



Digital Folklore
UNPLUGGED EP 5
Paul Prater

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[Intro]

Perry Carpenter:

Hi. I'm Perry Carpenter, one of the hosts of the Digital Folklore Podcast, and this is Digital Folklore Unplugged. If you've been following us for a while, you know that we just kicked off Season 2 of our main show, but that doesn't mean that we're going to stop these Unplugged editions. In our main format, we really pull out thematic elements from our experts that match the overall narrative frame that we've set. But these unplugged editions allow us to ditch all the fancy production, all the storytelling, and bring you the very raw or only slightly edited interviews with our experts. On today's episode, my co-host Mason and I had the chance to sit down with Paul Prater.

Paul Prater:

Hello, my name is Paul Prater.

Perry Carpenter:

Paul is an extremely multifaceted guy. He is a lawyer, a musician, a mentalist, a bizarre entertainer, an author, and he also collects ghost stories and leads haunted tours. Mason and I had a ton of fun on this interview, and we know that you'll enjoy it as well.

Oh, and just a reminder, if you're one of our Patreon supporters, you get access to these interviews a few days before they go out into our public podcast feed, and you often get a few extra tidbits that didn't make the main feed because they might not be as family-friendly or they were slightly different tone than the rest of the interview. But they are still hugely, hugely interesting and give a lot of insight into the personality and the variety of expertise that these experts have. And Paul's interview has some gems, I'll tell you.

Okay. With that, let's get unplugged.

[cut to main interview]



Digital Folklore
UNPLUGGED EP 5
Paul Prater

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Paul Prater:

Hello, my name is Paul Prater. I am a mentalist. I am an attorney. I'm an author. I'm a creator. I'm a ghost tour guide. I do all kinds of fun stuff. Usually when people say, "What do you do?" my answer is, "Fun." That's what I do is have fun.

Perry Carpenter:

I love that. That's awesome. Describe the type of mentalism and bizarre storytelling that you do so that people can get an idea of what those words mean. A lot of people haven't heard of bizarre and so they will just have a big fuzzy mark in their mind. So yeah, describe some of those facets of the type of person you are and the type of things that you do.

Paul Prater:

Sure. I have a few different branches of the mentalism that I do. The first one is corporate work, and obviously for that, you have to be conscious of what you're putting out there. I have to talk to my clients and make sure that they're okay with certain presentational angles. But for that, I typically just play up more of the attorney side of me and I weave that into the shows. Because as corporations are hiring me, I'm relating to them professional to professional. I'm one of their peers, and I think that comes across as more personable. That's one of the things that regardless of what I do, I've had a lot of people describe my style is it feels like we're just hanging out with you, having a conversation. So I really do strive for that in my shows to be relatable.

And what you would see at a corporate-type show would be me being able to reach into people's brains and pull out little tidbits of information, but also take them back on trips through time, back to their childhood. And I have my audience members do a lot of the discovery in the show. They actually create a lot of the outcomes. It's not me. I do not take on the role of this all-knowing, super smart, smarter than you guy. I don't think that's very relatable and I want to stay away from that.

Now, on the other side, I also do things like bizarre magic, which I'll explain. It's taking darker elements, sometimes having to do with the occult, sometimes having to do with just ghost stories or just the creepiness in general and putting a story and a presentation to that. But I still do the same approach in



Digital Folklore
UNPLUGGED EP 5
Paul Prater

<https://digitalfolklore.fm>

that I want to be personable and I want me and my audience members to go on this journey of discovery together where we find out things either about them or about a story or a mystery. That's what the bizarre magic side is. So it's not a "Ta-da, look at me" kind of thing. And really, if people start applauding wildly, I feel like I've probably done something wrong. I more want stunned silence than applause.

Perry Carpenter:

Yeah. Describe one of the effects just so people can get an idea, put some teeth in it, into it.

Paul Prater:

Sure. One of the ones that I enjoy that I actually, this is done on ghost tours, we have these old cards that it's hard to tell how old they are. They're recreations of something medieval, they have to be, but they're teaching ideas. For instance, people couldn't read so you have images to teach. And a person, whoever wants to be the person who helps out, I say they're the mayor of our little medieval village. They take these nine cards, mix them up, lay two hands out into a hand for me, hand for them, and a wild card in the middle. They get to pick which hand's mine, which hand is theirs, and they turn over cards. And each time we turn over one, we've eliminated this curse. They see another curse on there.

And there's some pretty horrific stuff on there. One of them is somebody getting sawn in half from the butt to the head while hanging upside down, pretty horrific images. But they're eliminating them. When we get down to three cards, I ask them, "Do you want to trade your card for mine? Do you want to trade your card for the wild card?" They make all the decisions, totally within their control. I don't do anything. And at the end, the only card that's not a horrible curse is the blessings, and that's the card that they're left with.

Perry Carpenter:

Nice.

Paul Prater:



Digital Folklore
UNPLUGGED EP 5
Paul Prater

<https://digitalfolklore.fm>

But again, that's when they say, "How did you do..." I get that a lot. "How did you do that?" I said, "I didn't do anything. I made no choices. I didn't mix the cards. I didn't deal the cards. I made no choices. You did this, not me."

Perry Carpenter:

So then bizarre magic from your perspective probably utilizes a lot of the same mechanical methods as traditional magic but has a different presentational frame?

