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Celeste Evans

CELESTE EVANS

The Beauty of Magic

By C. Dennis Schick

When Celeste Evans was born, fireworks were exploding in the sky, and it seemed as if the whole world celebrated. It was New Year's Eve, about 11:45 p.m. The year was 1931; the place, White Rock, British Columbia, Canada, about a mile from the United States border.

As a child, Celeste became fascinated with magic. One of the first sleight-of-hand effects she saw – throwing knots into a silk – became a signature in her act years later. Celeste says, “It may be hard to believe, but I practiced magic in secret from the time I was nine years old until I graduated from high school in 1950. I wasn't sure I was any good, so I kept it a secret from everybody by practicing in my bedroom and the farmhouse loft. I still believe in that old adage, practice, practice, practice!”

After high school, Celeste moved to Vancouver. “I worked as a comptometer operator – that was the machine that did computing before computers were invented,” she says. She found a magic shop and discovered magician Jon Kirby, who became her mentor. “He had me practicing seven hours a day,” Celeste recalls. “I paid him two dollars a week for lessons, and in those days two dollars was a lot for a young girl.”

But the lessons were paying off. In 1951, Okito visited the Vancouver Magic Circle, saw her card manipulations, and offered her an opening spot on his show in the States. She was still in her teens, and though she was living on her own, her mother would not permit it. However,

Celeste soon had an opportunity to work on a local carnival circuit, doing ten shows a day in a tent – a great training ground for developing skills and discipline. When the show closed, she returned to the work-a-day world and continued dreaming of a career in show business.

In 1953, her luck changed, seemingly overnight, though she had been planting the seeds of success for years. “After two years in Vancouver,” Celeste says, “I got a six-week tour entertaining Commonwealth troops in Korea and Japan under the auspices of the Canadian Legion. It was almost like the rags-to-riches stories of Horatio Alger. One week I was working a computer and the next I was performing magic in a foreign country. I loved it!”

Returning to Canada, she was booked into a nightclub in Anchorage, Alaska, and later performed her magic act while traveling with a Country and Western group throughout British Columbia. “I can still sing a mean C&W song,” she says with a grin. When she got home, a cablegram was waiting for her to appear on *Pick the Stars*, her first national television appearance. This led to more tours and eventually to New York City. There she appeared on *The Paul Winchell Show*, *Arthur Godfrey*, *The Ed Sullivan Show*, and *To Tell the Truth*. On *To Tell the Truth* Celeste escaped from a straightjacket in nine seconds and won a thousand-dollar award. She also fulfilled the dream of many entertainers, playing The Palace in New York.

After extensive tours of the United States, in 1957 Celeste was called by



in early 2003. She remarried in 1992. Celeste and Mitch were together and enjoyed retirement until Mitch's death in 2006.

In 2008 she compiled a book of magical *faux pas* entitled *Has This Ever Happened to You?* with stories by over one hundred magicians.

Celeste lives in Florida now and has divided her time in recent years between writing her autobiography, tending her garden, and swimming in her pool. She has two grandchildren, Ethan and Rachael.

The world still celebrates her birthday every New Year's Eve, and it's a brighter world because of a star named Celeste Evans.

Left: A 1962 painting of the glamorous Celeste Evans by New York magician and artist Lew Dick, based on an earlier photograph by Maurice Seymour. Below: Twenty-eight-year old Celeste Evans appeared at the China Theatre, Stockholm, Sweden, in 1959.

the United Nations to tour Africa and Egypt, and later England, France, Spain, Denmark, and Sweden. This was followed by a tour for the USO covering Greenland, Iceland, Newfoundland, and Germany. After another tour of U.S. Air Force Bases in North Africa, Celeste was asked to represent the John F. Kennedy Cultural Exchange in a tour covering the Near East and Indonesia. She performed before the crown prince or head of state of seven different countries.

