

## Altercation with a (Criss) Angel

When NBC's new show *Phenomenon* began taping a mile away from the Center for Inquiry/Los Angeles, our home-grown Independent Investigations Group (IIG) took notice. The show advertised that it sought America's next great mentalist, and there would be a competition—à la *American Idol* (voting and all)—to see who would be crowned the next “phenomenon.”

We weren't sure if the producers of the show considered the competitors performers or were treating them as having some sort of *real* powers—especially since longtime SKEPTICAL INQUIRER foe Uri Geller is one of them. So, we thought a closer look was in order and ordered tickets.

Geller appears on-camera along with magician Criss Angel as a commentator/judge of contestants vying for the title as best mentalist. Contestants compete until they are eliminated by phone and Internet voting. Angel, who has a show on A&E called *Mindfreak* where he performs big-time illusions, recently signed a giant contract with the Luxor Hotel in Las Vegas.

On Halloween night, IIGers Ross Blocher, Steve Muscarella, and I attended the taping of *Phenomenon* and were pleasantly surprised to witness a bit of an altercation between Angel and one of the performers. A guy named Jim Callahan performed a trick often called “automatic writing” where the mentalist claims to get information—in this case the identity or description of an item that was secretly placed in a box—from the “spirit” world. Callahan sat inside a ring of salt and after convulsing (while we laughed) for a few minutes, wrote down some words he supposedly got from the spirit of a dead author. Callahan claimed the author helped him identify the object in the box, a toy car. Applause, applause . . . judges, what do you think?

Geller, who professes to believe that spirits exist, went along with the stunt and complimented Callahan on his per-

formance. When Angel was asked what he thought of the feat, he replied, “I just think it's comical quite frankly,” and then proceeded to offer both Callahan and Geller a million dollars of his own money if they could guess the contents of two envelopes he pulled from his pocket. Neither “psychic” took Angel up on his seven-figure offer, but Callahan and Angel squared off on stage and had to be restrained.

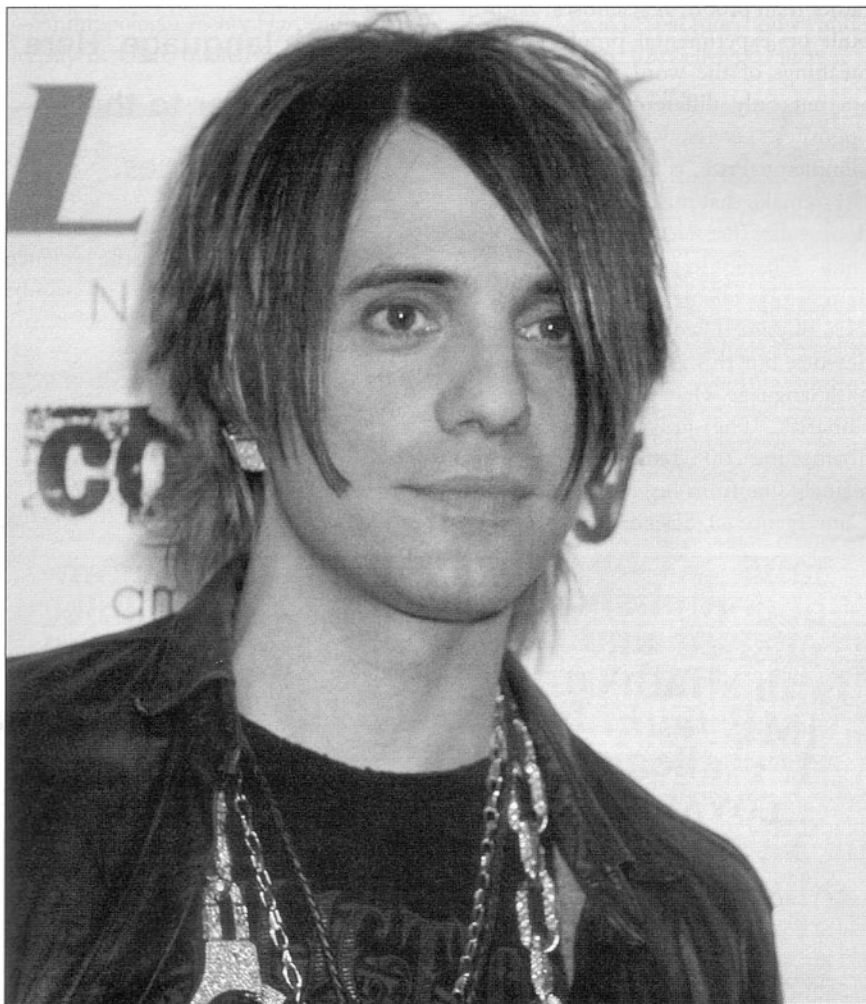
OK . . . we didn't believe that fisticuffs were narrowly avoided, but there was no doubt that Criss Angel, *uber*-popular magician to an entire generation of young rock and rollers, had challenged not only contestant Jim Callahan but also the very

*notion* of someone getting information from a spiritual world. Angel continued his assault off-camera during the commercial break and then warned audience members about paranormal fraud before leaving at the end of the show.

Skeptics should applaud Angel for defending the fine arts of mentalism and illusion while defying two promoters of the paranormal to put up or shut up. Keep up the good work, Criss.

—Jim Underdown

*Jim Underdown is executive director of the Center for Inquiry/Los Angeles, and chair and founder of the Independent Investigations Group.*



Criss Angel. Credit: Chris Connor / WENN [Photo via Newscom]