

PROFILES | JANUARY 7, 2013 ISSUE

A PICKPOCKET'S TALE

The spectacular thefts of Apollo Robbins.

BY ADAM GREEN

In magic circles, Robbins is regarded as a kind of legend. Psychiatrists, neuroscientists, and the military study his methods for what they reveal about the nature of human attention.

PHOTOGRAPH BY MARTIN SCHOELLER

A few years ago, at a Las Vegas convention for magicians, Penn Jillette, of the act Penn and Teller, was introduced to a soft-spoken young man named Apollo Robbins, who has a reputation as a pickpocket of almost supernatural ability. Jillette, who ranks pickpockets, he says, “a few notches below hypnotists on the show-biz totem pole,” was holding court at a table of colleagues, and he asked Robbins for a demonstration, ready to be unimpressed. Robbins demurred, claiming that he felt uncomfortable working in front of other magicians. He pointed out that, since Jillette was wearing only shorts and a sports shirt, he wouldn’t have much to work with.



“Come on,” Jillette said. “Steal something from me.”

Again, Robbins begged off, but he offered to do a trick instead. He instructed Jillette to place a ring that he was wearing on a piece of paper and trace its outline with a pen. By now, a small crowd had gathered. Jillette removed his ring, put it down on the paper, unclipped a pen from his shirt, and leaned forward, preparing to draw. After a moment, he froze and looked up. His face was pale.

“Fuck. You,” he said, and slumped into a chair.

Robbins held up a thin, cylindrical object: the cartridge from Jillette's pen.

Robbins, who is thirty-eight and lives in Las Vegas, is a peculiar variety-arts hybrid, known in the trade as a theatrical pickpocket. Among his peers, he is widely considered the best in the world at what he does, which is taking things from people's jackets, pants, purses, wrists, fingers, and necks, then returning them in amusing and mind-boggling ways. Robbins works smoothly and invisibly, with a diffident charm that belies his talent for larceny. One senses that he would prosper on the other side of the law. "You have to ask yourself one question," he often says as he holds up a wallet or a watch that he has just swiped. "Am I being paid enough to give it back?"

In more than a decade as a full-time entertainer, Robbins has taken (and returned) a lot of stuff, including items from well-known figures in the worlds of entertainment (Jennifer Garner, actress: engagement ring); sports (Charles Barkley, former N.B.A. star: wad of cash); and business (Ace Greenberg, former chairman of Bear Stearns: Patek Philippe watch). He is probably best known for an encounter with Jimmy Carter's Secret Service detail in 2001. While Carter was at dinner, Robbins struck up a conversation with several of his Secret Service men. Within a few minutes, he had emptied the agents' pockets of pretty much everything but their guns. Robbins brandished a copy of Carter's itinerary, and when an agent snatched it back he said, "You don't have the authorization to see that!" When the agent felt for his badge, Robbins produced it and handed it back. Then he turned to the head of the detail and handed him his watch, his badge, and the keys to the Carter motorcade.

In magic circles, Robbins is regarded as a kind of legend, though he largely remains, as the magician Paul Harris told me, "the best-kept secret in town." His talent, however, has started gaining notice further afield. Recently, psychiatrists, neuroscientists, and the military have studied his methods for what they reveal about the nature of human attention. Teller, a good friend of Robbins's, believes that widespread recognition is only a matter of time. "The popularity of crime as a sort of romantic thing in America is profoundly significant, and Apollo is tapping into that," he told me. "If you think about it, magic itself has many of the hallmarks of criminal activity: You lie, you cheat, you try not to get caught—but it's on a stage, it has a proscenium around it. When Apollo walks onstage, there's a sense that he might have one foot outside the proscenium. He takes a low crime and turns it into an art form."

■ first met Robbins in Las Vegas, and he took me to a walk-around corporate gig at the Rio Hotel and Casino. As he shook my hand, he took my measure with alert eyes, smiled, and said, “Hello, sir.” (He calls all men “sir.”) Despite the heat, he was dressed in black—jacket, shirt, tie, pants, and loafers. “It’s kind of my signature,” he told me, and explained that, were he to become a real pickpocket, he would dress “more upscale” to blend in at Las Vegas night spots. Robbins is short and compact, and he has the wiry physique of an acrobat beneath the softness of a few extra pounds. His face is lively and expressive, with prominent cheekbones, arched eyebrows, and pointy ears. He has tousled, light-brown hair and a soul patch. Robbins’s hands are slim and smooth, with tapered, manicured fingers, marred only by a scar on his right ring finger—from when he was eighteen and tried to juggle a set of hibachi knives at a Japanese steak house.

At the Rio, Robbins took in the scene with the appraising gaze of a jeweller. A few dozen middle-aged men and women, a group of advertising-sales representatives and their clients, were drinking and eating shrimp on a patio in the late-afternoon sun. Robbins had been told that they would be dressed in “business casual.” Most of the women had on colorful low-cut tops, tight white pants, and mules. Only a few of the men wore jackets. “This is going to be interesting,” Robbins said. “O.K. Time to go shopping.”

