

FLAIR sunday

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Jonathan Austin's
24 HOUR **Emergency**
JUGGLING AND MAGIC SERVICE

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Jonathan Austin, juggling fire at the St. Patrick's Festival, is a familiar face on the local scene.

So far, so good

Life's one big gig for juggler, magician Jonathan Austin

BY BILL LOHMANN
TIMES-DISPATCH STAFF WRITER

As music blared and coffee machines hummed, Jonathan Austin sat at a table in the coffee shop sipping a wild berry smoothie.

He swore off coffee a while back. Caffeine, he explained, makes him too jittery, which is not a good thing to be when you're juggling burning sticks and 14-pound bowling balls.

Austin is one of Richmond's most recognizable figures and, despite his youthful age of 32, one of its most veteran performers. He's a juggler, a magician and a comic. Most of all, he is everywhere.

Jonathan Austin's 24-Hour Emergency Juggling and Magic Service is the name of his one-man shop, and he's not kidding.

He performs at backyard birthday parties, corporate gatherings and city festivals. He makes frequent appearances at schools, churches and nursing homes. He's worked at Disney World and the White House. He's ridden his unicycle in New York's Central Park, he's amazed and amused on cruise ships. He's roamed restaurants, conventions and parade routes. He's entertained young children in broad daylight and shift workers in the middle of the night. He loves entertaining at public libraries, where, he said, "I really like the vibes."

His biggest crowd? Thousands at halftime of a college basketball game. The smallest? One. Yet, he seems to unleash the same amount of energy regardless of the size of his audience.

He works about 200 gigs a year, but only because no one has asked him to do more.

"Jonathan is probably the hardest-working entertainer hereabouts," said Norman Roscher, a local musician and longtime friend. "Jonathan is not just an entertainer, he is a performance artist who lives his art 24-7. He loves what he does."

Morning sunlight streamed into the new Crossroads Coffeehouse, a converted gas station on Forest Hill Avenue, and bathed Austin in a spotlight-like glow. Crossroads is a favorite stop for

Austin, who lives a few blocks away and on this particular morning was nattily attired in starched white tuxedo shirt with cufflinks, blue vest and black pants. He was scheduled to perform at a local child-care center later in the day, but he was already working a deck of cards. As he sipped his smoothie and talked, Austin shuffled and flipped them and practically made the things dance. It is a habit bordering on an obsession.

"I go through two or three packs a week," he said with a smile. "I'm trying to cut down."

If he doesn't have a deck of cards handy, he might pull out coins and start working them between his fingers, or he might remove a rubber band or two from the stash on his wrist and start stretching them from finger to finger. It's hard to say whether this is nervous energy or relentless practice, but, either way, one would hate to see what caffeine might do to him.

Actually, Austin said he subscribes to a Chinese theory that says a person's fingers are connected to a variety of vital organs, meaning busy fingers can lead to, among other things, greater brain function.

"I don't know whether that's true," he said, "but I'm counting on it."



FAMILY PHOTO

Now 32, Austin has grown up in the public spotlight. He took up juggling as a 12-year-old (above) and practiced everywhere, including his grandparents' back yard. As a 15-year-old (left) he was already in demand as a paid performer.

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Websites By:
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Austin

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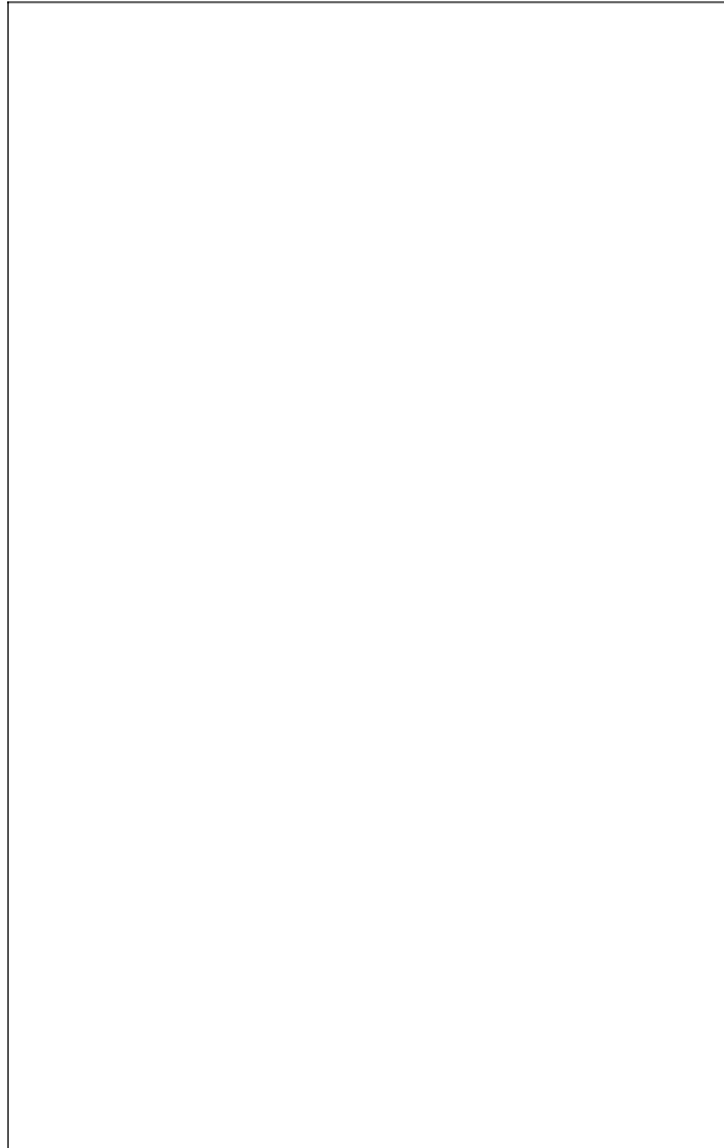
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JONATHAN AUSTIN ()
24-HOUR EMERGENCY JUGGLING AND MAGIC SERVICE (+)

TO FIND OUT MORE:

CINDY BLANCHARD/TIMES-DISPATCH

Combining magic, juggling and comedy is a balancing act for Austin, a favorite at festivals in the Richmond area. Crowds gathered last month to watch these performances at the St. Patrick's Festival.



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