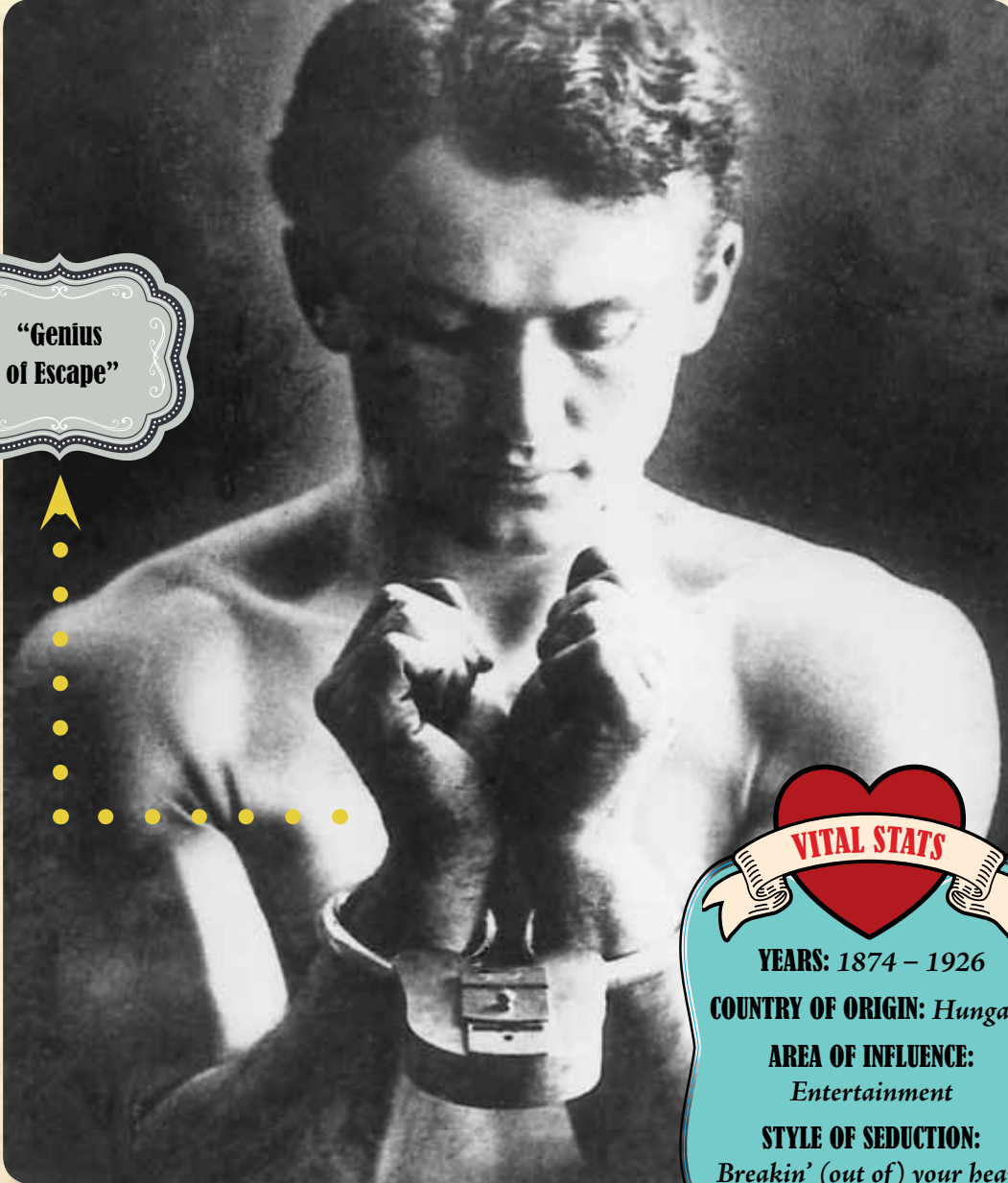


# HARRY HOUDINI

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“Genius  
of Escape”

## VITAL STATS

**YEARS:** 1874 – 1926

**COUNTRY OF ORIGIN:** Hungary

**AREA OF INFLUENCE:**  
Entertainment

**STYLE OF SEDUCTION:**  
Breakin’ (out of) your heart



**F**or magician Harry Houdini, no act was too outrageous. He made his name by popularizing escape acts that were pretty much nuts, from getting buried alive to being submerged underwater while wrapped in a straitjacket.

## ➤ HOUDINI’S LIFE STORY

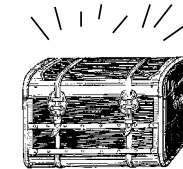
Born to a Zionist rabbi and homemaking mother in Budapest in 1874, the young Houdini (born Ehrich Weiss) began tossing newspapers on neighbors’ front porches and shining shoes to help support the family once they moved to the United States. After leaving home at the age of twelve to see the country on his own, the tween sent a letter home to his mother that was signed “Your truant son.” He clearly had a sense of humor to go with his death wish. After Houdini returned, the family gave him a taste of adventure when they moved to New York City just a year later. The thirteen-year-old found a gig cutting fabric in a garment district factory. While experiencing success in sports in school (which would prove to be a great blessing in his later career), the future illusionist stumbled upon *Memoirs of Robert-Houdin: Ambassador, Author, Conjuror* and was immediately taken with the world of magic.