Paul Prater:

Yes. Even my shows, my corporate shows, largely follow the same, use the same methods and have the same basic structures. The framework's different. Obviously, you don't use things like tarot cards or creepy image cards or what have you. You just change that. But I always ask my corporate clients too what their level of comfort is. Every corporation has a different culture. Some are very straight laced and some say, "No, I think that's awesome." And I also ask them, "Do I need to be G, PG, or R?" And I've had some say, "You can be X." I'm like, "I don't do those kind of shows, but... Or I will if the price is right." But anyway.

Perry Carpenter:

Exactly.

Paul Prater:

I don't tend to do anything aside from maybe PG-13 at worst. But I clarify that with clients too, and that helps me decide. What I'm going to present, obviously, is what the client wants if they're paying. Now, if it's my show, I do what I want and people are paying to come see me, and that's a whole different thing.

Perry Carpenter:

Yeah, absolutely.



Digital Folklore
UNPLUGGED EP 5
Paul Prater

<https://digitalfolklore.fm>

Paul Prater:

And all of my performances that I do that I put on are absolutely in the bizarre magic realm. So lots of creepiness, but they're still fun. There's still humor in them. It's very audience-engaged. Audience members participate in every routine I do. Literally, every one.

Perry Carpenter:

Yeah. And I've been to a few of your shows and nothing that you do is off-putting or uninviting or anything that would alienate an audience.

Paul Prater:

No.

Perry Carpenter:

Super, super relatable. But you're inviting them into this different way of thinking and you're inviting them into your house for a little bit. You show them some of the cool things that you're aware of. Talk a little bit about some of the other interesting presentational stuff you do. I know you've done bed of nails. You've done blockhead routines. How do those fit in and where does that take an audience?

Paul Prater:

Well, so the very first full-stage show I presented was a mix of much more straightforward magic, not bizarre. There was some, but it was a mix of magic and sideshow. So yeah, in that show, I would lift an anvil with my teeth and swing it around. I would do the human blockhead, hammering the nail into the nose. I did bed of nails where I created a bed of nails, built my own and lay on that, have someone stand on me. And then also did hand in animal trap, which is another one of those old sideshow bits. And I did it partially just because it interests me. I thought it was fascinating. As a kid, I still remember it was crazy. There was an empty field and they set up a canvas, old-style circus, and there were carnies and Tiny Tim played tiptoe through the tulips there at that circus. It was so weird. It just left a really strong



Digital Folklore
UNPLUGGED EP 5
Paul Prater

<https://digitalfolklore.fm>

impression on me, and I wanted to learn how those people did those things. And I've always been very curious.

So I put that in, and the show was more of a, I wouldn't say a circus theme, but lean that way. It was called Auditorium. So it was like the idea of all these odd things you may see. And so I structured it that way. And I guess to answer the question of what does it do to an audience, it gets a very strong reaction, I can tell you that. The human blockhead, especially when people see that, there's just this like, "Ah." It's a visceral reaction. And I liked that when I was younger. But as I've developed my shows, that's not what I'm going for now. And a lot of the sideshow stuff is just, it's real. So just getting up and down off the bed of nails, you have to be careful. I don't really relish people standing on me on nails anymore. I've gotten older. I just had just moved away from that stuff. I still love it, but yeah.

And I also think it's really preserving an art that I felt like was dying. Now, burlesque has really come back with a huge resurgence. And that's not recent. That's 15 years old now, so was my first show.

Perry Carpenter:

Right.

Paul Prater:

About that time is when this all seemed to be coming back. And I'm glad to see that the sideshow stuff is not only still alive, but seems to be flourishing.

Mason Amadeus:

I'm curious about I know there's generally a link between magic performance and creepiness, but then there's obviously a distinct line when you lean more into the creepy or the horror aspects of it. And I'm curious, what drew you to that part of it? If it was mostly the reaction from the audience or what about it is enthralling?

Paul Prater:



Digital Folklore
UNPLUGGED EP 5
Paul Prater

<https://digitalfolklore.fm>

No, as sad as it is to say, when I first started, my background briefly when I was young, I liked magic. And then I really got out of it for most of my teenage and early adult years. I would still do some mentalism here and there, open mic nights or what have you, but it didn't really grab me until I found this bizarre magic world. I didn't know that that existed before. And so I did not think about my audience, frankly. I just thought about me and what do I like and what do I enjoy? That is not how I think at all.

Now, every routine I do, I think about audience first. What does the audience, what do I want them to experience? And that's usually, maybe that goes back to an earlier question. I think that's the strongest definition of the bizarre magic to me, is I want to make my audience feel something and I get to decide in each act what that something is. It's not always fear. That makes for a monotonous show. Sometimes it's humor, sometimes it's, "Oh, that's sweet," but there's a lot of creepy in it too. But no, that's where... And I came to that just because I've always loved horror. I've always loved creepy books. When I was maybe 10 years old, 10 or 11, for Christmas, one of my favorite gifts was the complete works of Edgar Allen Poe. I loved that stuff. And my parents were very strict about it, so that's probably why I love it more, because I rebelled.

Mason Amadeus:

Ah, it's the forbidden fruit bit.

Paul Prater:

Oh, yeah.

Mason Amadeus:

Yeah.

