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RICHARD FAVERTY/BECKETT STUDIOS

# Thoughts

By Richard Hatch

“Ladies and gentleman,” the CEO announced, building momentum for the performer at his side, “You have seen him on *CNN Live* and the *Today Show*. You have read about him in *Psychology Today* and even in the *National Enquirer*. He has performed all around the world to standing ovations, please welcome, the Mind of Steven... err, what was your last name again?”

This nightmare introduction was not just a bad dream for Steve Shaw. It happened again and again during the first decade of his performing career. After it happened at three consecutive corporate performances, he had had enough. His birth name of “Steven Shaw” was simply too common, too forgettable. He needed a name that would be hard to forget, possibly one with a built in mnemonic, preferably something unusual and mysterious. He knew that he wanted a name with at least two hard consonants and as many or more syllables. Dunninger, Annemann, Corinda... something like that.

Steve had been a fan of *Banacek*, the early '70s television show starring George Peppard as the title character, a witty, urban insurance investigator. Though critically acclaimed, the show had run only two seasons, just 16 episodes, and had been off the air more than two decades; long enough not to be topical, yet still have the ring of familiarity. If a CEO didn't recognize the name Banacek, he would likely have to ask how to pronounce it, forcing him to focus on it and remember it. As an aid to pronunciation, Steve changed the spelling to “Banachek.” The change worked and stuck. He has been Banachek ever since.

Banachek was born Steven Robert Shaw on November 30, 1960, in Middlesex, England to an English mother and an American electrical engineer then stationed with the U.S. Air Force in England. His parents divorced before his first birthday and he stayed in England with his

mother, who remarried a Scotsman named Thomas Martin. Steve Shaw became “Steve Martin.”

During this period he recalled being goaded by older boys to steal a *Playboy* magazine from a local vendor and being caught by the vendor after a chase through the woods. He was released after telling the vendor where the older boys had hidden the many other magazines they had stolen, but he lived in fear for a time of being arrested and hauled away by Scotland Yard. When he was nine the family, which now included two much younger half-brothers, moved to South Africa where his stepfather worked for Firestone Tire Company.

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**It was *The Magic of Uri Geller* by James “The Amazing” Randi that convinced Banachek that Geller cheated, producing his phenomena by trickery, rather than paranormal powers.**

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His mother abandoned the family not long after the move and his stepfather, an alcoholic, became emotionally detached, leaving Banachek to nurture his younger half-siblings as best he could. Though he recalls South Africa as the most beautiful country he has ever known, his time there was a period of both emotional and financial privation. During one school year, he had only a single outfit for the entire year. Apartheid was still the rule of law and because Steve did not speak Afrikaans he was held back in school for a year, even though many of his classmates also spoke no Afrikaans. Rebellious against having been held back, he refused to learn Afrikaans, something he now regrets.

He recalls saving pennies to attend a school

performance by a magician who did a silk-to-egg routine and divined what students had written on a blackboard. Although intrigued, he was not smitten. He did experiment with disguises during this period, donning wigs, make-up, and clothes his mother had left behind, attempting to convince a local shopkeeper that he was an elderly lady.

In the summer of 1974, Uri Geller, the Israeli psychic superstar, visited South Africa, creating his usual sensations in the press with his apparently paranormal demonstrations. Though the 14-year old Banachek did not see Geller, he heard him on the radio and believed that his claimed powers were real — that was what all the adults around him believed.

Banachek took a nail and stroked it, attempting to make it bend by concentrated thought alone. He thought he detected a slight bend that might not have been there before, but he couldn't be sure, and subsequent attempts did not produce any further bends. Disappointed, he abandoned further experimentation.

Banachek's American grandparents had kept in touch via correspondence and encouraged him to join his birth father, then stationed in Australia. With his stepfather's approval in 1975, he traveled alone on his “Steve Martin” British passport to Woomera, South Australia, to meet the American father he had never known, and the three half-sisters and a half-brother his father and his American stepmother were raising. Woomera was then a restricted military area for the development of long-range missiles during the Cold War. Arriving in the desolate Australian desert, Banachek found himself in the midst of new family traumas, as his father's second marriage was also beginning to unravel. Returning to South Africa was not an option, and after a few months in Australia, he moved with his American family to Aurora, Colorado, this time as “Steven R. Shaw” on a

new American passport, and enrolled in Gateway High School.

In Colorado, Banachek encountered the book that literally changed the course of his life. It was *The Magic of Uri Geller* by James “The Amazing” Randi that convinced Banachek that Geller cheated, producing his phenomena by trickery, rather than paranormal powers. Inspired by the hints in the book, Banachek developed several original methods for visibly bending nails and cutlery. He soon added methods for changing the time on watches and seeing while blindfolded to his growing arsenal of apparently psychic feats, all of which were based on methods he developed largely on his own.

His American family continued to implode emotionally and after just seven months in Colorado they moved to Marianna, Pennsylvania, a coal-mining community where his American grandparents and many aunts, uncles and cousins lived. Today, Banachek jokingly refers to them as “hillbillies,” but they accepted him as family despite his unusual accent and strange abilities. In nearby Washington, Pennsylvania, Banachek picked up a copy of Henry Hay’s classic *Amateur Magician’s Handbook* and added additional tools to his repertoire, as well as learning of the work of Annemann and other predecessors in his chosen field of interest, mentalism.

