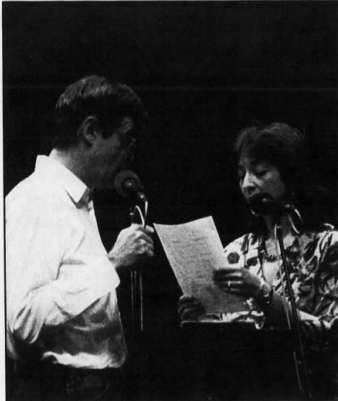


CAN 'A PRAIRIE HOME COMPANION' MAKE A CAREER?



"Darn good" was the praise that Garrison Keillor lavished on Velma Frye after her first "Prairie Home Companion" rehearsal.

Photo by Steve Schluter

How Velma Lee Frye made it to the World Theater stage

By Jan Godown

Hard to imagine this September day, but it is hot. The kind of hot that glues bare thighs to car seats. The kind of hot that forces alligators to nose deeper into swamps. The kind of hot that makes most people put projects on hold and tempts workaholics to skip town for a splash in the mountain streams of North Carolina. It is high summer in north Florida, in the state's capital, Tallahassee, just 45 miles down the road from the orange-red clay of southern Georgia.

In this shimmering heat, 96 daily, even as high as 101, it isn't surprising to find a woman in a black bathing suit plowing through the waters of the campus pool at Florida A&M University. The casual observer would deduce that she's under water to survive the heat. But Garrison Keillor, 1,362 miles away, is the reason this woman has staked out a lane all for herself in the pool. She is swimming hard, completing 17 laps every day in this September heat, she tells friends, so she can be skinny on the radio.

Her name is Velma Lee Frye. She is a singer of bluesy songs, a writer of love tunes and a classically trained musician who has learned the hard way that there will always be patrons who will ask to hear nearly any awful thing. "The first three years, she wouldn't even look up from the piano," says friend Rosanne Wood, a high school principal who remembers Frye's early performances at a local country club in 1973. Now it is 13 years later, September 1986. Frye teaches piano in her private studio, performs at parties and relies on a Friday-

night gig at a local bar where the requests scribbled on "bev naps," as she calls them, and passed up to the piano, are to her liking.

It seemed to be now or never for her career. Frye was soon to be 36. In one week, on Sept. 27, she would be stepping up to a microphone at the World Theater in St. Paul and performing with director-producer Sydney Pollack and humorist Roy Blount Jr. Keillor would tell an estimated 3 million radio listeners what a sweet voice Frye has. Many of them would agree, writing after the show to ask that she return. And by Christmas, Frye would have been invited back to perform on "A Prairie Home Companion" four times. She was also scheduled to perform last night and next Saturday.

Recording companies would call, listeners from Pittsburgh and Ames, Iowa, would write, call or send flowers. She would meet Ulla Keillor, Garrison's wife, and share a meal with the couple. Pollack, enchanted with her voice, would ask to hear her album. Learning she had never made one, he would settle for a home-grown tape. He would call a record producer on the East Coast and urge the friend to listen to his discovery. Pollack would write her a friendly note and say he hoped to work with her sometime.

