

## **FOUR (4) REVIEWS OF DEL RAY: AMERICA'S FOREMOST**

**From *MAGIC*, February 2011**

**“A well-rendered portrait of one of the greats.”**

**A review by Jason England**

Who was the greatest close-up magician of the 20th century? Coming to a consensus is an impossible task. That said, three names are consistently mentioned whenever the topic is broached: Michael Skinner, Albert Goshman, and Del Ray.

Books by or about Skinner and Goshman have already been published. But apart from some (rave) reviews and scattered reports about his work, virtually nothing has been published on the life and work of Del Ray.

John Moehring, in conjunction with publishers David Baldwin, Robert Escher, and William Spooner, has remedied that situation. He has written a wonderful biography of Del Ray that serves as a fitting tribute to one of the all-time greats. *Del Ray: America's Foremost* is almost 450 pages long, and the production qualities are first rate. A companion DVD, containing footage of Ray's close-up act, as well as some of his stage performances, accompanies the text.

Moehring covers Ray's life thoroughly, from his years growing up in an Ohio orphanage, to his professional career spanning five decades, to his death in 2003. Along the way, readers get a good feel for what Ray was like and what his motivations were for the magical and professional decisions he made. In fact, if there is one negative aspect to the story, it's that the author occasionally provides too much of what one friend called “what Del had for breakfast” detail. Although I noticed this aspect of writing, the level of detail did not detract from my enjoyment of the book. If anything, I found that the format of the text — there are over sixty short chapters in the biographical section alone — helped breakup the reading into easily digestible chunks.

The second part of the book consists of eight effects from Del Ray's professional close-up repertoire. Only one of them, the Royal Assembly, had been described before. Gary Plants authored the remaining seven trick descriptions based on performances on the accompanying DVD. He did an excellent job.

I really liked this book. If I were trying to convince you that it's a good book and one you'll enjoy reading, we could stop now. It *is* a good book and you *will* enjoy reading it. But there are two other topics pertinent to this review. The first of what is *not* included in the explanations of Del Ray's magic. You will not find explanations for Del Ray's dice stacking routine or any of his animatronic animal effects. These were Del Ray's calling cards, and as such, their absence is noteworthy. But at the same time, their absence is meaningless. You want the methods for those effects? Here they are: Del Ray used electromagnets to control the animals and operate the dice, along with radio transmitters to control a

magnet concealed in his table. Now you know. But so what? Del Ray's magic was so much more than props and methods. What set Del Ray apart from a demonstrator of mechanical marvels was Del Ray, the man.

Which brings me to the last topic of discussion. Effects are explained in the back of the book, but how does their publication "allow" readers to perform them? I'm not talking about the routine that was published when Del was alive, of the broader, classic routines like Hamman's Final Aces or Le Paul's Gymnastic Aces. I'm referring to Ray's private, original material and/or using Del Ray's mannerisms and lines. In other words, all the little touches that made Del Ray unique. I put the word "allow" in quotation marks because one can stop readers from performing these tricks. So the question really isn't *can* we perform them, but rather, *should* we?

The book isn't completely clear on this matter. Most magic books are, at the core, cookbooks. Readers are supposed to read the recipes, bake the cakes, and eat them too. But this book isn't so explicit. On the contrary, the opening line of the Introduction is, "Del Ray wouldn't like this book." On the same page we find, "It is not an exposé on how to do Del Ray's magic or emulate his style." Instead, we're told that the purpose of the book is to enable us to "admire, respect, study, and learn" from his secrets. The opening remarks in the effects section tell us that those of us attempting to "learn" the effects have been given an invaluable aid (the DVD). Does this mean "learn" in "study and gain knowledge from," or "learn" as in "have a Computer Deck made by an electronics whiz and start doing it in all my performances, exactly the way Del Ray did it?" I know how I'm reading this section, but I also know how a lot of other magicians will read it, too.

I asked Brad Henderson and Gary Plants if they felt that the inclusion of the effects in this book meant that magic consumers could actually perform Del Ray's routines without crossing ethical lines. Both gave me the same answer. On reflection, I agree with them. Both men said that ultimately Del Ray left his legacy in the hands of one of his closest friends, and if that person saw fit to publish Ray's methods, then we as buyers have the "right" to perform them. Del Ray appointed Bob Escher as the official "gatekeeper" of his legacy, and Escher has chosen to let the rest of us in, to a certain degree. For that, I thank him.