Robbins strolled through the crowd, smiling and nodding, resting a hand on a shoulder here, lightly touching an elbow there. From time to time, he let his fingertips graze someone’s pocket, a technique called “fanning.” “He’s got a cell phone, keys, and maybe some cash in that right front pocket,” Robbins whispered to me, indicating one man. “What I’m doing is taking inventory and making sight maps and getting a feel for who these people are and what I’m going to do with them. I’m a jazz performer—I have to improvise with what I’m given.”

By the time he finished his circuit of the patio, his manner had changed: he was more animated and playful, his movements graceful, almost stylized. Later, he told me that he uses his pre-show scouting missions to segue into his thief persona. “Normally, when I’m not performing or stealing, I second-guess myself, I have doubts,” he said. “But when I get into that mode I’m invincible.”

Robbins began by striking up a conversation with a pair of sales executives named Suzanne and Josh.

“What do you do?” Suzanne asked.

“I specialize in future used goods—goods that used to belong to you. I’m a pickpocket.”

Josh and Suzanne chuckled nervously.

“Don’t worry, I give everything back—it’s one of the conditions of my parole. Now, you said your name was Josh?”

“That’s right.”

“I believe you. Josh, would you come stand right here next to me?”

“Of course you don’t look anything like your reflection in the mirror.”



Robbins guided Josh by the elbow to stand on his right, and, as a few other people gathered to watch, he put his arm around him.

“Don’t be nervous,” Robbins went on. “I’m not actually going to put my hand in your pocket—I’m not ready for that kind of commitment. That’s because, at my last show, a guy had a hole in his pocket, and that was rather traumatizing to me.” Robbins cocked his left eyebrow and produced a silver dollar from his pocket. “Now, I’m going to give you this silver coin to hold on to, and we’ll see if I can steal it back.” Robbins positioned Josh’s left hand at shoulder level, palm up.

“O.K., I put this in your hand, and you close it. Would you be impressed if I could take it out of your hand? Say yes.”

“Yes.”

“So would I. O.K., open your hand.” Josh opened his hand, and Robbins snatched the coin from his palm and said, *“Thank you very much.”* He smiled. “O.K., one more time.”

Robbins closed the coin in his own hand and had Josh grab his wrist. When he opened his hand, the coin was gone. Josh laughed.

“The coin’s not in my hand—it couldn’t be. You know why? It’s on your left shoulder.”

Josh grew increasingly befuddled, as Robbins continued to make the coin vanish and reappear—on his shoulder, in his pocket, under his watchband. In the middle of this, Robbins started stealing Josh’s stuff. Josh’s watch seemed to melt off his wrist, and Robbins held it up behind his back for everyone to see. Then he took Josh’s wallet, his sunglasses, and his phone. Robbins dances around his victims, gently guiding them into place, floating in and out of their personal space. By the time they comprehend what has happened, Robbins is waiting with a look that says, “I understand what you must be feeling.” Robbins’s simplest improvisations have the dreamlike quality of a casual encounter gone subtly awry. He struck up a conversation with a young man, who told him, “We’re going to Penn and Teller after this.”

“Oh, then you’ll probably want these,” Robbins said, handing over a pair of tickets that had recently been in the young man’s wallet.

When Robbins hits his stride, it starts to seem as if the only possible explanation is an ability to start and stop time. At the Rio, a man’s cell phone disappeared from his jacket and was replaced by a piece of fried chicken; the cigarettes from a pack in one man’s breast pocket materialized loose in the side pocket of another; a woman’s engagement ring vanished and reappeared attached to a key ring in her husband’s pants; a man’s driver’s license disappeared from his wallet and turned up inside a sealed bag of M&M’s in his wife’s purse.

After the performance, Robbins and I had dinner at the bar. “A lot of magic is designed to appeal to people visually, but what I’m trying to affect is their minds, their moods, their perceptions,” he told me. “My goal isn’t to hurt them or to bewilder them with a puzzle but to challenge their maps of reality.”

By most reckonings, the first performer to make picking pockets the centerpiece of his act was an English magician of French extraction named Fred Brezin, who started performing in London, in 1906, billing himself as “The Original and First Pickpocket.” A Hungarian Jew named Adolph Herczog, who performed as Dr. Giovanni, made a splash in England in the nineteen-twenties by stealing a tiepin from the Prince of Wales, and went on to become a fixture of night clubs in

the United States. The heyday of theatrical pickpocketing came after the Second World War. By far the most famous exponent was a bushy-haired Serbian named Borislav Milojkovic, who went by the stage name Borra, King of the Pickpockets, and became a star of night clubs and circuses throughout Europe. He was able to snatch a victim's eyeglasses from his face without his realizing it. Robbins, who has studied tapes of Borra's act, recognizes in him a kindred spirit, and has made the eyeglasses steal a regular part of his own act, adding a seemingly impossible twist: sunglasses.

To the extent that people imagine the training of pickpockets, they probably picture the sooty urchins of Fagin's den, in "Oliver Twist," rehearsing the theft of fob watches from gentlemen's waistcoats. A similar sort of underworld academy, the School of the Seven Bells, is rumored to exist somewhere in Colombia: the final exam tests the ability to noiselessly remove items from the pockets of a jacket rigged with bells. But Robbins is self-taught, and his devotion to his studies borders on the monastic. Every moment not spent refining his technique or in some way expanding his knowledge of human nature and how to exploit it is, to his mind, time wasted.