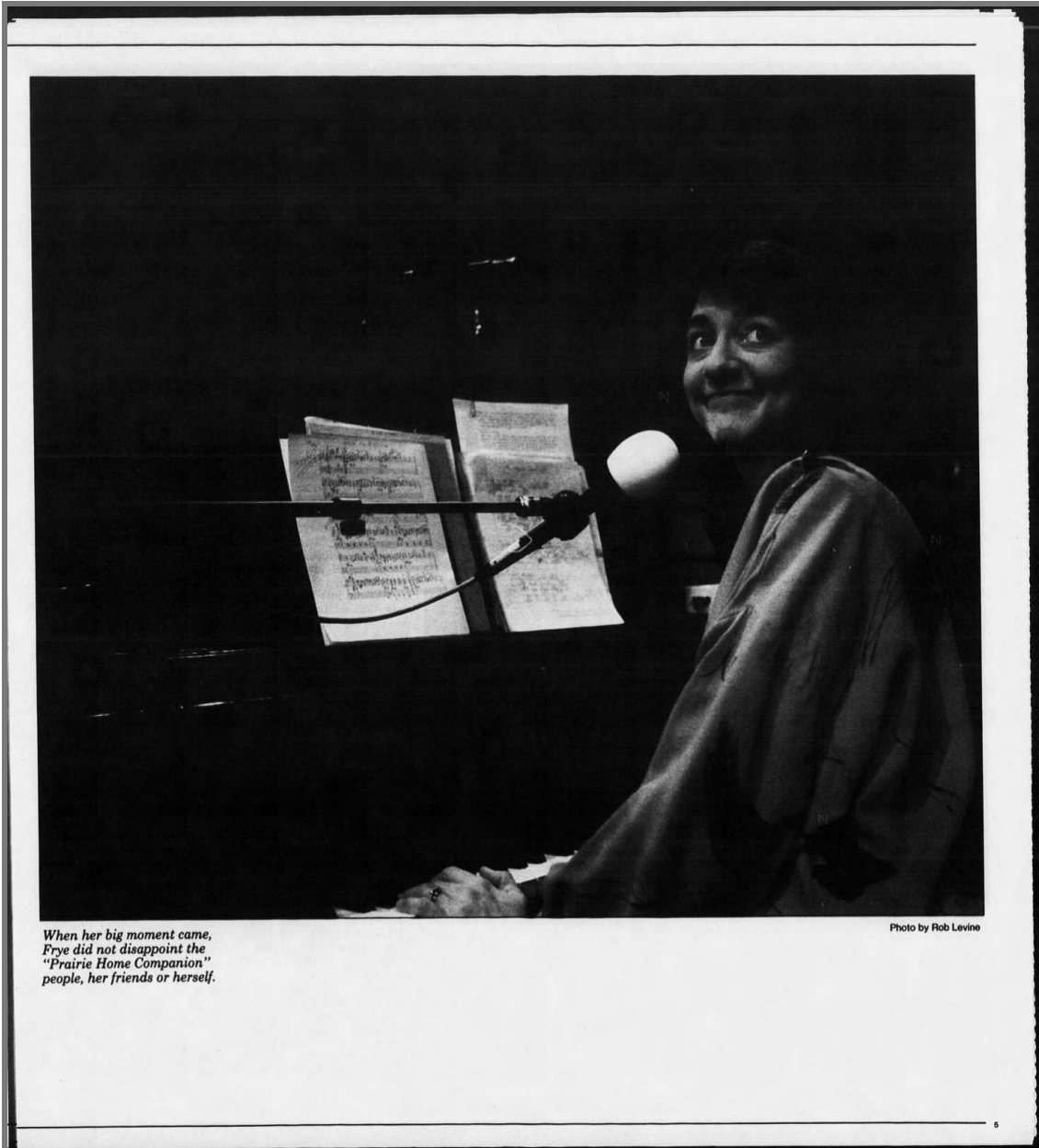
But all that was yet unknown to Frye, who didn't start to sing professionally until she was 23. The week before her Sept. 27 debut, she was concerned about getting skinny and about performing live before so many listeners, hoping she wouldn't flub anything, as she did recently during a local interview. ("Bleach blanket," she said charmingly, instead of "beach blanket.") After more than a decade of hard work, unpaid benefit concerts and sore throats, Frye has a devoted following in north Florida; she has fans in Washington, D.C., where she lived and performed for a while, and, oddly, she is also known in Krasnodar, a Ukrainian capital in the Soviet Union, where she traveled in 1985 as part of a Tallahassee peace mission.

She has given a lot of autographs on cocktail napkins, those "bev naps." But other than opening for Taj Mahal in Tallahassee in 1980, she hasn't glimpsed the big time.

How did a relatively unknown musician from Tallahassee land a booking on the show? Every week 20, 30, sometimes 40 players and singers send tapes to the show's headquarters at Minnesota Public Radio (MPR), seeking a Saturday-night guest spot on the World Theater stage alongside Keillor. Every week a Twin Cities-area consultant to the

Frye continued on page 6

MINNEAPOLIS STAR AND TRIBUNE SUNDAY MAGAZINE JANUARY 4, 1987



When her big moment came, Frye did not disappoint the "Prairie Home Companion" people, her friends or herself.