While I haven't come up with ethical reasons for not performing Del's tricks or using his presentations and mannerisms, I can find plenty of artistic reasons why we shouldn't. Those reasons boil down to this: no one, now or in the future, is or will be Del Ray, and no one should try to be Del Ray. To do so would be a disservice to the man and his memory. Instead, readers should do what the book asks of them: admire, respect, study, and learn.

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**From *Genii, The Conjurers' Magazine*, March 2011**  
**Del Ray: America's Foremost**  
**Reviewed by Jamy Ian Swiss**

At the height of Del Ray's career, he was advertised as America's foremost magician — hence the title of this posthumous biography — and it might surprise readers that the moniker was not mere promotional hyperbole. If nothing else, what one learns from John Moehring's biography — produced with the significant assistance of materials and information provided by three of Ray's longtime friends and colleagues, in addition to interviews and other research — is that Del Ray was an incredibly successful, busy, hard-working, highly paid professional magician throughout a lengthy and stellar career. In the 1950s he was steadily working the top of the nightclub market, from Beverly Hills to New York City, Texas to Chicago, and even Cuba. His remarkable silent stage act, a marvel of electromechanical engineering as much as sleight of hand, had set him apart from all other performers. Spontaneous bursts of fire flew through the air while cards were manipulated, canaries vanished and reappeared, and a mechanical bear repeatedly poured and drank a toast on command. No one had ever seen anything quite like it.

The man behind the bear was raised in an orphanage in a small town in Ohio, became interested in magic at a young age, and had quickly become an obsessive sleight-of-hand perfectionist as well as a mechanical innovator. His capacity for practice was apparently endless, as testified by a marvelous anecdote concerning the discovery of Ed Marlo's "Devilish Miracle" routine, which was to become a pet trick of Del's. Seeing it a convention, he learns the trick and, for the next two days and nights, barely sleeps or eats while he develops, refines, and practices his routine — essentially missing the convention he was supposed to be attending with his roommate magic pals.

A young Del Ray saw the Harry Blackstone show and managed to meet the man afterward and make an impression. Sometime later, at one of those magic conventions, he looked up Blackstone again, and taking some advice from Howard Thurston's *Fifty Card Tricks*, among Del's first magic books as a boy, he managed to land a job with the Blackstone show, getting his start in a peripatetic lifestyle of the touring magician, and learning lessons that would last a lifetime. Del's obsessive attention to detail caused him to rise in the ranks of the Blackstone show, and would of course later serve his own career as well.

Throughout his nightclub career, Del would often perform close-up magic at tables or for groups late at night after the floor shows. Sometimes this was a function of his determination to please the nightclub owner as well as the clientele, other times there was also good extra money in it. By the 1960s, he had developed an incredible repertoire that, like his inimitable stage act, consisted of a blend of stunning and unfathomable sleight of hand magic, particularly card work, deeply integrated with unprecedented electronics and remote-control devices. A

tiny bird sand and revealed selected cards and predicted the outcomes of multiple dice rolls, tiny ceramic animals performed feats of balance on command, and a little mouse crawled all around the surface of a large table locating a spectator's card.

And so, as the nightclub circuit changed and faded in the 1960s and 70s, Del Ray continued to be an incredibly busy and highly paid performer, but not primarily as a close-up entertainer at private events, hospitality suites, golf clubs, and trade shows.

And, in the 70s and beyond, he would be seen increasingly at magic conventions, as his legendary reputation and stature among magicians continued to grow. Those who saw him perform live, even once, would never forget the experience — that is face, not hyperbole.

I was fortunate enough to see Del Ray perform on a number of occasions, including a long show at the FFFF convention in 1988, portions of which are excerpted on the DVD that accompanies the book. Even in that setting, most attendees found themselves repeatedly and thoroughly fooled. A few days later I was privy to a conversation in which two noted attendees were discussing the Del Ray poker deal routine, and they simply hadn't the slightest idea how it worked.

