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THE PERFORMER

An Exclusive Interview With Darryl Purpose

BY RICHARD MUNCHKIN

DARRYL PURPOSE IS A BATTLE-SCARRED VETERAN OF THE BLACKJACK WARS. HE moved to Las Vegas at 19 and learned just enough about counting cards to lose all his money. He fell into a familiar pattern in Las Vegas—working a job and blowing his paycheck. At the same time, though, he was learning something about blackjack, because a year later he was one of the best players on the Ken Uston team.

Though the last bet Darryl made as part of a Ken Uston team was in December 1979, that part of his resumé follows him to this day. But his subsequent blackjack tales circle the globe, from Las Vegas to Korea, from Istanbul to Sri Lanka. He dealt with the Sicilian Mafia, the Japanese Yakuza, even the Tamil Tigers, who invented suicide bombing.

Today, Darryl is retired from blackjack. He hasn't played a hand in many years, though you wouldn't know it from the Griffin fliers that continue to pop up, claiming a Darryl sighting in Reno or St. Louis or New Orleans. Instead, he now does 150 concerts a year as a touring singer/songwriter. I've seen him in concert and his audience is mesmerized by his tales of traveling the world playing his guitar and, yes, blackjack. US Airline's in-flight magazine, *Attaché*, featured Darryl in its August 2003 issue. "Darryl Purpose," it wrote, "has the voice of James Taylor, the brains of Bob Dylan, and the soul of Willie Nelson."

You can purchase his CDs (he now has six) or check out his concert calendar at darrylpurpose.com.

How did you first get interested in blackjack?

Darryl Purpose: My mother put a copy of *Beat the Dealer* in my Christmas stocking when I was 16. I was interested in cards and games and I had a natural talent for math, so it appealed to me. I've since

forgiven her.

You couldn't play at that age.

Right. I was a little lost when I got out of high school, but I signed up for college. I was a classical guitar major. My left hand started to hurt for some reason, and they

put a splint on it. Then my right hand went. So there I was, a classical guitar major at Cal State Northridge, with splints on both hands. I dropped out of school, got in my '62 Chevy, and headed to Vegas. I had \$50, a couple of shirts, and my guitar.

Were you 21?

I was 19. I spent the \$50 to get a room for a week downtown. I wandered around living off the freebies. I was a regular at Centerfold's free breakfast, from 6 to 9 a.m. I eventually landed a job selling ballpoint pens in a phone room. Of course, they didn't pay right away. They paid a commission the following week. I was on the street for a little while.

You were sleeping in your car?

Right. I think my first paycheck was \$20. The next week was \$50, and the next week was \$200. I went to the Stardust, and thought I would gamble with \$50. I turned it into \$500. I thought, "This is easy."



You'd learned to count already?

I'd read Thorp's book. I was a bad counter like thousands of other people. From there it was a year and a half of working this phone job and regularly losing my paycheck. But each time I lost, I tried to learn more about the game. I was so immersed in blackjack that I had a recurring dream of being chased around by a giant eight of clubs. Eventually, I became proficient with Hi-Opt 1.

How did you go from hearing about professional teams to being a member of one?

I was playing graveyard downtown during that time. They were generally pretty cool about small-stakes counters. Steve Wynn would be on the floor at the Golden Nugget. He could count down a deck himself, and he would talk to you about it. He'd let me go one to four in dollars on the single deck.

One day I was playing my one to four in dollars at the Horseshoe and I noticed this guy at my table playing one to four in nickels. He seemed to be counting. I followed him into the Fremont coffee shop. I told him, "I'm a card counter too. I count the Hi-Opt 1 with a side of aces." That player was a guy named Art, and we became friends. He lived in Berkeley at 21 Channing Street. He would say, "My age is 21. My address is 21. And my profession is 21."

Art and I formed a little team with a \$2,000 bankroll. We ran around playing single deck betting up to \$20. I was losing and Art was winning, but overall we were down. It was all Art's money. It wasn't fun.

You know the problem with blackjack? It's that the bankrolls that are no fun drag on forever. The good bankrolls are over quickly. You spend most of your career down.

