



Harry Houdini

Born: *Erik Weisz* (later anglicized to *Ehrich Weiss*), March 24, 1874, in Budapest, Hungary.

Died: October 31, 1926 (aged 52) in Detroit, Michigan, U.S.

◆ How He Became a Magician

As a child, Houdini's family emigrated from Hungary to the United States, settling first in Wisconsin.

He showed early talent for physical feats, joining circuses and performing acrobatics and contortion work.

He became fascinated with magic after reading the autobiography of famed French magician **Jean-Eugène Robert-Houdin** and adopted the stage name *Harry Houdini* in his honor when he began performing professionally around **1891**, later adding the "i" to suggest "like Houdin."

◆ Influences

- **Jean-Eugène Robert-Houdin:** Houdini's stage name came from admiration of this pioneer of modern theatrical magic.
- **Joseph Rinn:** A magician at the Pastime Athletic Club who coached Houdini in his early performance skills.
- Houdini also absorbed inspiration from other vaudeville performers and "strongman" acts in the 1890s as he developed his unique performance style.

◆ What Type of Magic He Did



Houdini became best known for **escape acts** rather than traditional sleight-of-hand illusions:

- **Handcuff escapes**, chains, ropes, and escapes from locked containers.
- Daring feats from **underwater tanks**, straitjackets, sealed milk cans, coffins, and suspended positions high above the ground.
- Houdini's approach combined **physical strength, dexterity, concentration, and showmanship**; his escapes drew huge crowds in open-air exhibitions as well as theaters.
- Later in his career, he also **starred in silent films**, ran his own film studio, and actively **debunked fraudulent spiritualists and mediums** by exposing fake psychic phenomena.

◆ Performance Career Span

Houdini began his professional performing career in the **early 1890s** — billing himself under variations of his adopted stage name and doing card tricks, vaudeville performances, and stunt escapes.

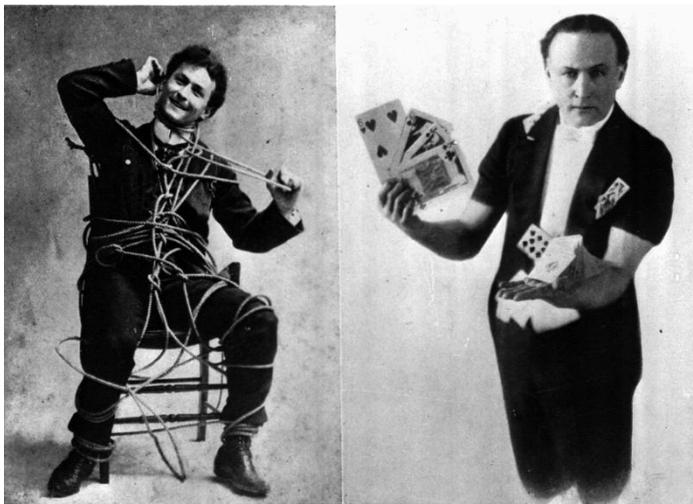
By around **1900** he had developed an international reputation for his escape works and continued performing publicly until his death in **1926**

◆ How He Died

Houdini died on **October 31, 1926** from **peritonitis caused by a ruptured appendix**.

In the days leading up to his death, while suffering abdominal pain from appendicitis, he was unexpectedly punched in the stomach by a visitor testing his claim that he could withstand hard blows — possibly worsening his condition. After performing one last show, he was hospitalized and underwent surgery, but the infection spread, and he died at age 52.

His passing on Halloween only added to his mystique and legacy as the world's greatest escape artist.



Signature Tricks, Illusions & Show Elements

1. Chinese Water Torture Cell

Houdini was suspended **upside-down in a glass tank filled with water**, locked at the ankles, and had to escape before drowning. This became his most iconic and dramatic act, performed throughout his career.

2. Milk Can Escape

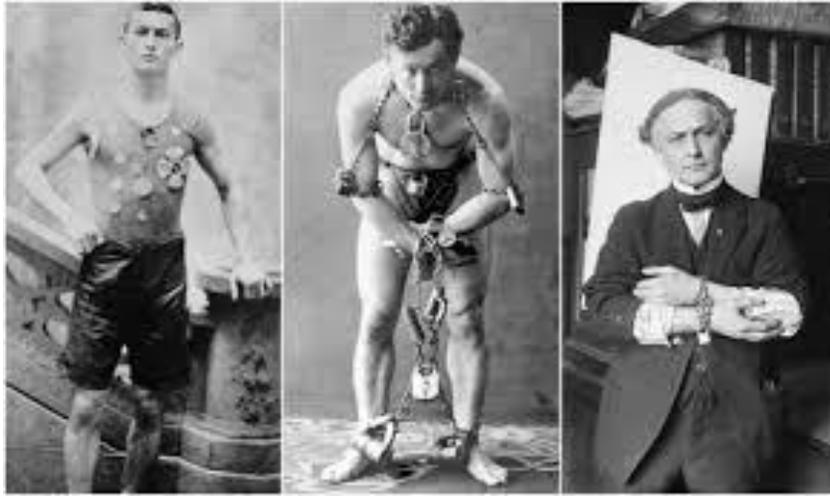
Houdini was **handcuffed and sealed inside a large milk can filled with water**, then emerged free after holding his breath and picking his way out — a sensational spectacle for audiences.

3. Suspended Straitjacket Escape

A spectacle often performed **in full view of crowds**, he would be strapped into a straitjacket and **hoisted high above the ground**, then wriggle free before dropping down.

4. Overboard Box Escape

Houdini was **handcuffed, nailed into a wooden crate, weighted, and thrown into water** (like the East River), then escaped beneath the surface to the amazement of onlookers.



Signature Tricks, Illusions & Show Elements

5. Jail & Real-World Escapes

He performed escapes from **actual jail cells**, sometimes locked up by local authorities, and freed himself to huge public interest — blurring the line between stunt and magic.

6. Handcuff Escapes (“Handcuff King”)

Before his bigger spectacles, Houdini rose to fame by **escaping heavy police handcuffs quickly and convincingly**, setting him apart from other magicians of his time.

7. Metamorphosis Illusion

A classic theatrical illusion performed with his wife Bess early in his career where he and she **swapped places instantly** inside a locked trunk — a dramatic transformation rather than an escape.

8. Elephant Vanish

In a **non-escape illusion** at the New York Hippodrome, Houdini *seemingly made a 10,000-pound elephant disappear*, one of his biggest stage spectacles.

These acts show how Houdini blended **danger, endurance, physical prowess, and clever mechanics** to create performances that thrilled and terrified audiences — many of which became defining moments in the history of magic and escape artistry