He held down as many as three jobs after school to support himself, and was also performing his psychic feats frequently during school. During his sophomore year, Banachek wrote a letter of introduction to Randi in New Jersey, telling him he felt he could successfully pose as a genuine psychic and fool scientists should such an opportunity arise. Randi responded with encouragement and thus the seed for what became the infamous “Alpha Project” was planted.

The student newspaper in the fall of 1977 quoted Banachek as saying that he didn’t use his psychic abilities for “cheating on tests or

homework, because that would be an unfair advantage.” Escalating family tensions forced Banachek to move out of his home during his senior year at Trinity High School.

In 1979, James S. McDonnell, Chairman of the Board of McDonnell Douglas Corporation, approved a \$500,000 grant to fund the McDonnell Laboratory for Psychic Research at Washington University in St. Louis. Washington University physicist Dr. Peter R. Phillips was chosen to head the lab, which announced to the press that it was seeking

accepted as a test subject!

Randi also heard about another teenage magician, a college freshman named Mike Edwards from Iowa, who had volunteered to be tested by McDonnell Labs. Edwards called Randi, telling him that he only knew how to bend keys and asked for his advice. Randi encouraged him to apply. According to Randi, of the more than 300 applicants for testing who responded to McDonnell Lab’s press release, only his two, Edwards and Banachek, were accepted for testing.

Randi set definite “ground rules” for his two co-conspirators. One of these was that if they were ever directly confronted by the laboratory staff with the question, “Are you cheating or have you cheated on any tests?” they were to reply honestly and reveal the deception and their association with Randi. Meanwhile, Randi wrote the Lab advising them in detail on experimental protocols they should follow in order to prevent fraud on the part of any test subjects.

Thanks to the ingenuity of the two test subjects and the gullibility of the testing personnel, both Banachek and Edwards were repeatedly validated as gifted psychics with a wide variety of abilities, not limited to PKMB. As word of the *Wunderkinder* spread through the psychic community, other researchers became interested in testing them. Berthold E. Scharz, M.D., a psychiatrist, tested Banachek and in 1982 produced a rhapsodic 51-page supplement to *The Journal of the American Society of Psychosomatic Dentistry and Medicine* entitled “Taming the Poltergeist: Clinical

Observations on Steve Shaw’s Telekinesis.” The monograph includes more than two-dozen photos purporting to document Banachek’s psychokinetic and telepathic abilities. Some of them show Banachek’s ability to psychically alter film, showing images that Schwarz interpreted as resembling “a woman’s torso, breast, nipple, and thigh” and another of “what

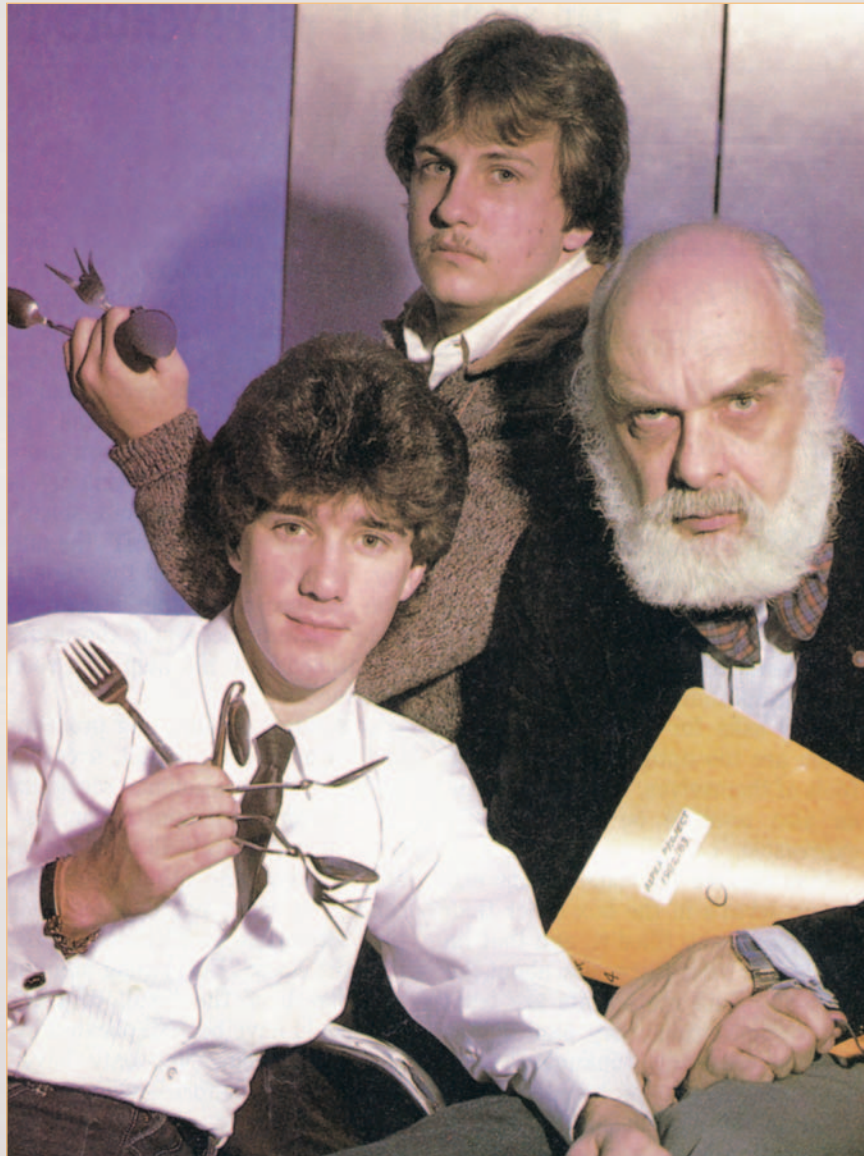


PHOTO DANA FEINMAN

Steve Shaw [Banachek], Mike Edwards, and James Randi in 1984, at the peak of Project Alpha.

youngsters with psychokinetic metal bending (PKMB) abilities to test. Banachek saw one of the press reports and wrote to the Lab describing his abilities, offering to be tested. They responded favorably. Just as they did, Randi contacted Banachek to tell him about the McDonnell Lab program, only to learn that not only did he know about it, he had already been

appeared to be the crowning of a baby's head during birth," though Banachek had taken no such photos during the testing. Banachek's explanation today of why the photos he took turned out that way: "I spat on the lens!"