Although I'd only heard of professional teams, Art had met a guy in the Bay Area who was one of the big players [known as "BPs"] on the Ken Uston team. One day Art told me that this BP was living in the same apartment complex as me. It was a crummy little complex called Enchanted Gardens. I went around the corner, and knocked on the guy's door. I said, "Hi, I'm Darryl. I'm your neighbor and I play blackjack." His

name was Ron Karr. He was a nice guy and he invited me in and offered me \$25 per shift to count down decks and call in the big player. I pulled Art into it. So we counted down decks for players on Ron's team. I called my mother and said "Mom, I'm a professional blackjack player."

It didn't take too many plays to be barred for the first time. It was at the Marina in Vegas. We'd just started and this pit boss came up and pointed at me. He said, "You." Then he pointed at Art, "And you." And then he pointed to the BP, "And you. If you guys don't want to end up in the desert, get out of here right now and don't come back." That was exciting, so I called my Mom again and said, "Mom, it works."

At some point during that time I quit my job selling pens, and that was the last real job I had.

One of the players wanted to put up \$10,000 to form a counting team to bet up to \$100. He invited me and Art to be part of that. I remember thinking, "Bet \$100!" My apartment cost \$200 a month and I'd been making \$200 a week before taxes. The idea of walking into a casino and betting \$100 blew me away. I was very nervous. We won some money and they raised the top bet to \$200. That was too much. I thought I'd have to quit. I was just too nervous, but somehow I got over it. That team ended winning about \$60,000, which was a great win back then, especially considering we started with a \$10,000 bank. I'd won about \$25,000 of it.

At some point we got invited to this big meeting with Ron. It was all very dramatic and they revealed that they were working on a shuffle-tracking computer. Art and I were invited to be part of that team. At the end of the meeting, one of the players said, "You have another option. I happen to know that Ken Uston's team is looking for players. You can try out for them or you can stay here with the shuffle-tracking computer team." True to our personalities, Art picked the computer team and I picked the Ken Uston team. I was totally star-struck at the idea of being on the Uston team. I wanted the glory of being on that stage.

So now you must go meet "the great Ken Uston."

Exactly. He was already the world's most famous blackjack player. Of course, that was because none of the real blackjack players want to be famous. That didn't matter to me. I was totally in awe of him. I counted really well at the time. I quickly made my place on the team, because I tested so well.

Tell me about the first meeting.

The team was operating out of the Jockey Club and the stories of Ken and the Jockey Club were mythic. All the debauchery and excellent card playing in this mysterious scene full of shag carpeting. I got to the Jockey Club and it was just as advertised.

Debauchery and card playing?

Drugs, women, and really good card counting. It was all new to me. I was so young and green, not just in blackjack, but in life.

Drugs and gambling sound like a dangerous mix.

Although there were a lot of drugs and alcohol around, we had strict rules about not mixing them with playing. I never drank and didn't do many drugs either.

Do you remember what your test was?

Well, they were looking for people to call plays for a big player.

The BPs were always people who looked like they should be betting a lot of money at the blackjack tables. Trying to look like high rollers as young twentysomethings was comical at best. We tried to dress up, but we weren't very good at it. We wished we were older, or Chinese, or something. The BPs solved that problem. I even turned out my mother as a BP later in my career. What a relief it was not to have to bet the money myself, and I was called Chunk, because of my proclivity to have the BPs "chunk" the money out there.

The downside of this was that they sent me out on my first plays into incredibly steamy situations with BPs who were already very hot. I was barred right away and they knew I was part of the Ken Uston team. Within weeks, I was completely Griffinized for life. My picture was in most casinos in the world before I'd turned 22.



Did you have any hard barrings?

I had a variety of barrings. One time at the Dunes I was pulled into the back room by the same security guard who beat up Mark Estes at the Hilton. He sat there with a pair of pliers and we talked about Mark and old times.

Did he threaten you with the pliers?

It was an implied threat. He was sitting at his desk in an office. There was no reason for him to have a pair of pliers. He was trying to talk me out of some money. Eventually, I was arrested for disturbing the peace, but they dropped the charges.

