

SESSION

The Magic of Joel Givens



By Joshua Jay

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SESSION

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Joel Givens

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"I'll have the barbecue sandwich, with the slaw *on* the sandwich," I said. In North Carolina, the slaw is always served on the sandwich. "Oh, and a Coke."

"Is Pepsi alright?" the waitress asked. She had blonde hair, pulled back. I nodded.

"I'll just have a coffee," Joel said to the waitress. She made a note and took off toward the kitchen.

"What? You're not eating?" I asked Joel. "No, I've got too much stuff to show you. Check this out right here," he said with a pronounced southern drawl. Joel Givens invited me to dinner, but I don't think food was anywhere on his agenda. I pulled my chair in and leaned forward. I looked Joel in the eye—he celebrated his 34th birthday last week, but he looked at least five years younger. I wasn't used to seeing his brown hair combed so neatly, and an untucked t-shirt and jeans were like a second skin. He was considerably shorter than I was, and he was overdressed for the occasion—he had just done a show. He loosened his tie and unfastened his top button. Then he reached for a sugar packet.

He held the sugar packet and said, "Josh, did you hear about the new promotion with these sugar packets?" I shrugged.

"In every tenth sugar packet, they're giving away a free stirrer for your convenience." He tore the sugar packet open and reached into it with only his left thumb and first finger. "What I don't understand is how they fit a stirrer this big into a packet this small!" As he spoke, he pulled out a stirrer three times the length of the packet, showing all sides of the packet as the stirrer emerged. He tapped the stirrer on the table—it was real.

"Oh, wow!" I said as he poured the sugar from the packet onto his bread plate.

"These stirrers do have a new collapsible feature." Joel then squeezed the ends of the coffee stirrer between his thumb and first finger. Before my eyes, the plastic piece shrank to a miniature stirrer, less than an inch long. He tucked the stirrer back into the ripped package and handed it to me.



"That's different," I said, breaking the silence.

"Yeah, it's one of my favorite things to do impromptu. Of course, by impromptu I mean that you can prepare it on the fly, just a second before you do it," Joel said.

"And plus, sugar packets and stirrers are everywhere," I added. "So where would you do this trick? Not in a show?"

"No. Not in a show. I used to do magic behind the bar in a little pub near where I live. I would make up four or five of these babies and then I was good to go all night."

"But I saw you take that sugar packet right off the table. There was no switch. That's not impromptu," I argued.

"I got here before you," Joel said. He smiled.

"That's not playing fair."

"I never play fair," he said. "Let me show you what I'm doing."



Joel proceeded to explain "**Sweet Straw**". Away from your audience, take the sugar packet you'll be using (Joel used an Equal packet) and tear a hole through one side near the edge of the packet, along the seam (photo 1). The hole should only puncture one layer of the packet so that the straw can be inserted. Joel refers to the straw used in the trick as a stirrer, but it's actually a thin, red straw, often with a white stripe running down the side. These are found in most bars and coffee shops. They're typically about five inches long (photo 2).

With a key or pocketknife (or in a bind, your teeth), cut a one-inch length off an end of the straw. Tuck the larger straw piece into the hole in the sugar packet until the end touches the opposite seam (photo 3). A large portion of the straw will protrude from the packet—that segment will be covered with the right fingers.

Tear a notch into the end of the packet, opposite the end near the secret hole. This will make tearing the packet easier during performance. Finally, place the small straw segment into a palm position in the left hand, between the first and second joints of the middle finger (photo 4). In this position, you can move the left hand naturally and even spread the fingers without worry of exposing the straw piece.

The placement of the prepared packet is situational. In our case, Joel placed the packet into the sugar holder on the table before I arrived. If being early for dinner is your thing, this will work well. When Joel is working behind a bar, he has the privilege of stocking the sugar packets at the bar himself. You could also begin with the prepared packet palmed and pretend to take it from the table, pushing it into view as you reach toward the sugar holder. Your method will be dictated by your situation.

When ready to perform, hold the sugar packet in the right hand, pinching the secret hole between the right thumb from behind and the right middle finger from the front (photo 5). From the front, the back of the right hand conceals the protruding straw segment.