Paul Prater:

My dad's a Baptist minister. Mom's very conservative. And I couldn't wear Iron Maiden shirts or anything with a skull on it or listen to that devil music and that's... See, I'm wearing my Metallica shirt.



Digital Folklore
UNPLUGGED EP 5
Paul Prater

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Mason Amadeus:

I was just about to say.

Paul Prater:

Still love metal, still play metal. But no, that was really the reason why I got into it is because I liked it and it really grabbed me and pulled me back into magic. Because like I say, it was something I'd gotten away from and gotten out of. And when my daughter was born, I just needed to be home more and I'm not good at sitting still or being home. And I pulled out Mark Wilson's Complete Course in Magic from when I was a kid and started playing with cards and coins and then found bizarre magic and went, "This, this is it. This is it for me."

Perry Carpenter:

I think in horror and even in some of the more traditional mentalism stuff, there's this idea of exploring something that's taboo or off limits or piercing the veil in some way. Getting to forgotten or hidden or that forbidden knowledge bit of it, I think is super, super appealing for those of us that have gone into that. And I think it's really, really interesting to take people on that journey into this world that they're less aware of or that they don't want to believe exists in some way and they keep pushing off or that their parents have protected them from.

Paul Prater:

Right.

Perry Carpenter:

And so I can definitely see how you resonate with that. For you, when you think about, because I know that you make your own props a lot of time as well and when you're doing that, you're aiming for a certain feel. You're trying to say, "How do I lean into the creepiness with this?" If you were to think about the things that define creepiness for you, the things that comprise that, what is creepy when you're thinking about it?



Digital Folklore
UNPLUGGED EP 5
Paul Prater

<https://digitalfolklore.fm>

Paul Prater:

Well, I think at the heart, creepy is, well, there's a few ways to define that, I guess. I think part of it is just the unexpected but particularly the unknown. That in and of itself is creepy. So even talking about Aleister Crowley or tarot cards or Ouija boards is creepy to people because it's the unknown. There's no explanation. There's no understanding. I think that's where some of it comes from. But when you're looking at props, you're talking about props, for whatever reason, everyone associates old with creepy. I don't know. Sometimes I have made concessions for buyers where I age things way more than I think they should be aged, but that idea of this old water stain thing seems to be creepy to people.

Some of the props I like working with are things that have to do with death, and that in and of themselves makes them creepy. For instance, like toe tags or Victorian cabinet cards, which aren't necessarily creepy but the pictures often look very strange because photography wasn't a snap and you're done. So you get these blurred faces and weird images. And I've worked with death cards too or the funeral cards that they use as well, and have used originals or made recreations of those as well. And I think those have an inherent interest to us nowadays, especially because I feel like humans are very separated from death now. Death in and of itself is a mystery now. We don't have a dead body in our home for a week before we have a funeral. We don't take pictures of the dead relatives usually. I think that just our modern human separation from death is what makes death so creepy.

Perry Carpenter:

Yeah, interesting.

Mason Amadeus:

That's something I think about a lot, but I feel like it will end up dovetailing into a whole different realm of conversation.

Perry Carpenter:

Yeah. Well, maybe we can go there in just a minute, but I want to just see if you have anything in this other area. You mentioned sometimes just old is creepy for people. When you think about some of the



Digital Folklore
UNPLUGGED EP 5
Paul Prater

<https://digitalfolklore.fm>

current media that is leaning into creepy, one of the themes that keeps coming up over and over is older technology. If you think about Stranger Things, it's VHS cassettes and 480p interlaced monitors where you can see the lines and everything or faded colors. What is it about that kind of older tech, that analog bit, what makes that strike us as creepy?

Paul Prater:

I think part of that too is very generational. Again, young people aren't familiar with that tech at all. And it does seem and it is primitive compared to what we have now. We've had just such this huge... Every year, a new iPhone comes out that's bigger and better. It just feels like technology's gotten so far advanced just in the time I've been alive. Half that technology didn't even exist when we were kids. And then our kids, my kids has never not known the internet. My kid's never not known a cell phone. It's pretty amazing when you think about you have this little device in your pocket that has all of the world's knowledge in it. That, it's unreal to me.

So I think when you go back and look at wow, that's what TV looked like, that's what video looked like. It really looked like that. I think again, it's just removed from them. It's foreign. It seems so ancient. Maybe a lot of that stuff when you talk about old tech and the creepiness of it does have to do directly with who you are as a person and what age you're at, probably. But we used it. When I was young, I think about Poltergeist and the little girl with their hands up on the TV with the fuzz. That's very strong image with that television communicating to her. That's probably always been around that technology can somehow be evil. And I often say I hate the fact that we have the internet and I love the fact that we have the internet.

Mason Amadeus:

Yeah. There's a touchstone that's come up a lot as we've been talking with a couple of different people about analog horror specifically, and it's that it was the last era of media being embodied in a physical form in a way that's interesting.

Paul Prater:



Digital Folklore
UNPLUGGED EP 5
Paul Prater

<https://digitalfolklore.fm>

That's true, yeah. I'm constantly on this back and forth. Do I throw away all of my CDs or do I keep them? I've got probably a thousand CDs and I'm like, "Do I just keep these?" Because everything's online now. And I thought, I remember distinctly thinking when I got CDs, "This is it. This is the embodiment, the perfect embodiment of the media. There will never be anything different or better." Naive thinking, obviously, but I was also, what, 22?