Did you call your Mom?

No. At that point it wasn't fun anymore.

The difference between playing music and playing blackjack is that when you get good at music, they ask you to come back. When you get good at blackjack ... It's very wearing psychologically to constantly be persona non grata.

One time I was calling plays on the single deck at Caesars. I was betting quarters while the BP was betting thousands on the other side of the table. At some point I heard the pit boss say, "Oh, there's Purpose. He must have lost his bankroll. He's down to betting quarters." They never caught on. Caesars at that time had a no-barring policy. They were the classy joint back then.

I've read that you were the fastest counter on the team.

Part of it was smoke and mirrors and didn't translate into [success] on the table. It was really about how quickly you could spread the cards. Someone would say "go" with a stopwatch and I'd spread the cards. I'd be looking at many cards at a time. I'd look at the last group of cards and say, "stop," and fold the deck up in one big motion. What they didn't know was that I was still counting, because I'd taken a mental picture of the last quarter of the deck. I could regularly count a single deck in ten seconds.

When did you get back together with Ken?

Ken called and told me about the first no-barring period in Atlantic City. He said, "Come to Atlantic City. There's a game here." This was the team he wrote about in Two Books on Blackjack.

I was out there for two weeks. I met Ron, my neighbor from the Enchanted Gardens, and Mark Estes. Mark was a professional bowler, and was most notable in the blackjack world for being beaten up by a security guard at the Las Vegas Hilton in 1977. That was a big deal, because they hadn't gotten physical with card counters (that we knew of) before that. We were all college dropouts who were good at math. We weren't tough guys in any way. [Mark Estes successfully sued the Hilton.]

Was it just the four of you, or were there more on the team?

There were others. Ken needed to be-

Ken [Uston] was mostly a figurehead on the team, the guy who could inspire people to get together and make some money. Ken was a sharp guy and a fine blackjack player. But his skill was getting other people to figure out the nuts and bolts of things.

lieve that our team members were better than anyone else was. A lot of the team still used the Revere Advanced Point Count. It was a three-level count and everyone believed that using this stronger count was a lot better than any one-level count could be. There was an elite sense of what it took to win at card counting. Over the years this was revealed to be false and now everyone uses the simplest count, the High-Low.

You said this bank lasted two weeks.

Yeah. It was on this bank that I won my first fifteen sessions, which pretty much puts to rest the argument of who's the best blackjack player in the world [laughs].

After Atlantic City, did you and Ken play hole cards?

I don't think Ken ever got into hole cards.

He talks about it in his book.

Ken didn't really get into it. He also didn't believe in shuffle tracking. You start to believe that you're something special and you get closed to new ideas. I think that's what was going on with Ken.

Ken and I were friends, as much as someone could be friends with Ken. He was alternately inspirational and maddening, but always interesting to hang out with. He was in a constant battle with chemical dependency. When you dug beneath the hype, he was a likable, vulnerable, and terribly unhappy guy. One of my most vivid memories is of seeing him in Reno the day after a security guard had sent him to the hospital with broken bones in his face. Boy, he looked bad. Later he wondered whether having

his face rearranged like that was going to be a problem when he got older. But he died of a heroin overdose in Paris a few years later, so I guess he needn't have worried. I did care about him, but I also spent most of my life trying to live down the heat I got being on his team.

I wanted to prove that I could do better than Ken's teams. And, in fact, we did a lot of innovative and interesting things after I placed my last bet as a member of his team. Still, the reason you want to interview me is because I was part of the Ken Uston team. Ken Uston is still the world's most famous blackjack player.

After the first Atlantic City trip, did you go back to Vegas?

I went back to playing in Vegas. I was only there for two weeks. I went back to Caesars, and for one of the very few times in my life I gambled. I decided to blow \$500. I went to the crap table and bet \$100 on the pass line and took odds. I turned the \$500 into \$1,000 and went to the baccarat table. I bet \$500 per hand and kept betting more as I won. They all knew that I was Darryl Purpose, professional card counter. They also knew that professional card counters don't play baccarat or any other game unless they have an edge. It drove them nuts. I won thirty consecutive hands in baccarat. My last hand, I lost some large bet, said, "Thank you very much," and walked with \$20,000.

