



Episode 1,496: “I Fooled Penn and Teller”

Guest: Doc Dixon

WOODS: I think most of you folks listening know that Penn Gillette of Penn and Teller is a libertarian, of course, the magician duo. Teller is also a libertarian, as it turns out, and so is our guest today, Doc Dixon, who appeared on the Penn and Teller program, *Fool Us*. And not only did he appear on the program, but he did, in fact, fool them. And then when I found out that he was on my email list, I said, *All right, come on, you SOB, you're coming on this show. We're going to talk this through* [laughing]. I have to talk to you about this, just because of my lifelong interest in this stuff and the fact that they are magicians that I follow closely, I go to live performances, I watch *Fool Us* faithfully. And I just want to pick your brain, first of all, about being a magician, and also about the process. So first of all, Doc, welcome to the show. Give us a little bit of your background.

DIXON: I live in Atlanta, Georgia. I've lived here for about a year with my wife and six sons, ages 4 to 12. So let's speak quietly, because I don't want them to know I'm here. They'll start to be loud.

WOODS: [laughing] Okay. I have five girls, so I know a little bit about what that's like.

DIXON: Oh, that's easy.

WOODS: No, half a dozen boys would be a challenge, I'll say.

DIXON: People have always told me that sons are harder when they're younger but easier when they're older, compared to daughters, and I hope that's true. I really do.

WOODS: [laughing]

DIXON: I mean, it's a blessing. I love my boys. We also have a grown daughter, who's 29. So yeah, big family. But yeah, I live just south of Atlanta, Georgia, and before that I lived in the Pittsburgh area. And I'm a magician, specifically mostly working in the corporate markets, because in magic, most people when they hear you're a magician for a living, it's like either end of the spectrum. Oh, you're a birthday party magician, or you're a Las Vegas headliner.

WOODS: Right.

DIXON: There's this big gap between the two, and a lot of that is people that do what I do, and that is entertaining at corporate events, performing at trade shows to help companies increase traffic, that sort of thing.

WOODS: It actually reminds me of how people think about bestselling authors.

DIXON: Yes.

WOODS: Which I am. They think, oh, you're a multimillionaire with 12 homes. That is not so, it turns out [laughing]. That is not so. There is a huge chasm between people whose books were featured on Oprah and some guy with a self-published book that sold ten copies. There's a huge array of people in between those. So how long have you been doing this?

DIXON: For a living about 30 years.

WOODS: Oh my gosh.

DIXON: Yeah, yeah.

WOODS: Oh, my gosh. Okay, now, are you —

DIXON: Now, I really thought you were going to get me on here to discuss things like Smoot-Hawley tariff.

WOODS: [laughing] That is the last thing in the world I want to talk about, man

DIXON: I had a great Smoot-Hawley bit, but never mind.

WOODS: Yeah, you're going to have to save that for some other podcast.

DIXON: Okay, all right. All right.

WOODS: So what impresses me about Penn and Teller is that — and I'm sure this would be true of a lot of other practitioners of sleight of hand — is that from time to time, they'll show you how the trick is done. Like they show you how the cup-and-ball routine is done, and then they do it again now that you know how it's done. And even though you know how it's done, a layman like me still finds that it's tricky to see Teller doing it. Like I know how he must be doing it, and he's so good that even after he explains it to me, I think, that is just amazing.

So these guys are able to sit there — I want to explain it to everybody in case they haven't seen it. You really should watch their program, *Fool Us*.

DIXON: Great show.

WOODS: The premise is, they bring all these top-notch magicians on to the program, and they sit and watch the routine, and the idea is that that magician is trying to fool them, is trying to get something past them that they can't figure out. They know magic inside and out. Most of the time, they know how a magician is doing what he's doing. But if you fool them, what is it that you get?

DIXON: You get the *Fool Us* trophy, which has the initials of *Fool Us* on there. Intelligent listeners can do the math.

WOODS: Yep.

DIXON: And also, I'll actually just be doing this in just a few days. I'll be leaving for Vegas to appear in their show.

WOODS: Okay, so that's the thing, you get to appear in their Vegas show, I guess as an opener? Is that how it works?

DIXON: No, the funny conceit of it is they do their show, and then I go up, so I can say very tongue-in-cheek, "Yeah, my opening act was Penn and Teller."

WOODS: Oh, that's hilarious. I absolutely love that. Okay, so I want to skip right ahead — I mean, I have other questions to ask you as a magician, but I'm too high-time-preference. I need my immediate gratification right now. So I have to ask you what the process is like. There must be a lot of magicians who want to get on that show. How do you do it?