I had heard about Del Ray for years, but I recall that when I first saw him in that performance — which if memory serves ran close to 90 minutes — I was surprised by the differences between what I had previously heard and what I had now seen. Magicians would always talk about the little mechanical animals and theorize about the nature of the technology behind these effects. By the 1980s and 90s it wasn't hard to speculate that the table was gimmicked with electromagnets among other things, and that Del was using concealed radio-control devices. Such technology probably looked like real magic in the early years of Del Ray's use; he was a pioneer, certainly in his applications to magic.

But what I found revelatory was that it didn't matter that by 1990 you could probably grasp the essential elements of the methodology; to me, this was in some ways the least interesting aspect of Del Ray's magic and performance. What no one had told me was that Del Ray was one of the great character acts in the history of magic. To me, he was comparable to another great sleight-of-hand entertainer and character whom I had grown up watching and being inspired by: Albert Goshman. Goshman was a complete package: the magic was impeccable and astonishing; the performance was hilarious as well as mystifying; and the character was distinct and memorable. All this was equally true of Del Ray.

With his Southwest accent and string tie, the running gag of "You could win this \$50 bill; it's a very old bill," a nonstop stream of one-liners, his stylish and distinctive brand of playing card handling, a repertoire of spectacularly engaging and consistently impenetrable miracles — to me the little animals were merely a bonus of sorts. And even there, what rendered the automata so thoroughly entertaining was, in the end, not the technology but the magical plots themselves as conceived by Del — that is, the role the animals played and the manner in which they were integrated with the magic plots — plus, yet again, his character.

Del Ray was, in fact, nothing less than a remarkable puppeteer. His manner of relating to the animals is what elevated them from clever mechanical devices and imbued them with life and personality, and the performance became a portrayal of the relationships that Del had with his charming little colleagues. This is puppetry and acting on a high level. And to me, that was the essence of Del Ray.

Del Ray was notoriously secretive about his work, and eschewed publicity in the magic world, interviews, and above all, virtually any discussion or publication of his work. His desire for secrecy was intended to operate beyond his death — not unlike some other notable and secretive past masters, from Hofzinsler to Charlie Miller. But friends, colleagues, and acolytes of such artists justifiably wish to pay tribute to such men, in order to give them credit and keep their names and achievements alive in the annals of magic, and so they should. But they are often conflicted as to how best to go about this and how to manage the issue of secrecy.

Given Del Ray's legendary secrecy, it was a momentary shock to turn a page and see photos of the inner mechanics of the Del Ray table! What's more, those friends who helped to assemble the material of this book actually possess a good understanding of the mechanics, and, wanting to make it clear how innovative the work was at the time it was developed, they offer reasonable detailed explanations of the workings. This is an appropriate tribute and I am glad they made this choice.

There are far fewer explanations when it comes to the workings of the stage act, or particularly, of the close-up sleight-of-hand material, however. A segment of the book does include straightforward technical descriptions (accurately reconstructed by Gary Plants) of eight tricks, all of which (along with many others) can be seen performed by Del on the accompanying DVD (which, even with hits barebones production values, is probably worth the price of the book, particularly to those who were never privileged to see the maestro in life). But a linear description of the workings of individual routines is a very different thing than attempting to bring an individual to life, much less providing insights and understanding as to what sets an artist's thinking and creativity apart when it came to sleight-of-hand magic. We are repeatedly told, for example, that early in his career, Ray could entertain with an hour of card tricks, but we rarely know what tricks, and when they are being developed, and how — much less, if you will, why. We are told of occasions when, in his early development, Del Ray met with and befriended some of the elite of sleight-of-hand card magic, from John Scarne to Ed Marlo to Eddie Fechter (whom, in my own personal guess, likely was the first to teach Del about controlled dice cup shots). And we learn, too, that Del tossed Monte for money in his youth and while in the military (and one wonders it, given some of his particular cardmanship skills and his deep knowledge of gambling, if his hustling experience ever extended to private games). And so, *America's Foremost* is a somewhat mixed bag of tricks. Collections of scrapbooks and handbills and brochures and journal articles have been turned into a detailed and readable narrative of the who, what, and where, thanks to the careful work of John Moehring. Del Ray's electromechanical magic innovations are well

established thanks to his friends David Baldwin, Robert Escher, and William Spooner; and Del Ray — the remarkable artist — remains an enigma. The mystery endures.