Schwarz reported that "Although segments of his psychic talents, like his metal bending, can be studied as has been done, it is evident that he has a full spectrum of interrelated psychic abilities... In addition to work done by physicists, the application of Steve's abilities to biological and medical experimentation in vitro and in vivo... should proceed."

In July of 1981 Randi attended the I.B.M. convention in Pittsburgh and dropped broad hints about "Project Alpha," hoping these reports would reach St. Louis. Just 11 days later they had, as Banachek and Edwards were told that rumors were circulating that the two of them were magicians sent by Randi to dupe the experimenters. The two braced themselves for the question they had agreed to answer honestly, prematurely ending the Alpha Project. But instead, the lab staff burst out laughing at the absurdity of the notion. The relieved test subjects simply joined in the laughter.

Banachek and Edwards were featured as celebrity panelists with Japanese metal bender Masuaki Kiyota at a New Frontiers Center Conference in Madison, Wisconsin in August 1982. The three of them demonstrated and discussed their abilities. Matsuaki's claim to psychic fame was his ability to produce corkscrew twists in cutlery. At close range, Banachek saw him surreptitiously insert a spoon in a secret slot in the sole of his shoe, obtaining the necessary leverage to produce the twist.

Uri Geller was also featured at the event, and it was Banachek's first chance not only to meet Geller, but to see him perform first hand. His initial reaction was one of disappointment, because Banachek's own work had focused on developing visible methods of bending. All of Geller's demonstrations at this event involved hidden bending, where the results were revealed but not apparently seen occurring in real time. Geller's blatant cheating was disappointing to the person he had unknowingly inspired.

Randi attended the Madison conference in disguise under the name Adam Jersin (an anagram of James Randi) and got a chance to watch not only Geller, but his own two psychics in action. This was the first time he saw Banachek's signature visible fork tine bend.

During one photo shoot for the *National Enquirer* on Banachek's metal bending ability, the photographer grew impatient with the time required to bend the cutlery psychically and told Banachek simply to bend it the usual way in the interest of time. The readers would be none the wiser! While doing so, Banachek

accidentally discovered what would become one of his other signature methods, an "in the hands" method of duplicating Matsuaki's corkscrew. He immediately and excitedly communicated the method to Randi, who shared it with others in the magic community, somewhat obscuring its origins today.

Shortly after the conference, both young men traveled to England at the invitation of the BBC, which was producing a documentary on parapsychology. *The Psychic News* predictably gave glowing reports of Banachek and Edwards' abilities. Finally, in January 1983, The Amazing Randi held a press conference in New York City with Banachek and Edwards to reveal the ruse. Over the four years of their involvement with the McDonnell Lab, the two young "psychics" were involved in 160 hours of testing, at an estimated expense of some \$10,000 for airfares, meals, and lodging. Other than a token per diem, the subjects were not paid for their testing time, and so, in Banachek's case, he actually lost income since he needed to take leaves of absence from his

then primary job as a hospital maintenance worker in Washington, Pennsylvania.

An NBC special *Magic or Miracle?* featuring Randi, Banachek, and Edwards aired in February 1983, followed by appearances on the *Today Show*, *CNN Live*, and a whirlwind of publicity. Numerous magazines and journals reported on the "Alpha Project" and debated its consequences, one of which would become clear in August 1985, when the McDonnell Lab closed due to a lack of funding.

Banachek decided to leave the security of his hospital job in Pennsylvania and enter show business full time. He packed his possessions in his car and headed west — destination California. But a friend from high school who'd moved to Houston convinced Banachek to take a detour through Texas. The Houston economy was booming because of a spike in oil prices and he was persuaded to stay a while. Banachek quickly settled into the local nightclub scene, starting as a walk-around mentalist at a club called Confetti's, and it wasn't long before he was hired as the club's



At age 20, Steve Shaw [Banachek] bends a key for a skeptical reporter.



**Working nightclubs, corporate shows, and colleges in the '80s and '90s, Banachek invited his audiences to be part of "The World's Largest ESP Experiment."**

director of entertainment. At one point in his early Houston career, he was performing at four or five restaurants on a weekly basis, always paid by the owners or management, rather than depending on patrons' tips.

