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## A Stand-Up Guy Happily Juggles His Passions

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This Latest Act Takes A Strong Constitution

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NEW YORK -- It's just a guy, three balls and an ornate stage at some unnamed live event. The Beatles' melancholy "Golden Slumbers" begins playing on a loudspeaker, and the gray-haired man in the dark shirt and pants is suddenly juggling in perfect sync to the music.

For 4 1/2 minutes, he tosses and grabs, his hands and body language capturing the pace and mood of the Fab Four as they build to the rousing three-song finale of the "Abbey Road" album. When the music ends and the last ball is caught, the crowd is on its feet, roaring. The man takes a bow and walks off the stage.

If you own a computer, odds are you've seen this video, which went viral in January and has been viewed, by conservative estimate, more than 20 million times. Given that most of the check-this-out flotsam of the Internet is freak-show material -- Japanese kids playing marimbas, a moron trying to ride an elk -- this performance is startling. It's not merely good. It's actually moving.

Nobody is more startled than the juggler himself, a 53-year-old stand-up comedian and D.C. native named Chris Bliss. He posted the clip, from a 2002 comedy festival in Montreal, on his personal Web site four years ago. As best he can tell, someone happened across it in January, cut and pasted the link, and sent it to friends. Who sent it to friends. And so on, and so on, until Bliss was spending \$12,000 a month on bandwidth fees to keep the video playing on his site.

"I'm just praying the Chinese have blocked it," he jokes. "Actually, someone suggested that I post it to Google video, and that's helped a lot. It was viewed 3 1/2 million times there in the month of March alone."

It's Monday evening and Bliss is sitting in his room at the Millennium Hotel, getting ready to appear today on "Good Morning America."

"My bags took 45 minutes to show up," he says, fresh out of a taxi from JFK airport and sounding remarkably unbothered. "What are you going to do?"

Bliss is tall and quick to smile. There's something serene about him. Wearing sneakers and a Tommy Bahama shirt, he looks like a CEO on permanent vacation.

The "GMA" invitation is one of dozens he's fielded in recent weeks. He's heard from Carson Daly's people, from "Ellen," from some new Simon Cowell show. "Dateline" wanted him to do battle in a "juggling war"

with some guy in a "Diss Bliss" video, a routine that used the same music but with five balls.

He's been asked to juggle before King Carl Gustav XVI of Sweden. The Big Apple Circus sent out a feeler. The Illinois Symphony Orchestra has been in touch, as has the Cornell Woodwind Ensemble and a faculty member at the Berklee School of Music.

He's politely declined them all. Because, as it turns out, juggling really doesn't interest Bliss. It's something he's been edging away from for years. It was the sum total of his act for a long time, in the '70s and '80s, when he played arenas as the opener for bands, including Michael Jackson and his brothers for the '84 "Victory" tour.

These days, Bliss is a full-time touring comic, doing mostly topical humor at corporate events and occasionally in clubs. But what he *really* wants to talk about isn't his next gig. What Chris Bliss wants to talk about is the Bill of Rights.

Yes, the man who is arguably the most famous juggler on the planet, the star of this month's in-box novelty distraction, will give you an utterly earnest yet thoroughly entertaining earful about the Bill of Rights.

Last year Bliss set up a nonprofit organization whose sole ambition is to build a monument to the Bill of Rights in all 50 state capitals. That goal, which he says will take years and as much as \$10 million, has been his near-total focus since November, when he dreamed up the concept and thought to himself, "Do it. How hard can it be?"

"The country these days is like a couple in a bad marriage," he says. "Everyone is either shouting at one another or sulking. And when a marriage goes sour, you've got to return to your vows. And the Bill of Rights are this country's vows."

Bliss is soliciting checks and explaining the project on a Web site ([Mybillofrights.org](http://Mybillofrights.org)) and at shows, where he passes around what he calls "a secular collection plate," asking the audience to spare whatever it can. So far he's raised about \$40,000. It's a start.

The tricky part, of course, is that everyone thinks that Bliss is "the juggling guy," and when TV producers call, they generally aren't ready for a pitch about our national vows. They want balls and Beatles. Which he'll give them, as long as they'll give him a moment for the Bill of Rights. Which, it turns out, is a deal few -- "Good Morning America" being the apparent exception -- have been willing to make.

"This might not come as a surprise to you," he says, "but it's a lot easier to sell juggling wars."

So Bliss faces a quandary that only the Internet could have produced. With so many TV channels, radio stations and Web sites, the pass-along e-mail is one of the few communal entertainment experiences we have these days. It's the digital answer to "The Ed Sullivan Show," a national platform where everyone gawks, then hashes over what they were gawking at. In the Sullivan era, though, you had to seek fame. The Internet can make you famous whether you like it or not. Or, in the case of Chris Bliss, it can make you famous for something you consider beside the point.

"I have to have a sense of humor about all this, because my friends know that I've always been conflicted about juggling for a long time," says Bliss. "But judging from the e-mail I'm getting, this video really touches people. It's uplifting, and I don't think the timing is a coincidence. I think people want something

without cynicism and guile right now."

Bliss was raised in American University Park and Bethesda, the son of a securities lawyer. He started juggling after his older sister taught him a move or two she'd learned in a theater class at Catholic University, and soon he had a handful of routines set to classic rock songs. Friends pushed him to perform at a coffeehouse. Then a band spotted him and hired him as an opener. Then a promoter spotted him and he quit college.

"I became a juggler to avoid law school," he jokes. "But there was no grand plan here. I started in the early '70s, traveling around opening for a rock band, and it was hand-to-mouth for a few years. Then one day I woke up and realized that I was earning a living as a juggler."

It worked surprisingly well for concerts: no setup, no sound-check and nobody had ever seen an act like it. But at some point during the "Victory" tour, it hit him: *I could be doing the same 12 minutes until I die*. He knew, too, that jugglers rank just above mimes in the showbiz hierarchy.

He moved to Los Angeles in 1985 and threw himself into comedy, cutting back the juggling as his material got better. In 1992, he appeared on "The Tonight Show" for the first of eight or so just-comedy visits. For a long time, on the road, he'd close with the "Golden Slumbers" number, though at one point he was allergic enough to it that he dropped it altogether.

Six years ago, he brought it back. It just worked too well to ignore.

"He's an excellent stand-up comedian, and then he ends with this juggling thing and it's just destruction," says Bruce Hills, the guy who brought Bliss to the Montreal Just for Laughs Comedy Festival. "We took him on this 20-city tour of Canada and it was a standing ovation every time."

After the video started popping up everywhere, Bliss heard from record-label lawyers who told him that he was infringing on a copyright. He diplomatically asked them for guidance and the matter was promptly dropped.

So given that lawyers won't stop this, where does it end? Nobody gets a stint at the Bellagio with a four-minute juggling shtick, and there's always the danger that he'll soon seem as passe as the creepy dancing baby that was forwarded around years ago. But as far as Bliss is concerned, all this is a bonus. Married and living in Scottsdale, Ariz., performing 200 dates a year, he says he's never been happier. He never asked for this, and if it goes away -- *when* it goes away -- he'll be happy to return to his regularly scheduled career.

Anyway, the ride has had some unexpected upsides. There have been six marriage proposals and e-mail from 24 countries. Ringo Starr posted the Bliss video at Ringostarr.com, a compliment he can relish for years.

"Except that it's right next to a video called 'Cool Dog,' " says Bliss, which turns out to be a clip of a bulldog riding a skateboard. "Believe me, it's hard to get a swelled head when you're right next to 'Cool Dog.' "

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