Mason Amadeus:

They didn't even last that long in retrospect. If you really think about it, CDs were pretty short-lived.

Paul Prater:

They really were.

Perry Carpenter:

Well, we keep finding things in our quest to create the perfect version of whatever that is. You've got VHS and laser disc and then DVD. And what you end up finding out is usually that the version that consumers have ended up adopting is the more inferior version of that thing, that there was always VHS or Betamax that was the competing version. It was actually better, but something-

Mason Amadeus:

DVD had Blu-ray.

Perry Carpenter:

Yeah. DVD had Blu-ray.

Paul Prater:

Which is a little more popular.



Digital Folklore
UNPLUGGED EP 5
Paul Prater

<https://digitalfolklore.fm>

Perry Carpenter:

CDs had MiniDisc associated. MiniDisc had way higher fidelity in a lot of ways. And now even we've standardized on MP3 but you find out that there are actually way higher resolution and much more compressible file types that are out there as well. So you could get better fidelity, less space, but it's just not widely adopted yet. That train of thought is going nowhere. But I was saying it extremely confidently.

Mason Amadeus:

It made me think of something that I didn't really connect before, and it's that in the current era, we're moving towards not owning anything. All of these streaming services, you don't have that music. If that streaming service goes away, it's not like you can pull it off your shelf. And so I wonder if part of the nostalgia attached to the analog horror, even for people who didn't experience it, was the very idea that you could own and have as personal property these pieces of media that meant something to you.

Perry Carpenter:

It could also be that that thing is potentially degrading as well. It's sitting there. It's aging like a body ages. And when you put it back in, it's not the thing that you remember. It's not the clear memory that you had about this. It is fuzzy. It's ugly. It's the color of the movies that we used to watch and think were high technicolor, they don't look as crisp and clear as we remember.

Paul Prater:

No. Even DVDs of movies that are now 15, 20 years old. But yeah, the mentioning of owning things is why I was very resistant for a long time to streaming music. I kept buying CDs as recently as a few years ago because I thought, "Well, hey, for something I can't even own." But I have shifted that mindset now and now I've got that problem with my books. If I turn my camera around, I've got shelves full of books, and what do I do with those?

Mason Amadeus:



Digital Folklore
UNPLUGGED EP 5
Paul Prater

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Right. No, the same. It's a little spooky to think about. Probably off-topic for the show, but just to think about not owning anything because it seems like we're really trending towards that. Leasing cars, streaming media.

Paul Prater:

Right. Well, once they get the driverless cars down solid, then you don't need to own a car.

Mason Amadeus:

You can just borrow one.

Paul Prater:

Order it like Uber. If they're all self-driving cars, then it's not an issue.

Mason Amadeus:

Right.

Perry Carpenter:

Yeah. Why pay tens of thousands of dollars for this thing that you use maybe an hour a day and then sits vacant 23 hours?

Paul Prater:

Right.

Perry Carpenter:

Yeah, I can see the mindset behind that.

Paul Prater:



Digital Folklore
UNPLUGGED EP 5
Paul Prater

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Think about parking lots no longer necessary, really.

Mason Amadeus:

Right. If they all just go back to this garage or I guess circle the block or whatever, just waiting for somebody.

Paul Prater:

Right, just constantly working. Yeah. Anyway, I'm sure that is off-topic.

Perry Carpenter:

Yeah. Well, but you could think of the other side of that though. There's a dystopia that lurks on the other side of not being able to own anything and sharing everything. Because what happens when that sharing possibility gets taken away either by the loss of some kind of connector that makes that possible or the degeneration of society in some way.

Paul Prater:

Right.

Mason Amadeus:

Yeah. It's where convenience, control, and intention meet that it really could go in a lot of different ways.

Perry Carpenter:

Yeah. Now, you really have a haves and haves-not type of society because you have the people that could afford and it was a luxury to actually own the thing that was there versus everybody else who is renting it or leasing it. And now you sever that ability to do it and now you've created two entirely



Digital Folklore
UNPLUGGED EP 5
Paul Prater

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different classes and no middle class. Anyway, that's totally different than anything we need to talk about.

Mason Amadeus:

Something I do want to touch on related to what we were telling, and I think it'll be really good for the episode, was storytelling is obviously a big part of everything you're doing, Paul. So how do you approach telling a story? It's an art form in and of itself. I've spoken with a professional storyteller once and didn't go very deep into talking shot, but I think it's fascinating. What is your approach to that?

Paul Prater:

My approach generally, if I'm scripting a routine and I do script my routines, I treat each piece that I do within the whole show as like a mini play that supports the thesis or main point of the play itself. I start with what do I want my audience to experience? What emotion do I want to bring out in this piece? And that gives me the direction I need as far as scripting goes.

And the second part of it though, to answer that question, is you just have to work and rework and rework your stories. One of the side interesting things I did that dovetails in with what we're talking about, when I did hand in the animal trap in that first show, I thought, "Why would you put your hand in an animal trap? That's just you're a dumb... Why would you put your hand in an animal trap?" So I needed to come up with a story that would explain that, and almost all of my stories touch on reality, actual things that have happened and often back to my childhood or my past. Because I think, at least Americans, we often have a shared childhood upbringing. Christmas was excitement.

