

# Penn

Vegas' favorite comic pundit shows off with a new poker book, his continuing Showtime series and the wild success of his charmingly filthy film, *The Aristocrats*

# Jillette

## AND HIS OUTRAGEOUS TRUTH INDUSTRY

BY MICHAEL SHULMAN

PORTRAITS BY FRANCIS GEORGE

As people who epitomize the personality of the “new” Las Vegas go, few do so with the aplomb or individual style of Penn Jillette. He’s the outspoken half of the comic duo Penn & Teller, the maverick entertainers who over the last 30 years have parlayed their unique sensibility into everything from writing for publications (*The New York Times*, *Playboy*) to portraying themselves on Fox’s *The Simpsons* (one of popular culture’s greatest honors) to delving into academia, lecturing at Oxford University and the Smithsonian Institution as well as MIT, where they serve as Visiting Scholars. The dichotomous pair, whose popular show at the Rio hotel was just renewed through 2010, also had their Emmy-nominated series on Showtime picked up for a third season. *Vegas* decided to interview the acclaimed writer, art collector, television producer and Las Vegas headliner while he was shooting a movie on location in the Caribbean.



With his longtime act with partner Teller under contract in Vegas through 2010 and his successful film *The Aristocrats* winning rave reviews, things seem like a snap for Penn Jillette.

Penn Jillette was shot on location at the Rio All-Suite Hotel & Casino's Palazzo Suites.



# VEGAS PERSONALITIES



Jillette, right, with *The Aristocrats* director Paul Provenza, left, and co-producer Peter Adam Golden at the Director's Guild Theatre in New York for the film's premiere.



Jillette with comedy partner Teller on the red carpet at the Shrine Auditorium in L.A. during arrivals for the 2004 Emmy Creative Arts Awards.



George Carlin is one of the royalty of comedic talent who appears in *The Aristocrats*.



Jillette helped write and edit *How to Cheat Your Friends at Poker*.

**VEGAS:** What can you tell us about the next season of *Bullshit!*, and what topics can we look forward to you addressing?

**PENN JILLETTE:** Well, lots of people work together to decide, but I'm gunning for the Boy Scouts. There's a lot of bullshit there, don't you think? You know, throwing out people for being gay and/or not having the right religion. And they meet on public property. And I'm not sure that way of starting a fire works. But they still have my knot board up at Troop 5 in Greenfield, Massachusetts, so I don't want to piss them off enough that they would take that down. Also vitamins...and luck would be good.

**Word on the street is that you've co-written a book, *How to Cheat Your Friends at Poker* [St. Martin's Press], although you are a relative newcomer to the game. What so fascinates you about it—let alone**

*"It's not a book about poker—it's a book about cheating. My friend knows a lot."*

**qualifies you to write a book on the subject?**

I didn't actually write the book: I edited it. But it was written by a real—no kidding—card cheat whom I've known since I was a kid. He convinced me *not* to play poker at all. His stories are amazing, but his writing is bad enough that I did write most of it. But the scummy, evil ideas are his. It wasn't until I met [professional players] Andy Bloch and Howard Lederer that I knew anyone played poker seriously *without* cheating. It's not a book about poker—it's a book about cheating. I know a little

about that; my friend knows a *lot* about it.

**Your documentary *The Aristocrats* has received unequivocally fantastic responses (except from AMC Theatres, which really only served to increase the film's indie street cred). Were you and [director] Paul Provenza expecting such widespread approval?**

No, we made it for the people in it and for people who love comedy and jazz. We thought we'd sell it on DVD from a web page and sell a few thousand. We were shocked and very pleased. It's nice to

know others love comedians and the culture of comedy as much as us.

**Was it as much fun to make as it is to watch?**

No matter how much fun you had watching, we had more fun making it. The time with those people was really great. You hear me laughing a lot in the movie, and we cut out most of my laughs. I did nothing but laugh.

**Who provided your favorite takes on the joke? Also, whose take in particular surprised you the most?**

Of course Carlin is the greatest, and Gilbert is the best, but I like Taylor Negron, because after the words mean nothing, he makes them mean what they mean again, and that's really a weird turn. Paul Reiser surprised me the most. I didn't know much about him—he was Provenza's friend, but he killed me. I love everything he does in the movie—and in the room live he was even better.

**I love the clips of you and Teller performing on *Saturday Night Live* in the mid '80s. How has your style changed over the last 20 years?**

We've changed a lot. Most people mellow, but we've gotten more 'us.' We've become more skeptical and hardcore and we trust the audience more. We used to think maybe we had to be a little careful, but now we just really tell the truth as we see it. No matter how smart we think the audience is, they're really smarter. It makes me sick that anyone plays down to an audience that's always smarter than we are. Still, people don't notice too much of a change, because I'm so big and loud and Teller is always quiet. The big things stay the same, but we always write new stuff. We've done almost six hours of different material just in Vegas, and I'm very proud of

that.

**Speaking of the last 20 years, how have audiences, specifically those in Las Vegas, changed?**

Either they keep getting smarter or we get better at seeing it. Those are impossible for me to tell apart.

**Has fatherhood changed you, and if so, how?**

It has made me so much happier. I was always the happiest person I knew, and now it's just out of the park. I can also work harder. One hour with Moxie is like a week off.

**Would you ever let your daughter date a guy like you?**

It's impossible for me to know what you think a guy like me is. But I'm not ashamed of what I am. If I hated what I was, I'd change. I try to be as good as I can, so...I don't know. I can't get outside myself

PROVENZA: DIMITRIOS KAMBOURIS/WIREIMAGE.COM. TELLER: STEVE GRANITZWIREIMAGE.COM. CARLIN: COURTESY OF THINKFILM.



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enough to answer that. But 14 weeks is a little early to date seriously.

**You’re well known as an avid collector of contemporary art. When did you begin collecting and of which media and artists are you most fond?**

That’s easy! It’s Tony Fitzpatrick. I love him as a person, as a friend, as a hero and as an artist. I have a copy of every etching he has ever done or ever will do. It’s a deal I made. I have a very bad visual memory and don’t think visually, so art really helps me. Conceptual art is easy for me, but I like the visual and emotional, so I learn more. But ‘Tony’ is the one-word answer, or he’ll kick my ass. And he can!

**Do you and Teller consider yourselves comedians who perform magic or magicians who incorporate humor into their act?**

That’s for other people to decide. No one can put himself in a category (at least no one who’s trying to show part of his heart). We consider ourselves writers. We always start with the idea and add tricks and jokes later.

**What do you most enjoy about performing for a live audience?**

Everything. It’s all I know how to do. I love the communication. I love doing stuff that’s really complicated and being understood. It’s the ideas.

**What advice can you offer to performers just starting out in their careers?**

Drop out of school! (That’s only for performers—doctors, stay in school!) And don’t worry about anything except the ideas and making them clear and speaking the truth as you see it from your brain and heart. Nothing else matters. Style doesn’t matter, venue doesn’t matter. If you don’t have anything to say, then you’ll never be any good.

**What do you most enjoy about living in Las Vegas?**

Doing our show and coming home to my family. I never really care where I am.

**Where do you see yourself in 20 years?**

I hope right where I am now. The show and my family are the goals. I just want to keep getting ideas and doing them. It’s all very trite and Pollyanna, but it’s the truth.

**Finally, is there any truth to the rumor that amongst friends, Teller is really the chatty one and you’re really just a wallflower?**

Well, he’s the director of the show. He talks to everyone we work with. I often read or write. Teller is the boss. And bosses talk a lot. ♠



Jillette, here with his four-month-old daughter, Moxie, says fatherhood has made him happier and enabled him to work harder.