

Pop Secret!
(Part One of a Three-Part Series)

Trivia Question 1: "In 2007, what trio toured under the name 'Solid Gold Answers?'"

by Bill Zam

Much of what I am about to tell you has previously been sworn to secrecy because being a writer requires keeping information from friends, family and co-workers in order to maintain the element of surprise. The rest of it is protected by various legal contracts. You can strap me to a seatless chair, pull my fingernails out or say, "Is it safe?" as many times as you want, but I still couldn't reveal all the details. If you recognize references to "Casino Royale," "Syriana" and "Marathon Man" in the previous sentence, you might have what it takes to participate in "The World Series of Pop Culture."

Then again, you might not. Making it to the television rounds of this game show, brought to you by Entertainment Weekly and VH1, is an extremely arduous task, and I'm not just talking about the difficulty of the trivia questions. Let me take you back to the opening credits of this story.

The beginning of all things game show, at least in my world, starts with a guy named Brian. In the four years I've known Brian, he has tried out for "Jeopardy," "The Weakest Link" and "Survivor," among others. So it was no surprise when I opened my e-mail in December to find out that I had 12 hours to decide whether I wanted to join Brian and his friend Chris (whom I'd never met) in pursuit of the World Series of Pop Culture (WSOPC) crown, starting with an audition in Orlando in February. If you've read my articles and found yourself missing some of the jokes, chances are they were obscure pop culture references. I knew this tournament was made for us based on our wealth of otherwise completely useless knowledge of movies, television and music. "Orlando in February" and the chance to win one third of \$250,000 didn't sound too shabby either.

The first step toward appearing on the WSOPC is passing the application process. Each contestant fills out a form professing their trivia skills and dedication in hopes of impressing the show's producers, and apparently we did. They liked what they read enough to invite us to the audition. We were going to Disney World, baby!

More precisely, Universal Studios, which was closer to where the auditions were held. As a Connecticut resident, this posed its own unique set of challenges that were not at all trivia-based. With two jobs and two young children, I could only jam two days into the schedule to actually be in Orlando for the tryouts. Before we left, though, there were two months (in between all the child-rearing and working) to study for the qualifying test.

If you've ever experienced the pain of pulling an all-nighter guzzling coffee and NoDoz[®] to prepare for an exam, you wouldn't even recognize this "study" fiesta. You have never crammed for such a fun test in your life. I downloaded reality TV Podcasts, watched "E! True Hollywood Story" and read Trivial Pursuit cards – blasphemy! – right out of the box. For really intense sessions, I would watch six episodes of "Heroes" at a clip just to become familiar with the current prime time schedule. Rather than being called a lazy good-for-nothing by my wife, this was actually sanctioned research and my family actually benefited from my heightened interest. For the first time I took interest in my wife's soap operas. My 7-year-old regarded me as god-like when I walked into his room and rattled off the names, colors and weapons of all four Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles before walking off to review the cast members of "WKRP."

There were difficulties, however. I had to suspend my almost religious "no spoilers" rule and risk learning the details of programs I hadn't seen in case they were on the test. My teammates and I tried to meet on a weekly basis, but we often couldn't all get together at the same time. There were also questions to be answered. Not just "Who sang 'Life in a Northern Town?'" or "What actor played the Hold-up Man in 'Coming to America?'" but critical questions like, "What is our

team name?" "What are we going to wear?" and "What time does your plane arrive?" Since we were flying in from Georgia, North Carolina and Connecticut, that last question would prove to be the most difficult to answer.

Being a writer, I had some clever ideas for team names that not only described the three of us as a unit, but made sly references to popular culture. In fact, I had 42 clever ideas. Sure, my teammates had some thoughts, but I was the Wizard of Words in our group, so naturally we looked at my comprehensive list and whittled it down to...something Brian's wife thought of. That name was the Solid Gold Answers, which combined everything we loved – a pun, a campy TV show reference and the chance to wear outfits we thought would make us stand out without being *kicked* out. We went for casual hip, wearing comfortable clothes with a gold accessory each (vest, tie, pocket square), beautifully designed by Brian's seamstress friend.

We had to provide publicity photos at the audition, so the day before I left, I suited up for the shoot and assessed my outfit from head to toe: Dyed brown hair, black shirt, gold tie, black belt, blue jeans, black shoes. Something looked out of place. Scanning back up, I realized there was a color that didn't belong. Black shoes, blue jeans, black belt, gold tie, black shirt, pink eye, dyed brown hair. D'oh! Pink eye?! I wasn't sure if I was seeing things or not seeing things, but a visit to the walk-in clinic revealed that I did indeed have conjunctivitis.

Like my eyelashes, the details of this trip were beginning to get sticky.

To see Part Two and Part Three of this series, as well as answers and anecdotes about the pop culture references made in this article, please visit www.billzam.com.