During this same period, Banachek partnered with stunt man David Paul Lord to produce promotions and publicity events. One of their first was a November 1984 three-day burial alive of Banachek, which resulted in headline stories in the local press. These burials were not created and promoted as escapes, but as endurance stunts. Banachek would be nailed into a coffin and lowered into the ground. After 24 hours he would communicate via walkie-talkie (pre cell phone days), reporting on his condition. After the proscribed period, the coffin would be exhumed, opened, and an exhausted Banachek would emerge and be revived and interviewed. In fact, however, it was an escape, as Banachek was never underground. He exited the coffin via a trap door in

the bottom as it was being shut, and entered a shallow pit under the platform on which the coffin was being nailed shut. He would remain in the pit until he could safely emerge under cover of darkness, returning to the scene at a distance for the walkie-talkie interview. A few hours prior to the exhumation, he would return to the secret pit beneath the platform, re-entering the coffin via the trapdoor just prior to the removal of the lid. Banachek also developed his acclaimed method for the Bullet Catch during this period [see "Penn & Teller's Magic Bullet," page 52].

Magic Island, a nightclub featuring magic and magicians, opened in Houston in 1984. By late 1985 Banachek had become the house mentalist there, performing multiple sets of close-up mentalism in a formal show setting. It was at this time that he met Scott Wells, who became and remains his business partner in bringing Banachek's products to the magic marketplace [see "Marketing Banachek's

Inspirations," page 54].

He also began performing his formal stand-up mentalism act as a headliner at comedy clubs, adding and refining a question-and-answer segment to his signature metal bending and his Russian Roulette with Knives routine. Those who have seen Banachek's Q&A often assume that he has a natural facility for numbers, since in the course of it he routinely tells audience members their phone numbers, serial numbers on their bills, etc. As a matter of fact, however, he is rather uncomfortable with numbers, perhaps as a result of his dyslexia, and relies on mnemonics to deal with them.

Banachek's familiarity with mnemonics played a key role in his second great debunking adventure with The Amazing Randi. In 1986, Randi enlisted the aid of Houston's skeptic community, of which Banachek was an active member, to attend and observe an upcoming faith healing event by televangelist Peter Popoff. Randi attended the event in disguise, and the participating skeptics were told to provide Popoff's assistants with false identities and pseudo ailments when they went through the crowd soliciting prayer cards. Randi suspected that Popoff was using mnemonics to retain and feed back the information gathered, under the pretence that he was receiving revelations via the Holy Spirit, with healings to follow. However, based on his own experience, Banachek felt that mnemonics could not account for the extensive detailed information that Popoff was communicating during his services.

By coincidence, Banachek succeeded in being recruited to serve as a voluntary aid to Popoff's staff, gathering cash donations in large buckets, which allowed him several opportunities to observe Popoff at close range. Banachek found it curious that such a relatively young man with such prodigious healing abilities would need the hearing aid that he detected. Using this as a clue, Randi and his team of investigators attended a subsequent Popoff event in San Francisco. Armed with a frequency scanner they were able to hone in on and tape record the broadcasts with all the ailment and identity information that Popoff's wife was transmitting to her husband. The public unmasking of Popoff's fraud on Johnny Carson's *Tonight Show* bankrupted the Popoff ministries in 1987.

Ironically, Banachek credits watching faith healers with the development of his performing style. "After seeing the emotion elicited by evangelists," he says, "I realized I wanted highs and lows in my show. There are times I constantly go all over the stage and move a mile a minute, but other times I slow down to add texture and contrast."

On October 31, 1987, television viewers in the United States and Europe had the opportu-

nity to watch *In Search of Houdini*, as Banachek performed a feat that even the daring Houdini had deemed too dangerous. Banachek was to be chained, shackled, and locked in a Plexiglas coffin, and then lowered into a nine-foot deep hole and buried. He would have two hours on live television to extricate himself from the restraints and physically dig his way to the surface.

The escape stunt was staged at a cemetery in Los Angeles, where the weather that Halloween night was cold and rainy. In fact it had rained for 32 hours straight. After a frightening one hour and 47 minutes, Banachek emerged dramatically from the rain-soaked plot. He had succeeded where his predecessors had failed.

Since the special was broadcast, two people have died trying to duplicate Banachek's incredible stunt. Banachek vowed never to perform this difficult feat again. But Japanese television made him a monetary offer he could not refuse, and on August 4, 1992 he repeated the feat on Japanese soil. Once again it rained, only this time a small typhoon hit the island. The hole was full of mud and had to be pumped clean before Banachek could perform the stunt. Somehow he managed again, earning a new nickname of "Rainman."

Several years later, Banachek sent a tape of his Buried Alive stunt to well-known producer Gary Ouellet, for possible use on one of the magic specials he was producing at the time. Ouellet told him he loved the look of it, but did not know how to bring it to TV in a short period of time. "I told him I had some thoughts on that and if he was serious we should talk. I did not hear back, but less than a month later I saw mention that Lance Burton was going to perform a Buried Alive on TV. At the time I was suspicious, as the program was being produced by Gary. But I waited just to see. Sure enough, the way Lance was handcuffed was exactly like mine, the Plexiglas case, the bulldozers... everything about the stunt was mine. Well, I called Lance and he was truly sorry; in fact, like a true gentleman, he called me back a few times, and we agreed it was not his fault, as the producer had approached him with my idea." As a result, Burton and Banachek became well acquainted and remain friends to this day.

In December of 1987 Banachek met Heidemarie Johnson, who became his wife and, for a time, his manager as well. He decided to leave the security of Magic Island and transition his career from comedy clubs to the corporate and college markets. After several years of increasing success, Banachek was signed by specialized management for those markets, increasing his bookings and fees substantially. By 1998 and 1999, he was named "Campus Performer of the Year" and in 2000 the "Campus Novelty Act of the Year" by the Association for the Promotion of

Campus Activities.