After years of working abroad, Celeste settled in Chicago, but she continued performing in clubs throughout the United States. Celeste married Harry Breyn of Breyn Management, a theatrical agency based in Illinois. Celeste and Harry had two children, Evan and Evanna. When Harry passed away in 1984, Celeste took over Breyn Management and successfully operated the business until she retired



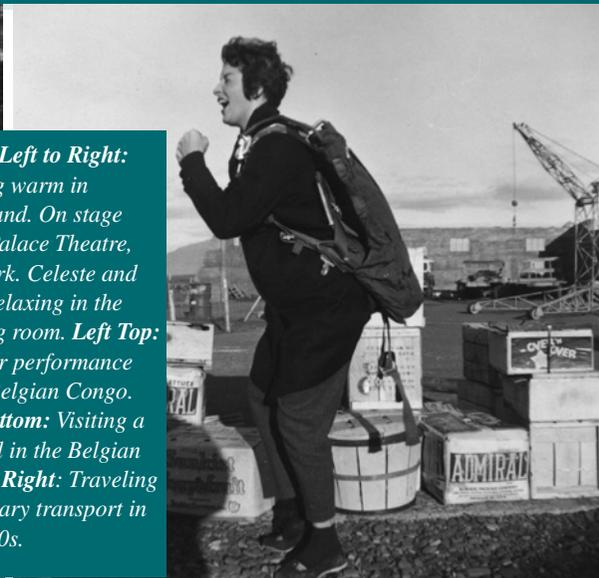


MEETING CELESTE EVANS By Walter Zaney Blaney

There was a famous song written by Harry Warren, a top composer of the 1930s – “I Met a Million Dollar Baby at the Five and Ten Cent Store.” I had always wanted to meet one, too. For a number of years I had been reading in the magic magazines about a beautiful lady magician, one of the top acts in show business, who was playing all the famous hotel supper clubs and theaters around the world. Then one day she came to Houston to appear at our premier Shamrock Hotel in its elite International Club Room where the top stars of the country appeared each week. At last I got to see in person this gorgeous lady present her classic act with the most amazing dove productions I had ever seen. I knew I had just met the Million Dollar Baby, Celeste Evans, not in a five and ten cent store, but in the best venue in town, and at the top of her game.

My wife Joyce and I invited Celeste to a party in our home along with a dozen of the main magicians in Houston. We were all delighted to learn that, star that she was, Celeste was just a down-to-earth gal who had paid her dues. With her joyful laugh and good humor she won the hearts of everyone. She has also won the hearts of everyone in her sixty-year career in show business on every continent and in all the major countries of the world. Celeste is just a remarkable lady, and one of the best ambassadors of magic of all time.

From the introduction to I Can Still See Me.



Above, Left to Right: Keeping warm in Greenland. On stage at the Palace Theatre, New York. Celeste and doves relaxing in the dressing room. **Left Top:** Outdoor performance in the Belgian Congo. **Left Bottom:** Visiting a hospital in the Belgian Congo. **Right:** Traveling by military transport in the 1950s.

The following excerpts are adapted from Celeste Evans' forthcoming autobiography, I Can Still See Me.

Throughout the years, my magician friends kept asking when I was going to write my autobiography. My usual answer was, "When the kids die!" Finally, after ten years of harping by my daughter Evanna, I realized it was time to start writing. Fearing that my memory would fail after sixty years in magic, I turned to the three passports I used up during ten of those years and pulled out my scrapbooks of photos and clippings. I realized that my story is a testament of the wonderful experience that the art of magic has to offer to all who enter its realm.



My given name is Margaret Ruth Stewart Evans, and everyone in the town where I grew up called me Ruth or Ruthie. When I was nine years old, I knew exactly what I was going to be when I grew up. I didn't quite know how to achieve it, but I knew I was destined for the profession of prestidigitation.

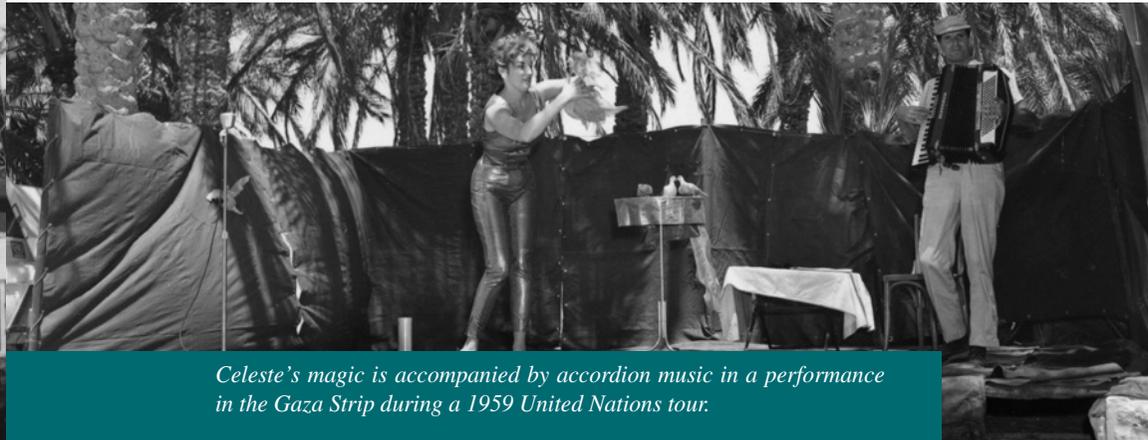
My decision came about because a boy and his twin brother, a few years older than I, were doing magic tricks on the beach. They were throwing knots into a silk. First, they would tie one knot, and then the knot would disappear. They would then throw the silk and, suddenly, two knots appeared. I was amazed and asked one of the boys