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**From *The Linking Ring*, December 2010  
“Del Ray — The Magician for His Time”  
A review by Bill Wells**

This is a book that very much needed to be written. The subject, Del Ray, was a unique performer during the latter half of the last century about whom only scattered articles have been written. He was unique in every sense of the word both in style and method of performance, yet because of his steadfast refusal to reveal his secrets of his professional or personal life, very little has hitherto been known about him. There simply was no other magician like him or anyone who did the effects he performed. He achieved unequalled business success as a magician with his original effects. It would have been a great tragedy if Del Ray's story had gone untold and his legacy to magic been unfulfilled.

Fortunately, this biography completely avoids this potential tragedy. The publication of *Del Ray: America's Foremost - The Magician for His Time* is the culmination of an effort begun shortly after Del Ray's death in late 2003 by three of his friends who sought to preserve his life and work for future generations of magicians. Dr. Bob Escher was bequeathed all of Del Ray's magic and began the effort by inventorying and documenting the collection. Dr. Bill Spooner analyzed the electronic apparatus in a detailed eighty page unpublished manuscript. The third partner in the enterprise, David Baldwin, set about collecting every video and film that existed of Del Ray performing. Much of the scarce footage existed only in private collections or carefully sequestered holdings. All the while, the trio searched for a writer. The task of preparing the text for the Del Ray biography finally came to successful resolution when John Moehring, a former editor of *MAGIC* and *M-U-M* magic magazines accepted the responsibility of authorship. The result is a masterpiece of determined exhaustive research into the life of an extremely secretive individual as well as an excellent piece of writing. In addition to using the foundation provided by the preparatory efforts of Escher, Spooner, and Baldwin, Moehring spend hours searching magical literature, entertainment trade papers, and scrap books coupled with multiple interviews of nearly fifty of Del Ray's friends and acquaintances to produce a fascinatingly detailed chronological narrative of this very private magician's life.

Part One of the book traces the life of Raymond Petrovic from his birth in 1927 until his death in 2003. The magic spark was ignited when nine-year-old Raymond witnessed two local semi-pro magicians at the orphanage where he spent twelve years of his youth. This spark grew into a lifelong burning passion for magic – a passion that was the single focus of his life. The author has captured the astonishing story of Del Ray’s youth and the development of the stage act that brought him considerable success in nightclubs and an appearance on Ed Sullivan’s *Toast of the Town* in 1951. All of this prior to the first introduction of his “electronic” stage act in 1953 — the act which would become his signature and the basis for his claim to the title of the most innovative magician of the 20th century.

I do not intend to spoil the reading of the biography by repeating events and stories in this review. Suffice to say, Moehring’s rendering of Del Ray’s life is both detailed and entertaining in covering his unmatched success in first the nightclub circuit with his stage act and later the country club market with his close up act which was developed in the ‘60s and ‘70s. While Del Ray’s initial rise to fame was obtained with his stage act, it is probably his very original and innovative close-up act with which he gained his greatest renown. The development and introduction of each of the close-up effects along with the continuing refinement of the stage act are chronicled fully including the trials and tribulations accompanying each new addition. Both acts continued to change and be upgraded during the entirety of Del Ray’s life. A life devoted to magic and a life in which Del Ray performed his magic as long as it was physically possible for him to do so.

This biography does not contain descriptive plans for reconstructing Del Ray’s electronic miracles. While certain features employed in the presentation of the various effects are covered and a detailed description of the famous table used in his close up act is included, it is not intended to be “... a technical exposé for the gratuitous sake of revealing a secret that Del Ray guarded for all his life. The detailed information is given to hopefully provide an understanding and appreciation of the genius that went into the creation of Del Ray’s masterpiece,” to quote the author. Copies of the electronic effects would be soulless imitations without Del Ray’s unique presentation style that made the electronic devices into real magic.