DIXON: Oh, yeah, yeah. Basically, the word goes out to the magic community — online, obviously — December — yeah, late December, November. The *Fool Us* season, like when I shot, my episode was shot in March. They're all shot over a two-week period in early March. So send us your video, and you essentially send them a private YouTube link. And they go through tons. I don't know how to quantify it, but hundreds, hundreds, a thousand-plus videos to get it down to the 50 or so that make it on the air. And their primary thing they're looking for is not a fooler. I mean, that's great. That's bonus. But they want to make good TV.

WOODS: Right.

DIXON: That's going to be a hook. I mean, one thing — it's a little inside baseball, but you'll hear is: "Why, we love card tricks." They got a lot of card tricks sent in.

WOODS: I'm sure, I'm sure.

DIXON: So if it's not a card trick, that does help. The routine I sent in, the advantage I think of getting accepted was that it kind of has a natural hook. I don't want to spoil the ending, but I did a variation of the classic shell game.

WOODS: And the ending is what fooled them. The ending is what fooled them. It was so great to see Penn guessing how you must have done it, and you saying, no, I did not do it that way, and him saying, well, then I guess you fooled us.

DIXON: Yeah, it was great.

WOODS: That must have been so satisfying.

DIXON: [laughing] Yes, because going into it, I had no feelings of, yes, I'm going to fool them. No, no, no, I thought, okay, I'm going to present the scene. I love this routine. My clients of the past however many years have loved this routine. I want to get it on TV. And then when

he said that, it was like, wow. And then watching it on the TV show, I didn't realize at the time that when he asked me, you did it in such in such a way, and I looked at him, I said, "No, sir," and I saw Alison Hannigan's expression —

WOODS: She's the host. Just telling everybody.

DIXON: Yeah, she's the host, and a wonderfully charming woman, because in these couple weeks airing, she's having this same conversation, essentially, again and again and again while they're debating. And it's much longer in real life than it is on TV. It's edited down. They're discussing how they think the trick is done, at least for me, a good ten minutes.

WOODS: Really? It's that much?

DIXON: Yes. And they're talking with the person behind the scenes, Mike Close, who functions as the magic consultant for the program. Very smart guy, Mike, magically and otherwise. And also, during the program, kind of the referee to determine whether they are fooled. And so it's long conversation and she's very charming about it. I will tell you that it's been an unexpected surprise the number of people who, since I've been able to announce I've been on the show and since the episode aired, the number of guys that have said, *Oh, wow, you met Allison Hannigan.*

WOODS: Oh, that's funny.

DIXON: I think I could form my own cottage industry, a set-up at comic cons. \$10, shake the hand of the man that shook Alison Hannigan's hand.

WOODS: Yeah, yeah.

DIXON: People adore her, and justifiably so, a wonderful person. But yeah, I'm sorry, I've gone way off the reservation, as far as what you've asked me.

WOODS: No, that's okay. I want all the information. I want all the inside scoop. I mean, of course, I knew that, obviously, the program has to be edited, but I did not realize how much time they took talking about how they think the trick is done. Now, that's really interesting. Now, when it's all over, the recording is over, do you at any time have to — or not actually have to, but feel in some way compelled to reveal to them what the secret actually is? Like as of this moment, do they now know how your trick is done?

DIXON: Yes. Yes.

WOODS: Okay, how did that come about?

DIXON: Well, if I can — I'll get to that, but can I just backtrack a little?

WOODS: Oh, yeah, take all the time you want.

DIXON: Okay, I'm introduced. Now, this helped me fool them. When they came up and I shook their hands, I did give them the Rothbardian secret handshake.

WOODS: Well, you told a joke about elections that they liked.

DIXON: [laughing] Yeah, I wrote that just for them in the show. As an entertainer, particularly in corporate venues, I do no political jokes. That's danger, Will Robinson.

WOODS: Oh, yeah, why would you do that? Right.

DIXON: Yeah. But the joke I did was, they were playing the shell game. The first round was with the audience, and they guessed the wrong shell. And I say, "Don't feel bad. It's my fault. It's the choice you had. They're all empty and identical. It's like voting."

WOODS: Yeah.

DIXON: I did that, and I was taken aback by their response.

WOODS: They loved it.

DIXON: Teller kicked up his feet, and then I improvised, I fist bumped both of them. And what made it particularly funny for me, once the episode aired, a good friend of mine messaged me and she said, "I said to my husband, 'Dave, look, there's three libertarians at the table.'" And then I do that joke a minute later. So just a very fun part of the experience.

