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Since first appearing on *Prairie Home Companion*, Velma Frye has been commuting to Lake Wobegon regularly

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Velma Frye has covered a lot of musical territory — heading for Bach one moment, veering towards the Beatles the next. Lately, she's been shuttling between two geographic locations that are equally diverse: Tallahassee, Fla., and Lake Wobegon, Minn.

Frye is a 37-year-old pianist and vocalist who performs every Friday night at *The Alley*, a lounge half a block from the state capitol in Tallahassee. The rest of the week, she composes and teaches piano in a nearby studio.

Frye was rehearsing for a benefit performance in Tallahassee last spring when her voice caught the attention of public radio raconteur Garrison Keillor, who

FAST TALK

was in town for the same benefit. He performed with Frye that night — the two of them singing *Amazing Grace* and *Tell Me Why*

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— and asked her to come to St. Paul, Minn., the next month.

St. Paul is the real-life location of the make-believe town of Lake Wobegon, the setting for Keillor's radio show, *The Prairie Home Companion*. Since *Prairie Home* has become a showcase for serious musicians — sort of the thinking man's MTV — it was a big break for Frye. She traveled to St. Paul, performed on the show and has since become a semi-regular. She's scheduled to perform again Jan. 3 and 10.

Florida: Were you nervous for that first show?

Frye: I didn't sleep very well for a few days before it. I dreamed all kinds of things. I dreamed that my plane didn't make it (to St. Paul) in time for the show. I

dreamed that I got up on stage and forgot the music, went blank.

Florida: But your plane did arrive safely at Lake Wobegon International?

Frye: Yes, and the show seems to fit my style. I played a medley built around the theme of "home," read some scripts, did some sound effects and improvised behind him (Keillor) when he delivered the messages. It's really the perfect kind of spot for me because I play acoustic music and don't play synthesizer. That knocks me out of a lot of jingle and session work, but it's perfect for *Prairie Home Companion*.

Florida: What kind of music do you like to perform?

Frye: I just hate songs that are predictable. A lot of Top 40 music, once you hear the "hook," that's it — everything else is repetition. I like to mix it up, a little Scarlatti, a little ragtime. I like something that surprises you every time you listen to it.

Florida: Are you from a musical family?

Frye: My father was musical, but he died when I was 4. About that time, I started playing Mrs. Overton's piano. I knocked on her door every day, but she would only let me in, poor woman, about every other day. By the time I was 10, I had talked my mother into buying a \$100 piano. Every night after dinner she would say, "You can either do the dishes or play the piano." Pretty crafty of her.

Florida: Other than your trips to St. Paul, do you travel much?

Frye: Last summer I traveled to Russia as part of a sister-city program. I performed in a town called Krasnodar. The Russian audiences were incredible — they loved the music. One night I got a standing ovation and so many flowers I couldn't hold them all.

Florida: What kind of music did they enjoy most?

Frye: They did not want Russian music. They wanted American music — ragtime, Bessie Smith, Fats Waller, Duke Ellington. I did one song in French, and I played John Lennon's *Imagine* as my final number.

Florida: What else impressed you about the Russian people?

Frye: They were very curious — they wanted to know what did I read, what did I listen to. . . . They knew they weren't going to be talking to us on the phone anytime soon, so they took advantage of every minute with us.

Florida: Obviously performing has been very rewarding for you. How about teaching?

Frye: I have just a few students, mostly adults, though I do have one very talented 8-year-old girl. We have this little joke that I try to find something to challenge her with every time, and when I do she is thrilled — she'll say, "Oh, you challenged me! Wonderful!"

Florida: What does it take to challenge you?

Frye: Well, before I perform on *Prairie Home Companion* next, I'll talk to (Garrison Keillor) about some things I'd like to perform, and I'll show him some original compositions I've been working on. So that's a real good motivator for me. *That's* a challenge. ■