

NICK LEWIN

KENTON KNEPPER

A MAGICAL MASTER JUST A CLICK AWAY!



KENTON KNEPPER HAS
SOMETHING IMPORTANT TO
SAY TO ALL MAGICIANS AND
MENTALISTS - AND WE ALL NEED
TO LISTEN!

By **NICK LEWIN**

I have been a fan of Kenton Knepper for some time. Like many other magicians, my first real exposure to him was with the release of his groundbreaking effect *Kolossal Killer*. Later when I met him and saw him perform at one of Michael Finney's *Dry Heat Golf Classic* the deal was sealed and I became a "Kolossal" fan of not only his magic, but also the man himself. One of the joys of writing freelance for *Vanish Magazine* is the freedom to choose my own topics to write about, and when I recently read Kenton's remarks about the impact of YouTube on learning in his blog, I made a mental note that this was a topic that I wanted to pursue in an article.

Some of his words that made such an impact on me, and indeed mirrored many of my own feelings, were "Some names in mentalism and magic are exposing things on YouTube as click bait and yet we are not paying the real creators or innovators. We pay copycats, people uneducated in mentalism and magic history, and con artists, not true originators or innovators. We pay for the sizzle. It doesn't seem to matter to customers that there is no meat in what they buy. You are buying stuff that cannot be performed in real life situations. Everyone can learn tricks for free. Even if you bought a trick and learned it,



anyone else can do the same. Buying a trick doesn't make you a mentalist or a magician any more than buying a piano makes you a musician."

I thought these were very valid points in this day and age, and Knepper went on to say, "You are being tricked into thinking that learning a trick is real learning. The real secrets are taught from masters to students over a period of time. These real secrets cannot be easily exposed. What you actually pay for is your part of the responsibility for making mentalism and magic what it will become. Much of what you are buying from some of the names in mentalism today isn't *theirs* at all."

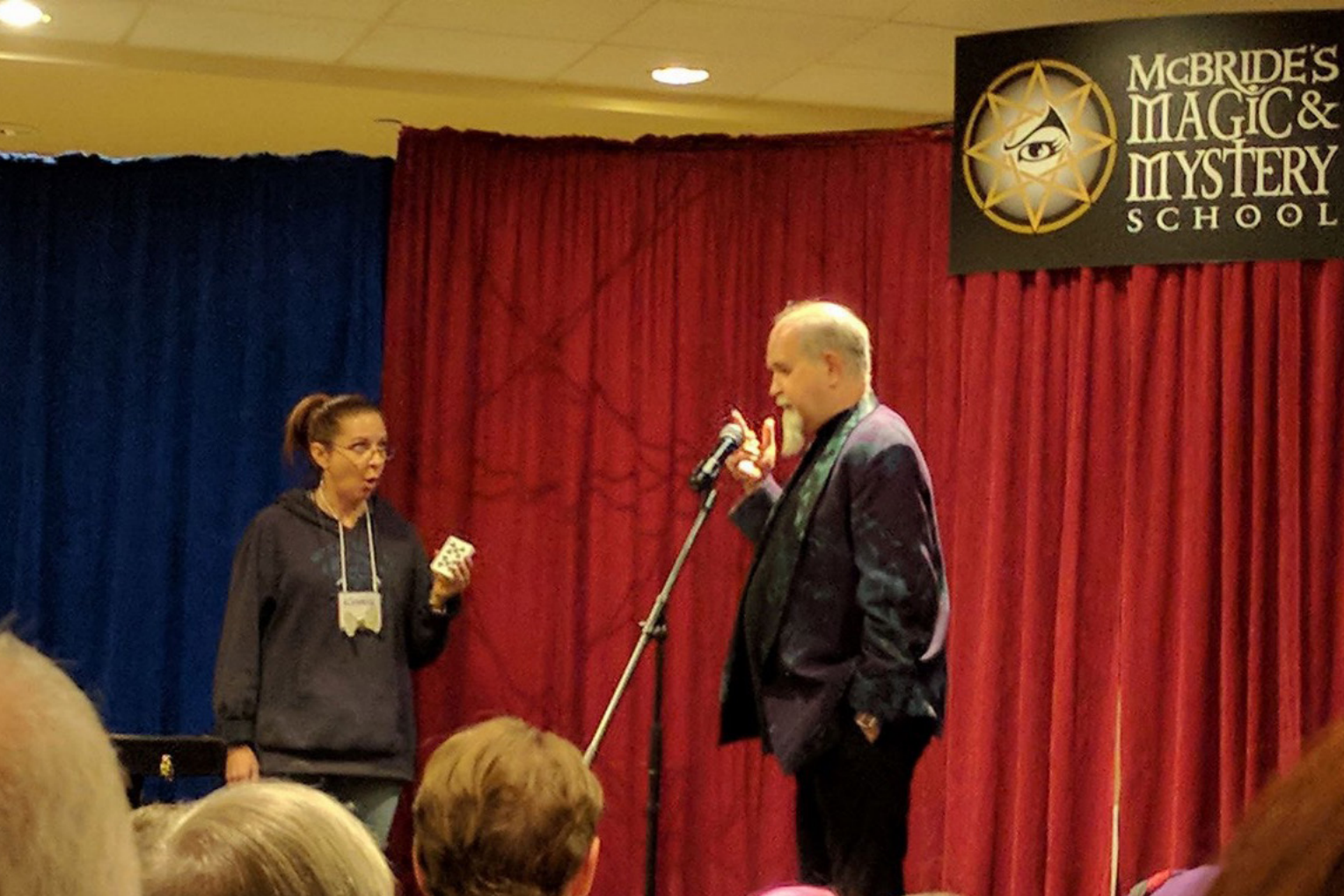
Recently I had to chance to spend some time interviewing Kenton for this story, and I'm looking forward to taking this opportunity to tell you a little more about both the man and his philosophy. Knepper was born in Cedar Rapids, Iowa and began his lifelong love affair with magic when he was being initiated into Cub Scouts. During the event, someone said, "We are having entertainment tonight; we have a