Part two of the book includes explanations for eight of Del Ray’s favorite close-up routines which, with the exception of one routine, are written by Gary Plants as derived from videos of Del actually performing the effects. These effects include: the Half-dollar Through Ring; The Bet; Blackjack Deal; Computer Deck; Gymnastic Aces without Aces; Final Aces; Card Stab; and The Royal Assembly from *Ireland’s 1954 Year Book* as written by Ed Marlo. The explanations are profusely illustrated with photos and drawings. Plants, a highly regarded card magician and author, continues to achieve his high standard of excellence in his explanations of Del Ray’s effects. This section of the book demonstrates that Del Ray was a performer of considerable ability in his own right and not solely because of electronic marvels.

The companion DVD provides the final portion of this Del Ray trilogy. The DVD includes ninety-four minutes of video clips selected from the film and video archive assembled by David Baldwin and includes the following: The earliest film recording of a Del Ray 1949 stage performance; 19-year-old Del Ray assisting Harry Blackstone with the “Flight of the Canaries”; Del performing his electronic version of the “Flight of the Canaries” in 1974; The complete stage act from the 1983 Tannen’s Jubilee; 1974 debut of the new Del Ray close-up act; The Rabbit & Frog close-up effects from a 1988 FFFF performance; The Singing Bird close-up effect from the above mentioned 1983 Tannen’s Jubilee; a 1990 performance of the Half-Dollar through Ring; The Blackjack Deal from a 1984 performance; The Computer Deck; Dice Stacking at the 1986 S.A.M. Convention; a rare performance of the Final Aces at an FFFF Encore performance; The Million Dollar Card Trick, or as Del preferred, the World’s Greatest Card Trick; The Coin Through the Card Box; Gymnastic Aces without Aces; rare footage of the Card Stab; A 1999 performance of Flipper, the card-finding penguin; Little Willie as performed at the 1988 FFFF; and a 1986 demonstration of The Bet with presentation points. One should note that all of the effects described by Gary Plants appear on the DVD.

This is a quality production not only because of the individuals involved in its production but also because of the Chuck Romano layout and the actual quality of the features used in publishing the book itself. The book is printed on gloss paper and features Smyth sewn case binding which allows the book to lay flat when opened. The DVD is contained within its own plastic flap pocket affixed to the inside back cover.

What more can be said? This is an exceptionally well-researched and written chronicle of the life of an exception magician in an exceptionally well-produced book with an accompanying DVD of selected performances spanning the life of the performer. John Moehring’s closing to Part One of the book sums up what this publication is all about:

“As per the wishes and desires of Bob Escher, David Baldwin, and Bill Spooner, this volume was created to keep alive the memory of Del Ray. It is a celebration of the personality, the achievements, the secrecy, and the genius that made the magical world of Del Ray unique. The book also serves as an affirmation of longtime friend Bob Filips’ belief that ‘magic was the only thing in Del Ray’s life that really mattered.’”

Very highly recommended.

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**From *The Magic Circular*, April 2011**  
**Published by The Magic Circle, London**  
**Del Ray – America’s Foremost**  
**Reviewed by Matthew Field**

The fabulous American magician Del Ray was one of my absolute favourites but, like Slydini, the absence of videos has made his name and magic less familiar than it ought to be. Del Ray was known for some unbelievable electronic tricks in which a tweeting toy bird located cards, a tipping teddy bear matched the magician shot for shot, the outcomes were predicted for three dice rolled by spectators, and lots more. If you want to build these tricks for yourself, you won’t find the secrets in this book, although why would you want to? Hints are there.

The workings of eight of Del Ray’s excellent close-up effects are explained by Gary Plants, and these are just great. Of course, you will be hard-pressed to get the same reaction Del Ray achieved with his riverboat gambler persona and hilarious patter. As always, the magician is what is memorable.

John Moehring describes in great detail the life of a man who was consigned to an orphanage, discovered magic, and became the most successful performer in his chosen fields, including night clubs and corporate functions. In a somewhat dry tone, John sometimes loses the character of Del Ray in the extraordinary detail, but one must be grateful that at last the written record of the man finally exists.

The accompanying DVD includes Del Ray on stage at the Tannen Jubilee and in close-up at Fechter’s, and in private videos from David Baldwin and Bob Escher. If you’ve never seen the great magician in action, this will be an eye-opener. If you have, it will be a treasured reminder of just how good he was.

Members David Baldwin and William Spooner, along with Bob Escher are the publishers, and this is clearly a labour of love. For those of us who revere Del Ray, it is truly a gift.