And anyway, to get back to the point, I talked about my Uncle Avery who went to World War II and he had this silver coin. And if I could grab it out of his hand, then he would let me have it. And once I hit 12 or 13, I thought, "All right, this year I'm fast enough. I've been doing martial arts. I can grab this coin." And I got up there and he had, not Parkinson's, ALS, and I didn't know that. The family didn't tell me I wasn't prepared for that. And I couldn't play that game with him anymore.

So what did I come up with? I had an animal trap laying around. If you're not fast, you get hurt. So the audience thinks I'm going to demonstrate how I can snatch this coin out of the animal trap. And when I



Digital Folklore
UNPLUGGED EP 5
Paul Prater

<https://digitalfolklore.fm>

put my hand in there and it goes off, it's really this sentimental ride. And then people are like, "Oh man, did he just mess up?" And I just say, "You know, I never did figure out how to get the coin out of that trap, but I'm sure Uncle Avery's looking at me laughing." So that gives you the idea of my storytelling and my approach to it.

Now, as a side note, there's a thing called it was a thing called Tales from the South. It was on NPR and I was on NPR with that story from Tales from the South. And there is no animal trap portion. It's just the story. And that's how I want to approach my shows that any story I tell doesn't need a trick or a punch. It's the story is sufficient. Now, if there's something extra that helps drive the point of the story home, then yeah, I love it. But yeah, my focus has always been on the story.

Mason Amadeus:

And you're really consciously playing with expectations there because you go into something not knowing what it's going to be, and then you make this aspirational story that then has this sad sentimental twist. And then it ends up with a shock, and then you end up with humor.

Paul Prater:

Right.

Mason Amadeus:

So there's definitely that arc.

Perry Carpenter:

You have this established pattern, expectation, break of the pattern. That's really good.

Paul Prater:



Digital Folklore
UNPLUGGED EP 5
Paul Prater

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If you guys have any interest in seeing that, it's on YouTube. It's called The End of Summer, Tales From the South, or just put my name in YouTube. It'll pop up because I was actually on there twice. I did their best of the year as well.

Mason Amadeus:

Oh, that's awesome.

Perry Carpenter:

One other part, and I want to get to this real quick too and then we're going to take a turn just into the haunted tours and things like legend tripping and legends in general. But part of your storytelling that goes into your shows and part of the storytelling that goes into the tour is the crafting of your persona.

Mason Amadeus:

Right.

Perry Carpenter:

You have a very specific persona that you literally, I mean you're still yourself, but you adorn yourself in a different persona whenever you're doing some of these shows. Can you describe the importance of that as far as tone-setting, storytelling, and the way that that sets expectation? And what's the reasoning for all of that?

Paul Prater:

Sure. I think particularly with the bizarre magic shows, I think your set dressing, which includes yourself primarily actually, is super important. The way I've described it is if you paid a lot of money to go see a play and it was drawn with crayons on boxes, you'd be pretty disappointed. So I start with just my dress. I tend to dress very nicely. Not a t-shirt and jeans, obviously. I think that's the important first start. What I want is people to have this idea that, "Oh, this is something classy. This is something." And also, I like to wear things that are a little bit odd so that way it throws people off. Sometimes it's just like spiky loafers



Digital Folklore
UNPLUGGED EP 5
Paul Prater

<https://digitalfolklore.fm>

or velvet loafers with skulls on them, or just cuff links that have posed face on them. I have those. Just something like that.

I think right off the bat, you start to set the expectation that it's not a goofy magic show. There's no sequence. There's no top hat or any of that kind of stuff. I think also when you're dressed that way, I'm the one running the show as I mentioned. Other people really make things happen, but it also establishes still I'm the one in charge here. I'm dressed nicer than everybody. Almost always. I'm wearing something no one else wears. So I think that is important. I want a certain, it's hard to describe this, but a certain aloofness without being aloof, because I want to be very, very personable with people. I want it to feel like we're just sitting around in my living room but yet at the same time, I'm the one in control here. I'm the one in charge here.

Perry Carpenter:

Yeah. I think about it as other. A lot of the fashion choices that you make me think of Victorian era, that type of spooky, you're gothic, that's now entered the modern world. So this person is obviously other and has some kind of mystique associated with that, some kind of hidden or forbidden knowledge that they're willing to share. And that naturally puts you in charge, not only because the dresses is more expensive or nicer or different, but is so foreign to what most people see on the street today.

Paul Prater:

And I don't go directly for a recreation of a Victorian outfit, but you're very right. It's Victorian-esque. It's like a cravat and a vest and a velvet jacket. But most of the things that I buy that I perform in are not any kind of recreation of period pieces or anything. They're just-

Perry Carpenter:

Yeah. I think it gives the modern person that feeling. Even though that you're not trying to recreate that per se, but it's like, "Oh, this person has knowledge of a different time."

Paul Prater:



Digital Folklore
UNPLUGGED EP 5
Paul Prater

<https://digitalfolklore.fm>

Right, yeah. If you ask most people what was men's Victorian dress, they wouldn't even be able to define that anyhow. They would go, "I don't know, top hats and tails." They really, most people don't have an idea. So as long as I'm giving that feel. And ghost tours are the same way. I'm wearing modern clothes. The only thing I bought that's a recreation of anything is I got a very nice brocade vest and a puff tie because you can't find puff ties or good brocade vest.