WOODS: Yeah.

DIXON: So I do the routine. Again, in real life, it's at least ten minutes. They discuss what they discuss. I'm not privy to that conversation, obviously, and I haven't asked about it. He says, "You fooled us." Yes. Come on stage. Give me the trophy. We're walking backstage, take some pictures. And they don't ask, but at that point, I'm fine with telling them.

WOODS: Yeah.

DIXON: I said to Teller, "Would you like to know how it's done?" And Teller: yes. Which, I have so much respect for them, just that was a big compliment, that one word. You know, huge. And I shared it with them briefly. And, just wonderful. I have to say, apart from the magic part of the show, so many reality shows — or not reality, but talent showcase shows on TV, they have snarky judges, and they inflict upon their performers this kind of prefab sob story. Like, *Oh, I hope this will change my life*, kind of woe-is me —

WOODS: Right. Yeah, like my-son-needs-an-operation kind of story.

DIXON: Yes. Yes, and Penn and Teller *Fool Us* is the exact opposite of that. If you're a fan of the show, make note of how they talk about particularly the people, the performers that don't hold them. Penn is always so gracious, so praising.

WOODS: I know. I love it.

DIXON: It's just wonderful. It's wonderful.

WOODS: Yeah, he's an absolute gentleman. I mean, he loves the craft. He loves people who love the craft. So I love watching him. I love listening to him. I'm so impressed when he knows so much, that he's been around for a while. Before we go one, I want to know, are you as a magician impressed by the knowledge they have? Or is it that all magicians just know all this stuff?

DIXON: No, all magicians do not have the encyclopedic knowledge that they have. And as much as Penn has at times joked about, you know, *Teller's the smart one; I'm just the big dumb guy* – no, no, no, no.

WOODS: Yeah, nobody falls for that.

DIXON: Yeah, they are both extremely smart. I have been watching the show where – my roots in magic began with card magic, sleight-of-hand magic. And I'm watching someone I'm thinking, okay, I know what this is – another performer on the show – and I'm going, wow, I think this might fool them, because you know, Penn and Teller, they're stage magicians, and I'm watching someone do something that's a rather esoteric card piece. And then in the "did they fool them" part of the show, Penn is citing virtual chapter and verse as to the book this came from. And just like, my mind is like, wow, they're that deep in the weeds on this that they know that much. So yeah, it is no easy feat.

I think, if there is a path to fooling them – and I say that having fooled once, and I'm far from an authority on this. I'm just saying my guess as a humble guest on the show, I think what helped me was I started off with the classic trick, which has a classic ending. You can't help but watch. If you know that ending, your mind goes one way. But then at a certain point, what's actually happening goes another way. And so in live performance, them watching me live and only getting a chance to see it once, by the time that ending happens, they've already gone the route of going the classic ending that in some ways, it's tougher for them because they know so much. Their knowledge almost forks against them at that point.

WOODS: Yeah, right, because they've seen these routines many times. They assume they're seeing that same routine again, and then there's a monkey wrench thrown in the works at the end. I've seen numerous cases of that on the show. And that I would say disproportionately is the kind of trick that does fool them, because there's they're so wired to expect that trick – *Oh, here it is again* – to go one way, and then it goes in a radically different direction.

Now, when they're conveying to the performer the way they think the trick is done and they do it in a way that is supposed to be understandable to magicians and not to the general public, I think most of the time, they're successful at that. But some of the times they're conveying to the performer the name of, let's say, somebody in magic from whom they got the trick. It could be a magic company; it could be a person who devises illusions and whatever. And so that makes me wonder: obviously, I don't expect magicians to develop all their tricks themselves or develop them all from scratch. But at the same time, I don't expect them to go down to the local novelty store for the tricks. It seems to me like there's some unknown thing out there that's known only to magicians, where a lot of magicians are, in fact, getting their tricks. Now, is that something you can tell us about?

DIXON: Sure. It's a bit of a generational thing. I occasionally in my work will meet a teenager that that knows a little magic, and I'll ask him a few questions about it, kind of fishing for the appropriate jargon. And if I hear some of that back, I'll then ask them: where do you learn

your magic? And I don't mean to sound like a Luddite, but it's a shame to say, most of the time I hear: YouTube.

WOODS: Oh.

DIXON: And the problem with that is there is no gatekeeper to it. And I don't mean in a censoring way; I mean, in the imprimatur of: this person who is putting this video knows what they're talking about. Some of the instruction you're going to get on YouTube in sleight of hand, much of it just as is very lacking.

WOODS: Really?