In pursuit of his craft, Robbins has ended up incorporating principles from such disparate fields as aikido, sales, and Latin ballroom dancing. He is a devotee of books like Robert B. Cialdini's "Influence: The Psychology of Persuasion," and has also immersed himself in the literature of criminal lore. The book that made the greatest impression on him was a paperback, published in 1964, called "Whiz Mob: A Correlation of the Technical Argot of Pickpockets with Their Behavior Patterns," by David W. Maurer, a professor of English who devoted his life to the study of raffish subcultures, before apparently killing himself, in 1981. Robbins loved the vivid trade lingo in "Whiz Mob," and he continues to pepper his conversation with such terms as "pit" (inside jacket pocket) and "prat" (side pant pocket), "skinning the poke" (removing the cash from a stolen wallet and wiping it off before tossing it) and "kissing the dog" (the mistake of letting a victim see your face). Reading about how street pickpockets operated, Robbins was gratified to discover that he had arrived at similar methods intuitively.

Street pickpockets generally work in teams, known as whiz mobs or wire mobs. The "steer" chooses the victim, who is referred to generically as the "mark," the "vic," or the "chump," but can also be categorized into various subspecies, among them "Mr. Bates" (businessman) and "pappy" (senior citizen). The "stall," or "stick," maneuvers the mark into position and holds him there, distracting his attention, perhaps by stumbling in his path, asking him for directions, or spilling something on him. The "shade" blocks the mark's view of what's about to happen, either with his body or with an object such as a newspaper. And

the “tool” (also known as the “wire,” the “dip,” or the “mechanic”) lifts his wallet and hands it off to the “duke man,” who hustles away, leaving the rest of the mob clean. Robbins explained to me that, in practice, the process is more fluid—team members often play several positions—and that it unfolds less as a linear sequence of events than as what he calls a “synchronized convergence,” like a well-executed offensive play on the gridiron.

“And so now I’m supposed to be the faithful companion who goes for help?”



If a crew of pickpockets is like a football squad, then its star quarterback is the “cannon,” an honorific generally reserved for pickpockets skilled enough to ply their trade without the help of a team. This is also known as “working single o.” Robbins works single o. He is his own steer, stall, shade, and duke man, though, unlike street criminals, he lets his victims know that he will be picking their pockets.

One day, over lunch at a Vietnamese restaurant in a Las Vegas strip mall, Robbins demonstrated his method on me. “When I shake someone’s hand, I apply the lightest pressure on their wrist with my index and middle fingers and lead them across my body to my left,” he said, showing me. “The cross-body lead is actually a move from salsa dancing. I’m finding out what kind of a partner they’re going to be, and I know that if they follow my lead I can do whatever I want with them.”

Robbins needs to get close to his victims without setting off alarm bells. “If I come at you head-on, like this,” he said, stepping forward, “I’m going to run into that bubble of your personal space very quickly, and that’s going to make you uncomfortable.” He took a step back. “So, what I do is I give you a point of focus, say a coin. Then I break eye contact by looking down, and I pivot around the point of focus, stepping forward in an arc, or a semicircle, till I’m in your space.” He demonstrated, winding up shoulder to shoulder with me, looking up at me sideways, his head cocked, all innocence. “See how I was able to close the gap?” he said. “I flew in under your radar and I have access to all your pockets.”

Learning how magic tricks are done is often disappointing, because it’s not really magic. With Robbins, though, effect and method are one and the same, and seeing how he accomplishes his thefts is just as impressive as witnessing, or failing to witness, the acts themselves. Each movement dovetails perfectly

with the next, with no extraneous steps or flourishes. When he places his arm somewhere, it's not an accident; he's blocking his victim's view or locking him in place or temporarily stashing a wallet by pinning it against its owner's body.

Robbins told me that he likes using the momentum of his victims' own movements to remove things from their pockets rather than pulling them out himself. He showed me what he meant, first asking me to put my wallet in my inside jacket pocket. "So your wallet is in your pocket?" he said, pulling my jacket open.

I checked, and it was.

"O.K., good. So now I clip the wallet with my middle and index fingers, and as I close the jacket and turn you to the right it just slides out."

As he spoke, Robbins turned me to the right, and then rested his right hand on my shoulder.

I said, "So if you were going to take the wallet that's when you would have done it, on the turn?" Robbins brought his hand forward to show me that he was holding my wallet between his fingers. Even though he had explained each step along the way, I hadn't felt a thing.

But physical technique, Robbins pointed out, is merely a tool. "It's all about the choreography of people's attention," he said. "Attention is like water. It flows. It's liquid. You create channels to divert it, and you hope that it flows the right way."