With the left hand, approach the left end of the sugar packet and tear at the notch, opening the packet at the left end. Drop the torn piece to the table with the left fingers and then reach into the opening. Grip the end of the long straw segment with the left thumb and first finger and pull the straw into view, about two inches (photo 6). You can perform this task with the left hand without fear of exposing the small straw segment it conceals because the left middle finger is not involved in the tearing or pulling and can remain curled. Pull the



photograph 1



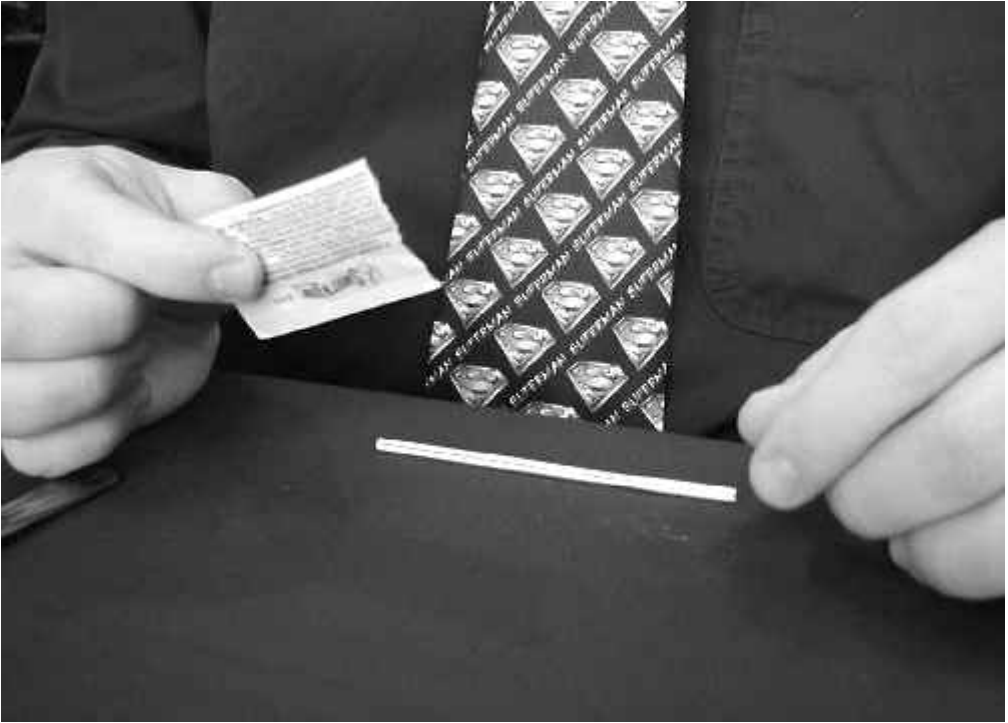
photograph 2

photograph 3



photograph 4





photograph 8

photograph 9





photograph 10



photograph 11

photograph 12



straw through the packet until it no longer sticks out of the right side.

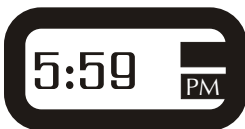
As soon as the straw "clears" the hole, pause. Open the right fingers and turn the sugar packet over to show that the straw really is contained inside the packet (photo 7). You are essentially disproving the method used. The small hole will blend in with the design on the packet and go unnoticed.

Continue pulling the straw with the left hand until it is free of the packet. Tap the straw against the table and drop it parallel to the table's edge, about an inch away (photo 8). Now pour the sugar into your ice tea or coffee and then table the sugar packet to your left. Wait for the offbeat.

When the moment is right, move the left and right hands in unison toward the tabled straw. Take hold of the straw with each hand, momentarily covering it completely from view (photo 9). Notice that the thumbs are behind the fingers, out of view. Sweep the straw off the edge of the table, secretly dropping the longer length into your lap. In a continuous movement, move the hands to chest height.

During this larger movement, push the small straw segment up and to a vertical position with the left thumb as you make a backward "C" with the right thumb and fingers (photo 10). The result is the illusion of holding the longer straw in the left fingers (which is actually held in place by the right fingers and thumb). Actually, the small segment protrudes from the left hand. Contact the upper portion of the straw segment with the right first finger while the right thumb is obscured from view by the left hand. The implication is that the thumb is contacting the other end (photo 11).

During the shrinking phase, move the right fingers and thumb toward each other. This pushes the small segment further into the left hand as you move the right thumb up until it contacts the small straw's lower end. Move the left hand out of the way to display the shrunken straw (photo 12). To conclude, place this "mini-stirrer" back into the packet on your left to show a perfect fit.



"The production works well on its own, without shrinking the straw," Joel said as an afterthought. "I understand you can't always lap a straw or get away from everybody to cut it apart. But I can prepare the production as I'm talking to people, right below the table's edge."

"I'm gonna try that tomorrow," I said. "But now show me something with cards."



Joel borrowed *my* deck after *I* shuffled. He reached over to my side of the table to take the deck and kept it near my face, with his arms extended. He gripped the

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