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Audiences let their hair down at hypnotist shows

When standing in front of a room full of strangers you probably wouldn't act out your audition for a role in an adult film, but at a Las Vegas hypnosis show, behavior like this can make you a star.

Hypnosis shows are the only ones in town that encourage audience members to lose their inhibitions on stage. What better place to do this than in Vegas?

"I think inside everybody there's this person that wants to be in front of people and just wants to cut loose. I think that's what hypnosis gives you," said Michael Johns, a comedian and hypnotist who co-hosts "Hypnosis Unleashed" at the Tropicana with Terry Stokes. "It gives you the opportunity to be a part of the show and get up there and have a little fun. It gives you a license to do goofy things that you probably would not have done before."

There are several hypnosis shows on the Las Vegas Strip, each of them flavored by the unique personalities of their hosts. With Johns' show, like most of the hypnosis acts in Vegas, he puts his volunteers in a series of outrageous and often adult-oriented scenarios.

"I always like to say we're going to step over the line in good taste. That's what we're going to do in the show, but you're not going to have to move out of your hometown or anything like that afterwards," said Johns.

He started his career as a stand-up comedian and then changed his act after seeing a hypnosis show.

"I was the star of the show, and I'm the kind of guy that didn't believe he could ever be hypnotized so it was amazing to me," said Johns.

Afterwards, he studied under a hypnotherapist in Florida and incorporated his new skills into his comedy routine.

The basic setup for every hypnosis show is the same. The host and hypnotist greets his or her audience and does a brief explanation of hypnosis and the show. During this "pre-talk," as it's called in the industry, the hosts are trying to both educate the audience and make them feel trusting enough to volunteer to be hypnotized.

"It's live performance, and you have to get people to like you in 10 or 15 minutes, get them to trust you to come up on stage. Then you have to hypnotize them, and then you have to choreograph a show out of that," said Corbin Craft, who co-hosts "Naughty Boys Hypnosis" with Rolan Whitt at Harmon Theater at Planet Hollywood. Hypnotist Anthony Cools, who performs at Paris Las Vegas, agrees.

"You can't rehearse a hypnosis show because it's based on audience participation. It's done on the fly," said Cools.

While relying on audience participation is always an unpredictable element, Craft explained that it's one of the main draws of hypnosis shows. People come to Vegas to go crazy and hypnosis shows give them that option.

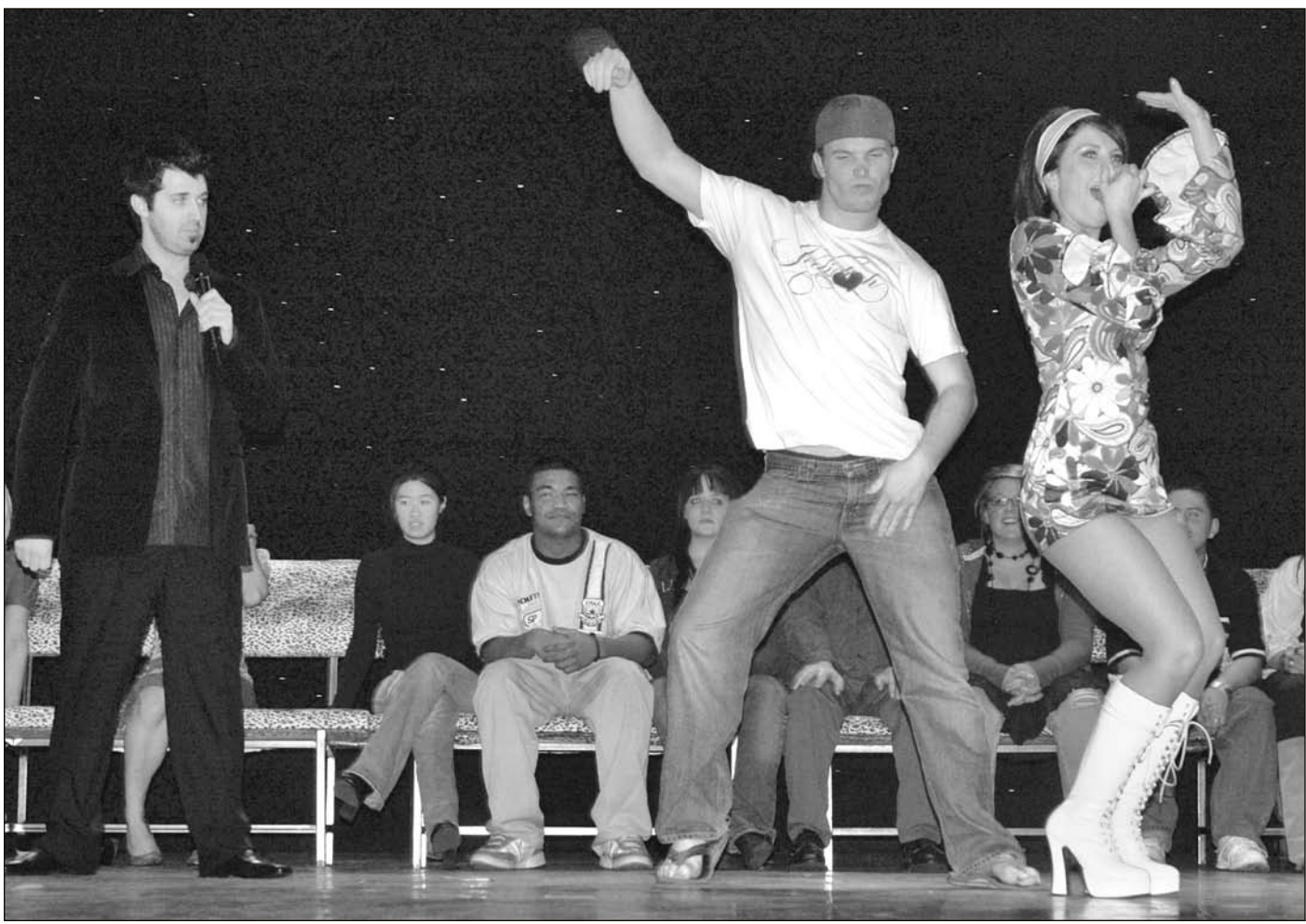
"This is an excuse for them to let their hair down, it totally is. It's like 'ok I'll let these guys hypnotize me and then whatever I do I can just blame them,'" said Craft.