Banachek's very first public show was at Washington Mall in Washington, Pennsylvania on Saturday, October 28, 1978. In that particular show he performed what is believed to be the first Russian Roulette routine with knives. Not having experience at structuring a show, he also performed an Acid Monte with real nitric acid. In fact, the mall still has a stain on its marble floor to this day from that demonstration. In that same show he performed two different Book Tests, some of the metal bending for which he has since become famous, a blindfold routine in which he found a candle with a balloon and various other effects. His performances have come a long way since then!

Although he is still performing some of those same effects in his current show, it has form and structure. His style is personal and has many signature moments. Whereas most mentalists like to introduce themselves via a conversation with the audience, Banachek lets his audience know what to expect and who he is with a quick snappy demonstration.

He usually enters from the back of the room and starts his first effect as he makes his way to the stage. Asking the entire audience to think of any playing card other than the Queen of Hearts or the Ace of Spades, Banachek then reveals the cards of four spectators, apparently using nothing other than non-verbal cues. It is shocking, and so to the point that in the first two minutes he has managed to convince the audience that this is not going to be an ordinary show and that they have nothing to fear by participating. At this point Banachek can slow down. He will usually give the audience instructions on how to participate in his Q&A segment, which he calls, "The world's largest ESP experiment."

It is easy to see that structure is important in Banachek's routines. Having revealed numbers and colors and cards in the first demonstration, he now moves to a Book Test where he reveals letters in a word merely thought of and finally words. From here he uses a unique phone book test to convince the audience that he can indeed influence every choice they make via verbal and non-verbal communication. The audience feels they are being let in on a secret and it is from this point on that they believe that they are seeing influencing in action. It is a whole new world that is opening for them.

From here Banachek moves on to his blindfold routine. He reveals a number on a borrowed dollar bill, and not only is he blindfolded with duct tape, coins, and a sleeping mask, he does not look in the direction of the bill. While revealing three objects from the audience, the spectator holding the objects stands behind Banachek and holds the objects over the top of his head. The impression is that even if he were not blindfolded, there is no way he could see the objects, yet he reveals their details down to

numbers and words printed in small letters on the underside. Not a moment is lost. To Banachek it is important that there is no dead time. For instance, while he is revealing the numbers on a spectator's dollar bill, another spectator is collecting the objects. While one spectator is removing the tape and coins, the other is returning the three objects. He even reveals one more hidden object after his blindfold is completely removed, so that the Q&A slips can be collected.

Next Banachek starts to reveal the audience thoughts. For the first person he reveals just his or her thought. With the second person he divines not only the thought, but also his or her zodiac sign, culminating with the revelation of the spectator's birth date. With the last person, after naming the thought he then also intuits his or her social security number. Although he has only read three thoughts, the impression is that he has done five such demonstrations. The audience is convinced via clever wording that Banachek is divulging information not written down.

All through the show Banachek reminds his audience he is not psychic, but using natural means to reveal information. It is at this point that he even teaches the audience some of these psychological techniques.

Banachek then performs a series of psychokinetic effects, from making a pen fall off a table, a version of his PK Touches, various metal bending, and a weird and mysterious voodoo routine where Banachek stabs an outline of a hand and a spectator's hand visibly starts to bleed. (In the college market, his presentations often result in students run-



While blindfolded Banachek with a beard reveals items held over his head [by wife Heidemarie in this posed publicity photo].

# Banachek on Penn & Teller and the Magic Bullet

I first performed my version of the Bullet Catch around 1985. At that time, I was working with a partner and was developing a way to do a 100% safe Bullet Catch. The idea came as a brainstorm when I was in a fishing supply store. While looking at some items there I knew I had it. Three factors were important: one, it had to be safe, which was unheard of in previous methods; two, I wanted a sheet of glass to break with no gimmicks; and three, it had to fool everyone.

My stage partner and I began to perform the Catch in various ways. Sometimes a dot was drawn on his mouth and he was set ablaze for a stunt full-body burn. One time we pretended he got shot and rushed him to the hospital. The news was all over the radio, yet no one could locate the hospital where he was. So later that afternoon, we called in to confess it was a hoax to gain publicity for that evening's show, where we would be doing the real thing. That night the club was packed, standing room only. We soon had the label of "daredevils." Bookings for my mentalism show through agents started to go down, and shortly after I appeared with my Buried Alive

stunt on the TV special, *In Search of Houdini*, my partner and I parted ways.

I then performed my version of the Bullet Catch alone, using a preset vice to hold the gun and footprints on the floor. The spectator who marked the casing fired the gun in the vice, and the person who marked the bullet head stood to my left. All in all, I performed the Bullet Catch about 50 times. I quit performing it shortly after I met my wife, Heidemarie. I think I performed the Bullet Catch only one more time.

On April 14, 1994, Penn & Teller showed up at my house. They arrived in a large limousine. Immediately after they were introduced to my wife, she asked if they wanted to take a shower. My wife did not know what big stars P&T were and thought they had just come in from a road trip, and knowing how much I travel in cars, merely thought they might want to freshen up. P&T were not taken aback, but I am sure that for a moment they wondered what James Randi, who was the connection between P&T and myself, had set them up for.

Penn & Teller were in Houston for a two-night engagement at Jones Hall and

they had come to visit at the suggestion of Randi. We talked quite a while about different concepts. Only in passing, did I talk about the Bullet Catch and the fact that I no longer performed it. I mentioned that I would be open to sharing my work and showing them how it could be made safe. That night, I spent some more time with P&T at Magic Island.