Robbins uses various metaphors to describe how he works with attention, talking about "surfing attention," "carving up the attentional pie," and "framing." "I use framing the way a movie director or a cinematographer would," he said. "If I lean my face close in to someone's, like this"—he demonstrated—"it's like a closeup. All their attention is on my face, and their pockets, especially the ones on their lower body, are out of the frame. Or if I want to move their attention off their jacket pocket, I can say, 'You had a wallet in your back pocket—is it still there?' Now their focus is on their back pocket, or their brain just short-circuits for a second, and I'm free to steal from their jacket."

Orchestrating it all is what Robbins, by way of Maurer, calls “grift sense.” “Grift sense is the closest thing to a sixth sense we have,” he told me. “It’s stepping outside yourself and seeing through the other person’s eyes, thinking through the other person’s mind, but it’s happening on a subconscious level.” He went on, “I can analyze how I do things, but the actual doing it—when the synapses just start firing—I can’t explain.”

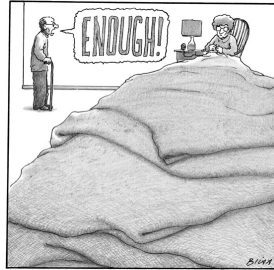
Apollo is not Robbins’s given name; it’s a nickname that he picked up in junior high because he always walked around spinning a yellow Apollo-model Frisbee on his finger. He took it as a stage name when he started performing magic, as a teen-ager. Soon he stopped using his real name altogether, and he asked me not to reveal it. “It’s a cocoon, from which I escaped,” he said.

Robbins was born in 1974, in Plainview, Texas, but grew up mostly in Springfield, Missouri. His parents, Larry and Betty, met at a small Baptist church in Enid, Oklahoma, where Larry was a sometime pastor. Betty, a widowed nursing student with three children, attended services. Larry and Betty describe the birth of their son as “a miracle of the Lord.” As they tell it, Betty’s doctors discovered tumors in her uterus and warned that she would probably die giving birth, and that the child, if it survived, would likely be crippled and brain damaged. The doctors urged an abortion, but Larry and Betty refused. Larry told me, “I realized that God had a special purpose for my son.”

Robbins was born with fine and gross motor-skill deficits. His legs bowed outward, and his feet twisted in. The doctors predicted that he would never walk normally or have full use of his hands. When Robbins was a toddler, he was fitted with the first of a series of metal-and-leather leg braces. Rehabilitation therapists helped him walk without tripping over his feet and taught him exercises to develop coordination, particularly in his hands.

When Robbins was four, Larry left his job and moved the family to Springfield, where he worked a series of low-paying jobs. One year, Robbins recalls, a local paper included them in a feature about the city’s neediest families. But he looks back on his early years with fondness. He remembers his father telling him stories about Huck Finn, Zorro, and Spider-Man, and letting him draw in church, which he managed by holding a pen with both hands.

When Robbins was five, he was able to stop wearing leg braces, and, as he grew up, he developed an uncanny degree of dexterity. He became an accomplished artist and cartoonist. He studied martial arts and taught himself how to ride a unicycle, eat fire, and juggle, getting to the point where he could keep five balls in the air at a time.



Robbins likes to say that he grew up in an oxymoron, with his pious father on one side and two larcenous half brothers on the other. His half brothers, who were in their teens by the time Robbins was born, learned the basics of shoplifting and picking pockets from an uncle and later graduated to more serious crimes. They passed their knowledge and their world view on to Robbins, who began shoplifting when he was in junior high (while also leading his church's Bible Quiz team to the state championships). Once, after stealing a pack of cigarettes from a convenience store, he was confronted by the manager. Feigning innocence, he hid the pack under his arm while the manager searched him. Then he let the pack drop into his hand and, while the manager's attention was distracted, slipped it into the pocket of the man's apron. Around this time, he started running away from home and skipping school. Robbins recalls that his father, convinced that his son was possessed by Satan, held him down and tried to cast the Devil out.

When Robbins was fifteen, he began to study magic seriously, after seeing a local magician at a county fair. Robbins honed his skills by performing at local restaurants. He preferred to forgo the usual props of the magic world, working only with whatever happened to be on hand. This was how he came to discover the entertainment value of secretly loading things into—and taking things out of—people's pockets.

During his senior year of high school, Robbins began dating the daughter of a local minister, and she became pregnant. After much dour conferring between the families, the pair got married. In the wedding photographs, Robbins's skin looks raw and patchy, the result of a fire-eating accident a week earlier, during which he had set his head aflame. Instead of calling 911, he called a local circus clown with fire-eating experience to come and help. After Robbins's son was born, he dropped out of school and got a job doing illustrations for religious literature, but he grew restless and quit. He started reading books on

personal development and sales techniques, and also put in a brief stint in telesales. “Everyone said, ‘He’s awfully flighty—he jumps from job to job,’” Robbins recalled. “But I would take what I needed and go. I figured I’ve only got so much time.”

When Robbins was twenty-two, he decided to move his young family to Las Vegas and devote himself to magic full time. Things began inauspiciously. On his first day in town, he was robbed at gunpoint, and for several weeks he could barely feed his wife and son. He took a job working for a chain of magic shops, doing graphic design and demonstrating tricks. His marriage quickly unravelled and his wife moved to North Dakota, taking their son with her. “I guess I must have had some kind of a nervous breakdown,” Robbins told me. “I started stuttering. I thought my life was over.” To raise money, he sold his collection of magic books.

