
Investigation of "Psychics"

"Top Psychic" Hydrick: Puffery and Puffs

James Randi

Those of us who have regularly observed the wonders that ABC-TV has featured on its popular program "That's Incredible" expect that we will continue to see parlor tricks presented as genuine miracles. The public eats it up, and the sponsors are delighted. In December of 1980, when a man who called himself "Song Chai" appeared on this show, claptrap once again took on the guise of established fact.

This "Master of Martial Arts," as ABC presented him, turned out to be James Hydrick, a Salt Lake City ex-convict who apparently learned more in the pokey than how to make license plates. According to a gushing account in the February 3, 1981, issue of the *Star*, Rupert Murdoch's tabloid newspaper, the "World's Top Psychic" demonstrated psychokinetic (PK) powers of very strong magnitude, flipping the pages of a telephone book and causing a pencil to turn merely by the power of his will. Dr. H. Kimball, chief psychologist for Utah's Davis County Mental Health Commission (the *Star* incorrectly called him "Kimble"), was quoted as saying: "James [Hydrick] is indeed what he purports to be—a savant, or one who can order the mind to do things people believe to be impossible. His power is incredible and staggering." Kimball went on to say, reported the *Star*, that Hydrick could move objects "by mental telepathy," find hidden objects blindfolded, and do push-ups on one thumb. "James recently broke his hand, and just two days later X-rays showed the bone to be almost healed," Kimball was quoted as saying.

Hydrick has told several stories about his quest for superpowers. He has claimed Tibetan lamas, Chinese Kung-Fu masters, and various wandering monks as his gurus. He has now dropped the Song Chai name and is

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just plain old James Hydrick, worker of wonders, master of martial arts, and healer—just your run-of-the-mill supernormal guy down the street.

His appearance on ABC-TV was indeed “incredible.” Host John Davidson doubted the pencil-turning trick, saying that Hydrick was merely blowing on the pencil to cause it to turn as it was lying balanced over the edge of a table. To prove the contrary, Hydrick asked Davidson to place his hand over his (Hydrick’s) mouth and nose; the pencil still turned! There were no controls of any kind on the page-turning demonstration, and it was all swallowed whole by the staff, along with a trick using a pair of toothpicks. One toothpick was made to jump with apparently no motive force being applied. Davidson had the correct solution in this case, too. Said Davidson, “The other toothpick is moving!” But the two co-hosts were quick to deny this on Hydrick’s behalf.

In the *Star*, a photo showed the “marvel” in which Hydrick “suspends a straw broom without touching it.” Martin Gardner was in gales of laughter over this one, since both it and the toothpick trick appeared years ago in his book *The Encyclopedia of Impromptu Tricks*. They are what we magicians term “bar tricks.” They are usually the stock-in-trade of those who have run out of funds for a beer at the local pub.

But what of the pencil and page tricks? Well, my jaundiced eye recognized these as rather tired old tricks that would not have made it into Gardner’s book and which I first saw on the back of cereal boxes. Davidson was right not only on the toothpick trick, but on the others as well. Hydrick was simply blowing the page over, and he spun the pencil around by the same means. Not immediately evident are these facts, however: First, the blast of air from a half-open mouth takes time to get to the props, and Hydrick made sure he turned his head away from the pencil and the page after giving a sharp puff of air, so that he was facing *away* when the action occurred. Second, one blows not directly at the prop but at the table in front of it. The pencil reacts to even the slightest of breezes directed at the table surface. The page-turning requires much more air, but again it is directed at the space in front of the book, causing a flow of air along the table, up the inclined surface of the book and under the edge of the page, which must be “tweaked” up a bit to accept the blast and thus be turned over.

Hydrick is currently giving lessons to children, who do nothing but point at the book while Hydrick blows the pages over. They actually believe *they* are doing it!

