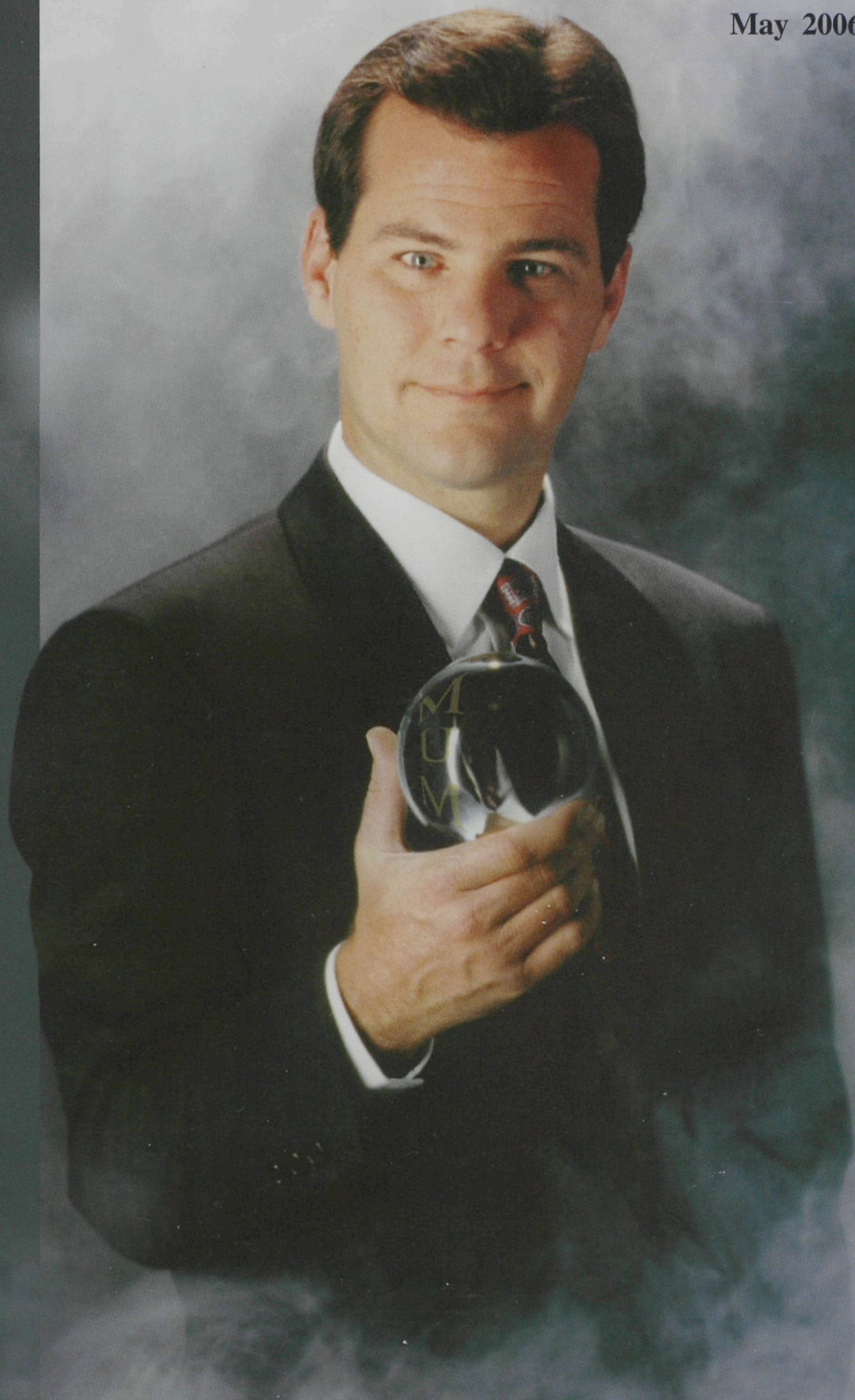


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Tim Conover

Simply Phenomenal

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PHOTO BY ROSS STANFIELD

Magician & Mind-Bender

Tim Conover

By Jon Racherbaumer

Conover is a formula of sorts... $E=mc^2$ is one formula. $C=me^2$ is another.