They're probably still studying those tapes trying to figure out what you were doing.

They probably are. But they never barred me.

Then I went to Aruba. They had a game with good rules, including early surrender, and it was another counter convention. We were holding out our chips, because we didn't want them to know how much we'd won. At some point they changed the chips and announced that if we didn't cash in the old chips in the next 24 hours, we wouldn't be able to. The heat was coming down. My friend Craig was the guinea pig to go cash out chips. He got the cash, then came back to the room. I was in the bathtub. He said, "Darryl, we have to go now." I got out of the bathtub and didn't even dry off; I just threw on my clothes. We grabbed my guitar and our suitcases and took the elevator down to the basement. We walked out, down the beach half a mile, and caught a taxi to the airport. Two months later, I ran into a guy who was there when that happened. He said, "Where were you guys? The security guards were looking all over the island for you."

How long before the phone call came to go back to Atlantic City?
August '79.

How long were you there this time?
I would say from August to December. It was during this time that I made a bet with Ken. I was trying to lose weight and he was trying to stop drinking alcohol. I bet I could go longer without eating than he could without drinking [alcohol]. The first one to break the fast would lose. Given that you need food to live, you can see how bad Ken's problem was—that we would consider this to be an even proposition.

Who won?

I did. I think he lasted four or five days.

How was Ken regarded as a player?

Ken was mostly a figurehead on the team, the guy who could inspire people to get together and make some money. Ken was a sharp guy and a fine blackjack player. But his skill was getting other people to figure out the nuts and bolts of things. About a year after we played together, he was involved in some bank, and I got a call from him asking me about betting levels and element of ruin. I told him he should read his book.

Have you ever been cheated?

In Istanbul I played against a short shoe. The count was plus twenty-something when the cut card came out after the first shoe. It was a trackable shuffle, so I cut the little cards to the back. The count came out twenty-something again. I backed my bet down to the minimum and watched this for a couple more shoes, then left. Oddly, I'd won about 20 top bets in those first two shoes before I realized the deck was short.

What about in the U.S.?

Very early in my career, I was playing \$50 to \$200 on a single deck in Lake Tahoe. I found a dealer named Pat at the South Tahoe Nugget who dealt a particularly great game. I played against him for forty minutes and went through about \$2,000. Later, I was talking to him at the bar. I told him I was a musician. He told me that his girlfriend was a singer and invited me to his house for dinner. I took him up on it. His girlfriend cooked dinner and the three of us hung out.

At some point I didn't feel like pretending to be someone I wasn't, so I told him that I was a card counter. He went into his bedroom and came out with a piece of paper. I recognized it as Lance Humble's Hi-Opt 1. He started quizzing me about my numbers. I not only knew the numbers on the paper he had, but the revisions put out by Julian Braun later. So he got that I was real.

I ended up spending the night and the next morning after breakfast he came to me with a deck of cards in his hand. He said, "You were honest with me and I'm going to be honest with

you." He placed a ten and a six face up on the table. He had me turn them over and tuck them under some chips. He reached over with his deck hand and when he turned them over it was a blackjack. He repeated this a few times. We became friends and played blackjack together for some years. To this day he says that he didn't cheat me that day at the Nugget. I believe him.

One of your songs is called "Dangerous Game." It's about an experience in Sri Lanka. What made you go there?

At that point I was pretty steamy in Nevada and I was hard to disguise, so I ended up playing in a lot of obscure places. We'd heard that Sri Lanka had a significant advantage off the top. I forget the exact rules, but it was maybe a .5% to 1% advantage. I went with Art, and it's such an odd place, even for globetrotting blackjack players.

On the way to Colombo on the plane, I opened a tourist book about Sri Lanka. It said that one of the odd things about the people in Colombo is that when they want to say, "yes," they shake their head from side to side, the way we say "no." I thought that was the strangest thing, so I turned to the guy next to me on the plane. He was from Colombo and I said, "It says in here that when you want to say yes, you shake your head from side to side. Is that true?" He shook his head from side to side and I thought, "Of course not. That's ridiculous." I'd go up to a taxi and say, "Can you take me to the casino?" He'd shake his head from side to side, and I'd go look for another taxi. It took me a couple days to catch on.

