



## **Anthony Darkstone Brook In Conversation With Ray Parker**

Ray Parker is a wonderful Entertainer. To call him an experienced all-round International Entertainer would not even begin to do justice to his consummate skill and talent.

I met Ray back in May 2007 when I was invited to lecture in Canada. I was with Paul Kilshaw, Michael Roth and few others in Tony Eng's Joke & Magic Shop( already sold to Murray Hatfield) when a sprightly, spirited, jolly character, full of verve, dynamism and a beaming smile "floated" into the shop and introduced himself.

I am happy to admit publicly that I am one of his biggest fans.

He is a long-time Member of The International Brotherhood of Magicians and The Society of American Magicians.

I've been in this business a while and I know a talented Pro when I see one. Ray Parker is The King! Nay! The Emperor! A fine wit, a genial personality and a very instantly likeable face endeared him to me instantly. We became firm friends.

I am delighted to share our friendship via the following words.

<http://rayparkermadhatter.ca/>  
facebook : Ray Parker

**ADB:** Hello Ray . Nice to be able to catch up with you. Thanks for taking the time to converse.

**RP:** Always a pleasure with you Tony.

**ADB:** Ray, you hail from England but now live in Victoria, B.C , Canada & I read somewhere that you have been an Entertainer for 71 years ..... care to elaborate on that ....

**RP:** I warn you that 71 years in show biz has given me many memories and it might take a while ...

**ADB:** Wonderful. I am sure we will just love to hear some of your recollections ...

**RP:** Yes as you say, I am English and years later moved to Canada. I now live in Victoria, B.C. From my earliest days, show biz has been part of my life. As a baby I was taken to the local Hippodrome and movie theaters in my mother's arms. I grew up watching my parent's favorite entertainment musicals and variety theater. Every week I was exposed to that type of entertainment. At weekends my favorite aunt and uncle would visit with my cousin Eileen.

Eileen was a talented entertainer, six months my senior, she danced and sang and at the age of three had already performed on stage doing an impersonation of Sophie Tucker singing "Some of these Days."

**ADB:** You even did a duet of sorts together....

**RP:** Yes we did. My Mother, Aunt and Uncle all played piano and Eileen and I would sing and dance in the corner of the room, one song I remember us doing together was :-

“Say say, oh playmate  
Come out and play with me  
And bring your dollies three  
Climb up my apple tree  
Slide down my rainbow  
Into my cellar door  
And we'll be jolly friends  
Forever more.

When I was 5 years old Eileen taught me “I Can't Give You Anything But Love Baby.” one of the hit songs of a 1928 Broadway show. a song that is still being recorded by today's stars (Diana Krall 1999.) I sang it many years later, on every show I did with the trio that played on my shows in England.

**ADB:** So, it is a family DNA thing ... showbiz is in your blood ...

**RP:** Absolutely! I know that you know exactly what I mean Tony. The performance, the performer, the audience. Hard to put into precise words but those like you and I know exactly what I mean by that enduring love affair and the need to perform, to entertain. To need that applause. It is not an ego thing and then again it is; it is not about you, it is about the audience, it is about you and the audience. You have written many articles yourself Tony on Performance & Presentation and we have spoken about that a few times.

It doesn't apply just to Magic. It applies to all performances. Magic however demands more from a performer.

**ADB:** It certainly does. I agree totally. Ray, you came into Magic quite late in your career as an Entertainer ..... how did that get started ?

**RP:** I had been buying balloons from another magician for my balloon sculpture routine and Jack Mellor a Vancouver magician had just taken over the franchise at his Magic store. Just before Christmas 1979, as he made up my order Jack asked, “Why don't you put some magic into your kid's show Ray.” I replied “I would love to be a magician, but my hands are too small.” (Yes, I really was that green.)

Jack said “My hands are small, I have arthritis and I've been a magician for years, I'll sell you a magic routine, teach you to do it, practice it till you do it well and put it in your show, I'll guarantee you will become a magician.” The routine he sold me was Professor Cheer.

