

JULY 2004 U.S. \$5

MAGIC

**Bob
Sheets**



FIVE TAKES ON



As told by Bob's friends: C.C. Allen, Ken Bengtson, Doc Eason, Bob Fitch, Eddie Goldstein, Bob Kohler, Steve Spill, J.C. Wagner, and Barry Wood

I ntermission was over and the audience was returning to their seats in the newly restored Arts Barn Theater in Gaithersburg, Maryland for the closing act of the night. *Wednesday Wizardry*, a new series of weekly shows featuring local and visiting pros, had found an audience and tonight the 90-seat theater was nearly full.

One of the performers, Barry Wood, having worked in the first half, knew it was a great audience. But he also grinned to himself, thinking, "They ain't seen nothin' yet." The closing act was Bob Sheets and, slipping quietly into the back seat, Barry was about to watch the Card Stab for the zillionth time.

But tonight was different. For some reason, Sheets was in a nostalgic mood. "Where's Bullwinkle?" shouted the blindfolded, knife-wielding, crazy man behind the table full of scattered cards. Barry smiled.

"My mind instantly flashed back to the early 1980s," Wood says. "I was sitting in the Brooke Farm Inn of Magic in Chevy Chase, Maryland, with my friend Bob Kohler, watching the audience collectively gasp in amazement at the sight of the selected card impaled on the knife. That was my introduction to the art of comedy magic. That night I also saw something I had never seen before: Bob Sheets performing behind the bar. Crazy bar bits, the Bra Trick, the Sugar Cubes, and other routines I would discover later were bits learned from his mentor, the great Chicago bar magician, Heba Haba Al."

But we are getting ahead of ourselves.

BOB SHEETS



To begin this story we must step back in time to Christmas of 1960. Don't envision a white, snowy holiday scenario, for this tale begins in sunny California on a day made even brighter when ten-year-old received a magic kit from his father. Upon opening the marvelous gift, Bobby Sheets found himself instantly hooked on the fascinating wonders he found inside. He soon discovered that San Diego had a

junior magicians club, joined it, and

before long was giving shows for his friends. By age 13, he had expanded his audiences to birthday parties and women's clubs, and by his graduation from high school he was one of the most active magicians in the San Diego area.

He augmented his magic income with normal jobs, or perhaps he supplemented his normal income with magic. Either way, Bob sold cookware, sewing machines, vacuum cleaners, and magazines by day, while working as a security guard and a short-order cook by night.

Bob joined the Navy in 1968. Almost immediately, he discovered that he was allergic to the wool government-issue blankets and was granted a medical discharge in a matter of weeks. Ironically, during that short time he received a "Dear Bob" letter from his girlfriend, who thought he would be absent too long to wait for him.

One summer day in 1969, when the Big John Strong Circus was in town for its annual visit, Bob's friend Ken Bengel, a juggler with the old-fashioned tent show, came to him with a small problem. Ken had been offered a contract for a touring show with Mark Wilson's Magical Productions, but he could only accept the new job if he could find a replacement for his act in the circus.

"Do you know how to eat fire?" Ken asked.

"No," said Bob.

"You do."

"No, I don't."

But Ken insisted, "Yes, you do!"

They went to Ken's house, made a few torches out of coat hangers, and Bob learned fire eating on the spot. Within hours, Ken took Bob to the circus lot to see Big John Strong. The circus impresario was a huge man, six foot four, weighing over 240 pounds, a man (according to his advertising) with more friends than Santa Claus. Ken told Big John, "Here's your new act." Bob was instantly hired. It was 2:30 in the afternoon and for the 5:30 show, Sheets was working center-ring, doing fire eating, a dove production, the Linking Rings set to music, and Professor Cheer's Comedy Rope routine.

When the circus left San Diego for its summer tour of ten western states, Sheets left with it, as a fire eater, magician, sideshow manager, cotton candy seller, and canvas man. To him, it was like going to college, only fun. "Big John Strong taught me how to be a showman," Sheets says. "I worked 20 hours a day and wished there were more hours."

Bob stayed with the circus for one season, then decided it was time for a more traditional education. He entered Southwestern College in Chula Vista, California, planning to major in business and minor in theater arts. To support himself he went back to sales, becoming a Fuller Brush man. His experience dealing with people of all kinds served him well, and he soon was managing a crew of half a dozen young salesmen.