if he would show me how it was done. He looked at me with a scowl and said, "You can't do magic, 'cause you're a girl!" That was all it took to get my dander up. I told him I would learn that trick if it took me ten years; I would be a famous magician, and everyone would know me.

When I later became a professional magician, I opened every performance with that trick, Knots to Silks. I would see that magician, Don Cornett, and his twin brother Ron, every now and again throughout my career and have to suppress a grin. I thought of him often during my many hours of practice. I took great pleasure in telling him (every chance I got), "Don't forget, girls can't do magic!"



Many people have asked why I changed my name from Ruth to Celeste. To me, it was no great decision. I was coming home from a dance in my hometown one evening and practicing my card fans as I walked. I thought, "Ruth is not a very interesting name for a magician." I could not imagine an M.C. introducing me as, "The mysterious, exciting beauty of magic – Ruth!" It just didn't work. So in my imagination, as I went through a whole slew of names that might fit, all of a sudden I looked up at the sky, and there it was – *Celeste*. The stars



Celeste's magic is accompanied by accordion music in a performance in the Gaza Strip during a 1959 United Nations tour.

were bright that night, and from then on I have gone by that name.

The Vancouver Expo had their big event once a year for about ten days, and a friend got me a job in the tent show. Looking back on it now, it's amazing that they even considered me. I was a big girl, hitting about two hundred-plus pounds on a scale. They didn't voice it, but I knew they thought they had a real novelty with me – a fat lady who could fool you with her magic tricks. If I was ever going to be known at all as a magician in show business, I had a long ways to go in pulling myself into shape....

After a year of touring Quebec in 1956, I went to the U.S. Immigration office and applied for a work visa for New York. I had no problem receiving one. The requirement back then was you had to prove that you were not taking any U.S citizen's job away. I explained that no one was doing my act. I was a novelty. I was a lady magician and through my research, no other lady magician was working New York. The only other lady magician in New York, Joan Brandon, was doing hypnosis.

In a short while of working New York City, I got a booking at the Palace Theater. The Palace was considered the biggie. If you got to play there, it was said you could play anywhere. They gave me a huge dressing room with a settee in it, which made me feel like a star. Maybe it *was* the star's dressing room; all the other dressing rooms were smaller than mine

I had one dove when I first arrived in New York. I was trying to figure out a way to produce more doves using misdirection or sleight of hand instead of relying on props. I didn't have any sleeves or pockets on my costumes, like the male magicians did, and that created quite a challenge. But with my strapless gowns and height



in heels, my appearance on stage, I was told, was quite electrifying. So it was quite easy for me to come up with various types of misdirection. At one point in my act a dove that I produced would start up my ankle and slowly crawl all the way up my body to my shoulder as I was leaning back. That was a great misdirection. With all the attention honed in on the dove walking up my bare leg from bare ankle to bare thigh, I could have stolen a baby buffalo and nobody would have noticed. So that immediate problem of producing eight to ten doves was solved.

