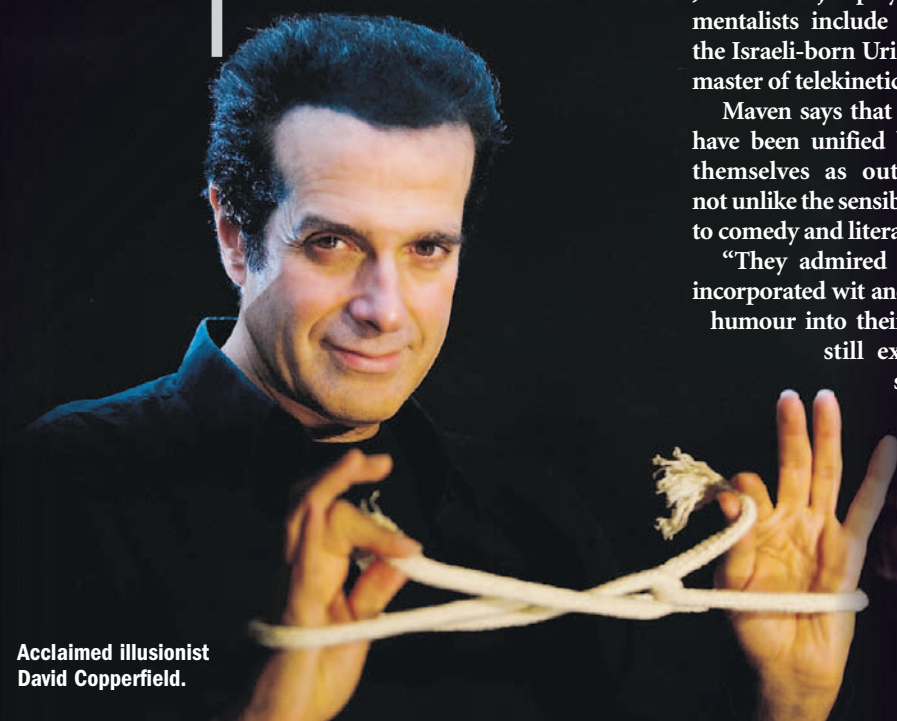
Swiss, a founding member of the National Capital Area Sceptics and the New York City Sceptics, contends that Jews are "raised to be the best atheists".

Coin magician David Roth is the son of Yiddish actress Flora Freiman and the grandson of Yiddish playwright Louis Freiman, both of whom worked in Jewish theatre on the Lower East Side.

Tanya Solomon, a zany magician



Magician Peter Samelson



Acclaimed illusionist David Copperfield.

right out of New Vaudeville, credits her cantor father for unwittingly teaching her the joy of performance and how to connect with an audience.

"There was immediacy to his communication and no fourth wall," she says. "It was like living with an actor. I had no formal stage experience, but my father always put me up on the bimah with the choir. Performing was part of my life. Many performers are the children of cantors, like the character in *The Jazz Singer*."

Harrison Greenbaum, who grew up in Five Towns, Long Island, a Jewish enclave, was raised in a Conservative Jewish home.

"My girlfriend wants me to be more like Jesus," he quips in his act. "I'm a slightly effeminate Jew who does magic. How much closer can I get?"

Samelson says the internet has replaced the brick-and-mortar magic stores where magicians traditionally met to buy props, work out and share trade secrets. The magician's life has become an increasingly isolated one, and experienced performers face no shortage of tech-savvy young competitors.

"My challenge is to keep current and keep my skill at a high level, but not lose that connection between my performance and the audience," he says. "We have that 'conversation' through the performance of magic."

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