

## Simon Aronson: 50 Years Trying for the Impossible

by Phil Willmarth

I have known Simon Aronson casually for some 30 years. While we both lived in the Chicago area, we did not travel in the same magic circles. Nonetheless, as I became more and more aware of him, appreciation of him as a person and as a magician grew steadily. He and Ginny did a superlative two-person mindreading act at one of Tony Andruzzi's Invocational. His card work was meticulous and baffling, and it became clear that he loved magic, especially card magic, and was exceptionally capable at it. Equally important, watching him at F.F.F.F., it was clear he has a very upbeat personality, was very sharing, and has a terrific sense of humor.

Simon Aronson is currently celebrating his fiftieth year in magic – with the publication of Simon's fourth big book *Try the Impossible*, with reviewers labeling it "Brilliant!" (See the review in this issue.) Simon has finally marketed several of his favorite packet tricks, including his classic "Red See Passover." More card magicians than ever are using Simon's "Stack to Remember" (usually referred to as the Aronson stack) for memorized deck magic – a field whose renaissance and popularity is due in large part to his in-depth explorations. And Simon has established his own web site at [www.simonaronson.com](http://www.simonaronson.com), with new effects and ideas on the Aronson stack, descriptions of his books and marketed products, and even movie clips of Simon in performance (check out his "Ring-

leader"). Throughout all of this, Simon has continued, each and every Saturday afternoon, to do what he enjoys most in magic: meet and session with his closest friends in magic.

Indeed, Simon is the first to acknowledge that it's the people he's friendly with who have made magic so rewarding. "I've been privileged to be part of an esoteric group that is enormously talented, challenging and creative, and the synergism has been an inspiration." Simon's long-term group of magical session mates includes a "who's who" list of Chicago's card magic elite: Ed Marlo, David Solomon, Steve Draun, John Bannon, and Bill Malone. And those are just his immediate friends as Simon says, "the guys I have met with, and still meet with, regularly."

Raised in Rye, New York, Simon was bitten by the magic bug at age eight. He went through the typical scenario of magic sets, books at the library, and then discovered Tannen's, where he was befriended by Lou Tannen himself. Simon performed his first paid show at age 11, and from then on the birthday circuit became his showplace. During the summers, as a teenager, Simon had a dream job: he ran the boardwalk magic shop at Playland amusement park, sort of a semi-pitchman of everything from Svengali decks to squirting fountain pens. He got to try out all the newest magic products, and joked with and performed for hundreds of strangers each day.

Simon also joined the Future American Magical Entertainers (F.A.M.E.) a boy's magic club in New York city (founded by Abe Horowitz, the father of Shari Lewis) and there Simon was turned on to close-up, and especially card magic. The club put on public shows in Central Park, and had monthly lectures by some of New York's greats, from Dai Vernon to Richard Himber. Simon's peers in F.A.M.E. included such legends as John Benzais and Persi Diaconis.

In 1961 Simon left the east to attend college at the University of Chicago. He says, "The first thing I did was seek out Ireland's Magic shop, and I hung out there whenever I could. I met some of Chicago's finest magicians, from Johnny Thompson to Harry Riser, from Jay and Frances Marshall to Dorny – and they all were so generous, so helpful, and such good magicians. It was like finding a home base in this new city." One day in 1965, at the magic shop Simon met a fellow his own age, and they formed an immediate friendship that persists today. David Solomon and Simon became an inseparable team, meeting to session every week, and helping each other create better magic.

Together Simon and David met Ed Marlo, and soon became permanent and loyal members (along with Steve Draun) of the "Marlo Table" a closely knit group that met every Saturday at Ed's favorite restaurant, to session and practice and learn from Marlo. That nuclear group has continued for over 30 years. Over time, the membership occasionally changed – for example, in the 70's a budding young restaurant comic from Chicago's south side became a regular member. As Simon observes, "Who would ever have thought that the Marlo table would produce a Bill Malone!" John Bannon joined the table in 1988. Over the years, the weekly session was the visiting place for practically every magician passing through Chicago, because everyone

wanted to meet Marlo. As a result, Simon enjoyed the company of some of the world's finest cardmen. When Marlo passed away in 1991, David, John, and Simon decided to keep the tradition going, and that triumvirate keeps the weekly "session" alive and well.