The latter equation translates to "Conover equals miracles/energy squared," a formulation that partially defines a world-class *phenomenon*. Notice that shop-worn cognomens such as magician, showman, mentalist, corporate entertainer are not used. Although Timothy Conover comfortably fits into those categories, he — like his well-developed magic presentations — combines skills in almost every category while transcending any one of them. This makes him *phenomenal*. And other p-words tumble off the tongue's tip: pitchman, prodigious, polished, precise,

peppy, perceptive, perfectionist, personable, and, yes, oh, yes! — *psychic*. A person simply wants to point and jump up and down in place (as Conover often does in performance) and then afterwards sputter superlatives that sound as though one is "talking in tongues."

This is the effect he has on most lay people, including magicians who helplessly find they feel like laymen again. This is also why he is touted, awarded, praised, and has reached a high place in a domain he dominates, doing so without swagger, chest-thumping, or bombast. And he does this by dint of highly perfected technical skills, infectious energy, and an irrepressible enthusiasm for what he does — enthusiasm undeniably inclusive insofar as audiences are literally and completely



The magician turned mentalist sometimes lets magic prevail on the trade show floor, as Conover astounds the crowd by producing water from thin air.

yanked into his wonderland. They become immersed in it.

Conover was probably fated to be a magician. His father and grandfather were magicians. So, from an early age he was exposed to it, perhaps also inheriting a genetic predisposition? But it's true from an early age he saw the right stuff, done in the right way; and he came of age at the right time and place when Doug Henning emerged and "magic" — a talent relegated to "novelty-variety act" — was on the upswing.

In fact, it was after Conover saw one of Henning's television specials that he *felt* the potential of "magic" to be something more than a curious hobby or musty, arcane art form. He realized that it had the capacity to enthrall and incite an enduring sense of wonder. In short, he believed in Henning's boyish, enthusiastic message that magic was wonderful and full of wonder. There were lots of magic books and equipment around the Conover household. So, fired up by Henning, he set out to learn everything he could. He read voraciously and practiced long hours every day — sometimes six to eight hours — as musicians practice their instrument in a quest not only for proficiency but total mastery.

Fortunately, he lived in the Washington, D.C. area, which had Al Cohen's Magic Shop and Denny & Lee's in Baltimore. There were serious students living there — practitioners who knew great magic and had dedication and style and attitude. Therefore, Conover was exposed to guys such as Scotty York, Buddy Smith, Bill Wells, Harvey Rosenthal, Howie Schwarzman, John Kennedy, Denny Haney. These guys were task-masters, mentors, and coaches who set the bar high. For example, a rite of passage was not only to master a technically challenging routine, but to understand why such routines work and why they are good.

One such routine was John Ramsay's Cylinder and Coins, a presentation few magicians ever fully master. This is a routine that Ramsay had shown to many of the greats in magic — Al Baker, T. Nelson Downs, Jean Hugar, Nate Leipzig, Ralph Hull, to name a few — and none claimed to have followed the moves or understood the exact

method. It is a lesson in misdirection and the nature of feints; a routine that separates the men from the boys, the masters from the dabblers. Conover not only mastered the routine, he added elements of his own to fool those familiar with Ramsay's routine. It wasn't long before he was earning a reputation as a young man with exceptional chops and a performer who delivered the goods with earnest enthusiasm.

Another thing that helped shape Conover was the kind of magic he focused on. For one thing, although he knew lots about card magic and can ably perform the tough stuff, he did not, like other young magicians tend to do, get obsessed about pasteboards. Instead he was more fascinated about the approaches taken by Del Ray and Tony Slydini — enchanting magic that seemed pure and essential, visual and visceral, dynamic and direct.

And Tim was taken by the way Del Ray mollified the harsh sting of powerfully puzzling magic by playing the role of another bystander. Rather than being an all-powerful, solitary perpetrator, he *narrated* what was miraculously happening. The focus was on the "magic," not the person directly or indirectly producing it. This example deeply affected Conover and became a guiding principle as he progressively upped the stakes, raising the level of mystery and deepening the layers of conviction.