Photo by Rob Levine



Keillor praised Frye's "absolutely sure touch" at the piano and her ability to sing harmony with him.

Photo by Steve Schluter

Frye

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show culls the tapes. She recommends that one, maybe two, survive to be added to a list of possibilities. The list carries names of people Keillor has heard about, of artists whom friends have recommended. Not many great unsolicited tapes come in.

"Then I listen to them. And Garrison listens to them," says "Prairie Home Companion" talent coordinator Helen Edinger, talking about the one or two new audition tapes that have made the list. The show consultant, whose name is kept a secret by the staff, listens for quality, Edinger says. "Garrison, I think, looks for a whole lot of different things. He's got such a wide range of musical tastes. We get such a variety of tapes, there are absolutely no musical categories." There are just-for-laughs amateurs who ask for invitations, along with the regular mixture of small-time professional duos, trios, groups and individual performers.

"We did just recently get a tape that a father sent of his kid playing Suzuki violin. We do get people who say, 'I love to sing and play, and I'd love to be on your show.' And then they just turn on the tape recorder."

In Frye's case, she snagged a spot on the show without the consultant or Edinger having listened to her. Keillor went to Tallahassee in March 1985 to raise money for the town's chapter of Jimmy and Rosalynn Carter's favorite cause. It is a low-income housing effort called Habitat for Humanity. Frye, a passionate supporter of causes from public housing to local public radio, was one of several musicians invited to perform at the sold-out benefit with Keillor. Her performance was to have been routine, until another's illness pushed her into the limelight.

During the same-day rehearsal, she was surprised when Keillor appeared standoffish. Professional and careful, yes, but exuding a certain reserve. He sounded so friendly on the radio, like

everyone's favorite cousin come by for a visit. Later, even after they had sung a duet before the crowd, and she had provided piano backup for him several times during the show, she left the stage unsure whether he liked her stuff, although she felt pleased by a fine performance to add to her resume.

True, Keillor had said from the stage that Frye reminded him of his sister and that she had a sweet voice. But when, at a reception after the benefit, Frye stood at the end of a line of fans to talk with him, Keillor said nothing special, posing with her for a photo as he had with others in the adoring crowd.

Because friends at the Keillor reception had badgered Frye, she dug into her black leather shoulder bag and handed Keillor her card. Hearing nothing by the end of the following month, April, Frye puffed up her courage, gave in again to her urging friends and wrote him. She made the stationery, superimposing on pink paper a Victorian-style drawing of a woman playing piano to a lineup of howling kitties. She complimented Keillor on saying her first name correctly (people often call her Thelma, which she hates). And then she asked him to put her on his show. "Our long summer will be rolling in soon, and I need to get out of town before those alligators down at Wakulla Springs get hungry and travel the back roads up to Tallahassee," she wrote to Keillor.

Again she heard nothing. And more of nothing. A time of life that had begun in March with the Habitat benefit as a hopeful season was turning into a hot, slow spring. She would have thought a "Prairie Home Companion" appearance was not ever to be, but then her phone rang two months later, on June 9. "There was this angelic voice saying, 'This is Rosalie Miller with 'A Prairie Home Companion' in St. Paul. Garrison Keillor asked me to call and book you on the show.'"

Joy. Elation. "I wondered if I were dreaming. I think my eyes must have gotten real big. I sat up straight, and I think I went into a real smooth, 'I think I can... ' I



Photo by Steve Schluter

guess I wanted it to appear like I was very professional." Which her penchant for schedules, her practice sessions, research and attention to concert details show she is. But when she put down the telephone, she cried.

She called three friends and then stopped telling the good news. "I wanted to keep it inside myself and enjoy it and turn it over and experience it before I let it out. I didn't think, 'Wow, I could get famous.' I thought of it as a beautiful opportunity. My first response was more of Zen."

Then, as she started thinking about what she would sing and what she would play and what new material she could write and what she would wear, and how she could mess it up, she switched into a different mode. It started to feel scary.

Frye approached the performance as if she were beginning law school and training for the Olympics. She made lists, drew monthly

calendars, planned timetables and set goals. She worked late at nights, on into the mornings, slept briefly and then rose uncharacteristically early to get a head start on the days. She swam.