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magician who is going to perform for us." The magician was Mark Edmonds who performed a bunch of tricks including suspending someone in mid-air and after his performance he announced he gave lessons and taught a class at the YMCA on Saturdays. Knepper's parents said, "Would you like to go?" Kenton said; "NO!" Okay, maybe it wasn't quite love at very first sight with magic!

However, Knepper's parents somehow managed to spirit him away to the YMCA the following Saturday where he saw a kid standing in front of the allotted room with two handkerchiefs that changed color. "Suddenly something in my head clicked," says Kenton, "I literally heard it click." Knepper instantly recognized his future path and by the age of eight Edmonds had him present a lecture on the history of magic. That same year he performed his first show at a birthday party. In this manner and at this precociously young age, Kenton began a dual career that would continue to thrive as both a magician and magical educator.

In those early years, Knepper was a vera-



cious reader and worked hard at turning the tricks he discovered in books into actual performance pieces. Says Kenton, "The joy of learning magic from books isn't just the tricks you learn, but the understanding of the art that begins to form in the background of your mind and becomes the foundation of your future." Although Kenton grew up in a relatively small town, he was lucky to find an assortment of magicians living locally who enjoyed a wide range of experience in real world magic, and they acted as teachers to fan the flames of interest in the magical arts that were fast becoming his passion.

I asked Kenton how he felt about the current generations to whom YouTube has become a form of digital mentor and replaced the live model that we older magicians grew up with. "What you gain is immediacy." Knepper responded instantly. "At least you learn how some tricks are done—even wrongly!" You also gain the opportunity to learn from some of the greatest teachers in the world. The downside is that just as often you are learning from someone who doesn't really know, or is holding back information. Many real teachers don't want to teach in such an open forum and tend to hold back certain information. Most people are not really learning; they are just getting tricks." Making this point even clearer Knepper states, "The real secrets are not handed over for free. They cannot be easily exposed. The real secrets of mentalism and magic come drop by drop, not in an instant video. Rare teachers know how to build you up so that you become your own master mentalist or magician, not a mere trickster."

One of Kenton's mentors in the late '70s was close-up giant John Mendoza. Kenton recalls, "To become a student of John's cost ten thousand dollars, even back then, and involved driving about an hour and a half, and staying



Kenton with Stevie Nicks

with him at his house for three days a week—for years." Hearing Kenton talk about his actual training with Mendoza created an immediate parallel of my mentorship with Ken Brooke in the '60s in London. Both men required a great deal of attention to the details they explained to you, then they expected you to fully master what had been taught on your own. Only then would they give you the information you would need in order to move forward. Both men also required substantial payment in addition to your investment in time. In my opinion this adds greatly not only to the way you learn, but what you *do* with the information once you have absorbed it. Information that is given too freely or cheaply can often dissipate as easily as it is acquired.