By the time he was making some headway in the tradeshow field, he also realized that providing killer tricks and strong presentations was not enough. He wanted to express a point of view, a distinct personality, a vivid character. Because of his artistic bent (he studied art), the organizing principles that come out of such study lent themselves to developing a memorable persona. Maurine Christopher recently wrote in *The Illustrated History of Magic* (2005 Updated Edition) that "Tim Conover stars in a category of magic that has strong appeal even to intellectuals who don't enjoy watching quicker-than-the-eye card tricks or lovely, scantily clad ladies being sawed in half. He is a mentalist."

The initial questions Tim asked himself were: "Who are the performers



PHOTOS BY ROSS STANFIELD

Bills visibly change from fives, tens, and twenties to hundreds, whenever Tim magically pitches trade show execs on their corporate strengths.

that excite and fascinate *me*? What do they have in common?" The performers that came to mind were Robin Williams, Tom Cruise, Jack Nicholson, and Michael Jackson (at the peak of his "Thriller" fame). Each person was energetic or at least made viewers think that they had a robust reserve of potential energy that might explode any second and could drive their internal and external engines forever. Their performances had forward momentum.

Tim also was impressed by a Norman Rockwell painting that showed a baseball umpire confronting a player, exerting his authority — yelling, intent, unwavering, signaling that "Hey-you-are-out-of-here!" This umpire, an ultimate arbiter, was an object of love and hate... always in control. Tim thought to himself, "This is the character I want to be!" In fact, he was already hard-wired to be this sort of performer. All he had to do now was pump up the volume and broaden the gestures. At the time he was still performing magic.

But by 1986, the trade show field became competitive, and workers were sensitive to distinguishing themselves from anything that smacked of being stereotypical, even if the proficiency level was exceptional. Three years later, Conover switched from high-end magic to idiosyncratic mentalism. His aim was "to explore a new frontier of the magical arts unknown to the vast majority of other magicians" and to come up with "new effects to dream about, using diabolical and subtle methods extremely difficult to detect, even under repeated viewings."

The key phrase here is "diabolical and subtle methods extremely

difficult to detect even under repeated viewings." Few presentations of magic or mentalism withstand repeated viewings, which is the case in the trade-show environment. Businessmen are particularly challenged by anything puzzling and mysterious. They are problem solvers. If a mental feat is a brain-buster, they will come back to watch it over and over, hoping to solve the puzzle.

When Conover made the transition he had already been collecting the classic books on mentalism and found inspiration and motifs from inventor-writers such as Ted Annemann, Milbourne Christopher, Joseph Dunninger, Corinda, and William Larsen. Another key aspect was to emphasize the interplay between minds, the dramatic situations of the phenomena being played out. All props had to be recognizable

and commonplace: books, newspapers, a crystal ball, a blindfold, money, jewelry.

At a banquet Tim might borrow silverware and then Geller-like cause knives and forks to bend, twist, twirl, and finally break

apart. If he borrows finger rings, he causes them to visibly melt together and shrink in slow motion. Then he unlinks them and gives them back.

When Maurine Christopher recently recognized Tim's exceptional abilities by awarding him Best Mentalist from the Milbourne Christopher Foundation, she wrote of Tim's performances: "Someone in the audience is requested to recall his most recent memorable dream. Conover opens up a sealed envelope, takes out a wallet and a folded

His aim was to come up with new effects to dream about, using diabolical and subtle methods extremely difficult to detect, even under repeated viewings.

sheet of paper inside — it is an accurate description of the dream. In the Crystal Ball routine, he chooses folks from the audience at random and tells them where they were born, places they have visited, important people they have met, their pets' names, and where a birthmark is. He performs his think-of-a-word newspaper or book test to spotlight the client of the day. He generally closes with his sensational telephone book feat. One spectator on stage points to a seven-digit number in the local phone book. Eight spectators in the audience open the leather pads given them by the mentalist earlier. Inside each: a piece of paper with the selected phone number written on it."