I spent the next day with Teller at Charlie Randall's house. That was when I discovered what an amazing man Teller is — very clever. As we talked, I realized what great respect he and Penn have for each other and how they complement each other perfectly.

The next evening, my wife, son, and I went to their show. It was the first time I had seen them perform live. I was delighted. It was one of the best, if not the best, shows I had ever seen.

On the following day, April 16, Teller called. He said they were interested in the Bullet Catch. Could I bring all my props to their hotel in the morning? Sure I could.

I showed up with my 357-magnum (actually a .38 with a scope), my sheet-of-glass holder, a box of bullets, a magic marker, and some other bits of business. It took some convincing, but not much, that my method was 100% safe.

P&T asked if they could take the props with them, gun and all. I was ecstatic and said yes. They asked how much I wanted for it. I told them, "You're friends of Randi, you have helped him at times, and I respect you both for that. Play with it and we will talk later."

We talked on the phone a few times. I suggested a laser sight instead of the scope, and they had thought of that. I was amazed that P&T were taking gun-training classes. They talked with the FBI. Every day, they were thinking up a new way to improve the effect, eliminating a problem, adding a new wrinkle to the routine. Finally, Teller called with an invitation. He and Penn wanted to fly me to Las Vegas and have me stay at Bally's so I could see the Magic Bullet.

On Saturday, June 10, 1995, at 9 p.m., I entered Bally's Celebrity Showroom, where I was seated in section A, table 106, seat 1. The show commenced. Again, I watched the wonders of P&T that I had seen and been entertained with in the past. I witnessed their haunt-



Penn & Teller and the double-barreled Magic Bullet experience at the Rio in Las Vegas.

ingly frightening version of the Spirit Cabinet. Finally, they got to the Magic Bullet. It was great, incredible, but more important it was Penn & Teller. Oh, the method for the marking and observing the bullet go into the gun and the breaking of the glass was mine, but the rest was all P&T. And, you know what? They fooled me with part of the routine.

My magic marker may have inspired the part of the Magic Bullet that fooled me, but it fooled me badly. It was interesting that everyone talked about the glass and the loading of the gun, but what gets me is no one mentioned the fact that neither Penn nor Teller ever put their hands to their mouth. In the first stage version, a spectator got to select how the outcome would be by flipping a coin, and Penn and Teller never come near each other during or after the coin toss.

After the show P&T met with me in Teller's dressing room, the same one Frank Sinatra had when he played Bally's. We talked. I raved. I mentioned one or two small things, aspects they had already discussed. (Did I not say P&T thought out every little detail?) As I left, they both thanked me. Teller nonchalantly placed something in my pocket.

Back in my hotel room, as I took off my jacket I reached into my pocket and found an envelope. Inside it was a check. When I saw how much it was for I was shocked. It was more than I would have ever thought of asking for — even if I had decided to sell the Bullet Catch to someone other than P&T. I felt immense guilt. Penn & Teller had taken my small-time effect and turned it into something first class. It had so much P&T all over it, and so little Banachek that I barely recognized it. Teller later assured me that without my method they could never do the effect, and they would not ever have thought of doing it had I not assured them that my way was safe.

Why did P&T choose to call their Bullet Catch effect the Magic Bullet? P&T do not claim they catch the bullet that is fired from the gun. They know their audiences are too smart for that. But they do want the audience to believe that there is some magic that causes the bullet to get from one side of the stage to the other.

I have listened to and read of many explanations for their presentation of the effect. Most are way off, a few have come close, but no one I've talked with has yet figured out the full method of Penn & Teller's Magic Bullet.

ning from the room.)

Banachek slows down and tells a story about Abraham Lincoln and how he supposedly predicted his own death. He uses this story to frame a Confabulation routine where audience decisions are shown to be predicted between two stapled index cards in a zippered compartment in a wallet. This is usually where Banachek's audience awards him with what is generally the first of two standing ovations during his show.

Finally Banachek is ready to close his show with his signature Russian Roulette. Five knives are shown, two are real, three are simply handles. All are sealed in identical envelopes. These are mixed. A prediction is presented. Five people come up and after some byplay where Banachek attempts to influence their choices (and demonstrates how he is doing so), the spectators select envelopes. The prediction is opened and the three people with the numbers named step forward with their enveloped knives. Two stab Banachek in the stomach as he stretches across a stool. Finally, he takes the third envelope, holds his hand over it and, on the count of three, slams his hand down on it. As he takes his bow and receives his second ovation, Banachek dramatically stabs the two dangerously sharp knives into a block of wood.

Banachek admits he's not a psychic and everything is accomplished by normal means. He tells his audiences that each effect is the result of either verbal communication, non-verbal communication, magic, psychology, and perceptual manipulation or combinations of those factors.

"For years after the Alpha Project I struggled with what my claims were." Banachek says. "I knew I did not want to claim I was using real powers and did not even want to give that impression. However, the very act of performing mentalism left people with belief in psychic powers, despite my claims to the contrary.

"I voiced this concern to James Randi and he sent me a little-seen article by Ned Rutledge, where Ned told how at a university demonstration he talked about how he used his five known senses to create the illusion of a sixth. I finally had something I could live with: a non-psychic, non-BS framing of mentalism.

"There is a definition given here that to read *minds* is something psychic (in the supernatural sense) and that to read *thoughts* is really a combination of techniques used to deduce certain information a person may be thinking of, and that these techniques are more physiological and psychological in some form, whether it be verbal, non-verbal, magic or simply psychological techniques we are using. This is all true."

