

DÉJÀ VU

By **Mac King**

Last night during a trick where I destroy some kind man's money and make him sweat for a few minutes, the guy got mad, grabbed my tie and pulled my face up so close to his, I could smell the beer on his breath. For a brief instant I was frightened, but I played it pretty smooth, got a few laughs, and, in one of those weird moments you have on stage where what seems like 30 minutes of thought are compressed into a tight six-second ball, my mind drifted back to the first show I ever did for money in a comedy club.

The drunkard had me in his grip, his hand grabbing my tie so that my neck was pulled closer and closer to the point of the knife-edged scissors he held clutched in his other hand. How did I, Mac King, get in this near fatal position? If I made it out of this situation alive, what lessons would I learn from the series of mistakes which led me to a predicament such as this? These are the thoughts that raced through my mind as I tried to determine what this sot meant to do with the scissors and my neck.

Of course my thoughts turned to my mother. Now, before you call in the shrinks, let me regress one level deeper into this story within a story and try to explain what happened that night 11 years ago.

It had all begun six months before when I met an agent in my hometown of Louisville, Kentucky. I had just graduated from Macalester College with my handy degree in Cultural Anthropology. I was in an amateur contest at a place called the "Thirty-Thirty Club." Actually, "place" is too nice of a word. The "Thirty-Thirty Club" was a dump. Anyway, I was in this amateur contest. I was the only magic act. There were poetry readers, comics, singers, and even a woman who told children's stories. After the contest, a big bear of a man introduced himself to me as Tom Sobel. He booked primarily jug bands but was experimenting with putting stand-up comedy into a few bars around Kentucky, Indiana, and Ohio.

"How much material have you got?" he wanted to know.

"Oh, twice as much as the five minutes you saw tonight. If I have to, I can do 15 minutes," I stated proudly. We exchanged phone numbers and he left.

A few months later he actually called me. "Can you go to Cincinnati in two months to a club called DWI? You would be doing 30 minutes as an opening act for an impressionist. It would pay \$25 plus five bucks for gas."

Even though the longest show I'd done at that point was 15 minutes, I jumped at the opportunity. I was extremely excited. When I told my mother about this wonderful opportunity, she was excited too. "I'll go with you," she announced. So that is how my mother happened to be there on that fateful night in Cincinnati, and why my thoughts were on her as the plastered volunteer came closer and closer to murdering her oldest son!

He was choking me vigorously with my own tie, and I dared not struggle or he might actually hurt me with the scissors he had picked up off of my table. You could practically touch the tension in the room it was so tangible and thick. As if he had been rehearsing the timing and pacing for months, he waited until the tautness of the audience had reached its greatest level, then neatly cut off my tie just below the knot and dropped it and my scissors onto the stage. Then he left! Just walked out of the building completely! Never came back! I stood there dumbfounded and tried unsuccessfully to think of a satisfactory way to bring my show to a conclusion.

The moral of that story is: Always keep your scissors out of the reach of drunks, and beware of taking your mother to your show.

Thus ends the tale within a tale, but I believe that by examining the outcome of the two similar situations that happened 11 years apart, there are larger lessons to be learned. When I first started doing comedy clubs, all of my experience as a magician was doing civic clubs and amusement parks. All of my props were neatly laid out on my little portable table that was placed on stage before I was introduced. When I worked my first comedy club, I naturally followed the same procedure. It was what I knew. After the drunk in Ohio got his hands on my scissors so easily, I made the decision to carry all of the props for my show in my pockets. That way I would have control over them at all times. With careful planning, this worked for a while, but after I began adding material to my act and doing more time on stage (although after my disaster in Cincin-

nati, it was a while before I was booked to do any more than a 15 minute opening spot), working completely out of my pockets became impractical.

Also, as I worked more comedy clubs, I began to hang around more comedians. I listened to what these comedians said about me and about other magicians. Mostly it was negative. I listened to what the club managers and owners said about me and other magicians. Mostly it was negative.

One of the complaints I heard was how messy magic acts were. They had stuff scattered all over the stage both before and after their portion of the show. Also, I had heard horror stories of other acts monkeying around with a guy's props. To some comics, anything left on stage is fair game. I decided that if I couldn't carry it on stage with me at the beginning of my act and carry it off stage with me at the end of my act, then it wasn't going to be in my act. Not only was there a danger of another comedian or drunk audience member messing with it, but in my mind it was also a simple question of courtesy. Remember when your mom (funny how my mom keeps creeping into this article) told you to leave things in better condition than you found them? She was right, and to apply this to the stages in the clubs I worked involved quite a bit of effort, but I wanted to perform in comedy clubs. I liked the audiences. I liked the challenge of entertaining an audience who, when they heard the next act was a magician, might just boo before I even started. So, I got me a little suitcase and made sure everything that wouldn't fit into my suit would fit into the suitcase. And I worked out little comedy bits so that nothing, not even a one-inch piece of rope, was left on the state after I'd finished my act.

Of course, I still don't have a way to stop my mother from coming to my shows. ●

Mac's little disclaimer: If you come to my show in a club, please don't hold me to this business of not leaving anything on the stage at the end of my act. I have been lucky enough to advance to headliner in all clubs I work. This means, among other things, that I am the last act on stage. Therefore, I can now leave as big a mess as I want and come back and clean it up after the people have all gone home.