Of course, Bob also continued doing magic, playing fairs, schools, and department stores. After only one semester, he found college too slow, so he did a three-month magic tour of Job Corps camps around the country under the auspices of the U.S. Department of Health, Education, and Welfare. Instead of returning to college, he re-upped with the circus and played small towns across the country for a second season.



At nineteen-years-old, Bob toured doing magic and eating fire on the Big John Strong Circus.



Bob was ready for a change. When the Big John Strong Circus left Chicago, Bob didn't. Once again, he followed his friend Ken Bengé's lead; he went into trade shows, learning the business by working for Gene Bullard, who had purchased Mark Wilson's trade show company. He was hired to work such exhibits as the Hand Machine and

Robot Girl, as well as taking on the role of International Cookie Recipe Thief in the *Elf Magic Show*, an attraction that toured shopping malls. Bob also produced and performed trade shows and corporate engagements for Westinghouse, Motorola, General Electric, and Edison Electric. The man obviously had energy.

One night, a good friend, Jerry Newton, took Bob into a Chicago bar and eatery known as the Pickle Barrel. Bob was never the same. He met a funny little old man, Heba Haba Al, a magical bartender. Watching the local legend, he was hit with an epiphany — Heba Haba's kind of intimate magical entertainment was something that fit him like a glove. He learned how to tend bar and was taught what for him were truly the real secrets from the real master: how to capture a crowd, hook them, make them stay, and make them return.

Bob worked side by side with Heba Haba for ten months. The master taught his student many routines, but Sheets developed his own as well, along with a unique comic personality. "I decided that I was going to have more fun than the customers, and I succeeded. I wanted the bar to be roaring with laughter, excitement, and activity." Bob was a big hit with the crowds at the Pickle Barrel. "It's a very personal type of act. The audience is part of it. Many of the illusions are based on apparent failure. When the tricks finally succeed in a startling or unexpected manner, it creates far more excitement than a trick performed routinely."

Although he was enjoying success, Bob decided it was time to leave the Windy City. Armed with his newly found zaniness behind the bar, some trade-show experience, and the stand-up act from the circus, Sheets took Horace Greeley's proverbial advice and headed west — back to where he started.

Bob's friend, J.C. Wagner, was bartending at the exclusive Singing Hills Country Club in the San Diego area, and he brought Bob onto the job. Within three months the bar had a happy hour like it had never experienced. However, the management of the upper crust establishment couldn't handle Bob's irreverent humor, so he set out to find a new venue where his conjuring craziness was acceptable.

On San Diego's Coronado Island, in the shadow of

the famous Hotel Del Coronado, there was a quaint little bar attached to an Italian restaurant. Unfortunately, or maybe fortunately, Marco's Roman Lounge was as dead as the dearest of doornails. The Italian restaurateur was doubtful that a magician could make a difference but told "Bob-a-sheet," as he called him, that he was welcome to do anything he wanted if he could "maka the bar pay." A few months later, there was standing room only. Bob then returned J.C. Wagner's earlier kindness by hiring him. On Halloween night of 1973, J.C. became a nightly performer at Marco's. He stayed for over a year.

Local media started carrying stories about the amazing things happening at this entertaining place. What they wrote about was one of the wildest, funniest magic bars in the history of libation. Not only was Bob a talented magician, he was a wacky bartender, serving cokes with whipped cream and a cherry on top or a glass of water that came in a half-gallon tumbler. Customers who returned to see Sheets' fantastic magical routines were every bit as interested in watching the reaction of their guests as they were in seeing the tricks again. One of the audience favorites was the Card Stab, a happy marriage of Bob's mastery of comedy and drama. This routine would become a signature piece for Sheets who, almost ten years later, won Ron MacMillan's 13th Annual International Close-up Contest with it, accepting his award on the stage of the London Palladium.

While the bar was successful, Bob was restless. In 1975, he took a vacation in the snow capital of Aspen, Colorado. While in nearby Snowmass, he discovered The Tower, an attractive restaurant that was owned by folk music star John Denver. After convincing management to hire him, Bob went back to California, turned in his resignation at Marco's, piled everything he owned into a bread truck, and hit the road back to Snowmass. Upon arrival, the truck broke down, so Bob turned it into a non-mobile home and went to work at The Tower, transforming the service bar of the restaurant into a magical experience.