One day, Robbins got a call from the head of entertainment at Caesar’s Magical Empire, a now defunct Roman-themed dinner-theatre extravaganza at Caesar’s Palace, offering him a two-week job filling in for a magician. On his first night at work, a woman in the crowd, from whom he hadn’t stolen anything, shouted, “My rings! I had a diamond and a sapphire—where are they?” The woman and her husband accosted Robbins and threatened to call hotel security.

“Don’t walk away,” Robbins said calmly. “Let’s go together, because if I had your rings I could just get rid of them while you were gone. So let’s have them search me in front of you.” He continued in a soothing tone, “I understand how you feel. Once we eliminate the possibility that I stole your rings, then you’ll be able to think more clearly and figure out what happened to them.”

“I was using an old sales technique called ‘Feel, Felt, Found,’ where you empathize with the customer,” Robbins told me. “Also, the improv technique of never using a negative—agree and add on instead.”

While Robbins was being searched, the woman went to check her room and discovered that she had left her jewelry there. Robbins was offered his first permanent gig.

Robbins describes his years at Caesar’s Magical Empire, where he worked from 1998 until it closed, in 2002, as his “college and graduate-school education” in picking pockets. His job was to dress as a wizard and provide seven minutes of entertainment for tourists waiting to be led to dinner by a toga-clad hostess. “I decided I wouldn’t do any magic tricks—just stealing,” Robbins said. “That way, I had to work

without a net.” He estimates that he met twenty-four people during every show, and that he stole something from three of them. At six shows an hour, five hours a day, five days a week, forty weeks a year, that works out to at least eighty-one thousand pockets picked. “It was a hyper-learning experience,” he said.

Before long, magicians from all over the country were stopping by to see him work, and when they asked him about his methods he realized that he had nothing to tell them. “That really bothered me,” Robbins said. “I wanted to articulate what I was doing.” He also worried about whether his quest to understand his gift was hampered because he wasn’t able to compare notes with criminal pickpockets, and began his intensive reading in the literature of pickpocketry. “Once, a real pickpocket from South America came to see me perform at Caesar’s,” Robbins told me. “He came up to me afterward and said, ‘You’re a brother to me, and I am so proud that you have found a way to do good with this.’ He was sure I was a real thief. Then he showed me a few steals, which was so cool.”

After Caesar’s Magical Empire closed, Robbins decided to bill himself exclusively as a pickpocket. He was soon in demand as a corporate entertainer. By the time he turned thirty, he was a fixture of the Las Vegas sleight-of-hand scene. Teller threw him a birthday party that was attended by some of the world’s best magicians. Looking around at the men who had once been his inspiration, Robbins realized that he had become their peer. He told me, “For the first time in my life, I felt like I really belonged.”

Robbins earns a decent living, mostly by performing at corporate functions in Las Vegas and around the country, and by doing a variety of consulting gigs. But, from time to time, he wonders about reaching a larger audience. His friends, too, have a sense that his preternatural abilities mark him out for finer things. Jillette thinks that Robbins has yet to find just the right vehicle for his talents. “My advice to Apollo is: I don’t care how many cool tricks you can do. How do I come away from the show a different person?”

A few years ago, Robbins came up with an idea for a real-life Whiz Mob: a group of ex-cons, magicians, and cops, who could be a kind of performing brain trust, lecturing and consulting on pickpocketing, con games, crooked gambling, fraud, and deception. One winter morning, Robbins and I drove four and a half hours north from Las Vegas, through the desert, to the Tonopah Conservation Camp, a minimum-security prison, where a pickpocket named Gary Scott was serving time. Robbins had seen an interview

with Scott on “Dateline NBC,” along with surveillance footage of him stealing from a woman’s purse in an elevator. “I liked that when he made the steal he didn’t use a stall, even though he had one right there,” Robbins recalled. “And in the interview he was using words like ‘cannon’ and ‘stick,’ and I got all excited.”

“That would be in Aisle Six, the worried-well section.”



Scott, at five feet four and two hundred and ten pounds, cut a memorable figure. I later heard his appearance compared, more than once, to a bowling ball. His hair was plaited in cornrows, and he walked with a slight limp. He clearly had no idea why we were there, but it didn’t seem to bother him. Speaking in a gravelly mixture of urban slang and old-fashioned street-crime lingo, he told us that he was born in Memphis but grew

up in Chicago, where, at age thirteen, he learned how to pick pockets at what he called “whiz school,” under the tutelage of two local cannons named High Pocket and Finger Wave Dave. “I been playing since I was knee-high to a shit-ball,” he said. “At first, I was a moll buzzer. I used to play in the ghetto. Then I started playing Skokie, then I started playing downtown in the Loop. They got Shot-Jims down there, and if you can play at that level and beat a chump, right there on the corner in front of they face—believe me, you can play.” (Rough translation: “I started out stealing from women’s purses in my neighborhood, and then I started to ply my trade downtown, where I got so good that I was able to steal wallets out of men’s jacket and pant pockets even under the eagle eye of undercover police officers trained in the ways of my profession.”) By the time he was fourteen, he said, he was paying most of his family’s household bills and wearing Armani suits to school. At fifteen, he stole a pistol from a security guard’s holster on a dare and was shot five times by a plainclothes policeman who happened to witness the theft (hence the limp).