During these early years, Knepper performed every kind of magic from close up to illusions including a great deal of what he classifies as “pretty magic.” In this manner he was able to learn psychology and theatre, which are two of the things that give such edge to his later specialization in mentalism. Studying at school, psychology and philosophy were a serious part of his itinerary and coupled with a growing interest in the symbolism of magic were ground zero to more metaphysical aspects. Kenton’s mastery of various combinations of trickery, suggestion, hypnosis, and genuine arcane information helps define his unique status in the magic world.

Knepper’s key reading at this junction featured the works of Harlan Tarbell, Ormand McGill, and S. H. Sharp in whom he recognized an inner resonance with the inner

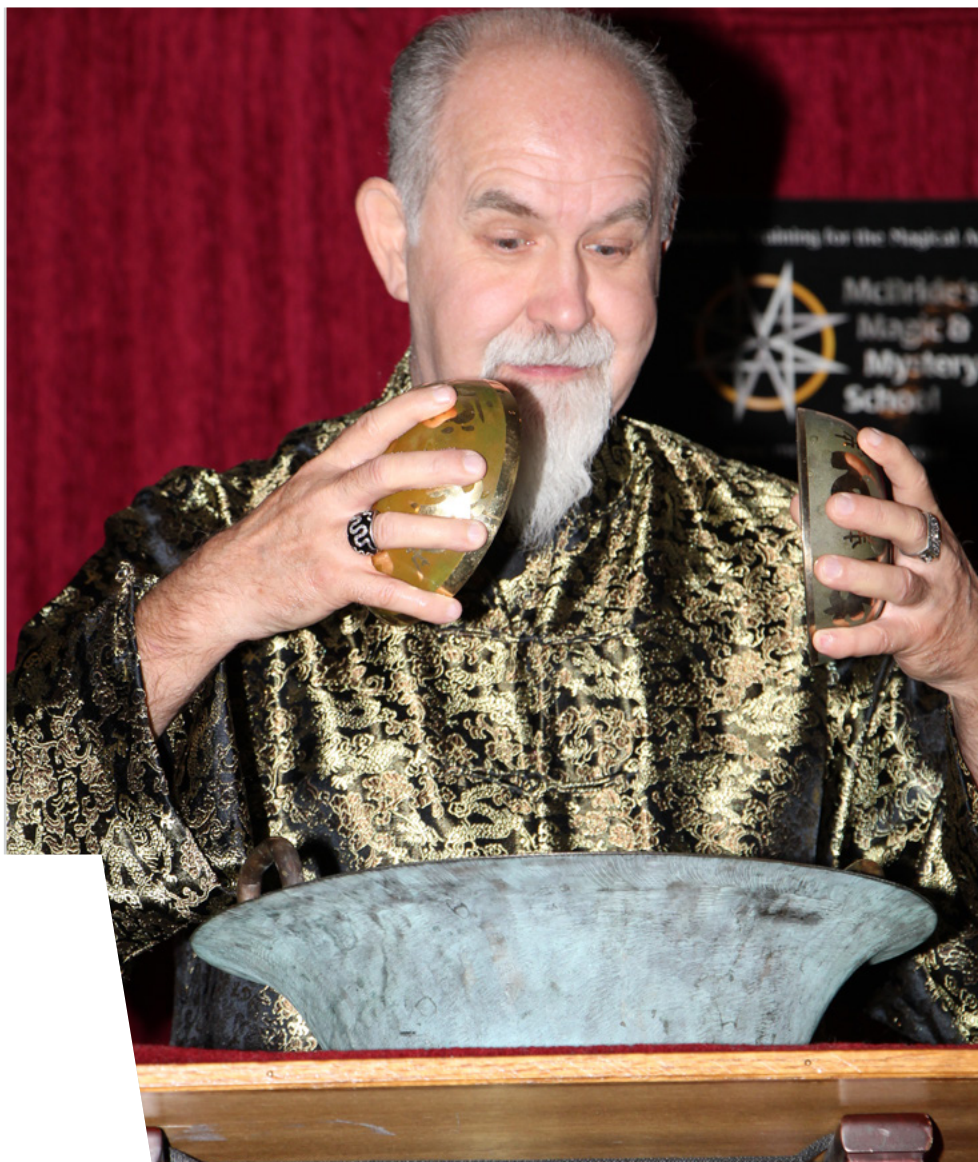
and outer aspects of magic. “If you read between the lines of these men, certainly McGill, they were pretty blatant about esoteric philosophy and the things they were working with and studying such as suggestion and breathing exercises.” All this was to find a significant place in Knepper’s future work.