One night, a young man by the name of Doc Eason dropped by The Tower to have a drink. "At the time," Doc explains, "my only exposure to magic had been a little book I read as a teenager, Bill Turner's *How to do Tricks with Cards*, so I figured I knew all there was to know about card tricks. Armed with this tiny bit of knowledge, I played right into Bob's hands. With cards flying everywhere when Sheets shuffled, and his 'I'm not as good as the others' comments, I was totally convinced this guy was a klutz, and I could easily follow what he was doing." Bob's carefree and disarming way of handling cards suckered Doc right in and, as the evening wore on, he became totally enchanted. "It was lunacy on a grand scale. Bob had the barroom in the palm of his hand. The spell he wove that night had a profound effect on me!" Doc Eason would end up staying at magic bar of The Tower for 27 years, until it closed in April 2004.

In the early '70s, Marco told "Bob-a-sheet" that if he could "maka the bar pay" he had a job. Sheets stayed three years.

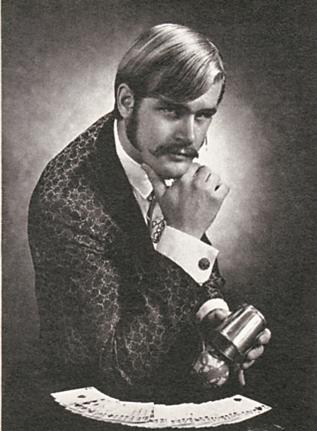
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By 1977, it was time, Bob felt, to once again transform himself. This time into the “Jolly Jester,” and it was time to test an idea he had called “the funnel.” His theory was that he could make a venue, similar to the Close-up Room at the Magic Castle, wildly successful because everyone would want to see it, yet only a few could get in, thus creating the funnel.

That winter, Bob and fellow magician Kevin Dawson opened the Jolly Jester Magic Dinner Theatre in Aspen. The lounge restaurant seated only 65 people. The Jolly Jester (that being Bob) would go outside and work the street. Then, like the Pied Piper, he would lead the bewildered and amused crowd through the small door beneath the Jolly Jester sign to a room where they could get in, but could not get out. That is, until they spent a small fortune on food, drink, and Bob. Performing two stage shows a night, Sheets also mixed drinks and performed close-up at the bar.

Also working the Jolly Jester in its early days was Eddie Goldstein. “It was more than a magical place,” Eddie says. “I remember once Bob came in and announced to all of us that we were not magicians! We were ‘professional partiers.’ What an image! It transformed the way we thought about all we were doing. It suddenly didn’t matter how many card tricks you did, so long as the guests were laughing and having a good time. This image really captures Bob: the life of the party!”

Goldstein recalls the favorite party bit Bob did behind the bar — the Handkerchief Trick. “You know, the one where Bob stuck two handkerchiefs down a woman’s cleavage to determine if she was hot or not. This stunt, as Bob used to say, was done purely as a public service for the rest of the bar. But it was his favorite trick. The amazing thing is that the audience roared with laughter and applauded in a certain way that only happened with that particular trick. We magicians could be on the other side of the building, hear that certain roar from the bar, and say to each other, ‘Bob just did the Handkerchief Trick.’”

Steve Spill, son of Magic Castle host Sandy Spill, soon joined Bob at the Jolly Jester. Steve’s dry, laid-



When Sheets opened the Jolly Jester in Aspen it wasn’t long before he was joined by madman Steve Spill, who became part of the illusion act at the Brooke Farm Inn of Magic (above right).

back trickery was the perfect contrast to Bob’s crazy conjuring. Together, they put on an unforgettable show. Not content to do just close-up and stand-up, Bob and Steve expanded their 90-minute stage show to include Illusions — levitating an audience volunteer and an insane version of the Metamorphosis in which Steve played Harry Houdini and Bob, in drag, portrayed wife, Bess. Anything went at the Jolly Jester.

Bob reveals that it was not unusual to lock the doors early and turn the place into a private party. “We would line up the customers for upside-down margaritas. People would lie on their backs while we poured the alcohol directly into their mouths. And for an extra five bucks from their buddies, we would hit them in the face with a whipped cream pie.” Reports have it that there are photographs of Ted Kennedy at the Jester bar with his shirt off, and according to Bob, on this auspicious evening they actually pied the whole Kennedy clan, and Dad paid!

The show became the talk of the town. Visiting celebrities went out of their way to stop by and be a part of the Jolly Jester experience. However, Aspen wasn’t big enough for Sheets and Spill. In 1980, they decided to head to the capital. And we don’t mean Denver. The nation’s capital, D.C.