Scott said that he’d played cannon in a gang for years. “A cannon is like a psychiatrist, he’s like an ambassador, he’s like a high-paid movie star all in one,” he told me. “If I’m working single o, and I see a guy walking down the street with his wife and I want to beat her purse, I’ll walk up to him and say, ‘Hey, Coach, how you doing?’, and I’ll reach across his wife to shake his hand. She gonna look straight into his face and be, like, ‘When were you a coach?’ And he gonna be looking back and forth between her and me, saying, ‘What coach?’ That’s when my hand goes into her purse, and I beat her.”

Robbins grew excited. “That’s what’s called a pattern interrupt,” he said. “It locks up their brain, puts a question mark in there, and after that you can just bust them.”

Robbins explained what he did for a living, and demonstrated on Scott, who was flabbergasted. They spent the best part of an hour comparing techniques, and talked about projects on which they might collaborate after Scott was released. Robbins suggested that they could work on a public-education crime-awareness project.

“All the major sporting events have big screens,” Robbins said. “Imagine if there’s a little video clip, a demonstration of pickpocketing on those screens, before the event. And imagine if you could sell the rights to play those films.”

Scott clapped his hands, and said, “Whoo! Phenomenal! You and me, we think a lot alike.”

Later, as we said goodbye, Scott said, “We’re gonna need a Brink’s truck, all the money we’re gonna make.”

A few months after this meeting, Scott was transferred to a halfway house near the Las Vegas airport, and Robbins took to chauffeuring him around town. He wanted to get to know Scott better, and also to keep him away from the lures of public transportation. “I have a feeling that a bus for him is like a bar for an alcoholic,” he said.

Scott was excited about getting involved in show business. (He also had a plan to launch a line of theftproof clothing.) Robbins saw tremendous potential for him, but he tried to manage his expectations, explaining that none of it was going to happen overnight. Once, he pressed Scott about whether he was committed to the hard work it would take. Scott repeatedly insisted that, as he put it, “I’m an honest guy,” which finally prompted Robbins to say, “But, Gary—you’re a thief.”

To add to the group’s criminal element, Robbins brought in an old friend, Rod the Hop. A rangy man in his early fifties, with a rawboned face and a Southern twang, Rod is widely considered one of the finest card cheats alive. His nickname refers to his signature move—invisibly transposing the top and bottom halves of a deck. His career included a stint as a dealer for a casino in Las Vegas, where he made sure that certain well-connected individuals left the table happy. His luck ran out, though, when he became

obsessed with beating slot machines, and he wound up serving a yearlong sentence. Since then, Rod had kept himself out of the clutches of the law, hanging around magic circles while working as a salesman at a used-car lot. The Whiz Mob represented a chance to put his criminal skills to legitimate use and earn the money for hip-replacement surgery, though he was wary. “Once you learn about cheating, and you start making some money from it, you’re never going to win square again,” he said. “God’s not going to let you cheat and have good luck, too.”

Representing the other side of the law was Sergeant Tim Shalhoob, who had been the Las Vegas Police Department’s foremost expert on pickpockets. Among the impressive feats on Shalhoob’s résumé was the arrest of Gary Scott, in 2003. “Gary was definitely one of the top two or three guys working the circuit,” he recalled. “On the other hand, he’s a very distinctive-looking individual, so any time he got caught on a security camera he was easy to identify.” Shalhoob had grown fond of Scott over the years and felt sorry for him when he learned that a lot of the money that he had stolen had gone toward medical expenses for his wife, who had survived breast cancer. So he gave Scott a choice. “I told him, ‘O.K., here’s what we’re going to do: we can house you for about twenty years. Or here’s option B: we’ll agree to a two-to-three-year sentence, but you have to make a series of videotapes for law-enforcement officers explaining the specifics of what you do for a living, and you also have to go on national TV and show your face, so that you’re pretty much ineffective as a pickpocket from now on.’” Scott took the deal, and he and Shalhoob remained close from then on. For Shalhoob, the Whiz Mob offered a way of breaking into the lucrative law-enforcement convention circuit and gave him a creative outlet for his obsession. “We’re the same animal, pickpockets and cops,” he told me. “We’re both adrenaline junkies.”

Robbins threw himself into the role of team leader and arranged for Rod and Gary to test the waters as public speakers and performers, first at a law-enforcement conference and then at a walk-around magic gig. Unfortunately, Scott, despite his outgoing personality, was petrified of getting up onstage, and, despite his reputation as a cannon, his sleight-of-hand skills were not audience-ready. One afternoon, I watched Robbins teach Scott a routine in which he had to ask a spectator to sign a twenty-dollar bill, fold it, wrap it in a handkerchief, and put it in his pocket. After some byplay, the spectator would discover that the bill was no longer there, whereupon Scott would pull from his own pocket a small metal tube, secured with a padlock, and remove the signed bill.