**ADB:** I hear that within a few days you started using it ....

**RP:** That's right Tony, the following weekend I was working a breakfast with Santa at a Hudson Bay store as Krackers the Clown with my youngest son as a partner. I performed the routine modified to suit my character and personality. It was the highlight of the show, in fact while my son was performing the next act, the organizer of the show came into the dressing room and said they had received requests for me to do it again and I actually performed the routine twice on that occasion.

**ADB:** Hooked ?

**RP:** I'll say ..hook, line & sinker . The following Monday I went to Jack Mellor's Magic store and with expert advice from my mentor, I purchased as much magic as I could afford.

I set about to design a magic show that used as many of my talents as possible. Keeping in mind a quotation I had recently come across in my researching anything I could read about magic, "Robert-Houdin's oft quoted suggestion that "a magician is an actor playing the part of a magician."

**ADB:** ...and that is exactly what you did .....

**RP:** Yes Tony. As you, and others who know me well know, I have the soul of an actor and I love to entertain. Yes it is my job but it is also an integral part of me. I made a very conscious decision that was what I would do & created a character that used these new skills, using jokes and acting skills from a lifetime of performing, most important to me using as much comedy as was possible.

**ADB:** That impressed your agent too I hear ...

**RP:** Absolutely! I am happy to tell you that when I presented my new act to my agent, he began to book me on banquets, theater shows and conventions, magic was now becoming my main source of income.

**ADB:** But it didn't just coast smoothly on from there did it ?

**RP:** That's right Tony. Not only did it take off and the bookings came flooding in....in 1981 came the next major transformation. My agent called me and asked "Could you do a magic show as The Mad Hatter?" I gave him my standard answer, "No problem."

The show was a month away it was called A Spring Affair, the audience a group of Convention Planners. With the help of Nora, my wife, who makes all of my costumes, I set about creating the character, then the contract arrived. Ray Parker to perform strolling, sleight of hand!!! Just one small problem ...

**ADB:** ..and what was that?

**RP:** I had never done close up. I took a crash course, invented a routine combining a Svengali deck and an electric deck, a metal TT which I used to disappear cigarettes, a borrowed finger chopper and a bag of balloons. I finished making the first Mad Hatters hat the day of the booking and performed that night in my new role.

**ADB:** How did the show go?

**RP:** The show was an immense success, the agent used the photos of the event to print new promo and booked me to repeat the same show for what he entitled A Naval Affair, and for that I created another character Captain Cookie.

**ADB:** I love characters in Magic. Share with us a little about Captain Cookie.

**RP:** Captain Cookie was once again a character created at very short notice, wearing a borrowed admiral's bicorn (or cocked hat) and a naval uniform created out of a blue blazer on which Nora added epaulettes and various gold braid decorations, plus dress pants and cummerbund from my tux outfit and white frilly shirt. I performed a similar act to the one created for the Mad Hatter except I used navy references and jokes, every time I performed as this character it involved a naval theme or was on board ship. Much later , as the character developed we created a white outfit including a white bicorn which Nora and I made; BTW, I also have made all of my Mad Hatter hats, which Nora then covered with velvet.

**ADB:** I have a special fondness for your Mad Hatter character ... you use that one a great deal ...

**RP:** Yes Tony, The Mad Hatter seems to have a real appeal to audiences and I'm happy to say he pays most of the bills. However, both characters remain in my repertoire but The Mad Hatter became my main source bookings.

It was also the act that secured me three performances on CBCTV in The Jimmy Ferguson show. The magic effect they chose to use was Professor Cheer. The two other performances were cross talk, with Ferguson playing opposite me in skits which I wrote.

**ADB:** The Mad Hatter has drawn some compliments from Royalty ....

**RP:** Yes indeed Tony. I am very proud of that. It was in that year I began to work Fairs and Exhibitions and for many years summer and fall I toured Canada. When working the Royal Winter Fair in Toronto in 1991, I was standing in a reception line for Sarah, Duchess of York (Fergie) and as she reached me she pointed and said "Nice Hat" a comment I often hear but not one I expected from a Duchess.

