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THE ART OF PSYCHOLOGICAL ILLUSION THE MIND READERS

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We are blessed in the UK with some of the most talented and entertaining mind-reading acts in the world. Derren Brown has been at the forefront of bringing this form of entertainment to the masses and remains the world's leading performer whilst other highly entertaining and equally mystifying UK performers include John Archer, David Berglas, Luke Jermy, Graham Jolley, Andy Nyman and Marc Paul.

Some believe the fashion of Mentalism and psychological illusion is a recent occurrence. Nothing can be further from the truth and, in this series of short features on the forefathers of this particular type of magic, I will be looking at the history of mind-reading acts and bringing you intriguing stories (some will astound you) of the successes and adventures of some of the leading exponents of this captivating and sometimes astounding genre of magic.

Alexander The Man Who Knows (1880 – 1954)

This series of articles starts with one of the most fascinating stories in the history of magic, let alone mentalism. Alexander's story is surrounded by intrigue, controversy and a mixture of fact and fiction (much generated by Alexander himself). Here was an average magic performer, copying acts from performers including Houdini whilst striving to find a successful formula. He eventually and almost accidentally found fame and a considerable fortune as the world's leading mind-reader. Here was a very driven, focused individual, whose strengths included a very good grasp of human psychology, a remarkable understanding of marketing and promotion, an astute financial mind that enabled him to profit from his successes and by amalgamating ideas from anyone and anywhere to create what was one of the most successful acts of its time. Here was a 1920s performer who would rig a stage with underground wires to receive electronic signals, use concealed earpieces under his turban and hidden listening devices in the toilets of theatres to gain vital information to be used later in his shows. He was also a serial adulterer, with up to twelve possible marriages, a bigamist, a suspected murderer, a money launderer and drug smuggler with a significant FBI dossier. Alexander's life, as the original man of mystery, was nothing but dull.

Born to Irish immigrants in a small town called Alexandria (Hason County in the Dakota territory, US) on 30 June 1880, Claude Alexander Conlin became a master of his trade long before many other performers saw the potential of a mind-reading act (although he was also influenced by the success of Anna Eva Fay and Sammi Baldwin). He was the son of a doctor, Berthold Michael Joseph Conlin (affectionately known as BMJ) and Martha Johnson, and grew up mainly in southeast Alaska. Within the family Claude Alexander was known as "CA" and his brother Clarence B was known as "CB." Clarence B had a successful career as an attorney and also worked as a stage mentalist, although his fame never equalled that of his brother Claude.

As an adolescent, Claude spent much of his time hunting and fishing, passions that remained with him throughout his life. Travelling shows visiting his town and regular trips to the magic section of his local library, where he discovered Hoffmann's *Modern Magic*, fed his curiosity over the mysteries of life (as did the revealing pictures of women found in his father's medical books) leading to an early fascination with magic (and women). After being expelled from school at seventeen he decided, without his parents' approval, to travel east and by chance found work at the famous spiritualist resort of Lily Dale, near Cassadega, NY. It was here that Claude's magical education really took hold. During his work as a boat-boy and cleaner he discovered the fraudulent techniques of the mediums, learning how they did their slate writing, billet switches, rope ties and other tricks of the trade. More importantly he discovered the psychics' psychology, which allowed them to turn simple effects into supposed miracles. Presumably considering a career in magic he visited T Nelson Downs (the 'King of Coins') after leaving Lily Dale on his way west. His nomadic instincts led him to the Alaskan gold rush where a long-term friendship with a Greek immigrant, Alexander Pericles Pantages, began. It was during his time here that he was suspected of shooting a swindling gangster Jefferson Randolph 'Soapy' Smith, who was apparently out to get Pantages (although many say that the whole story was fabricated to add to the mystery of Alexander). Following work as a faro dealer, an assayer of gold, a cashier and a psychic (telling prospectors where they could find gold), Claude gave his first stage performance in 1898. It was not until returning to Seattle in 1902, however, that Claude decided to make a career as a magician and he took the name Alexander the Great (after his friend) and started performing in vaudeville as a stage illusionist.