In 1982 Kenton moved to Phoenix, Arizona and started the next phase of his magical career and he began to morph into the close-up/mentalist/teacher we now know. In the ‘80s there was a great deal of work for magicians in Phoenix and Kenton had the opportunity to really polish his craft. A further turning point was when two local attorneys opened a restaurant/bar called Jame’s Place that specifically featured magic. Many of the other local magicians performed there, but it was Knepper who

effectively became the house magician. During these years Kenton began to focus more exclusively on his close-up work. Although he had featured mentalism in his show throughout his early career, it also began to find a more significant home in his contemporary work. During these years Kenton found a great sponsor for his work with Penn, one of the makers of premiere tennis equipment, and he became the Penn Racquet Ball Magician. This connection resulted in many years of great work. Knepper was certainly keeping busy as a performer, but he definitely hadn’t abandoned his role as a teacher.

Always a fund of creative ideas, Knepper had begun to share his ideas and effects as a lecturer back in Iowa, and this side of his work expanded during the years after he moved to Arizona. He had many individual students, including Peter Turner, Luca Volpe, Pablo Amirá and Fraser Parker that he worked with intensely. I asked Kenton what the focus of his mentoring was with these students and he replied, “I really liked to stress attention to detail and how to become fully developed magicians whose personality was deeply integrated with their performance. It wasn’t just about what they did, but who they were and what they really wanted to represent.” Kenton had also begun marketing some magic in his Iowa days when he released his *Field Pendulum*, however, he probably came to national prominence around 1987 when he released his brilliant and much imitated *Kolossal Killer* routine. Originally known as *Kenton’s Klose Kall*, the diabolical subtlety and versatility of this principle made it an instant classic throughout the magic community.





A great stand alone effect *Kolossal Killer* or any card worker this routine supplied the perfect out

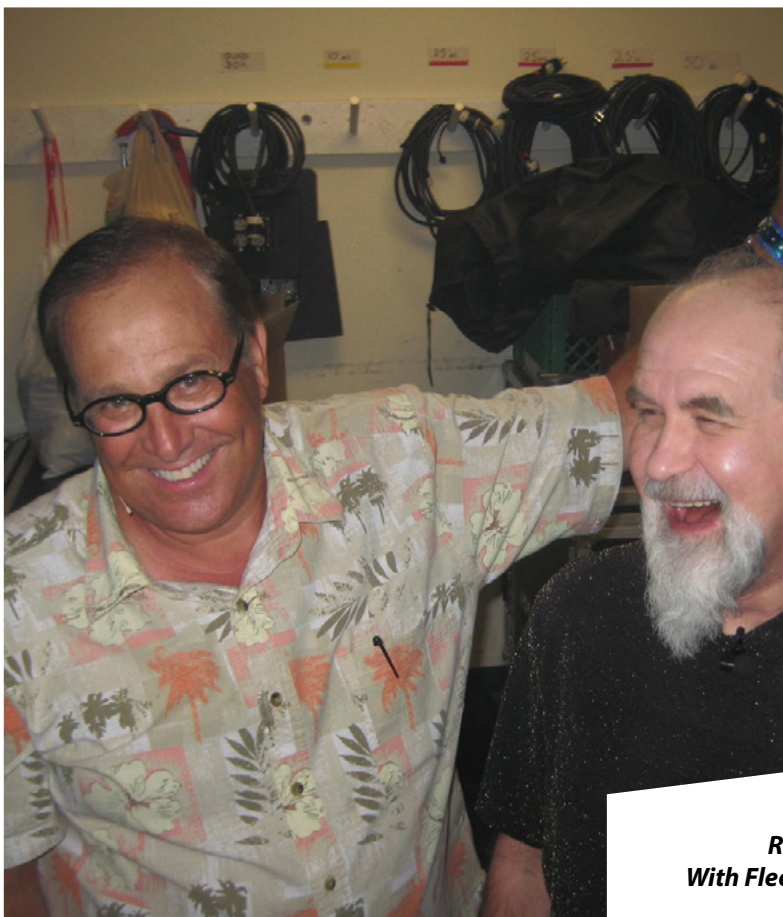
Another of Knepper's innovative ideas that propelled him into even higher visibility was his *Multiple Dual Reality*. This is the concept, which was initially released in a series of audiotapes in 1992 as *Wonder Words*. It was an idea that sowed seeds that are continuing to blossom in the world of mentalism. *Wonder Words* was based on the assumption of the multiple realities that exist in an individual's world and how they interact with each other. For a magician these co-existing realities might include performer, participant, observer etc.