There was much to learn. Frye had become aware of Keillor in 1984, when a friend suggested she read Keillor's first best seller, "Happy to Be Here," at a time when Frye wanted inspiration while writing dialogue ideas for a live local television music series she hosted. She now found herself full of questions, devouring newspaper and magazine stories about the shy Midwestern bard.

She made phone calls to St. Paul to check on details and wrote notes and letters to the MPR staff. "Dear Penpal Rosalie, Here's this week's collection of questions and answers," she began one letter. On her July schedule she wrote: "Decide: Sell tapes before show? Send new tapes to record companies? ... Old PHC's: Write Burt, Paul. ...

Frye encouraged her friends from many miles away to attend her first "Prairie Home Companion" performance. That way, she said, she would be sure someone was there to applaud.

See Charlie: Butch Thompson tape... Find places to stay in Twin Cities for rest of week... Decide and begin other m. skills: orchestration, percussion, guitar, v. range... Think: themes, tunes... IMPROVISE... COMPOSE... TECHNIQUE... Collect ticket money... Read Keillor writ-

Frye continued on page 8

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Frye

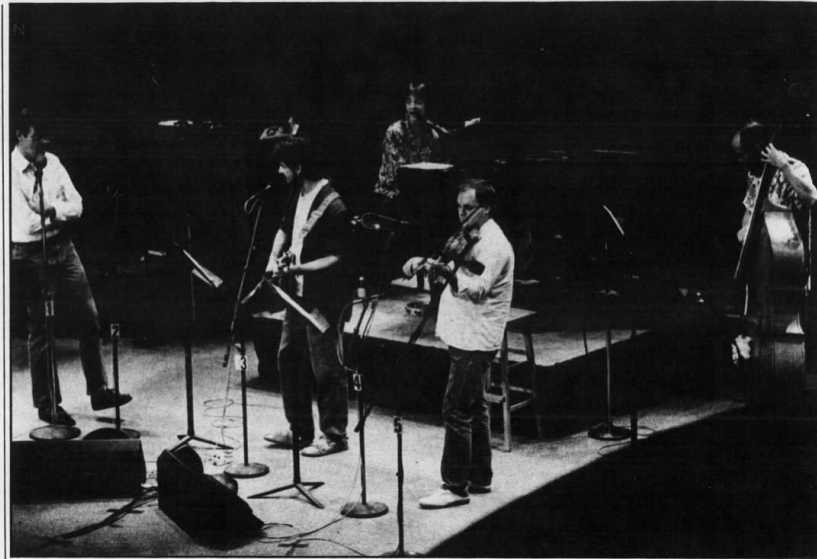
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ings... Read Twin Cities, Minnesota... Consider July letter... "And, an attractive, tall (5 feet 10) woman, she wanted to lose weight. Her hope was: "July 5, 145 lbs... July 12, 143... July 19, 141... July 26, 139." By the start of September, she planned to be down to 130.

So here was Frye, slicing through the water at the Florida A&M pool, a white cap protecting medium-length hair as black as her studio baby grand, sunscreen blocking her flawless skin the color of piano ivories. At the beginning of the summer, she couldn't complete a single lap. Now it was Sept. 20, seven days before showtime, and Frye was like a dolphin, traveling at a steady pace. She was up to a half-mile daily.

She alerted a network of friends, through a handmade handbill, that she was approaching her national radio debut. She sent demo tapes to record companies, among them the Windham Hill label in North Carolina, which rejected her. She was fielding compliments from her local fans and was excited that her surrogate family, friends in Florida, North Carolina and elsewhere, was turning the appearance into a happening. Several wanted to buy tickets to the show. They would converge on the Twin Cities, a group of eight, one even arriving after days by train, and make a champagne event of it. This is what she had hoped for. "I want everyone there who can go. So it will feel like home," she said during the summer. "I know they'll clap."

Other friends planned private radio parties in their homes. The staff at the local public radio station on the campus of Florida State University staged a public broadcast of "Prairie Home Companion." Fans were invited to an outdoor picnic at a local children's museum, leading up to air time. There was local entertainment, and men were invited to dress for



contest, which, surprisingly, they did, complete with red suspenders.