“First of all, get all the cash out of your pockets,” Robbins instructed him. “People are going to say you stole it from them. I don’t want you to have any cash in your pockets during the show.”

Scott tried the routine. As he reached for the silk, he looked down. Robbins jumped up. “No, no, no,” he said. “You’re a pickpocket. You know where your pockets are. Take your time. Again.”

Scott started again. He enunciated his words clearly, speaking with a mild English accent: “May I borrow a dollar bill from you, sir? Thank you very much, sir.”

“Good, good—don’t rush,” Robbins said. “O.K., you’ve had the bill signed, and you’ve rolled it up and put on the rubber bands—keep going.”

Scott placed the rolled-up bill in the palm of his right hand, whipped the handkerchief out of his breast pocket with a flourish, placed it over his hand, and said, “I shall place the bill into my hand and cover it with this handkerchief.”

“Stop putting your hands on my breasts with your eyes.”



“They can see that’s what you’re doing,” Robbins interrupted. “You don’t need to tell them.”

Scott clutched the bill tensely in his hand, which he held pinned to his rib cage.

“Relax,” Robbins said. “And don’t pull your hand close to your body like that. It’s going to make him nervous. And stay in his space, but to the side of it. Not up in his face—people get very jumpy when they feel their personal space is invaded, especially by a two-hundred-and-ten-pound African-American pickpocket.”

The next day, Gary Scott and Rod the Hop made their *début* as lecturers at the Luxor Hotel, in front of some two hundred and fifty casino managers, hotel security officers, policemen, and park rangers. Scott was terrified at the prospect of speaking in public (“I thought you were in Toastmasters,” Rod said), and Rod had reservations of his own. “Man, I just can’t get used to Apollo saying, ‘This is Rod the Hop—he’s a cheat,’” he told me. “My ass puckers every time.”

There was a polite round of applause, followed by silence, as Scott made his way down the aisle. Finally, standing at the lectern, he shuffled some notes and, in a thick whisper, said, “I’m very nervous.” He began hesitantly, holding tight to the lectern as he recounted his start in the profession at thirteen. He offered some general observations, among them that “pickpockets affect our global economy, here in America, as well as abroad.” He may have been winging it when he said, “I made an oath that the same energy I took to do it I would take to fight against it—even if it cost me my life,” but the sentiment appeared to affect him and he started to hit his stride, launching into an impassioned speech, the gist of which was that cannons were “the silent terrorists that’s messing up our economy.”

That evening, the Whiz Mob convened at Detective Shalhoob’s house for a cookout and a group meeting. Robbins was still concerned about Scott’s abilities and his commitment, and he took him aside and put a hand on his shoulder. “Here’s what I need you to do. I asked you to buy some handkerchiefs and thread so we could make the gimmick for the bill routine, and you didn’t. You say you want me to teach you how to do the watch steal, so you can start performing, but I need to see some real effort from you, do you understand?”

Scott looked up at him, fighting back tears, and nodded.

Later, as the evening was breaking up, Robbins noticed Scott slumped on a couch and went over to cheer him up. He pulled a version of the pen-cartridge steal he had done on Penn Jillette. Scott laughed until tears ran down his cheeks. Then he looked down and noticed that his tie was gone. When he looked up, Robbins was holding it.

“You’re a real cannon, Apollo,” he said, beaming. “You ain’t bullshit, and people love you. You got a caviar personality.”

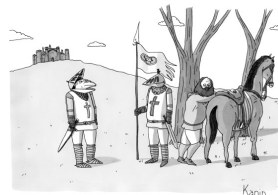
Despite Robbins’s best efforts, the Whiz Mob fell apart. Rod spent another spell in jail, and Scott disappeared for a while. Robbins was deflated at the failure. “I had this idea of forming a brain trust of guys to help my career,” he told me. “But I ended up doing the opposite: I put together a group where I have to look after everybody.” Still, he had a variety of other schemes to take the place of the disbanded group. When I saw him recently, he was in New York shooting several spots for “Brain Games,” a National Geographic cable series that uses interactive experiments, demonstrations, and games to explore various aspects of how the mind works. He was also performing

shows under the sobriquet the Gentleman Thief, consulting on the TNT series “Leverage,” and giving seminars for law-enforcement organizations. He was setting up a consulting and corporate-training outfit and collaborating with Barry McManus, a former C.I.A. interrogator, and Charles Morgan III, an associate clinical professor of psychiatry at Yale Medical School. Robbins told me that he’d decided to scale back on working with ex-convicts: “The recidivism rate was just too high.”