**ADB:** Speaking of Royalty ...you have performed for Her Majesty Queen Elizabeth II.

**RP:** Yes Tony. I am also very proud of that. Honestly who wouldn't be? That was as my Town Crier character.

**ADB:** Another of your characters that I love ....

**RP:** Thank you Tony. I have appeared as Town Crier at numerous events, including greeting Queen Elizabeth the Second on her Jubilee Year visit to Victoria. I am proud to say I am an Official Town Crier and member of the Pacific Northwest Company of Town Criers.

**ADB:** That character is also in great demand ...

**RP:** Yes Tony, I am glad to say that it is in great demand, and I have competed in world championships, appeared in TV programs, and the character is rated as one of the top town criers around the world.

In my second year as a member of Victoria Magic Circle, the then President Tony Eng, appointed me the official Town crier of Victoria Magic Circle and I have made declarations of magic events since then in The USA, Australia, The UK and Canada.

In October 2011, I performed this duty in Anacortes, Washington announcing the tri-city magic convention.

**ADB:** Let me take you back briefly to the early years. You told us a bit about your beginnings as an infant & toddler ..... share some other childhood memories please...

**RP:** I'd be happy too Tony. When I was eleven I moved to Church of England Senior Mixed School and was soon invited to join the choir. The following December I was asked by my teacher Miss Jessie Simmonds to participate in a Christmas concert and volunteered to put on a Punch and Judy puppet show. I created the puppets, built the Punch and Judy booth and wrote the script.

At rehearsals for the show I showed the latest puppet creations and demonstrated the voices I would use. Often offering advice to other performers on ways to improve their performances, using knowledge I had gained from my attendances at variety shows.

Miss Simmonds finally asked me where I had got all these ideas from and I explained about the theater and movies.

The show was such a success she recruited me to help put on a monthly series of shows at the local Institute to raise funds for the Armed Forces Comfort Fund, which provided parcels for the troops fighting in World War 2.

I wrote scripts, decided to perform on the shows as a comedian, persuading my pal Lew Worrall to become my partner.

Copying a number of acts I had watched professional comedians perform, I wrote scripts based on a comedy interruption theme, where Lew would begin to perform a serious poem and I would stop him to ask funny questions. After the punch-line, he would always angrily remark, "I don't wish to know that."

**ADB:** You also did some stunts & falls way back then and that training was to serve you well later ....

**RP:** I also did some comedy dance routines and some acrobatic stunts involving falls and using a chair as a prop. I continued to use acrobatic stunts and falls in a number of different acts through the rest of my career up until I was about 55 years old.

Due to a shortage of teachers we had to leave school at 14 and join the wartime workforce. I went into aircraft production.

We both also joined the Army Cadets and registered at night school.

Very soon we joined a drama group at night school acting in plays and also began to put on regular variety performances for the army cadets.

This continued until joining the armed forces in 1947, I began to appear in shows put on in the camps, finally taking over organizing the shows.

**ADB:** That continued whilst you were in the Service ...

**RP:** Yes it did Tony. Whilst in Royal Engineers Army College in Chatham, Kent I joined a theater group at the local YMCA, appearing in variety shows and plays and in 1948 in Kenya, East Africa began organizing and performing troop entertainment. This led to a show called "Sorry Surrey." which toured army camps in Kenya.

**ADB:** You left the Armed Forces in 1949 ...

**RP:** Yes Tony. On release from the armed forces in 1949 I began to enter talent competitions.

During my service in the army I had developed a comedy impressionist act, this became the one that won "Opportunity Knocks," "Carrol Levis Discoveries and finally top prize in a talent show that ran for 10 weeks at the Wolverhampton Hippodrome. The prize was a sum of money and a theater run. this later led to appearances on BBC Radio and the first night opening of BBC Manchester TV Studios in a show called Top Town.

Around that time many variety theaters were closing and many entertainers, (myself included) began to obtain work in the Working Mens Clubs. Working Mens Clubs were social clubs run by factories all over the UK. They were equipped with stages dressing rooms and musical accompaniment for the acts. The pay was good (much better than the theaters). Acts moved to a different club every night, the work was plentiful and for the next 10 years I worked full time at night and still held down a day time job.