To convince an audience that he reads thoughts and not minds, Banachek often tells a the story of a husband and wife who are sitting on a park bench when a pretty girl goes jogging

by. The husband turns his head to look; the wife slaps the husband in the face. "You know what the husband was thinking, and you know what his wife was thinking," Banachek says. "You have not read their minds, but you have read their thoughts. That is what I do."

British mentalist Ian Rowland, who bills himself as "The Mind Motivator," understands how Banachek's use of psychological subtleties causes him to be perceived as a honest-to-goodness mindreader. "If people wonder what the man is all about as a performer," Rowland says, "let me share a story from a few years back. I saw Banachek work a convention in Las Vegas, where he was on stage in front of hundreds and hundreds of people. But this was no ordinary audience. This convention was organized by the James Randi Educational Foundation. Every single person in the room was a full-fledged skeptic, a flint-hard non-believer in psychic powers and suchlike. Tough crowd if you're a mindreader.

"Julia Sweeney was in the audience and Banachek gets her onstage and starts reading her thoughts. [Actress and comedian Sweeney created the gender-confused character of "Pat" on *Saturday Night Live* in the early 1990s.] Banachek tells Julia what she's thinking. And he's right. He tells her what word just popped into her head. Right again. He invites her to swap around any letters in that word, and he tells her exactly which letters she just moved, and why. By this point, Julia has had enough of Steve detailing everything that's going on inside her own head. She screams — literally screams out loud, 'How do you *do* that?' She's freaked out, baffled, frustrated, but royally entertained. Everyone is. There's laughter, uproar, applause. Everyone's with Julia in the same moment — 'Yeah, how the heck *does* he do that?' It's what I call the Banachek moment. And it's a good question: How does he do it? The rest of us can learn the tricks, sure. But we can't be Banachek."

In 2005, Criss Angel, who had just signed a contract with A&E for his weekly *MINDFREAK* series, sought out Banachek because he had specific interests in two effects associated with him. Angel wanted to do a Bullet Catch, and he wanted to do a Buried Alive. Banachek told him he could not do the Penn & Teller Bullet Catch, but perhaps they could come up with something different. So they talked about doing the Buried Alive. They discussed pre-show work, another of Banachek's areas of expertise, and it was not long before Angel determined that he wanted Banachek as a consultant for his show.

However, Banachek had a solid calendar of college bookings to fill. Banachek was impressed with the respect with which Criss treated the people around him, and he agreed to help out on the first season, with the understanding that he would be able to

schedule his *MINDFREAK* work around his performing dates.

Banachek quickly became an indispensable part of the team, brainstorming plots and methods, and simplifying ideas and making them practical. As an example, on one of the first shows, the crew told Banachek that on the next day's shoot, Angel would be making two chosen cards float out of a deck. Banachek asked them what the method was, and then told them it would not work and why. He reworked the concept so that a single thought-of selection, which initially stood up from among the face-down cards spread on the floor, would then float up into the magician's hand. The effect became not only practical and performable, but a memorable piece of magic.

Banachek calls Criss "truly amazing with a strong sense of self." He credits Angel with single-handedly changing the demographics of A&E's viewership. Angel did perform a Buried Alive the first season. And a Russian Roulette segment was filmed, but never aired because A&E had concerns about a program showing firearms in use. Banachek was disappointed, since he felt this was an extremely strong concept (and A&E's concerns seem a bit ironic given they air episodes of *The Sopranos* on the

same nights *MINDFREAK* airs).

After the second season, Angel made Banachek "Magic Producer" for the third and fourth seasons, and with the additional responsibilities and compensation he now enjoys the work even more. Banachek attributes much of his satisfaction with this new role to his recognition that it is not his job to be the star, it is his duty to make sure Criss Angel is the star. If Banachek is invisible and Criss looks good, Banachek has done his job successfully.

A show of this nature burns up an incredible amount of material, so the initial period of brainstorming and planning for the coming season is where Banachek's legendary creativity gets a workout. Generally four or five effects are featured each show, and there are currently 22 shows each season. In two weeks of pre-show brainstorming, the creative team came up with 350 possible effects. One of the things that Banachek has learned from working with Angel on *MINDFREAK* is not to worry about what magicians think. They are not the intended audience the show is trying to reach.

Some in the magic community have assumed that Banachek's involvement with the recent NBC *Phenomenon* show was due to his association with Criss Angel, who co-critiqued the per-

formers with show creator Uri Geller. But, in fact, Banachek's involvement with Angel and *MINDFREAK* almost precluded his participation on *Phenomenon*. Since both shows were in production simultaneously, Criss had reservations about Banachek's talents being spread too thin. He was next to irreplaceable on the *MINDFREAK* set, and working on *Phenomena* could create inconsistency. Fortunately, Angel's management company, The Firm, was able to convince him that it would be in his best interest to have Banachek working behind the scenes on both shows.

Since Banachek's time on *Phenomenon* would be limited, he brought in Bob Fitch to coach the competing mentalists. Banachek and Fitch worked with contestants to tighten their scripts, keep the methods honest with no stooging, and make sure that no unwanted doors were left open, in pre-show work and other methods. In theory, with \$250,000 at stake, one of the contestant could have achieved miracles simply by bribing audience members to react appropriately on cue.

Given Banachek's long association with Geller's arch adversary Randi, some wondered how the two would get along. But Banachek told Geller from the outset that he would be happy to

# Marketing Banachek's Inspirations

By Scott Wells

It all started with a simple question, "Have you ever done any magic on the radio?" In 1989 I was a house magician and Banachek was the house mentalist at Magic Island in Houston. I was going to my high school reunion and wanted to get some radio time in my local market. Banachek had a wealth of experience and proceeded to give me one idea after another, and he even let me listen to clips of radio broadcasts where he was a guest. With his advice, my radio debut went even better than expected.