Perry Carpenter:

Right.

Paul Prater:

Of course, the other side with that is the vest is a little too short because the pants came up over your belly button back then.

Perry Carpenter:

Right. And you're not wanting to go that detailed.

Paul Prater:

No.

Perry Carpenter:

You don't want the super high-waisted pants.

Paul Prater:

No, I've put on COVID weight. I can't get those over my belly. I got to get back in the gym before I do that option. Go ahead. I'm sorry, Mason. You had a question?

Mason Amadeus:



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UNPLUGGED EP 5
Paul Prater

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No, you're good. I have a question that's 50/50 whether it would land in the episode, but I'm just so curious. When you have a routine and you're fully prepared and you're actually in the moment doing it, I'm curious where your head is at. Because obviously you've analyzed all of the expectation building and things like that. Do you find that during a performance, whether it's a tour or a routine, your analytical mind is going separate as you just muscle memory through it? Or do you feel more present in the exact moment you're in?

Paul Prater:

No, it's actually a good question that you ask. And the reason why is I try to create routines that force me to be in the moment. A friend of mine who did sound and lights for a lot of my shows but does not know magic, he described my shows as a choose your own adventure book that you can make choices but they're always going to end up where you want them to. But what that means is I have to pay close attention. I have to really be aware of what's going on. And I do that on purpose because yes, I have found myself even with the routines I do, I did a month-long run in Utah where I was doing three shows a day, six days a week, I could absolutely think of anything I wanted to and still do my routine because I had it down so cold.

But I don't like that. I really like to be present in the moment because I do love performing and I love people and I love... I often remind myself, "Look at what you're doing. This is your dream. You're doing what you always wanted to do. Be aware of it, savor it." So no, I try to be very in the moment. But yeah, I can absolutely zone out. I have ghost tours. I've told the same story night after night after night after night. Especially the storytelling part, I can totally zone out and tell that story.

Mason Amadeus:

Interesting. Because I'm very into improv performance, and that is always a balance of analytical versus being present because listening is a big part of it. So when it's something that is rote but also interactive, that's got to be an interesting blend.

Paul Prater:



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UNPLUGGED EP 5
Paul Prater

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Yeah, it is. And when my mind starts wandering off then snap back into the moment, I catch myself doing that and go, "No."

Mason Amadeus:

"Be here."

Paul Prater:

"Be aware. Be in this moment. This is a wonderful moment. Be here."

Perry Carpenter:

Cool. That's super cool.

Paul Prater:

But admittedly, when you do the same thing night... It was great doing that run in Utah, but man, three shows a night, six days a week, it eventually does get to be a grind. But I remind myself, this isn't forever.

Perry Carpenter:

I can imagine the high points in that are the way that you get to interact with whatever the participant is, right? It's like, "How can I either find a funny way to play off this person or make their personality shine or make this feel different than the other thing?" Because this is a different person and they're going to have different words and reactions and so on.

Paul Prater:

Right. And I don't treat my spectators like props. Many mentalists do. They're just up there to do this rote action. I'll always start out with, "What's your name? Where are you from? Thank you for coming out tonight." I personalize them and humanize them. And then almost every routine, I have a question



Digital Folklore
UNPLUGGED EP 5
Paul Prater

<https://digitalfolklore.fm>

for them. And so yeah, that's where I get to play off that, like one of them on ghost tours. "Which do you think controls stronger in life? Fate or free will." And I love to hear people's responses. And sometimes they're funny and always have a follow-up. No matter what they say, I say, "So did you buy your tickets here tonight or did someone else buy your ticket?" And then always have fun with that, with fate or free will.

Perry Carpenter:

Nice.

Mason Amadeus:

Oh, that's wicked.

Perry Carpenter:

Let's talk about the ghost tours.

Paul Prater:

Sure.

Perry Carpenter:

First thing, I want to talk about the mindset of somebody that decides to go to a ghost tour. In folklore, there's this concept called legend tripping, which is you've heard about these interesting stories or phenomena and almost as a rite of passage, you decide to go on this thing and participate in it maybe because somebody dared you. There's things that we used to do in high school. Somebody would say, "There's an abandoned asylum on this hill, and if anybody goes in at 3:00 AM on a third Tuesday of the month, they're going to die. They never return." And then everybody turns it into a dare type of thing and it becomes a rite of passage.



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UNPLUGGED EP 5
Paul Prater

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I think that haunted tours serve that function for grown adults in a lot of ways is you get to still participate in some of those things. So as you've seen the types of people that come on these year after year, are there any things that they've shared with you about what they're hoping to see or what they want to experience with other people or just with the environment?

Paul Prater:

Yeah, it's pretty clear. There's basically two groups that come on the tours. You have the ghost people who are the believers who hope to see something or experience something, and you have the people who are there just like wink, wink, nudge, nudge, "We understand this is all just in good fun." And so I specifically cater to both of those groups on the tour. It's built that way to cater to both of those people because even before the ghost tours, I found that most of the people who came to my shows were women who brought their husbands who didn't want to be there because I can do something they can't.