Tim is a meticulous thinker and planner. Like writers of screenplays, he firmly believes that all presentations should be complete with no wasted movements or words — everything that happens or is said should service the requisite tensions of drama. In Tim's case, all actions, even pauses, are relentless. When he designs a program, complete with a script, he makes certain that the opening effect is short and strong. He also likes to be alone on the stage, at least at the beginning, and the effects he performs must forecast or symbolize the "journey" he will take with his audience.

His middle effects are calculated to build from weakest to strongest, never the reverse; and some routines must be slower, others longer, and some a little of both. He also sprinkles a few quick tricks between formal program pieces (following the model set by Del Ray). These quick tricks should appear to be extemporaneous, as though you thought of them on the spot to be apropos for the show you are doing at the time. His basic act is like a Christmas tree and it takes years to hang all of the ornaments, says David Williamson. These ornaments can be lines, bits of business, quick tricks, or anything that enhances the body of the program.

It must be mentioned that there is another deeply profound theory imbedded into the structure of Tim's mind-reading act. It is Frenchman Pascal de Clermont's "Ladder of Believability." In short, this theory posits that one cannot just come out and start doing Q. and A. The audience will not believe you and will simply ask or speculate how or where you got the information. Like the slow stepping up of the impossibility structure of hypnosis, which is critical to make it work, you have to start with small, believable possibilities, and then gradually increase the threshold of credulity until you are doing what seems impossible. Believers will follow you the whole way. Non-believers and skeptics are either intellectually pacified or relax enough to be "carried up the ladder," because a previous test could conceivably be possible. That is, each successive test is progressively believable, and it isn't too big of a leap from 52 possibilities to 100 possibilities. When matters reach unlimited possibilities, it is easier for the non-believers to digest and consider it possible. Without such a structure, you would lose them after the first or second presentation. Tim's show is designed to punch first, step back, and begin the gradual ascent up the "Ladder of Believability."

Tim met Pascal de Clermont during his concentrated exploration of mind reading when he joined the Psychic Entertainers Association. This group consists of a different breed of magician, although to this day, Tim walks with both groups and fails to see any major differences.



Think of one single word among the tens of thousands in a daily newspaper and Tim will tell you what it is.



Doubly blindfolded, he's able to identify not only objects held over his hand, but he knows who its owner is as well.



Spectators are not as bamboozled by how Conover achieves sightless vision as they are bothered by what he knows about the objects hidden from his sight.

Master of Flow

Besides choosing a character that audiences can identify with, Tim's image is unlike others stereotypically associated with mentalism, psychic phenomena, and any of the other bizarre associations that flit about nearby like bats out of hell. He doesn't have the granite stare or ponderous voice of a Dunninger. He doesn't have any Goth-like trappings, nor does he look like he traffics in the powers of darkness. He looks refreshingly normal and radiates exuberant *transparency*. He looks clean-cut, all-American, and boyishly avid. He holds a crystal ball like it was a bubble found underneath his pillow. And he wants to share his discovery with *everybody*. He is also a master of what psychologist Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi calls "flow." According to him, "Flow is a mental state of operation in which the person is fully immersed in what he or she is doing, characterized by a feeling of energized focus, full involvement, and success in the process of the activity."

Conover not only lives in this state, he eventually draws everyone around him into a kind of flowing festival of sights, sounds, and experiences. First, the phenomenon Tim demonstrates is direct and easily discernible. Because he is steadfastly focused, he forces his audience to focus. The field of attention is restricted and consequently specta-

tors tend to delve deeply into what is happening. Ultimately they become less self-conscious because they are part of what is happening.

Back in the '60s the phrase "go with the flow" was popular and it loosely characterizes what happens during a Conover performance. There are currents of energy and he achieves this in many ways. For example, in a tradeshow environment the spectators are standing. When Tim works onstage, he forms a committee of assistants that stand. In both cases, Tim can then move ("flow") within this group. The spectators are carried along by the flow of the action, sometimes being an integral part of this "flowing."