Wonder Words made quite an impact not only in the magic world, but its intrinsic power was recognized on a larger scale when orders started to come in from studio heads and similar figures who desired a new approach to the topics it illuminated. Kenton's friend Jeff McBride was also instrumental in spreading the word about this new idea within the magic world. Like many innovative ideas in magic, *Wonder Words* was not without its critics initially, but it has always been predominate in Knepper's style to court controversy by incorporating paradigm busting elements into his work. In his blending of esoteric with traditional magical disciplines, Kenton was very much in line with the groundbreaking work that McBride and Eugene Burger molded into their *Magic and Mystery School* model. In fact, it was Eugene Burger who helped inspire Kenton to look for a new way to interact with his students rather than fall back on the traditional traveling lecture formula.



“Kenton has devised a system of learning that helps develop every aspect of a student's potential persona and performing skill.

Knepper has always maintained a steady group of “in person” students, and also communicated very closely with magicians around the world who studied his ideas. Originally this long distance advising was in the form of letters and phone calls. As technology began to change the landscape it was very natural for Kenton to embrace the endless boundaries offered by the new digital landscape. This was when a second big “buzz” occurred around Knepper's work and ideas. In 2006 at Eugene Burger's urging, Kenton started utilizing video more extensively in his teaching and began to offer individual learning sessions and also working with small groups of up to six students on an international basis.



Right:
With Fleetwood Mac



It became instantly evident that this new dimension of learning was proving very productive with his students.

Knepper's new manner of teaching is as old as the hills and yet as new as the Internet. Kenton has devised a system of learning that helps develop every aspect of a student's potential persona and performing skill. The way Knepper has structured his online courses encourages his students to receive their lessons at the cor-

rect speed for them to best absorb them. Even more importantly, it allows them the opportunity to learn with a consistency that much more clearly mirrors the old-fashioned master/student roles that have always accomplish the optimal levels of learning and growth.

While still presenting lectures and workshops when location and circumstances made it easy and practical, the new vision in Kenton's mind was to offer his informa-

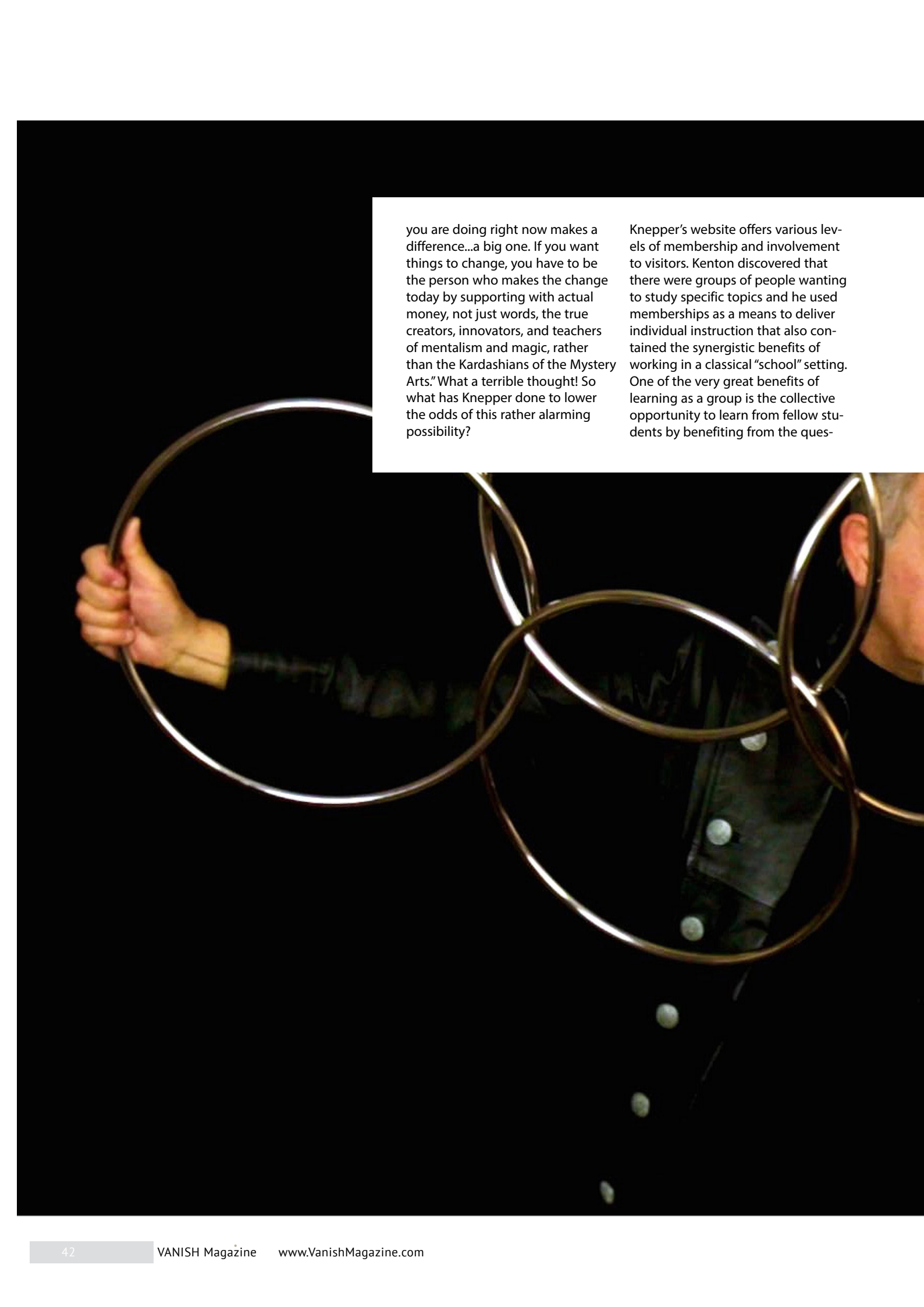
tion as a fully integrated online teaching resource. This would allow students to study and learn in a manner that more closely represented the one-on-one mentorship that he himself had experienced. Knepper's quietly radical form of the online mentorship offered something new and different to his students in its use of modern technology. Along the way he also managed to avoid some of the "YouTube negatives" that were fast becoming noticeable.