And so I have a standard line I use right off the bat now, and part of it is, "There's a bunch of you who are wondering if I can really read your mind," and blah, blah, blah. But my next line is, "There are a smaller number of you who are wondering if I'm single." And now you can see the men bristle a little bit. And I go, "If you're buying dinner and drinks, yes, I am." But my follow-up is, "There's a smaller number of you still who are wondering if I'm gay. If you're buying dinner and drinks, yes, I am." And so I get that laugh right off the bat. The men then relax and they're like, "Okay, now I can enjoy the show."

So the ghost tours was the exact same way. It's relevant because women bring their husbands here like, "Oh, this is all a bunch of crap. I don't believe in this." So I make it fun. Right off the bat, I cater to them and I say right at the beginning, "I'm an attorney. I don't say that for the purpose of getting business, though look me up if you need a good lawyer. I say that because it means I'm a skeptic and it means I dug in and learned the history behind these stories, and I'm going to share that history with you tonight. This is not made up. These are the true stories. This is the real history." So that way, it really plays to... Unfortunately, that's generally the split that plays to the men, whereas the women want to hear about the ghost.

Perry Carpenter:



Digital Folklore
UNPLUGGED EP 5
Paul Prater

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Right. That's really cool. So describe the tour experience and maybe share one of the more interesting stories, either about why you created it or one that you like to share.

Mason Amadeus:

Just to tuck into your question too, the balance between history and legend that goes into it.

Paul Prater:

Right. I'll start by saying I started the tours because a friend of mine, Ed Underwood, had started ghost tours in Jonesboro, and he had asked me to take over. This was 15 years ago, and I told him I just had no interest. He was a performer as well. That's how we met. And he pretty much talked me into it. And I loved it and I wanted to create one here. Jonesboro is obviously two hours away from Little Rock and that was too far to drive.

So I went to our... Well, the way it started actually, and I tell this story on the tour, is one of the stops, we were sitting at this bar, me and the owner. And he looks up at this window and goes, "People say they see a ghost up there." And it hit me. If there's one story, there have to be more stories. There's not just one ghost.

So I went to the History Commission and they were super helpful. And the historian there already had an interest in this so he had ghost stories for me already. He had histories for me. He had photos for me. So he was really, really helpful in getting that all set up. And then one of my favorite stories, they're not all ghost stories. And to answer that question about the split, it's much more history than it is ghost stories. One of the reviews I got this year said it was still a five-star review so I'm happy. He goes, "The stories might not be as creepy as you want, but I sure learned a lot."

Mason Amadeus:

Nice.

Paul Prater:



Digital Folklore
UNPLUGGED EP 5
Paul Prater

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So yeah, the history component's very big. And I say at the beginning, "We're going to talk about the history, but you can't talk about the history without talking about the ghost because those stories are wrapped up in history. They're part of it."

So not every stop has a ghost story, but most of them do. Some of them are just interesting history, like Carrie Nation who would go and smash up bars and all that. She spoke in Argenta where I would do the tours where old church used to be, and I educate people about Carrie Nation. A lot of people aren't familiar with her. And I think though, maybe my favorite story on the tour is the one I end with. And I don't want to give too much of it away. It's a place called Four Quarter, and it's very well written about. Any listener could actually Google Four Quarter Bar and haunted in Arkansas and they're going to find the stories about this prostitute who was murdered there and people see her spirit there.

The part I'm not going to give away but I'll hint at is I tear apart that story, and it's the one most people are familiar with, if they are at all. If they're familiar with any of the stories, it's that one. And then I tear down this story and people are like, "Oh man, really? That doesn't hold water." But then I tell them about all of the unexplainable stuff that's happened there and I am a skeptic and I've experienced unexplainable stuff in that building. And one of the best stories about it is one of the bartenders was there at 10:00 in the morning. He was just putting in a water heater. They weren't even open yet. And he heard this crash and he went out to the bar and the bar top, the very top of, it's probably 12 foot high and there's a pot still behind beer cans, and that pot still is at the front edge of the bar in the ice bin. So it didn't just fall, it flew forward and it didn't disturb any of the beer cans.

And I tell this story and people are like, "Wow, that's weird." And the best part of it is they have a video camera pointing down the bar and the bar owner pulled the video and I show that to everyone on the tour.

Mason Amadeus:

Oh, wow.

Paul Prater:



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UNPLUGGED EP 5
Paul Prater

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It's totally unexplainable. So that's my favorite story because I tell the story that everyone knows, then tear it apart and then go, "But something's going on here. I don't know what." And I really love that because again, that plays to both the believers in the nonbelievers. Great. You've just torn apart this ghost story, but then the believers are like, "But all this stuff happened that's unexplainable." And I just love that. I love playing that. Again, like you said, I love playing with expectations.

Perry Carpenter:

I love that. Have you gone on the haunted tour at the Crescent Hotel or any of any other ones? What do you experience? As somebody who has done these yourself and then goes on other ones, what's the compare and contrast in your mind?

Paul Prater:

The biggest one is just the guide. You're a personality and you're a storyteller. If you're not a good storyteller, then the two are just, "Isn't that great?" I feel like you have to really set a place and a time where that's part of the fun to me with this. That is the illusion part. If there is one on the tour is that I'm having people look at these buildings and I have a flip book of what they look like in the past. So I'm really trying to get people to be present in a place and time and be able to envision what it was like.

