



# The Magnificent Oz

## the many sides of oz pearlman

By Alex Harrell

Photography by Atisha Paulson

Everyone wants to know the secret behind mentalism. Is Oz Pearlman psychic? Did he Google me beforehand? How did he guess my social security number?

But these aren't the questions you should be asking. What you *should* be asking is: How the hell did Oz Pearlman turn his childhood hobby of card tricks into two-plus decades of dazzling deception?

The secret to mentalism isn't mind-games and misdirection or market analysis and behavioral dynamics. It's hustling.

**O**z Pearlman has run 37 miles today. Tomorrow, he flies to Las Vegas to perform for a high-net-worth corporate CEO whose technology you may or may not be using right now. Pearlman performed 25 shows in January; usually 170 a year. He's appeared in dozens of TV shows on all the major networks along with numerous cable channels since taking third place on America's Got Talent's 10th season, and had an NBC Special last year that got nominated for an Emmy. He's also training for his first ultramarathon since having kids, though he's done a dozen or so before.

He's a busy guy.

"Most of my creativity happens during runs because I'm just a father of two kids, business is busy. I was on the road the majority of the month, I'm flying to places nonstop while also running a business," Pearlman said, emphasizing his lack of time to unwind and disconnect. "Running is my zone-out time. I really just brainstorm and figure out tricks for TV and my show; I think if you're not physically fit, it's very tough to be mentally fit."

As a world-renowned mentalist, it's safe to assume that Pearlman's got to be *pretty* mentally fit.

"You have to be in the zone," he said. "It's a very focused approach during the show, if that makes sense."

And it does: just like any job, one has to put on a performance — being "on," so to speak, to do what needs to be done. Only, Pearlman's job *is* the performance. The former Merrill Lynch employee may have left Wall Street, but he didn't stop selling.

"All I'm selling is mentalism," he said. "I'm selling this concept."

There's no "thing" in his show — no doves, no coins. He's the show, not the props. *He's* the product.

"It's all about the emotional hook and truly connecting with a person," Pearlman said. "For a sophisticated audience, they like the fact that it's not a card trick. Because no matter how good a magic trick is, it will never hit you emotionally the way mentalism does. You'll never have somebody tell you five years later, like, 'You're not gonna believe the card trick this guy did to me!' That's very rare."

But when it relates to something close to your heart, that you truly care about, such as your family or friends or a pet; those are the moments that stay with you down the line.

And that's what makes Oz (pronounced *ohs*, by the way) Pearlman stick.



## MAGNETIC MOMENTS

After moving from Israel to America at the young age of three, Pearlman grew up in the Michigan suburb Farmington Hills — about 10 miles northwest of Detroit — in a secular Jewish, lower-middle-class family. He didn't have a traditional bar mitzvah, instead going on a cruise with the family and seeing a magician for the first time.

Shortly thereafter, he was hooked.

"I became obsessed," he said, doubting if he had ever seen a magic show on television before the trip to Bermuda. "It just eluded me in my early years."

The obsession was most likely a combination of things. Pearlman's parents divorced; magic was "a great thing to do if you're a kid and you don't know what to do with your emotions," as he put it. Plus, it's relatively normal for kids to become fixated on a hobby or topic. It's particularly common amongst gifted children — which Pearlman was. He got an 800 on the math portion of the SAT at age 12 and attended the University of Michigan just four years later after graduating high school when he was 16 years old.

"In civilian life, I'm not really a mentalist."

"I would probably spend eight to 10 hours a day doing magic or practicing tricks while doing homework," Pearlman said, referring to his junior high school days when he would have cards and coins hidden under his desk. "[Teachers] couldn't stop me from doing it," he continued. "They'd be like, 'No more cards.' I just had them under the table."

Though it took a bit of time to realize, having an obsession at such a young age was a fruitful distraction. At 14, Pearlman had his first restaurant gig performing magic tricks. His version of Malcolm Gladwell's 10,000 hours was spent learning the psychology of how to win over a table and the social dynamics of playing a crowd. Understanding how to approach groups, be it CEOs and movie stars or just regular Midwestern folk, and hone his skills as the character that Oz the Mentalist embodies.

He was able to cover tuition for the Michigan of University with all that experience, by the way. He studied computer science before switching his major to electrical engineering, continuing to perform magic for tuition. He also grew some thick skin during those 10,000 hours.

"You have to learn not to take offense to things, that sometimes it's not personal," he said. "I think rejection is very important. The more you get accustomed to

rejection and better at handling it, the better that life is in general."