Many shows I worked were as part of a trio The Parker Brothers, Hal Ray and Peter. We performed variety show, Harmonica, song, comedy skits, impressions, crosstalk acts and a comedy harmonica act known as The Harmonica Maniacs. We also performed at night clubs and theaters. In the 1950s, I also took operatic singing lessons and incorporated it into my act with the Parker Brothers.

In the last 3 years before I moved to Canada in 1965 I also began a new act in which I combined stand up comedy and lip-sync, I called it Off the Record and it became my most requested act. I also performed as a vocalist and soon I was working a number of gigs with a back up trio, incorporating all my acts in a pub show, which I also emceed and introduced other acts from the audience.

**ADB:** Reads like a movie script. What a wealth of talent & experience. So tell us about the early years in Canada.

**RP:** Thank you Tony for your kind words. My first job in Canada was singing in a restaurant with an organ and violinist accompaniment but soon I was getting work with Off the Record.

In 1966 two things happened that really kicked off my Canadian career. I got my first acting role in a TV series called Magistrate's Court as a car thief .

I also formed a show based on the British pub show format that worked very well for a North American audience which I named The Carnaby Crowd. This show as changed over the years and is now called British Music Hall, Palace of Varieties.

In 1968 I went full time pro and toured as emcee, vocalist with a 4 piece band and comedian for an hypnotist show. The show opened on Vancouver Island that part of the tour concluded in a 10 day run at the McPherson Theatre. Then the financial backer fell out with the hypnotist and withdrew funding. The show was downsized, the band let go. Being under a 5 year contract I continued with the tour. Finally in Dawson Creek after being owed 6 weeks wages I was able to cancel my contract.

I returned to Vancouver and resumed booking myself in night clubs, Legions, etc.

**ADB:** This is when your love of characters was born from the necessity to stay in work ...

**RP:** Yes Tony. I acquired an agent and soon was fully booked. One specialty being, whenever my agent required a special character, I was always able provide it. I became an old prospector, a town crier, a secret agent disguised as an Arab named Ali Kadabra, a financial advisor, a river boat gambler, the oldest Canadian postie, etc.

**ADB:** Your background in stunts & falls helped too...

**RP:** Yes it did. It was during this time I incorporated a stunt in which I fell off the stage during the act, using my acrobatic skills, appeared to trip summersault and land on my back.

I did this for many years, even on a Variety Club telethon, when host Ronnie Prophet, told the audience that I had been doing it at a venue he was working, to raise donations for the telethon.

He asked me if I was prepared to do it off the stage of the Queen Elizabeth Theater from an extension built over the orchestra pit. It was the highest distance I had ever done that fall and required me to angle the fall, to miss the front row of the audience, but I agreed on the condition viewers sent in donations. I was fortunate everything went well and I pulled it off.

**ADB:** You are well known for your one-liners which now have a great following on face-book --myself included. Where does the inspiration come from?

**RP:** Various sources but mostly from a keen observance of human nature. I am the stage of my Life when I truly can see the humor in most things. I am also a Certified Clinical Hypnotherapist. That helps . However, it is a separate part of my Life. I do not perform stage hypnosis.

**ADB:** Ah yes! Stage Hypnosis. We both have similar views on that. There's a much debated topic. For all kinds of reasons, let's avoid that discussion here. You and I have several friends in common. One of them is Shawn Farquhar. He was a guest at my home for dinner and more recently in September this year one of my Superstar guests on my Live Talk Show at The British Ring 25 Convention. Shawn is well known for his skills and FISM Championship status but what a lot of people don't know is that he has over the years been very helpful to a great number of Magicians including a few International Vegas headliners. He played a great influence in your life.

**RP:** Shawn is great. In the mid 80s I joined the Vancouver Magic Circle IBM Ring 92. In 1985 and 1990 I won The Wilf Rutherford Trophy for children's magic. At club meetings, I was given some valuable advice on card forcing by Shawn Farquhar, so much so that in my very first attempt at competing for the Ray Gamble Trophy, Impromptu magic with a previously unopened deck, I won!