I thought others might like to benefit from Banachek's knowledge and creativity, too, so I talked with him about putting together an audiotape. The resulting interview went on for nearly four hours and included his clips and mine along with suggestions on getting booked on the radio, working with the announcer and callers, as well as tricks to do on the radio. I rewrote the questions and we re-taped the interview, and then I edited it all on a small boom box. With that, Banachek and I formed our

partnership called "Magic Inspirations" that same year – he being the creative force and me handling the business.

To complement a lecture on radio magic, Banachek gave me a copy of a complete mentalism routine entitled *Pre-Thoughts*. I published that in a spiral-bound booklet that was quickly followed by another spiral-bound publication of a technique called *Psychokinetic Touches*. Not to have been considered as a full routine, but rather a method, sales for *Psychokinetic Touches* started very slow. We next published a soft cover, stapled booklet called *Psychokinetic Time*, which was an impromptu method of altering the time on a borrowed watch. Sales for this title were slow at first, with only a few professionals realizing its value. Banachek's reason for wanting this and other routines out there was not just so they would be associated with him, but so these effects would be correctly performed. We next came out with the *Psychokinetic Pen*, followed by a few products for the mentalist.

During this time Banachek had been compiling his thoughts for a real book with the dream of it becoming a series.

That came to reality in 1998 with the publication of our first hardcover book, *Psychological Subtleties (PS1)*. We quickly followed with a second hardback, *Psychophysiological Thought Reading*, a book on muscle reading. The saying, "A rising tide lifts all ships," was never truer, because as sales for *PS1* increased, interest in Banachek's other products began to soar. That buoyed our confidence and belief that there was a market for his mentalism products. *PS1* broke all our expectations with sales to date of over 5,000 copies. Since late 2006, there are nearly 3,000 copies of *Psychological Subtleties 2 (PS2)* in circulation. *PS2* earned the Magic Woods "Book of the Year" for 2007. Our major project for 2008 is to publish *Psychological Subtleties 3* and then to reformat and republish *PS1*, which has been out of print for nearly two years.

Banachek continues to be a formidable creative force in the world of mentalism and magic. His ideas have become a staple of almost all amateur and professional mentalists and his legacy is secure. I expect our friendship and partnership to continue for the rest of our lives.

help him on the show as long as he refrained from “making any claims.” Under those conditions, they could have a “conversation.”

“Well,” Uri claimed, “I did find oil you know...”

“Uri, don’t go there,” Banachek told him, and apparently Geller refrained from pressing the point further.

One evening after working on the show, Uri, his longtime associate Shipi Strang, Heidemarie, Banachek, and television actor/magician Steve Valentine went out to dine at Yamashiro’s, on the hill above the Magic Castle. At one point, Shipi started handing Uri color marking pens, as he began drawing on one of the restaurant plates, presenting the result as a gift to Banachek and Heidemarie. But the plate belonged to the restaurant, so Banachek had to sneak it out, bringing back unwelcome childhood fears of Scotland Yard! “Apparently Uri was not content impairing a restaurant’s silverware,” Banachek said with a laugh. “Now he has his sights set on ruining the rest of their table setting!”

Banachek was content to be a coach, rather than a contestant on the *Phenomenon* show, feeling that at this point in his career he would have little to gain from performing under the competition conditions. The producers constantly pressured the acts to perform “bigger” feats, even though Banachek argued that bigger was not nec-



Criss Angel and Banachek on *MINDFREAK* set.

essarily better. To make his point, he rolled up a piece of tinfoil and placed it on the conference table, then backed off from the table to a distance at which it was abundantly clear he could have no physical influence on the ball. “Watch the ball,” he commanded. “I will make it move.” The producers sat in rapt silence, intensely watching the tiny ball, as Banachek focused his concentration on it as well. When the tension reach a peak, he relaxed and smiled, confessing that it was not going to move. But if it had, they had to agree that the small miracle would have been much more impressive than any of the big effects for which they had been pushing.

In addition to pushing the contestants to come

up with new and untested material, the producers often changed their expectations at the last minute. As an example, the lone female contestant, Angela Funovits, was once given a script at 4 a.m. with the expectation that she would have it mastered in time for the live broadcast at 5 that afternoon. Fortunately, thanks to her penchant for hard work, and no doubt with some serious coaching from Bob Fitch and Banachek, she hit her verbal and physical marks on cue.

As a result of his work on *MINDFREAK*, Banachek has been signed as a client by The Firm, the management agency that handles Criss Angel, as well as Cameron Diaz, Snoop Dog, Lincoln Park, Leonardo DiCaprio, and other noted entertainers. As Angel’s

production company wraps its fourth season of *MINDFREAK*, it will begin production of two pilot episodes for a new Banachek series on A&E. Shooting is slated for April, and although the cable network has only bought two shows, Banachek reminds himself that *MINDFREAK* started with only six shows sold before A&E made its commitment for 16 and then 20 programs in the first season.

Banachek is confident his TV show will succeed on its merits and is not terribly concerned, secure in the knowledge that his many talents will find interesting challenges no matter what happens. “At the very least,” he smiles, “they’ll remember the name... Banachek!” ♦



Banachek shoots the first two episodes of his possible A&E series this April.