The Brooke Farm Inn, in Chevy Chase, Maryland, was an old barn that had once been a historical teahouse where Eleanor Roosevelt entertained guests. Located in a residential area, it was a charming facility, large enough to house a dinner theater. Bob, along with Steve Spill and a few restaurateurs from Aspen, Mark



At the Brooke Farm Inn of Magic, fellow magicians would travel across the country to see Sheets perform his Card Stab. [Facing page] Sheets works Cups and Balls at a street performers festival.



and Mike Regan, turned the place into just that. Seating about 125 diners, Brooke Farm boasted of a magic bar, a close-up table, and a stage, albeit small. The bar was open seven days a week, with dinner shows Wednesday through Sunday, and a special matinee for kids on Saturday. The second year, Scotty York joined the gang as a performing bartender. Over the next few years, a number of young magicians became regulars: Tim Conover, John Kennedy, David Williamson, John Ekin, Alan Hayden, Bob Kohler, Jamy Ian Swiss, and Eddie Goldstein. And because there were always visiting magicians in town, it was like a 365-day-a-year magic convention.

When Sheets started appearing nightly at the Brooke Farm Inn of Magic, he profoundly affected the magicians who lived in the area. Bob Kohler claims that without meeting Sheets, he would not have experienced a career as a professional magician. "It began the first time I saw Sheets and Steve Spill in their two-man show," says Kohler. "I went with my friend Seth Kramer and they seated us in the front row. At that time I had been an amateur for a little over a year. I was totally

blown away. Bob really got to me. He sunk the hook deep... really deep. But the most important thing was the way Sheets made me feel. I had the time of my life. To this day, I can't remember laughing out loud any harder than I did that night. I wanted to make people feel that way. And to imagine getting *paid* for doing such a wonderful thing? Wow!"

The two Bobs have been close friends ever since that night. And, like all of the pros who have worked with Sheets, Kohler has stories. More often than not, when asked about Bob Sheets stories, the usual response is, "Oh yeah, I have a Bob story, but it can't be printed."

Bob Kohler, however, has a couple that can be shared. Kohler tells of the time, after working with Bob at the Brooke Farm Inn for several months, that it was finally his turn to appear with Sheets at a private show. It was at the most prestigious country club in D.C., and the guests were all prominent politicians and elite business leaders. They were to perform in a ballroom for 300 guests, with our stations at opposite ends of the hall. What happened next was the *second* time Sheets changed Kohler's life. "It wasn't long before Bob had 298 of the guests at his end of the room," Kohler says. "The people were having the time of their lives. Meanwhile, I'm at the other end... the lonely end. Throughout the evening Bob had crowds of people watching him. The laughs were loud, the applause deafening. Me, I performed for a senator and his 'date' in silence. It was very depressing."

That night Kohler couldn't sleep. All he could think about was how the audiences absolutely loved Bob. It didn't matter to Kohler if he was technically superior, or if he could classic palm four coins and drop them one at a time. He realized that night that what matters is that the audience accepts you as a performer and loves you. "When Sheets performs," Kohler says, "the audience wants him to win and win big."

While the Brooke Farm Inn of Magic was successful, it was not profitable enough to keep investors happy. So, after five years, the venue changed financial hands and Bob, with three new owners, opened yet another magical dinner theater on the East Coast, the Inn of Magic in Wheaton, Maryland. The building, an abandoned Chuck E. Cheese's pizza parlor, was larger than the previous places, seating around 225 people. In addition, they shifted the style to something more like the Magic Castle, featuring a cast with rotating guest magicians. Visiting performers included Dave Willis, Peter Samelson, Robert Baxt, Bob Fellows, Harry Maurer, the comedy magic team of Kohl & Company and, of course, the dynamic duo of Sheets and Spill. There was a Saturday kids show featuring John Ekin.

Not long after the Inn of Magic opened, Sheets approached Bob Kohler one night and told him that Ricky Jay and Michael Skinner had flown all the way from the West Coast to see him do his famous version of the Malini Card Stab. He asked Kohler if he would sit behind them and listen to their comments. Bob said, "No problem... I love being the fly on the wall."

Bob's handling of the Card Stab is a diabolical work of art. Those lucky enough to see him perform it are invariably fooled by both his

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handling of the selections and his acting. “Yes,” says Kohler, “some of Bob’s craziness is acting.” After the four spectators select cards and return them to the deck, Bob goes into a high energy shuffling sequence. In true Sheets fashion, he manages to mess up the shuffle, lose control, and spray cards all over the floor.