And while he's not dealing with much rejection these days, it still happens, just like it happens to anyone else. The only difference, perhaps, is in his attitude.

"You have to cement your resolve and say, 'I'm gonna keep at it and keep at it,' and realize that so much of the time, people are busy. It's all about timing and luck," Pearlman said. "To a degree, you can make your luck through consistency, but so much of life is timing. So many of the people you think of that are huge stars, in a different, parallel universe, there were moments in their lives that were offshoots; where if something happened differently, they wouldn't be who they are. I've just kind of come to be aware of that."

Pearlman's moment of timing and luck happened to be on America's Got Talent: the NBC competition series that dominates primetime television (dominates as in it averaged 12 million viewers in 2018). He landed third place on AGT's 10th season in 2015; the highlight of his career to date.

So much of Pearlman's shtick is the emotional connection one feels to a mentalist, so a live television show such as AGT was the perfect platform to captivate crowds — only this time, they were watching him at home versus over dinner.

"People are very emotionally invested in it, the same way that they get invested in a sports team," he elaborated. "If you're into the Giants, you're *super* into the Giants, and that's how this show is. People really get behind you. For example with me, the Jewish community was like, 'He's our guy!'"

Since doing America's Got Talent, Pearlman has been incredibly busy (or finally found the sweet spot between luck and timing). His "bread and butter" is corporate events and private parties all over the country — occasionally all over the world.

He had a year-long residency at iPic Theaters, selling out the 140-seat room for his live show "Truth Be Told — An Evening of Mentalism and Mind Reading with Oz Pearlman."

"The secret to success, more than anything, with mentalism is that I can adapt and I can customize my content; that's why I've been on so many TV shows," he shrugged, referring to the likes of ESPN, CNBC, Fox Business, the Hallmark Channel, Rachael Ray, Dr. Oz. "Shows you wouldn't think of, like, why is a mentalist on a cooking show?"

Well, because he can tailor an entire performance based on cooking.

"It's all about the concept," Pearlman continued, "that plays to the audience."



"I make mistakes in shows, almost always," Pearlman said. "It makes the show stronger. It humanizes you."

## MORE THAN MAGIC

Another lesson learned early for Pearlman? Newton's first law.

"You need something happening to get things happening," he said. "You need something topical and timely that, generally speaking, the public can consume — whether it's a ticket or a book or an item — to create publicity."

Without a reason to care, nobody cares. In a society plagued by cancel culture dependent on the attention economy, relevancy comes and goes as quickly as you can scroll through your Instagram feed.

"You could be very successful momentarily," Pearlman began to explain. "Like right now, I don't have a public show. I had a residency last year. But people that aren't in the public eye won't realize. They'll be like, 'Oh, what have you been up to lately? You haven't been on television in two months.' And I can just say I'm absolutely *crushing* it. I had 25 shows last month that are all private, and pay way more than if I actually had a public show. But people associate success and relevance with a public show."

Pearlman made a parallel to that of a band. Think of a musician that hasn't put out an album in two years, but makes bank playing sold-out shows every night.

"The public perception is different than success," he paused. "It's weird."

That being said, he does want to get another public show going, and ultimately become a household name as the U.S. face of mentalism, which is quickly becoming more possible than not. Pearlman participated in CNBC's Celebrity Stock Draft and a Bravo TV show

about real estate.

But he and his wife (who he met on JDate, mind you) have two small children and are soon moving from Tribeca to Brooklyn. He's training for an ultramarathon in Florida. His interests and passions go beyond the realm of entertainment; *he* exists outside of entertainment. Pearlman is more than just a magician. He's not always a mentalist.

"It's not always 'on.' It needs to be turned-on fully. So that's the one thing in civilian life — real life — I'm not really a mentalist."

He's not a dancing monkey. Of course, some of the most critical skills a mentalist needs, such as having a sharp memory and understanding body language cues, can't "turn off" the way a falsetto or fake smile can; they're innately a part of Pearlman. But taking those skills and applying them to everyday conversations? Not so innate.

"That takes focus and commitment, and I don't really do that day to day," he said, though noting that some mentalists and magicians are always on.

"I have a buddy in Vancouver who's adamant about it; think about somebody who's proselytizing, who's Mormon and wants you to be a Mormon," Pearlman said. "He thinks that you can't *not* wear the cape. It's like, if you have Superman skills, you need to wear the cape all the time. You need to be doing magic all day, every day. I don't want to do magic all day... Let's just be ourselves."

After all, what makes Superman so cool? The fact that he's actually Clark Kent.