Flow is fun. Furthermore, what is interesting about what Conover achieves is that the activity for the spectators is not wholly passive (like watching television). Contrary to what you might expect, flow usually happens *not* during relaxing moments of leisure and entertainment, but rather when we are actively involved in a

challenging enterprise that stretches our mental and physical abilities.

Yes, spectators are entertained by what Conover does because they are intermittently surprised, stunned, perplexed, and amused. These are the perturbations in the flowing field of energy. However, spectators are simultaneously being challenged by what they are experiencing. The events defy reason. They test one's threshold of gullibility. They engage one's critical thinking faculties. So, while they are simultaneously laughing and crying out in astonishment, they are speculating and wondering and calculating. They are riding the crests of psychic

A mentalist receiving thoughts is similar to being outside in a thunderstorm. Suddenly, there is a bright flash of light and everything becomes clear and startling.



When Conover enables spectators with the power to look into his crystal and see their friends' past, present, and future, it's perhaps best described as "psychic contagion."

energy waves. There is a feedback loop that's almost palpable.

There are many specific ways Tim creates a field of energetic flowing. For example, he recommends tripling the level of your everyday expression of energy. Use larger movements, a more forceful voice inflection, and exhibit youthful vitality. At first this will feel strange and exaggerated, but over time it will become second nature.

Another device is to always do the unexpected. For example, when you approach a spectator, go towards someone nearby and then change directions at the last second and pick the chosen person. This commonplace activity is more interesting to watch. When you watch Tim in performance, he is almost always smiling. This is infectious. (He took this cue from Denny Haney, along with the habit of laughing at one's self.) Direct laughter toward you, not your audience; it is endearing.

Tim seldom looks at the few props he uses (unless he wants the audience to look at them). He looks at spectators, "throwing threads from his eyes to theirs," as does Juan Tameriz. Everyone in the audience must feel connected. Be animated, exciting, dynamic, youthful, and almost childlike in your character. It is addictive.

Fill the staging area. Use stage right, stage left, upstage, downstage. Twirl, spin, stop, and go. Adopt Slydini's rule of "coordinated movement." That is both hands start at the same time and end at the same time regardless of the distance each must travel. If your hands independently move, it draws attention to each specific and separate movement. Also, adopt Slydini's rule of tension and relaxation. When you raise your hand to make a point, imagine that you are shooting a gun. Feel the tension and energy required to hold a gun still. This is the moment of tension, punctuation, and attention. What you feel, your audience will feel. Once the gun is fired, relax. Your arm falls almost lifeless to the rest position by your side or onto the table. When you relax, your audience relaxes.

Hyperbole or fact?

Conover, unlike many magicians, delivers what his brochure promises. One expects tout sheets to be hyperbolic — the usual, extravagant, hard-selling claims. However, Tim actually is equal to the hype, sometimes surpassing it. Here is the pitch: "Tim performs a 60-minute, high-speed, interactive thought reading. A mentalist receiving thoughts is similar to being outside in a thunderstorm. Suddenly, there is a bright flash of light, and everything becomes clear and startling. Tim's program has the impact of experiencing a powerful thunderstorm. He performs at a breathtaking, energetic, dramatic extreme that will bring your audience to the edge of their seats.

"Tim enters the stage highlighted in a spotlight. Your spontaneous thoughts are captured in an entertaining series of thunderbolt presentations. Birthdates are dramatically revealed. Words randomly selected out of well-known books are instantly captured from across the room. Drawings are duplicated. Three members of the audience construct the elements of a dream vacation and find a complete description sealed in an envelope, inside a wallet, that remains in the spectator's hands throughout the presentation.

"With his eyes completely blindfolded, Tim identifies personal objects you choose at random. He divines the serial numbers on bills of any denomination. Personal messages sealed in envelopes are described in intimate detail without ever being collected. Birthplaces, social security numbers, close friends, birthmarks, important events, situations, and thoughts known only to you are revealed in a delightfully captivating experience.

"This is the award-winning program that has earned Tim rave reviews from his peers and corporate audiences around the globe. You will find yourself believing it may really be possible to capture thoughts you are only thinking."

What you read is what you get.