DIXON: Oh, yeah. Yeah. I mean, okay, I'm in my home office here, and I'm sitting in front of probably 70 feet, if you stacked them end from end, of magic books. I'm of an age where that's where my magic education comes from. But the YouTube videos, I see them and they're incomplete or sometimes they're just plain wrong. And I'll frequently say, "Here, here's my card. If you have a serious interest, feel free to email me, and I can recommend some books to you."

WOODS: Ah, okay.

DIXON: Maybe I'm old-fashioned. Get off my lawn. But wait, all that being said, I can't be too grouchy about it, because when I in my incompetent skill set try to do any home repair, what's the first thing I do? Go on YouTube, you know? I go see what someone else has done.

WOODS: Well, yeah, that's why I was surprised to hear you say that, because for all its faults, if I want to know how to fix my toilet, I can find a video on it.

DIXON: Yeah, yeah. Same here. Same here.

WOODS: Do you ever have to deal with hecklers? If you're in the corporate market, you assume these people are well behaved. But have you ever in 30 years had to deal with that?

DIXON: Yes. Not that often. I dealt with it more early on, decades ago, when probably my act wasn't as good so it deserved to get heckled [laughing]. But that was a long time ago. Now, it doesn't happen. It just doesn't, particularly in the corporate market, while they may not be concerned what I on stage feel, they certainly don't want to look rude to their coworkers.

WOODS: Right, so that is a constraint.

DIXON: Yeah, I'll tell you a technique I have used a few times, and it's not so much for hecklers, it's for the person that says something that, they're being helpful and it's funny. And this is kind of a behind-the-scenes thing here. Are you familiar enough with *Star Trek* to know the term Kobayashi Maru?

WOODS: I unfortunately am not. My friends are.

DIXON: Okay, in *Star Trek II*, it was something where it was a fight simulation, battle simulation, in the old William Shatner *Star Trek*, and what he did was he changed the

programming of the computer, and it was said that he cheated. And Kirk's response was to the effect of: I didn't cheat, I adapted, I improvised. So here's what I'll do in those settings when someone says something, it adds to the — I don't do this that often. I have to pick my spots — it adds the laugh to the show, but I fear that's going to give them a license again to do this, and it may not add to the show that time, and then it creates an awkward moment. They'll say the remark. It gets a laugh. And I will point out, "Now, that is the way to heckle. He added to the show." And oddly enough, that gets a laugh. And I'll say, "But be careful, because the next time you may do it, it may not add to the show, and then it gives us the awkward pause."

WOODS: Ah.

DIXON: Here's what that sets up. The next time that person says something, if it's funny, it gets a laugh. That's great. They've added to the show. But because I've said what I've said, if they say something that's not funny, I just look and shrug, and that also gets a laugh because I predicted it.

WOODS: Right. Right, right. Oh, that is good. That's good. I like that strategy. Now, as a magician, obviously, you're perfecting your routine over the years. It must be tricky to differentiate yourself, because there are a lot of classic tricks people expect to see that a lot of magicians do, and there are only so many things you can do. I mean, I guess everything's a variation on something. How do you come up with a routine?

DIXON: I'm a big fan of the classics, sort of what I did on Penn and Teller, and that is I did a classic routine, but that ending is mine. So if a magician begins with the classics and then varies them not only in the effect, but also predominantly in presentation, that's a way to differentiate.

WOODS: Okay, so who would you say in this day and age, leaving Penn and Teller out of it, are the most impressive magicians from your point of view? Like ones we might have heard of?

DIXON: Oh, well that's a tough proviso you put on, leaving Penn and Teller out of it.

WOODS: Because we already know how good they are.

DIXON: Sure. Well, David Copperfield is just a beast.

WOODS: Yeah.

DIXON: A 40+-year career. I don't know how you can hold a candle to it. I mean, when he was introduced earlier in the season on *Fool Us*, he took the Penn and Teller seats and Penn and Teller fooled him.

WOODS: I missed that. I have to find that.

DIXON: Oh, you've got to find it. It's great. It's great in my mind, because I don't like snark and meanness in entertainment. I really love when I see people that are that great being gracious. The graciousness between the two acts was so in evidence. They introduced him, they

introduced Copperfield — I don't know if this verbatim but it amounted to this — as the greatest magician of all time, or the greatest magician on the planet.

WOODS: Oh, wow.

DIXON: So, wow. To me, watching it had a real Rat Pack affect and feel to it, these titans in this craft together on stage. Wonderful to watch. Yeah, you'll find it on YouTube, contradicting my previous comments.