"If you want to have a persona of a mentalist or a magician, if you want to live magic and mentalism, then you need to study with a sincere master teacher, not another online trick-of-the-day shop," says Knepper. He adds, "As long as you do not read, refuse to learn anything but tricks, and not know mentalism or magical history at all, you will be scammed by non-creative people into paying them with money, love, attention, and publicity while the originators can't pay to take care of their basic needs. Great actors know that they have to do deep secret work on the inside to make their character on stage or screen seem realistic. Magicians and mentalists right now think all they need is Google and YouTube to be great. They are in for a world of disappointment."

Kenton puts it very succinctly, "Many mentalists and magicians today are like the people who watch *The Kardashians* and click on all the news about them, while complaining about the stupidity of what is on television, like *The Kardashians*. What

With Richard Webster



A person is performing a ring trick, holding several interlocking metal rings. The rings are arranged in a complex, overlapping pattern. The person's hands are visible, and they are wearing a dark jacket. The background is black.

you are doing right now makes a difference...a big one. If you want things to change, you have to be the person who makes the change today by supporting with actual money, not just words, the true creators, innovators, and teachers of mentalism and magic, rather than the Kardashians of the Mystery Arts." What a terrible thought! So what has Knepper done to lower the odds of this rather alarming possibility?

Knepper's website offers various levels of membership and involvement to visitors. Kenton discovered that there were groups of people wanting to study specific topics and he used memberships as a means to deliver individual instruction that also contained the synergistic benefits of working in a classical "school" setting. One of the very great benefits of learning as a group is the collective opportunity to learn from fellow students by benefiting from the ques-

tions they formulate. The very best way to learn from a teacher is closely related to the level of questions that are answered by him. It might be that a question posed by a student in England is a vital key to the development of a student sitting at his computer in Minnesota.

The magical highway is littered with magicians who firmly believe that all they need is just one more trick to make their act a commercial success. What they probably need more is the

kind of information that Kenton supplies to the ever-increasing band of mentalist/magicians who are taking the opportunity to reap the benefits from this powerful magic resource. Rather than concentrating on tricks, but instead focusing on principles, Knepper fulfills every teacher's ultimate goal and replaces the gift of fish with the ability to use a fishing pole and become self sufficient.

Knepper's website offers a wide range of classes, courses, memberships and

events to inspire visiting magicians into beginning a meaningful pathway to their goals. I strongly recommend that if this style of learning resonates with you, that you visit his site and see the exciting options that are presented there. Never has it been easier or more cost effective to consult with a master of the Magical Arts and learn from his experience. You can find Kenton's website at <http://www.wonderwizards.com>