Depending on the references you read, Alexander had between eight and twelve marriages, marrying one woman twice and being married to two women at the same time. He married the first of his wives, Jessie Cullen, in 1902 (divorcing in 1903) and tried to develop an act to rival Houdini's popular escape act. His second marriage was to Ethel Lyman, whom he met when she was only fourteen years old.

Fate would play a significant part in much of Alexander's life. A chance call to leave his hotel in San Francisco early one morning saved his life when the hotel was destroyed in an earthquake as he crossed the street and it was a blizzard, which stopped the trains transporting his show, that led to one of his assistants suggesting he simply do his short mind-reading set as the main act. Despite his reluctance, he had little choice in the matter and the success of the 'prop-less' show surprised even Alexander. He never looked back, however, and now in his mid-thirties he discarded the large props and relied on his tremendous skills as a showman

to put over an act of mind-reading, taking inspiration from, or simply copying, other top mentalists of the time including Anna Eva Fay and Sammi Baldwin. Despite already being married (and now with a five year old son) he married his third wife, seventeen year old Della Martell in 1907 and returned to San Francisco to act as a psychic, knowing he would have plenty of customers seeking to speak with lost ones from the previous year's earthquake.

To add the sense of mysticism in his stage act, he began wearing a jewelled turban and performed with a crystal ball as 'Alexander The Man Who Knows,' presenting a quasi-Oriental setting with lavish costumes for himself and several female assistants. He promoted his psychic act as a form of mind-reading and could achieve the most remarkable display the world had ever seen. He also performed as a psychic, using the name Astro to distance himself from his stage act, earning more money than he could from stage performances. He married again in 1915 to Lillian Marion, who would become an integral part of his show, and they were to stay together for fourteen years before she would file for divorce. His show at the time consisted of audience members giving Alexander sealed questions which he answered from the stage (fans of Derren will have seen him perform this type of routine in one of his own shows).

Alexander's mind-reading show became a hit and, at the height of his career, he sold out theatres across the United States and Canada for weeks at a time. He made millions from box office receipts and, having the foresight to side-sell, made even more from the sale of books, crystal balls and related merchandise. (His mail order business had six full-time employees posting merchandise.) He travelled the world, and counted show-business luminaries like Alexander Pantages, John Considine, Rudolph Valentine and Clara Bow among his friends. One of his strengths was understanding marketing and Alexander was at the forefront of poster designs to promote his stage acts. Some of his designs and concepts were quite masterful, including detail like eastern words to add further mysticism, or giving himself a darker 'Eastern' complexion. His posters are still very much in demand.

In terms of innovation it was his use of electronic transmitting devices in the act that really catches the imagination. Using his turban to hide

earpieces he could perform extraordinary feats of mind-reading that had never been seen before. Humorously, Alexander suffered from bad nerves before every show, being concerned that the electronics might fail (nothing changes!) His show featured many straight magic effects such as the nest of boxes and vanishing cane, which, as many successful modern day mentalists would agree, are a fine way to add colour and diversity to a mind-reading act. He would also perform Asrah, the Cabinet Box and one of his favourite and most successful illusions, Spirit Painting. A particular feature of this illusion was that Alexander would ask local politicians, community leaders and doctors (all of whom could not advertise publicly) to pay to have their picture appear in every show.

In his early 'forties, he authored many books and wrote under the name C Alexander. In 1921 he wrote and published *The Life And Mysteries Of The Celebrated Dr Q* (also known as *The Dr Q Book*). He also operated a publishing house, the C Alexander Publishing Company in Los Angeles, California. His company released his own pro-spiritualist and 'New Thought' material, including a multi-volume series called *The Inner Secrets of Psychology* and a booklet for his clients titled *Personal Lessons, Codes, and Instructions for Members of the Crystal Silence League*. He often ended shows saying "someday psychology will be taught in schools" much to the disbelief of his audiences.

It is reported that Alexander earned around four million dollars during his relatively short career (equivalent to around £150-200 million in today's money). He dominated the stage for nearly a decade before retiring in 1924, at the age of forty-three, the richest man in vaudeville. In retirement he spent much of his time at his retreat hunting, fishing and taking photos of nude women. Through the later hobby he made a further forty-thousand dollars, selling the images to calendar companies.

Claude Alexander Conlin died in 1954 aged seventy-four. ●

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