WOODS: Is there anybody you think is overrated or derivative that we've heard of? I mean, not that you want to badmouth people, but that makes for good podcasting. Let's be honest.

DIXON: [laughing] Easy joke in 3, 2, 1: Paul Krugman.

WOODS: [laughing] Okay, fair enough. But nobody else? Like somebody like me watches David Blaine, and I think this guy's unbelievable. But for all I know, a professional magician looks at him and says, "I could do this." It's like the vocalist Josh Groban. He came out of Broadway, and then he made a huge career for himself as a recording artist. And a lot of other Broadway acts were saying, "Well, look, any Broadway singer could sing as well as that guy." Yeah, but none of them had the, I don't know, the motivation to go out and do it.

DIXON: You know, I look at David Blaine, and am nothing but impressed, particularly in the way he cut a unique path for his career. I mean, he too, not the length of career that Copperfield has had, but it's been 20 years since his first special, 20 years plus. A giant.

WOODS: Yeah, that's amazing. There's a routine you can find, on YouTube, in which he does a trick with George W. Bush, and at the end of the trick, he's got Bush's watch. [laughing] It's unbelievable. How did he do that? I mean, you see him do it, but Bush doesn't realize it's happening.

DIXON: I used to do that.

WOODS: Now, okay, I realize we're not dealing with the brightest president of all time, but still.

DIXON: I used to do the same thing, steal people's watches. It used to be the closer of my standup act. I don't do it anywhere near as often because cell phones have changed the number of people that wear watches. They're harder to find.

WOODS: Oh, that's right. They're hard to find, so it has to be an older person because then they'd be more likely to wear them.

DIXON: Yep.

WOODS: Ah, smart. So are you able to maintain your career just through word of mouth, or do you have to aggressively market? What do you do?

DIXON: All of that. I mean, I market. You know, I've said since I had the notice that I can announce I've been on the show, talking about marketing, that began with this. It was filmed

in March. I was given the notice, I think in July, that I was allowed to announce I'd be on the show. Then, of course, I wasn't allowed to announce that I fooled them until after the show aired, and so that's been several stages of marketing to my clients. *Hey, look for me on the show.* After the show aired: *Hey, here's a clip from the show,* to new clients. I mean, it's constant. It's much like your business. I haven't received just one email from Tom Woods.

WOODS: [laughing] No, you haven't.

DIXON: I get them on a pretty regular basis.

WOODS: Yes, you do so.

DIXON: So much like my business, same thing, a pretty regular basis. And your prospects are people that are interested in what you do. My prospects, much like a landscaper doesn't try to sell people in the desert who have no plants, I don't try to sell to people who have no entertainment needs or who don't have needs for what I do. So I pitch to them. But the difference is, for a number of people that have a need for what I do, they may not realize it. And that kind of goes back to what we've talked about early on, that people know magicians: birthday parties, Las Vegas headliners. And there's this whole gap in between, a big chunk of that being corporate entertainment, that some of them don't know about. Meeting planners know about it, but say a company's exhibiting at a trade show and they want to get more leads. If they haven't seen me or see other people that do what I do, they don't know how helpful I can be to them. So I'm constantly marketing to those people, and of course, constantly marketing to the people that I've already worked with, that sort of thing.

WOODS: Right, sure, sure. Well, let's do a little marketing for you right now. What's your website?

DIXON: Oh, thank you. It is DocDixon.com. You can learn there, when you see the link to the *Fool Us* appearance right on the front page. And it mostly talks about the corporate entertainment that I do. And I think I may have messaged you about this, but one other thing I do that is totally different from the corporate side, my six boys from my wife and I, all of them came to us through adoption. And that's obviously a big part of our lives, and so something I've begun to do just recently, mostly for churches, is that it's an event that's half date night for couples, where I do my standup comedy act, and then the other half is a talk about walking people through the adoption process, through the foster adoption process, which is how we did it, because people can be terrified about it if they don't know the facts. So we kind of hold their hands through it. And that came through something my wife and I have just done one-on-one informally with people for years, and we've realized how hearing from someone who's been through that process makes it a little easier.

WOODS: Wow.

DIXON: So you can find out information about that there or just contact me through the website.

WOODS: And that's interesting, too. Wow. Okay, DocDixon.com is definitely where you want to go. I'll link to it at TomWoods.com/1496. Well, thanks for coming on and talking about this

and satisfying my curiosity about the inner workings and the behind-the-scenes stuff. Now, I'm much more satisfied now that I know all this stuff. So continued good luck to you.

DIXON: Thank you, Tom, and the same to you. Love the podcast.