“When this happened,” Kohler remembers, “Ricky Jay turned to Michael Skinner and said, ‘I can’t believe we flew all the way out here to see him screw it up.’ They both bought into the big lie.” Bob still had total control over the cards, and when he started stabbing the selections correctly while blindfolded, fly-on-the-wall Bob Kohler realized that both Michael and Ricky were blown away. At the end of the show, he ran backstage to tell Bob about their reactions.

“Bob cracked up,” Kohler says. “He came out to their table and both Michael and Ricky told Bob how great it was. Without missing a beat Bob said, ‘But you missed the Pass!’”

Ricky said, “There was no Pass.”

Skinner agreed.

Sheets said, “You missed it.” A mild argument ensued. Bob invited them to watch the second show and told them exactly when he was going to do the Pass. Naturally, they stuck around. Bob yells ‘Bullwinkle!’ as he does the Pass. Michael and Ricky are speechless.

Hordes of knowledgeable magicians have been fooled by Sheets. His style causes you to laugh and relax. You miss the Pass. You miss the Card Under the Drink for the tenth time. “But it doesn’t matter,” Kohler reminds. “You’ve had the time of your life in his presence.”

Sheets and fellow performer Barry Wood had become close friends, and in the mid 1990s, they decided to attend a street per-

formers festival in Canada. Barry tells of how he received a real education in the art of street magic when they arrived at the festival and found out there were designated street areas where the artists were supposed to appear. They were scheduled to work in spots that were far from being favorable performing conditions. There were poor sight lines, lack of shade for the spectators, and way too much ambient noise. So Sheets and Wood hopped into rickshaws available to the tourists and headed out in search of a prime performance spot.

“I chuckle to myself as I remember what was perhaps one of the greatest entrances for a street show ever,” Barry says. “Picture two guys directing their own respective rickshaw drivers to enter a crowded food court area. Heads turned and people stopped their conversations and just gaped at us. Bob shouted over to me, ‘What do you think? You wanna do a show here?’ He then turned to the crowd and asked, ‘You guys wanna see a show?’ So we got out of our rickshaws and performed a street show.” Later in the week of the festival, the location that Bob and Barry had picked was designated as “an official festival performance spot.”

In 1998, when Steve Spill opened his own magic venue, Magicopolis, in Santa Monica, California, Sheets stepped in to help. He was also instrumental in getting Barry Wood a job there.

“Bob has always been generous with his time, talent, and willingness to share,” Barry says with a smile. “One thing that stands out in my mind is the day we went to see underground cardman Jack Birnman, who was bedridden with lung cancer. Bob brought routines he was working on, along with his music and sound system, and did a full show for him. Jack loved it.”



Many consider Bob one of magic's great teachers. Ask Doc Eason, Johnny Fox, Jerry Newton, Jon Stetson, or virtually anybody who has worked with him. "Not only does Sheets encourage others, nobody seems to have launched more magicians than Bob," according to trade-show performer and corporate entertainer Peter Studebaker. "He has given me wise counsel over the years, which is amazing

because half of the time I can't understand what he is trying to say. I think *non sequitur* is Latin for Bob Sheets!"

When actor/magician Bob Fitch decided to facilitate his Performance Workshop in 1999, it was Bob Sheets who gave Fitch and his wife, Pauline, the "green light." Bob was the first performer to sign up for the week-long course.

"I'm thankful to Bob," says Fitch. "He gave me a new career. Once he had encouraged us to go ahead, he then beat the bushes and convinced other magicians — very successful magicians — to attend. Single-handedly he sold them on their need to not be satisfied, to be even more successful, to explore their unknown potential, and to take their magic artfully into the next millennium. They came from all over the country and were soon echoing Bob's phrase, 'You've got to *sell* every minute you're on stage.'"

Fitch's Performance Workshop is now in its sixth year, and Bob Sheets has attended each year. "Every year Bob brings new material, new enthusiasm, and a willingness to learn and to dare. He has become sharper, funnier, more successful, more theatrical, and more capable of pinpointing the problems of others and helping them to solve their problems.

"Bob works harder on defining his character and refining his magic more than anyone I've come in contact with. Plus he's achieved what so many would die to know: how to be objective about himself and his work. How to stand back and honestly be able to appraise if it's right for him or if it's good enough. Fitch says that the Workshop now has a process it didn't have before. Sheets claims that he has to keep the Workshop filled with performers because he wants to keep coming back.