Adding a final *i* to Robert-Houdin’s name to complement his budding onstage persona, Houdini began to teach himself tricks, booking himself at traveling fairs and amusement parks as

a part of the attractions. One of his first tricks was inspired simply by the materials around him: Houdini would ask witnesses to tie him up with nearby rope and lock him in a cabinet, and somehow he always managed to reemerge free of his restraints. This fascination with self-imposed bondage became a theme in his work, and calling himself the “Handcuff King,” he used the shackles as a kind of trademark feature in his acts.

Houdini slowly gained notoriety in America as part of a double act with a menagerie of props meant to utterly constrain his movements—locks and keys, straitjackets, sealed chests, and even coffins. But he grew impatient with his level of fame in the United States and took off on a European tour to amaze what he thought might be more easily impressed audiences across the Atlantic.

It did the trick, and he happily sailed to stardom while honing such acts as the Milk Can Escape, in



which he folded himself into what was essentially a large metal milk bottle (large for a milk bottle, that is, not large for a human) that was then filled with water and sealed. After two minutes, out he would pop, having apparently held his breath and managed to force his way free despite a very limited sphere of movement. (It was later explained that the “seal” on the milk can was compromised, even though audiences couldn’t detect it. Still, it was quite a trick.) A natural performer, he



began applying his unbelievable control over his body as a silent film actor and spent much of his final years adding to his written work on magic, which is now in the possession of the Library of Congress.

In October of 1926, at age fifty-two, Houdini accepted the challenge from a young man to deliver a few blows to his stomach. He had accepted these kinds of challenges numerous times before, but this time he was taken by surprise. After receiving the punches, he fell ill, his appendix ruptured, and he died of peritonitis on Halloween.

#### ➤ THE STORY OF HIS SEX LIFE

Houdini met fellow performer Beatrice “Bess” Rahner—a Brooklyn girl born and raised—on the road and married her in 1894. They began touring as a double act with “The Beautiful Bess” as Harry’s magician’s assistant. The two lovers had agreed that should anything happen to Houdini during an act, she would attempt to make contact with him in the afterlife by means of a séance.

After making such attempts for a decade, the disenchanted Bess decided, “Ten years is long enough to wait for any man.”

### HOUDINI AND SPIRITUALISM

Even though Houdini and his wife agreed to try and stay in touch after he passed away, Houdini was deeply opposed to such activities and fought against them for much of his life. Houdini’s acts relied in equal measure on planning, physical ability, and a few shortcuts, but it seems possible that his experience in showmanship contributed to his skepticism about “spiritualism”—the belief that souls survive after death and can be contacted via mediums, for instance. Spiritualism was very popular at the time. In fact, Sherlock Holmes creator Arthur Conan Doyle was himself a believer, and, since he and Houdini were friends, they engaged in a spirited debate on the topic for quite some time. (It remains unclear who exactly won that argument.) Like Doyle, Houdini appeared to want to believe but could never quite get there.

#### ➤ WHY HE MATTERS

Houdini was entirely self-taught and driven by a passion for dazzling audiences with impossible feats. His legacy includes the invention of the escape from a straitjacket and the underwater

chamber trick. Also highlighting his résumé was the biggest feat attempted on a magician’s stage: the disappearance of a live elephant. In an era of cabarets and flappers, Houdini took stage performance to a whole new level, setting a precedent for entertainers to push their acts to the limit.



#### ➤ BEST FEATURE: His audacity.

Preoccupied since childhood with what others told him was beyond the realm of possibility, Houdini made a name for himself by always pushing the envelope. While his utter fearlessness in

pleasing crowds and pushing his own physical limits eventually may have contributed to his death, we’re pretty sure he wouldn’t have had it any other way.

➤ **HEAT RATING:** If you want to be a star, then you have to bring the heat.



Houdini was obsessed with death. He was also obsessed with fame. He was short, stocky, and bowlegged. His pointy nose and reverse widow’s peak don’t exactly say “come hither,” but there’s no denying the appeal of such a devoted risk-taker. There was pretty much nothing he wouldn’t do. He was, without a doubt, a star.

### QUOTABLES

*“He had the essential masculine quality of courage to a supreme degree. Nobody has ever done, and nobody in all human probability will ever do, such reckless feats of daring. His whole life was one long succession of them.”*

Sir Arthur Conan Doyle

*“Houdini, the magician who debunked magic, could not bear to see the great rationalist [Arthur Conan] Doyle enchanted by ghosts and frauds. And so he did what any friend would: He set out to prove spiritualism false and rob his friend Doyle of the only comforting fiction that was keeping him sane. It was the least he could do.”*

comedian John Hodgman

*“People either didn’t believe Houdini when he said that his tricks on film were real, or they didn’t care.”*

New York Times critic John Leonard