It's a beautiful country, but at that time there were two civil wars going on. The Tamil Tigers, who invented suicide bombings, were battling from the north. It was fierce and ugly, and bodies were turning up every day. At the Colombo Hilton where we were staying, they had about

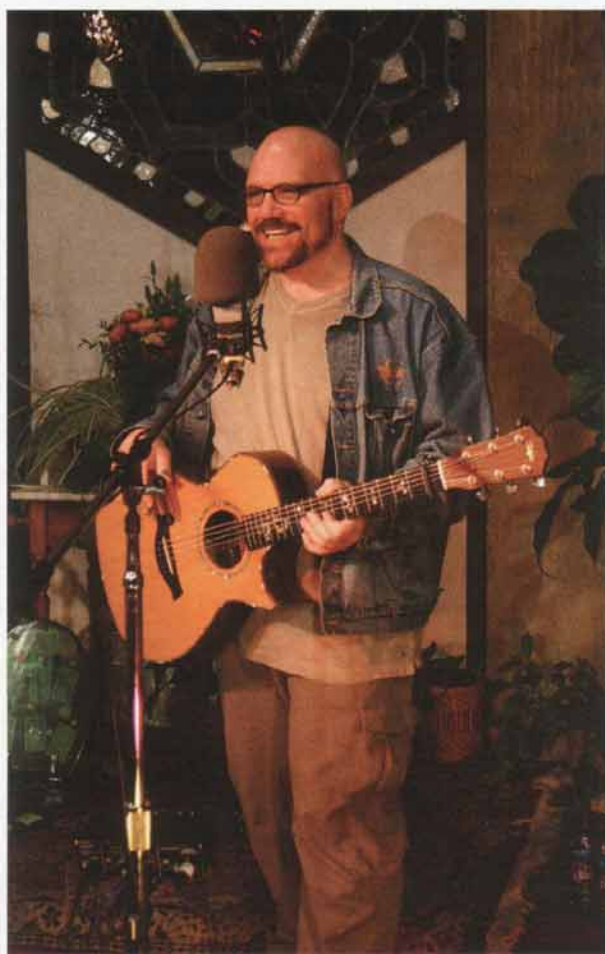
15% occupancy. There's a picture of me at the pool, and I'm the only person there. I'm reading a newspaper and the headline says, "Parties to Replace Slain Candidates."

We would read the paper every morning just to check if the place we ate lunch at was still open, that it hadn't been bombed.

Were there many people in the casino?

The casinos were very small, maybe three or four tables at the most. There were other players, but not many.

After a few days at one casino, I got the tap on the shoulder. The casino owner invited me to the back room. The owner was part Dutch and part Indian. He spoke English very well. He accused me of being a professional blackjack player. In his mind that was the equivalent of cheating. He kept repeating, "It's a very dangerous game you're playing." At the time I felt like I was just doing my job. I wasn't particularly afraid. My job was to play until they didn't allow me to, then take the money home. He was basically telling me to leave without my



chips. I had between \$5,000 and \$10,000. My attitude was, "No way. I'm not leaving without the chips."

Then he wanted me to give up half the chips. Again, I was, "No way." We had this 45-minute conversation and I ended up giving him \$200 and keeping the rest. I declined his offer of a ride back to the hotel. I got on the phone and called Art. I let him know the situation I was in and asked him to come get me. He asked me, "Do you think they might kill you?" I answered, "Yes, that's a possibility." He sent a taxi to pick me up. We got on the next plane out of there and never went back.

Did you play in Korea?