Hydrick took me up on my offer of \$10,000 for one paranormal demonstration under proper conditions of observation. We met on stage at the new TV show “That’s My Line,” where I had invited claimants to come and to try their skill. During a rehearsal the day before, I’d been in the control room while, unknown to Hydrick and his managers, the entire 90-minute practice session had been videotaped, with a highly sensitive microphone aimed and focused at Hydrick’s mouth, and with the amplifier

You will recall that, even when Hydrick's mouth and nose were covered by Davidson on the "That's Incredible" show, the pencil had moved. I demonstrated that, when almost *any* movements were made near a carefully balanced pencil, it turned. Hydrick had made sharp karate movements that caused the pencil to turn—and Davidson fell for it.

But please recall that the *Star* had quoted from "one of America's best known and respected clinical psychologists, Dr. Heber Kimble [*sic*]." He had said all those wonderful things about Hydrick, remember? Well, in my stubborn way, I decided to call Dr. Kimball. He was aghast at what I read him from the *Star*, not being a reader of this high-class literature. He laughed at the quotes, and labeled them totally untrue. He had never endorsed Hydrick at all, he told me. The most he had said was that he saw him move a page, turn a pencil, and cause a plant to stir—by what means, he had no idea. Kimball claims no expertise in conjuring abilities or the detection of fraud. "I don't know if Hydrick has these powers, nor could I know unless I examined him under proper laboratory conditions," said Kimball. He had never commented on Hydrick's "self-healing" and knew nothing about what he had been quoted as saying. Kimball *had* seen Hydrick do the one-thumb push-up—an impressive sight, but hardly paranormal.

I have subsequently confirmed that Hydrick's ability to block karate blows while blindfolded is also a result of trickery—looking out the bottom of the blindfold to see the movements of his "attacker's" feet. According to karate experts who tested Hydrick in Provo, Utah, with this idea in mind they had the attacker punch without moving his feet; Hydrick failed to block the punch. When the attacker moved his feet as though he was punching but made no punch, Hydrick thrust up his hands to block it.

A credulous Associated Press article about Hydrick and his performances, by a reporter from AP's Salt Lake City bureau, mentioned—without noting the significance of the fact—that Hydrick had been interested in magic since he was ten years old. This naive eyewitness account of Hydrick's feats once again demonstrates that reporters—for all their professional journalistic skills—are untrained at detecting deception by tricksters claiming psychic powers.

Bear in mind that ABC-TV, the staff of the "That's Incredible" show and the producers, Alan Landsberg Productions, have all been aware of, and are currently very much aware of, the willingness of the Committee for the Scientific Investigation of Claims of the Paranormal to offer expert advice on these matters. They have not only declined to call on the Committee, but telegrams I sent to ABC-TV President Anthony Thomopoulos, to Landsberg, and to the TV show were ignored. The only comment I got from ABC-TV was through Eric Parham, ABC's New York publicist. He said that he "couldn't care less, personally, whether the stunts were authentic." He referred me to Landsberg Productions and to producer Woody Fraser. They never responded to my inquiries. ●

“Superpsychic” Vaughan: Claims vs. the Record

James Randi

New Ways of Consciousness is a San Francisco-based operation devoted to researching the paranormal. Its president, 44-year-old Alan Vaughan, now residing in Los Angeles, is the chain-smoking former editor of *Psychic Magazine* (currently known as *New Realities*) and a member of the Parapsychological Association. Vaughan is known as the Bay Area's leading psychic and predictor of events, as well as a possessor of psychokinetic (PK) powers.

When my longstanding offer of \$10,000 for any successful performance of a paranormal nature under controlled conditions was noted in *Omni* (April 1980), Alan Vaughan sent a letter to publisher Bob Guccione demanding to be tested in the *Omni* offices in the presence of editor Ben Bova and other staffers. Guccione declined the opportunity, but Bova and senior editor Scot Morris reluctantly agreed to be witnesses.