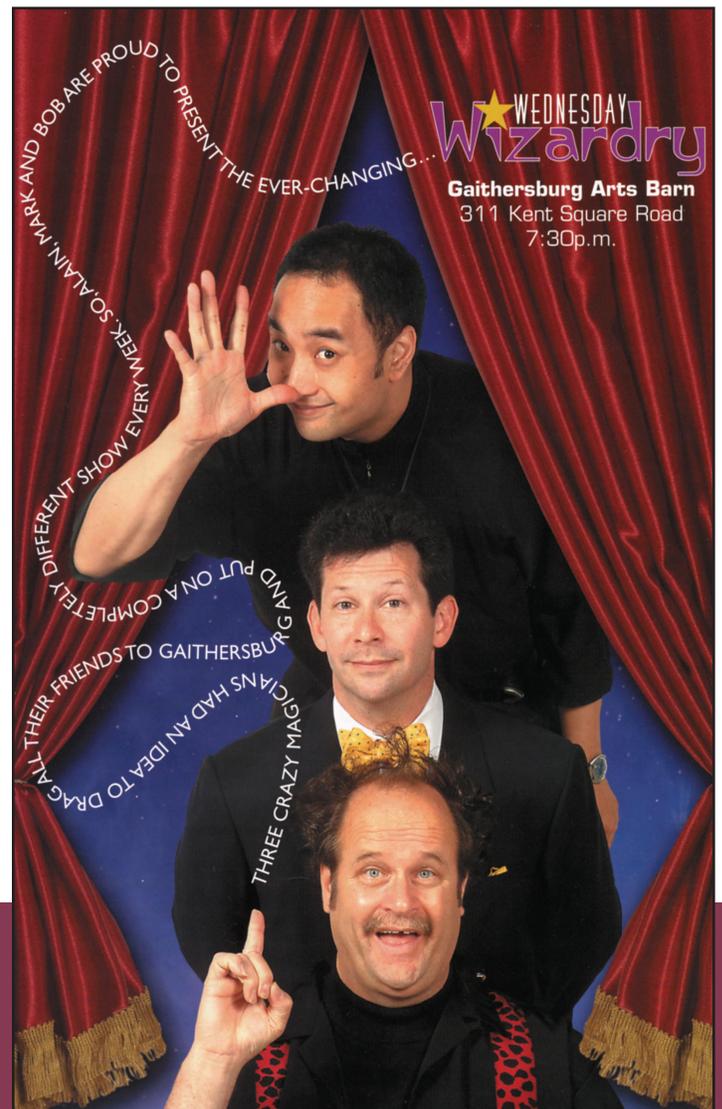
"Ironically, he sharpens his wits, tools, and knowledge on others. By using what he does for himself to help them, he's become a great coach, a loving mentor. "I'm always in awe of Bob's progress and discovery. If you're lucky enough to get advice from Bob, whether it's your magic or your performance, take it! If there were anyone I would pass this Workshop onto, it would be Bob Sheets. Why? Because he's teaching me!"

"I was doing a lecture for the Rocky Mountain Convention last

year and Bob yelled out, encouragingly, "Get up there and show them what you can do!" Then later, during a difficult moment in the lecture, he said, 'Lighten up Bob, you need to take one of your own classes!' After that laugh, I did lighten up. It was the right word at the right time. That's Bob Sheets.

In the spring of 2003, Sheets got a call from his friend Mark Phillips who told him that the City of Gaithersburg, Maryland was willing to sponsor magical theater. He asked Bob if he would be interested in creating a monthly show? Bob's answer was typically enthusiastic. "Why not do it weekly?" The result is *Wednesday Wizardry* at the Gaithersburg Arts Barn. Every week Mark, Bob, and Alain Nu produce a different magic show, featuring visiting magicians and a group of talented in-house close-up workers.

Bob Sheets, once again, is having a great time doing his thing — experimenting with character, redefining his magic, and pleasing his audiences. "Whenever I select a new or old trick to perform I try to pick one that I enjoy performing as much as the audience likes watching. I want to see the look in their eyes at the magic moment when they're free falling and they have no idea where they are. If I can get everyone else to see that moment, then I've done what I always wanted to do since I was ten years old... magic." ♦



In September, the City of Gaithersburg begins its third season of presenting Wednesday Wizardry at the Gaithersburg Arts Barn, 311 Kent Square Road. For ticket information and reservations call (301) 258-6394.