On the way to Sri Lanka we were in Korea. Somehow we ended up playing blackjack at the Disabled American Veterans Club. There were no disabled people, no Americans, and no veterans. As I understand it, this place was a front for a Yakuza-run casino and meeting place. Art and I went in there and lost, and lost, and lost. It was a \$300 limit and we got stuck \$20,000. We lost all this money, then went to Sri Lanka. After Sri Lanka, we returned to Korea to win back our money. One day we just could not lose a hand. We started cashing out a few thousand at a time. That worked for a while, but then all of a sudden they didn't have any more money. Art and I left being owed the balance.

Did you take the chips or a check? Or was it, "We'll pay you the next time we see you."?

It was exactly that—we'll pay you next time. What were we going to do?

I came back the next day and was asking for their superiors. They wanted to deal with me in the front room and have me go away. I wasn't going to let that happen. I started opening doors. I ended up bursting into some Yakuza meeting. There were all these Japanese guys sitting around a conference table and I started talking in English about how I wanted my money. I did leave there alive that day.

A couple of days passed and they called me and said, "We've got your money. Come on down." Right, like I'm going to go down there and they're just

going to give me the money. Before I went I called another blackjack player named Jake. He was the only guy I knew in Seoul at the time. I told him what was going on and that I was a little worried. I said, "If you don't hear from me in an hour, do whatever you can. Call the embassy, or the police, or whatever."

I got in a taxi, but we got into one of those remarkable Seoul traffic jams and it occurred to me that I wouldn't be able to call Jake within the hour.

Luckily, we were stopped next to an American Army base. I got out of the cab and found a little hole in the chain-link fence where the guard was standing. He took me to a phone and I called Jake, who was beyond worried. The end of the story is, I got there and they gave me all the money.

One of the players I interviewed in the past said, "How did we ever play blackjack before there were cell phones?"

Right. How did we live before cell phones? A lot of people got lost going from one play to another. One guy didn't know about the Sahara in Vegas, but he did know about the Sahara in Lake Tahoe. In Vegas, he got the signal to go to the backup club, the Sahara, and he went to the airport and hopped a plane for Tahoe.

You've told me about getting hassled in casinos around the world. Did you ever stop and say, "This is dangerous, and I don't want to do this anymore."?

I was ready to hop a plane to play in Iraq until I started playing music full-time in 1996. Sometime in 1999, maybe, I got a call from Art who wanted me to go to what I considered the most dangerous place I could play blackjack. He offered me quite a lot of money and I said no. I thought it was too dangerous.

For me the game was to accomplish something, to get really good at something. I'd already done it. I got to the top of the blackjack world. It just wasn't interesting to me anymore. It wasn't about the money. It was about picking an endeavor and trying to be the best. At that time I was driving hundreds of miles to play guitar and sing, sometimes just for tips. That was more interesting to me than going to a dangerous place and

being paid a lot of money to gamble.

You say you've accomplished what you wanted to in blackjack, yet you're now participating in Ultimate Blackjack Tour tournaments. What got you playing in these UBT events?

Some friends and I wanted to take a vacation and one of them thought it would be fun to coordinate it with the UBT event in Aruba. I'd never played tournament blackjack before, but I gave it a try. I played a \$540-buy-in table and won, then played another and won that too. I was hooked. At that point I thought it might be good to learn something about how to play Elimination BJ [laughs].

You liked it enough to go to the event in St. Kitts?

Yes. I enjoyed the format and I wanted to see if I could have even better results by practicing and developing my UBT chops.

Did you have better results?

No! Turns out there's a lot of luck in this format in the short run and you don't have to be an expert to win. I'm not used to that kind of game, which makes it interesting. There were some pretty good players there as well.

What do you think of Elimination Blackjack?

I'm enjoying the challenge of learning a new game. I've never played poker and there are elements of poker in this game. The elimination rounds bring excitement to the middle rounds of the tournament that you wouldn't normally have.

For the non-card counter out there, what advice would you give him about playing Elimination Blackjack?

I'd tell them to give it a try. It's a fun format and you don't have to be an expert to win. •

*Richard Munchkin is a writer, producer, and director of film and television, and a prolific chronicler of professional gamblers. His interviews appear in magazines, online, and in his book *Gambling Wizards-Conversations with the World's Greatest Gamblers*. More of his interviews can be read at blackjackforumonline.com.*