Robbins has also been approached by the Department of Defense to consult on the military applications of pickpocketing, behavioral influence, and con games. The D.O.D. has just endowed a new research-and-training facility at Yale, which opens this month. Robbins is to be an adjunct professor there, and will give lectures and design training modules. The defense application of Robbins’s work is less strange than it might at first seem. Barton Whaley and Susan Stratton Aykroyd’s “Textbook of Political-Military Counterdeception” (2007) notes that, in the nineteen-seventies, “conjurors had evolved theories and principles of deception and counterdeception that were substantially more advanced than currently used by political or military intelligence analysts.” I spoke to the Special Operations Command official who had recruited Robbins for the project, and he told me that Robbins had been brought to his attention by some of his men, who had been impressed by videos of him on YouTube. “It’s no big secret that a lot of Army Special Forces guys have a very big interest in magic and deception and being able to manipulate attention,” he said. “Apollo is the guy who actually gets into the nuts and bolts of how it works, why it works, and oftentimes can extrapolate that into the bigger principle.”

Robbins’s work has also been noticed by neuroscientists. A couple of years ago, he caused a stir at the annual convention of the Association for the Scientific Study of Consciousness, explaining his theories of attention management and deconstructing his “Coin on Shoulder” routine. The co-chairs of that year’s conference, Stephen Macknik and Susana Martinez-Conde, a husband-and-wife team of neuroscientists, subsequently started working with Robbins, and collaborated on a book, “Sleights of Mind,” which relates some of Robbins’s techniques to aspects of cognition.

“Whoa, Galahad—you’ve got a bad case of knight face.”



Learning about the cognitive underpinnings of his gifts hasn’t made Robbins a better pickpocket, but it has given him a new framework for describing what he does. It has also given him a new and less felonious group of peers, not to mention the satisfaction of seeing his own intuitions borne out. One of the first things that

Robbins ever explained to me was his observation that the eye will follow an object moving in an arc without looking back to its point of origin, but that when an object is moving in a straight line the eye tends to return to the point of origin, the viewer's attention snapping back as if it were a rubber band. Robbins discussed his theory with Macknik and Martinez-Conde, who devised an experiment to test it. Subjects were shown two videos of Robbins performing a simple coin trick while lab equipment tracked the motion of their eyes. In one video, Robbins pulled his hand away in an arc at the crucial moment of the trick; in the other, it moved in a straight line. Sure enough, the eyes of the viewers followed Robbins's hand more persistently when it described an arc. The results were published last year in the journal *Frontiers in Human Neuroscience*, with Robbins listed as one of four co-authors. His academic affiliation was given as Whizmob, Inc.

The intersection of magic and neuroscience has become a topic of some interest in the scientific community, and Robbins is now a regular on the lecture circuit. Recently, at a forum in Baltimore, he shared a stage with the psychologist Daniel Kahneman—who won a Nobel Prize for his work in behavioral economics—and the two had a long discussion about so-called “inattention blindness,” the phenomenon of focussing so intently on a single task that one fails to notice things in plain sight.

Many of Robbins's neuroscience talks find their way onto YouTube, and I asked him if he was concerned that he might be giving too much away. “It doesn't matter if people are aware of how I work, or even what I'm going to do,” he said. “They still won't catch it. While they're trying to watch for it, I'll be watching them.”

Amid the competing demands on his time and attention, Robbins continues to do the thing that has made it all possible—entertaining people by picking their pockets. Like many magicians, he does both walk-around shows and a stage show, and also works with his second wife, Ahndao Le Do, a former performance artist and women's advocate, who is now a stage mentalist. He confesses, though, that the appeal of doing walk-around performances at parties has begun to wane, and he has grown dissatisfied with corporate audiences. “They're not there because they're interested in you or in what you have to say,” he told me. “They came there to eat their dinner, get their awards, have a chuckle, get drunk, and then go home.”

Ultimately, Robbins would like to develop a different kind of stage act—a one-man show in a theatre. “I think the pickpocketing thing would be much more fun and engaging as part of a narrative about my life,” he said. Years ago, Teller told Robbins that he needed to ask himself two questions: Why do I steal? And why do I give it back? Increasingly, Robbins sees his stealing as “a metaphor, an experiment for me to play with human interactions.” He told me, “Looking back, I can see that I was really learning a lot about how people work through this little experiment of stealing from them. I learned a lot about how they handle their attention, how they handle stress, how they handle confidence. So when I look at why I steal, basically it’s my way of communicating with people.”

At the moment, Robbins has no idea how this more exploratory, biographical show might look, but he has known for many years how he would like it to end—with a spectacular act of theft that he calls his holy grail. “At the beginning of the show, everybody gets a nicely engraved black envelope and a little red paper heart,” he told me. “I say, ‘All of you have been given one of these. Put your heart in your envelope, seal it, and hide it in your purse or in your pocket. Guard your heart.’”

Robbins went on, “At the end of the show, I point to a guy in the audience and have him stand up. I show my hand empty, then I close it, and when I open it again there’s a heart in it. The guy looks in his envelope—his heart is missing. Then I reach into my pockets and pull out all the hearts—handfuls of them—and let them flutter to the ground. The rest of the audience check their envelopes, and all their hearts are gone. I stand there smiling, and as soon as I see that look of astonishment on their faces I bow and walk off. It’s the only time I don’t give back what I’ve stolen.”

Robbins laughed. Then he inhaled and let the air seep out through his lips. “Some people say, ‘Well, that’s impossible,’” he said. “But I don’t think so. Do I know how to do it yet? No. But I’m working on it.” ♦