In 1986 Vancouver hosted Expo 86. I worked at many different functions some as an actor, once playing the oldest gas pump jockey in the world on Esso's corporate day, stage magic and many appearances as the Mad Hatter performing walk about sleight of hand. The character drew great attention, so much so, that when I had to provide a substitute, while I honored a booking in an Alberta Fair the manager insisted my replacement had to wear a costume.

In 1993, I secured a principle role in Jack's Place an hour long TV drama and worked with Hal Linden and many other stars including a scene with Sheena Easton, playing Artie a magician, I produced six doves by throwing open my cape and prevent her from auditioning for Jack (Hal Linden)

The magic advisor for this show and a sequel was Shawn Farquhar and the dove handler on the day of shooting Ray Roch. Most of the extras cast as magicians in the show were played by members of the Vancouver Magic Circle.

**ADB:** I am indeed very fortunate to have lectured in Canada and had a many kind things said about me. You are all a great bunch of folk. I loved my time there. Thanks to my pal Michael Roth who organized it all. Now, you have a really nice philosophy about attending lectures.

**RP:** Ever since I joined my first Magic club I have tried to attend every lecture available to me, I consider them to be the most valuable asset a magician can utilize to improve his act. If you only learn one move or an idea to present your act in a better way, then the cost of the lecture is well worth the expense.

In 2002 I moved to Victoria where I presently live and am a member of Victoria Magic Circle, Ernie Crockford IBM Ring 183. You lectured there and I was fortunate enough to spend most of the day in your company, I learned much from you, but most importantly began a friendship I treasure.

**ADB:** Me too Ray. Thank you. It was one of the best ever. We had fun at my workshop and one remarkable memorable moment for me was at my lecture when the late great Tony Eng gave me a standing O. All you guys joined in. I really had a lump in throat. Yes Sir! I had a truly wonderful time there. A very treasured memory. The funniest part was that I am not a card Magician but managed to get whoops and hollers of delight from Tony Eng and the other Card experts!!!! Simple is best eh Ray?

**RP:** Yes that was indeed an enjoyable day . You, Michael Roth and the rest of the gang .It was just one of those days that just rolled together and very entertaining from both a personal and professional viewpoint.

**ADB:** You used the magic word ... "Entertaining" .... crucial when performing Magic ....

**RP:** I wholeheartedly agree Tony. You and I have chatted about this quite often and at length. You raised it during your lecture. Our thoughts are similar on this. The Entertainment value is what "sells" the magic. Not the trick. Yes, of course the technical skill is important or even at times the lack of it .... But what is vital, crucial, absolutely necessary and completely indispensable is the Presentation. I am not saying anything that has not been said before but it cannot be said often enough in relation to Magic.

**ADB:** How very true Ray. And you are expertly qualified by your empirical experience to make those comments. You have in addition a perception of the performance of Magic that has been honed by decades of performing experience in almost every aspect of performance, not just Magic.

**RP:** Thank you Tony. With all humility ... what you say is true. I do feel that I have an understanding of what it takes to be a successful act.

**ADB:** You were praised by no less than the late great Jack Lemmon. If anyone knew about timing and presentation he certainly did.

**RP:** Yes he was kind. Following Jack's Place I appeared in many TV series in various roles including an unforgettable part in a TV movie starring Jack Lemmon. Lemmon and I met on set early one morning before anyone else arrived and spent time together. A memorable meeting with a wonderful man.

**ADB:** Your Club has presented you with a few awards...

**RP:** Yes. I am very honored. During the time I have been a member of Victoria Magic Circle I have been awarded The Wansborough Best Comedy Magic Trophy twice and been declared winner of the Farquhar Magician of the Year Trophy in 2010.

**ADB:** Ray, you are in every sense of the word a real gem and are very highly rated and thought of by your peers, myself included. Thank you kindly for taking time to converse a while and share your life and philosophy.

**RP:** Thank you Tony. It has been a pleasure. If in some small way my story helps and inspires then I am honored and happy. Come back to Canada and visit us soon. Let's go feed the seals again.