Vaughan's claim was that he could determine, by general ESP sensing, in which one of ten plastic film canisters a ball-bearing was concealed. He said he would do it correctly at least five times in ten tries, and we set up a test using a random method for selecting the canister in



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“Psychic” Alan Vaughan as he was tested in the offices of *Omni*

which the steel ball would be placed. We met for the test on June 25.

By chance alone, without any of his awesome powers working, the probability of Vaughan fulfilling his claim of five or more “hits” was 1 in 612. Fairly good odds against which to place my prize, I felt. After ten attempts, Vaughan had scored zero. He attributed his failure to unfamiliar conditions, although before the test he had specifically declared, in writing, that he was confident of success, that my presence in the room would not inhibit him, that he was compatible with all present, and that he was feeling well enough to perform. I had insisted upon these statements’ being agreed upon in advance to forestall the expected rationalizations.

I had agreed to test Vaughan again during a projected trip to California, and in August I was in the office of Richard Saltus, science writer for the *San Francisco Examiner*, to supervise round number two, my check again offered for success. This time we saw a score of one “hit” in twelve tries, still using the same ten canisters but with a much larger ball-bearing (13/16 of an inch in diameter). Again, he had failed. We planned to meet again in New York, again at the *Omni* offices, for yet a third test.

November 3 was the scheduled day. Vaughan sat down confidently before *Omni* judges while I waited outside the room at his request to avoid any “negative vibes.” The test ground on to its conclusion, the performer seated before a row of plastic vials waving his hand over them mystically. The score this time was two out of twelve. Vaughan’s reputation as a leading psychic was fading fast.

Meanwhile, I’d been looking into his other major claims. One was that he had demonstrated powerful PK abilities for John Jungerman at the University of California at Davis, using an interferometer/laser device. Such a machine reacts to a force of as little as 10^{-13} watts exerted over a period of two minutes. This is an *extremely* small amount of force, and such a sensitive device is subject to all kinds of artifacts—external influences that can outperform the sought-after phenomena. Jungerman was dismayed at Vaughan’s description of a “massive deflection” he said he had produced on the setup. Vaughan had arrived in the company of what Jungerman called a “small crowd,” and the results were not at all convincing to the professor. “Alan was rather excited over it,” he said, but we never did see anything that was above artifact background.”

Vaughan also is said to be the leading prophet of momentous events in the United States. What of the ability? Well, in 1971, he told us that Nixon would be reelected for ending the Vietnam war and would have run against Muskie. Ted Kennedy would be president in 1976, he promised. The Reverend Philip Berrigan and Patty Hearst would be exonerated; Mt. Pelee would erupt in 1972, killing thousands; and J. Edgar Hoover would retire under White House pressure in the summer of 1971. Jackie Kennedy Onassis would again be widowed, “probably before the end of 1973.” Even on rather likely events, he was wrong.

On January 1, 1980, Vaughan predicted that Ted Kennedy would not

oppose Carter in the convention race, that Ronald Reagan *would not even be a candidate*, and that Carter would win. Later that year, he was on record to declare that the Iran matter would end with the death of seven hostages, that they would all be put on trial, some being condemned to death, and that the U.S. Marines would rescue them. Shortly before that rescue, said Vaughan, Khomeini would be ousted from power. And, happily, he tells us that home mortgage rates will go down to 10 percent in 1981 and that the auto industry will make a strong recovery. We can all hope that these latter two prognostications are somewhat more accurate than the others.

With the 46 predictions Vaughan made in three widely circulated newspaper articles (the only ones that have come to my attention), he scored:

Totally wrong	26
Right	0
Vague, not determinable	14
Not yet determinable	6

Where, one is bound to ask, does Alan Vaughan get his reputation as a superpsychic? Obviously, it arises from the failure of the press and the public to follow up on his performances, from his dedicated rationalizations of failures, and from the value assigned to anecdotal accounts of "miracles." Put to the test, he fails. And that is in spite of his signed statement that the tests are fair and proper. ●

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