Although Marlo was primarily known for his sleight-of-hand and technical expertise, Simon and Ed formed a special kinship working together with stacks and prearrangements of all kinds, and it was Marlo's article on the memorized deck (in *Ibidem* #8) that first turned Simon on to this arcane topic. Branching out on his own in the 70's, Simon developed a host of new principles and effects for the memorized deck, and in his many publications Simon showed how sophisticated and deceptive this forgotten tool could really be. In the Introduction to Simon's first book, *Card Ideas* (1978), Marlo writes, "Simon's use of the memorized deck is impressive, and the locations are impossible to reconstruct even by those who use a memorized deck." Simon's pioneer work in this field helped popularized the memorized deck worldwide.

In addition to card magic, Simon has always had an avid interest in mentalism. In 1965 Simon saw the two-person mindreading act of Eddie Fields and George Martz, and right then Simon decided that was the kind of act he wanted to perform. So, for the next few months, Simon did nothing but study two-person mindreading. He became good friends with Eddie Fields, and he watched and studied whatever other two-person acts he could find, going back to the early years of vaudeville. "And then," Simon says, "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. So I decided to start from scratch, by tailoring



*Ginny and Simon Aronson.*

ANNE WHITE PHOTO

my own system to the way I spoke, to the words that actually were natural for me.” Simon devised his own act (“It’s the Thought that Counts”), which he and his charming wife, Ginny, performed throughout the Chicago area. Although

they have long since retired from professional engagements, they still practice their mind reading prowess, and in recent years they’ve received rave reviews with their performances at magic conventions.

Simon insists that he is, at heart, still an amateur – but a lifelong one with a passion for developing new and subtle methods. Simon says, “I’ve always thought of myself as primarily an inventor more than a performer. I try to create effects that hopefully look like real magic – and by that I mean creating the illusion that the magic just happens, almost a “hands off” appearance. One of the best compliments a magician can receive is when your spectator says something like “But I was watching and you didn’t do anything.” Simon’s written works on card magic (spanning over 25 years) attest to the wide range of Simon’s explorations over the years, from stacks to sleights, from gaffs to subtleties to mathematical ideas. Perhaps most diabolical is Simon’s ability to combine such disparate principles together, to create very deceptive magic. When asked for his “favorites” Simon shrugs off having to make choices among his many effects, but says “certainly *Shuffle-bored*, “Red See Passover,” “Everybody’s Lazy,” and the “Instruction Card” effect are right up there.”

All of this magical activity has been “the fun part of my life, my playground,” Simon insists, but for over 25 years Simon shared this playtime with his successful career as a corporate lawyer and partner in one of Chicago’s prestige law firms, where Simon specialized in real estate development. He recently retired from the practice of law, because Simon explains, “I could.” Now he devotes even more time to “playing” with magic, and loves every minute of it.

No article about Simon and his magic

would be complete without mentioning the deep and constant participation of his wife Ginny. A successful (and still active) lawyer, Ginny has been more than simply the better half of their mindreading act. Ginny is a magic spouse who over the years has been exposed to truly expert magic, and she loves to watch it. “When you’ve had Ed Marlo, David Roth and Lennart Green all performing for you in your own kitchen, you quickly appreciate how artful magic can be,” she says. Ginny is the editor of all of Simon’s books, the hostess of the Chicago weekly Saturday session (which has met regularly in her kitchen for the past ten years) and both one of Simon’s ardent supporters and his strongest critics. “I tell him if something plays well, when some effect seems too complicated, and when he flashes. I’m his mirror, in more ways than one.”

Simon and Ginny are a great magic couple, and Simon says his first 50 years in magic are “a good start.” Who knows what his next 50 years will bring?

You’ll find Simon’s tricks in *Genii*, *Inoltre*, *Kabbala*, *The Linking Ring*, *Magic*, *Marlo’s Magazine*, *M-U-M*, and *Sticks & Stones*. You’ll also find him in these books: *Arch Triumphs*, *At the Table*, *The Last Hierophant*, *Powerful Magic*, and *Semi-Automatic Card Tricks, Volume 2*. His own books are: *The Card Ideas of Simon Aronson*, *A Stack to Remember*, *Shuffle-bored*, *Sessions* (with David Solomon), *The Aronson Approach* and *Try the Impossible*. Indeed, who knows what his next 50 years will bring?

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