One of the unique aspects of "Naughty Boys Hypnosis" is that the show incorporates a lot of elaborate and naughty props, a tool Craft and Whitt learned from the original Dr. Naughty, Dean Stirling, Craft's late father who also performed as a hypnotist in Vegas.

"He's the one that taught us how to use props and the value of them and how much further you can go with the comedy with a prop and how real it makes the bit, not just to the people that are on stage because they're hypnotized, but it brings a sense of realism to the people in the audience as well," said Craft.

Before hosting the show, Craft and Whitt learned how to do hypnosis by working on Dr. Naughty's show. Whitt used to perform comedy as the opening act, and Craft did sound and lighting. Craft is a certified clinical hypnotist and Whitt is in the process of getting his certification.

While Cools doesn't use an assortment of props, his show is equally outrageous. It starts with a 3-D movie and bikini-clad female comedians who start the show with a few jokes before Cools performs. Well known as one of the edgiest hypnosis



Above, a hypnotized male volunteer shows off his dance moves along side a cast member during Marc Savard's show at the V Theater in the Miracle Mile Shops at Planet Hollywood. Below, (clockwise from left), Anthony Cools; Corbin Craft and Rolan Whitt; Marc Savard; and Michael Johns.



acts on the Strip, Cools explained that sometimes guests are apprehensive about getting on stage.

"I'm definitely at the forefront of the nastier shows in town, and I think people are warned," said Cools.

Even if you don't volunteer to be hypnotized, hypnotist Marc Savard said people like watching hypnosis shows because they can relate to those on stage.

"There's something about the phenomenon of hypnosis that adds an element of raw laughter and spontaneity. You can go to a comedy club and watch some comics and sometimes you identify with the comic and sometimes you don't ... whereas with hypnosis it's always the people from the audience and you can identify with them because they're real people," said Savard, who performs at V Theater in the Miracle Mile Shops at Planet Hollywood.

Along with his adult humor, Savard's show features showgirls who perform dance numbers and, in some of the scenarios, interact with hypnotized volunteers.

Savard first became fascinated with hypnosis when he attended a show while trying to get into medical school. Afterwards, he started researching it and practiced hypnotizing friends before

performing in front of an audience.

When he was 23 he used his skills on himself after being hit by a drunk driver. He suffered a broken back and fractured skull and used his mind to control his pain and make a rapid recovery just six months after the accident. Now he is a certified hypnotherapist and has a school where he teaches stage hypnosis to other up-and-coming hypnotists. Despite his certification, Savard explained that learning to hypnotize people is the easy part of doing stage hypnosis because people are naturally suggestible.

"We think in words. Once you change those words and those ideas, you can cause organic change in the body, and it really comes down to one thing. Where the mind goes, the body and the emotions follow," said Savard.

Hypnosis is a natural state of consciousness between being awake and sleeping where people are highly suggestible. When you watch a hypnosis show, not only do you get to watch people do something out of the ordinary, but you're also getting a glimpse of that person when they aren't

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— Michael Johns, co-host "Hypnosis Unleashed"

feeling restricted by social norms. "It allows us to be our truest self. It allows our truest personality to come out without consequence," said Savard.

This is only to a certain extent though, because he explained, that even while hypnotized, people have what's called a subconscious watchdog that prevents them from doing anything against their morals or beliefs.

Along with getting people to do things for entertainment, being hypnotized can also help people make impacting life changes, explained Dr. Scott Lewis who has a show at Riviera. A former chiropractor, Lewis started doing clinical hypnosis 22 years ago.

"I got interested in hypnosis because I was 41 pounds overweight. I learned how to do hypnosis and lost the weight, and then I started incorporating it into my practice. I've been performing for eight years," said Lewis.

He was featured on "Inside Edition" for a hypno-diet therapy he did with Vegas showgirls who needed to get back in shape after their pregnancies. Aside from his show he continues to do private hypnotherapy sessions. He also performs his show on cruise ships and does seminars on weight loss.

In his show, Lewis both entertains and educates his audience on the power of hypnosis and how it can change people's lives. His show is more family-friendly than some of the other hypnosis shows on the Strip.

"I like having the clean alternative and just really showing people what else can be done with hypnosis and still have a very funny and entertaining show," said Lewis.

If you want to be a spectator or you want to be the star, hypnosis shows offer an experience that can't be compared to any other show in Vegas.

"The show is people. You get to see what people are like when they are not inhibited. You get to see a very charming side of people... It's just very empowering, and people love seeing people at their best," said Lewis.

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