

# Master Manipulator

Corey Kilgannon  
New York Times  
April 19, 2018

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Jeff Sitar, 56, strode into the vacated bank branch, passed the abandoned teller windows and beheld his latest challenge: a stainless steel vault the size of an elevator door with two combination dials.

“It’s a monster,” muttered Mr. Sitar, who removed a black satin jacket — emblazoned with “Jeff Sitar, Safecracker” across the back, as well as the logo of a hand manipulating a dial — and revealed a black muscle shirt with the same logo.

He wore black cowboy boots, cargo pants and broad black sweatbands on his forearms like a star athlete. With a few quick spritzes from a pocket breath freshener, he was ready for his encounter.

“O.K., let’s do it,” said Mr. Sitar, whose business card says, “World Champion Safecracker — Serving the United States of America.”

Mr. Sitar has made his living since his teens by opening safes, largely in the North Jersey area (he lives in Clifton), and has gained some renown by winning many safecracking competitions and serving as a consultant on heist films.

He opens locks by manipulation — “dialing for dollars,” he calls it — relying on his sensitive fingers and ears, as well as his experience to figure out a combination.

Mr. Sitar claims he has never met a safe he could not open. In the rare instances that he cannot manipulate a lock, he has drills to access the lock’s mechanism.

At this former bank branch in Totowa, N.J., the vault had a four-number combination, said Mr. Sitar, who affixed a flashlight and magnifying glass on the vault door and began spinning the vault’s 100-number dial.

He put his ear to the safe, listening and feeling for the lightest traces of resistance to indicate the “contact points” on the dial to help find the next number of the vault’s combination.

“Every lock has its own personality,” he said. “I can tell pretty quickly if the lock is talking to me or not.”

So far, this one was stymying Mr. Sitar, an eight-time winner of the Lockmaster’s International Safecracking Competition, which safecrackers call the world championships.

Mr. Sitar said he stopped competing in 2007 because “it started to get stressful — everyone wants to knock off the top dog.”

Then there are the back problems and other aches and pains from 40 years of squeezing into tight spaces to access safes.

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Mr. Sitar’s fees start at \$150 and increase depending on the size and difficulty of the safe and travel expenses. Clients range from old family safes in basements to ones in offices or jewelry stores. Sometimes they contain money and valuables, sometimes they don’t.

“You get people who think they’re going to take a trip around the world with what’s inside,” Mr. Sitar said. “But, usually, you wind up with sad faces.”

Not always, though. A recent client from Virginia brought Mr. Sitar a 100-year-old safe, which Mr. Sitar opened in less than 10 minutes, he said. There was \$20,000 in cash and other valuables inside, and the owner tipped him \$500.

Mr. Sitar said he was a boy when his father died, so he began working when he was 12 at a locksmith shop in Passaic where an old instructional manual, “The Art of Manipulation,” ignited his obsession.

“While other kids were going to the movies, I was going to junkyards looking for safes to practice on,” said Mr. Sitar, who by 18 began to take on local jobs.

“Back then, I couldn’t believe people knew about me three towns away,” he said. “Now I get calls from Paris.”

With intense practice, he said, “I could feel things in safes that other guys didn’t feel.”

One television special tested his touch skills by setting up lock cylinders to rub against a toothpick, a Post-it note and a feather. Mr. Sitar detected them all, while turning the lock dials.

Inside his modest home in Clifton, much of the furniture consists of heavy, antique safes, and in his basement there are hundreds of locks that have been removed from safes. His dog is a mixed breed named — what else? — Combo.

Mr. Sitar said he has opened safes for law enforcement agencies, the military, sheikhs and celebrities. He was evasive about many details, he said, because of client confidentiality and the concern that his skills could be co-opted by trickery or forced into criminal activity.

His policy is to open a client’s safe and step aside to let the owner discover what is inside.

“I don’t want to know,” he said. “Pay me and let me go to my next job.”

As for the vault in Totowa, bank officials left behind no combination, said the property manager Carol Brown, who watched Mr. Sitar work.

“Any diamonds, I get first dibs,” she joked.

He has opened vaults in less than five minutes, but he was now more than 10 minutes into this one. Those sweatbands now seemed necessary. He had enlisted an electronic stethoscope to better hear the lock tumblers clicking.

Suddenly, he turned a large circular handle and the heavy vault door opened to reveal a dusty interior of empty safe deposit boxes.

With another vault conquered, Mr. Sitar headed home and found his aluminum storm door locked. The world champion safecracker was, momentarily, locked out of his own house.

“You should see the ribbing I get,” he said, “when I can’t open a ketchup bottle.”