Now, in the Crescent for instance, it's a little bit easier because it looks like what it always looked like. It's a creepy old Victorian hotel so you're present in that place in time automatically. But also another guy who started those, and he's a theater guy, and Keith had a background in theater. He doesn't run the tours anymore. He's older. But he always has theatrical people or theater people, and that to me is the key to having a good ghost tour. And I've done them all over.

Perry Carpenter:

That whole thing is basically a stage as well in the way that our minds work because it does look like your traditional haunted house or haunted hotel, and it has this huge reputation that's already set in expectation.



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UNPLUGGED EP 5
Paul Prater

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Paul Prater:

Exactly.

Perry Carpenter:

The most haunted hotel in the US or I think that's the claim, if not the world. So anybody that's done a slightest bit of research already has that frame set up. And then they go in and you read the reviews of people. They're like, "As we got closer, I started to feel sick." So I think that that's really, really interesting to see how those different environments work differently.

And I guess for you, you have the Argenta the way that it looks now, you've got your picture book of the way that it looked back then, and you have people filling in the stage some with their minds as well.

Paul Prater:

Right.

Perry Carpenter:

As you think about, and you may not have an answer right now, but would love to know if as you think about just the topic of legend, is there a favorite legend or urban legend that comes to mind that really resonated with you?

Paul Prater:

There is, but it's something more recent.

Perry Carpenter:

That's fine.

Paul Prater:



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UNPLUGGED EP 5
Paul Prater

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And I'll explain why. It came about through the ghost tours when I was doing the research for them. Because I did, I wrote a book too. I've got a Haunted Argenta book that has all the stories. But I did my research through archives and old newspapers and I found this legend that there was a werewolf in North Little Rock not far from where we do the ghost tours.

Now, when I read more about it and found what I could, people claimed on multiple occasions to see this shaggy hairy man walking wolf-like down into the swamps. There used to be swamps at the base of Park Hill, area of North Little Rock. They would tell their kids not to go down there because the werewolf might get them. But in reality, I think it's probably because the swamps are inherently dangerous. So by using the werewolf story, you keep the kids out of danger.

But where it got super interesting to me is I found another story where they said the werewolf had murdered someone. And I started going down this path and I found within a period of about 15 years, three people were murdered in the same way and their bodies dumped at almost the same location. And I took that to the History Commission and said, "Have you guys ever found this or recognized this?" And the answer was, "No. We think you probably found a serial killer." And that was really exciting that that tied in to the werewolf. The werewolf story is what set me down that path.

And totally coincidentally, one of my best friends, I was talking to him about the book while I was writing it and was telling him this story and I said, "Yeah. Well, the first girl that was killed was named Florence Shuket. And he went, "That's my family." He goes, "That's my mom's side of the family."

Mason Amadeus:

What the hell? Are you serious? That is wild.

Paul Prater:

And yeah, I love that. I love the whole story, first of all, about just the werewolf and trying to keep the kids out of the swamps. But then when it tied into the murders and I found the three different murders, and...

Perry Carpenter:



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UNPLUGGED EP 5
Paul Prater

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Has there been any follow-up after that?

Paul Prater:

I wrote it all up in the book as the Werewolf of Cherry Hill and wrote about those murders. But they were so long ago, I don't really know how they would tie anybody for sure. It was very hard to find much information about them aside from the newspapers back then loved to report like, "Oh, the neck was cut open and the body was ravaged," or whatever. But as far as follow-up arrest or anyone tried, they didn't write about that. It wasn't sensationalist. So it's often hard to find the follow-ups to stories like what happened at the end after this horrible thing.

Perry Carpenter:

All right, so this is a call-out to anybody that wants to start the next True-Crime podcast.

Mason Amadeus:

Yeah, right. The next Bear Brook.

Paul Prater:

There you go.

Perry Carpenter:

Werewolf of Cherry Hill. Somebody should do a series on that and investigate it. That would be pretty cool.

Paul Prater:

Yeah, I've got the start of it.

Mason Amadeus:



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UNPLUGGED EP 5
Paul Prater

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It's interesting because it's the root of a legend that you have uncovered. Because like you said, the swamps are inherently dangerous and people could just always have said that. So it's interesting to have linked that to it. And I'm curious too about, and this might be a creaky segue so step carefully across it, but I'm just curious how you feel about oral tradition. Because in a way, you're keeping that alive by doing these ghost tours in person, and I imagine at some point that you've explored that realm of things and thought about oral tradition.

Paul Prater:

Oh yeah, I love it. And I think part of that is growing up, my dad's family lived in a place called Greasy Creek, Kentucky, and you didn't really have good TV signal. There was really nothing to do out there. We would sit on the front porch and listen to the old folks tell stories. And I think that really just, that hit me. That was awesome. That was so foreign. This was the '80s but yet they still had an outhouse and you'd have to draw water out of the well to take a bath. It was so primitive and weird, and I loved it. But the storytelling was a big part of that. And so I think that's where... I think stories are hugely important. I think that's our most primitive form of entertainment, and it's still a valid form of entertainment even today. And that's awesome to me that with all of our technology, nothing can replace a good story.

Perry Carpenter:

What a great line that is.

[ending credits]

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UNPLUGGED EP 5
Paul Prater

<https://digitalfolklore.fm>

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