I wanted to do the act a bit differently than other dove workers. I could imagine what the picture would look like if I had on a break-a-way skirt and, at that moment, went into silk juggling as a lead into a steal. In my mind, I would wear long fishnet stockings, a high bikini cut leotard, wrist-like gloves and shoes, all glowing in black light. The birds produced would also glow in black light. That picture in my mind was overwhelming and I was determined to find a way to make it work

I went to a lady who designed and made beautiful costumes; she was the mother of a famous dance team and designed all their



Top: On tour as part of President John F. Kennedy's Cultural Exchange Program, 1961. From left: Wife of Indonesian President Sukarno, Buddy Rich, President Sukarno, Celeste Evans, and Joey Adams. Center: "The King and I." Celeste is greeted by the King of Thailand in 1961. Bottom: Ten years earlier, nineteen-year-old Celeste Evans met Okito at the Vancouver Magic Circle.

gorgeous outfits. I told her my idea and she knew exactly what I wanted. I was still a bit on the overweight side; I was not Mae West, but was quite curvy nonetheless. She said she would make me the costumes, but it would take three months. I was shocked; it didn't take me three months to make some of my own costumes. She told me she would put me on a diet, and by the time the costumes were done, I would fit into them because I would end up with a twenty-five-inch waist. So, no more hamburgers and other junk food; just hard-boiled eggs, bananas, black coffee, and a tablespoon of apple cider vinegar after each meal. Well, it worked. By the time the costume was finished, I did have that twenty-five-inch waist.

The already-established magicians had no problem with me working the same territory, as they respected the pros. But some of the young, up-and-coming male magicians took notice of me and were not too happy. They considered me not just a threat, but a gigantic threat, and they wanted me out of town. The rumor mill began to grind. For example, one magician said that I swapped tricks for tricks. Wow. How low can someone get? There were many other stories, but the one that really brought this nastiness home was when the Humane Society showed up at my performance at a magic club in New Jersey. They arrived just after my performance ended. They told me that someone had phoned in and said, "Celeste Evans collects pigeons in the park, dyes them, does the performance, and the birds are dead the next day." They insisted on seeing one of the birds, so I pulled out one of the pretty white ones and showed them. They immediately said, "That is not a pigeon." I said, "I know." They replied, "You must have an enemy in this group you are performing for." This I already knew.



I was in a male-dominated profession, and I had to stand out. I had to set myself apart from being a “ta-dah” girl assistant to being the sexy magician. I used every asset that a woman is born with to enhance even the basic of silk productions. The right moves and the right music, combined with my magic and a lot of hard work, produced an act that was not only different, but that was hard for any man to duplicate. I came up with original tricks and places to hide things that men in the profession couldn’t copy – everything from producing and vanishing silks with a burlesque flair to rope tricks and doves from body loads that had never even been thought of before. One advantage I had over the boys: Not only did curves look good, but they made for excellent places to hide props.

Below are some of the tricks I used over the years:

The sleight performances of card flourishes and Multiplying Balls stayed in, as did the cut-and-restored rope routines. Added to these was the Crystal Tube (not to be confused with the Crystal Casket), in which a colored silk was put in the tube and, *voila*, a colored dove would appear in place of the silk.

A small black bag was shown empty and twisted in the handcuff position, showing it was impossible for anything to be in it, but lo and behold, another dove would magically appear.

A large, colorful streamer would be twirled in the air and when gathered up, another dove came into vision. Three silks were then pulled from the top of my dress, juggled, and then bunched together. Suddenly, a dove would appear. I would fly this bird around the stage, and then put him on my shoe. He would crawl up my exposed leg, up my skintight dress, and onto my shoulder. While I was still holding the silks in my hand, I would produce four more doves that would take their place on my outstretched arms. The streamer and



Celeste autographing a poster at the 2008 Magic Collectors' Association conference in Schaumburg, Illinois.

juggling and bird productions were all done in black light with the birds tinted various colors. They would all show up in the dark, as did my costume.

After some of the birds on my arms were put on their perches, the two remaining doves jumped onto a hoop and started rotating on it, flapping their wings, all still in black light.

My finale was a card trick with a man in the audience. He would select a card; I would place it in a Duck Pan and light it on fire. To put out the fire I would put on the lid and when I pulled off the lid, a fancy poodle dog appeared with the chosen card hanging from his collar.

For more information on Celeste Evans, join her on Facebook or visit her online at www.CelesteEvansMagic.com.

Editor's Note: Celeste Evans' autobiography, I Can Still See Me, is being typeset and printed by SPS Publications, Inc. Because I have a financial interest in this company, I asked our International President, Rolando Santos, to make the final determination about this month's cover story. He enthusiastically recommended that Celeste Evans be featured for her contributions to the art of magic.