Meanwhile, Frye continued teaching her private-lesson students and playing piano at her regular gig. One Friday at a Tallahassee bar, the Alley, she was introduced to a friend's friend, a Bob somebody, who was visiting from Washington, D.C. A few days later she learned he was the news director of National Public Radio. He wanted a reporter to interview her for National Public Radio's evening drive-time show, "All Things Considered." As the piece aired, the president of A & M Records was jogging, listening to the show. He told an aide to find out about Frye and get a tape up from Tallahassee.

This was adding pressure to her schedule, but nothing in Florida could match the responsibility she felt once she arrived at the offices of MPR Friday afternoon, Sept. 25, and learned what Keillor had in mind. She came back



Photos by Steve Schluter

to her room at the St. Paul Hotel and told her friends, "I have work to do!" They wanted to know what it had been like. She shared an exchange she had with the Voice of Lake Wobegon. She was seated at a piano. "Give me a little outdoor music," he had asked.

Frye: "Outdoor music?"
Keillor: "Outdoor music."
Frye: "Twee bird?"

Keillor: "No, nothing birdlike."

Frye: (out loud, but to herself): "A little outdoor music, sure..."

Before the next night, she needed to memorize new songs, lines, practice more on the piano and come up with suitable

Velma Frye had done her homework before she arrived at her "Prairie Home Companion" dressing room, left. In addition to her musical preparations, she even read Garrison Keillor's books. It all paid off, as she performed well with Keillor, above, and the backup musicians.

outdoor music, nontweeie bird, for a skit. She was to play through the 15-minute intermission. She was to perform in skits. She was to play backup for Keillor and sing with him in duet. Until this, the Friday before the show, she hadn't known exactly what she'd perform. Now it seemed as if Keillor was trusting her with a lot to do. It felt good, but also

scary. Her friends planned a night out, would catch the "Circus" performance at Theater de la Jeune Lune, go bar hopping, whatever. She was going to stay in and work to be ready for rehearsal Saturday afternoon.

Keillor had been friendly, she said, inquiring about her plans for the evening, asking her to call if she needed help. Her friends wanted to know what he said about her. Were any compliments sent her way? It seemed as if the session was going to break up without a summation. "Well, boys," Frye had coaxed in her best Mae West style. "How'd I do?" The man on bass said she was fantastic. Greg Brown said something complimentary, but she had a hard time hearing him because what came through was Keillor's "Darn good." She hadn't ever heard that expression before. So she took it to be Minnesotan for "great."

Then, suddenly, there was no more practice, only the show that hadn't even been a possibility in February and was now an Event of Her Life in September. Frye primped in the mirrored dressing room, took a big breath and went on stage in a borrowed dress. She placed a lit votive candle on the piano and opened the show with a Caribbean-influenced song, "Images," sung a capella as she shook a tambourine to help keep rhythm. The applause was gratifying, and she allowed herself to feel good. She acted in a skit with Pollack, sang a hymn with Keillor, sang two songs, including one she wrote herself and one, about a grandmother in a nursing home, that produced tears in the audience.

She played during the intermission. She was good. On stage, Keillor explained how he had met Frye at the Tallahassee benefit. "I loved her singing and playing," he said. "Velma Frye, what a wonderful name." It was a special show, with Keillor's Cub Scout troop leader Pearl Forsberg part of the audience, with good friend Blount kidding around and with Pollack in town to talk about possible movie ideas. "I've always said there would be a place on our show for

someone who made a film out of a work by a Danish author," Keillor said, introducing Pollack, named best director and producer in 1986 for "Out of Africa," the movie about the life of Isak Dinesen.

In his warm-up remarks to the audience before the show, Keillor acknowledged his own arrival on the Ten Sexiest Men in America list of Playgirl magazine by announcing that the Ten Sexiest Women in America were in the audience, saying: "I hope to meet you all at some time."

Near the end of the show, Keillor said he hoped Frye would come back real soon.

And she did. This time the telephone call came much sooner, asking her to return for the Nov. 15 and 22 shows. Before she left the Twin Cities after the November appearances, she was booked for the two dates in January. Then Keillor asked her to come up sooner than that, on Dec. 20. Then she was called in quickly to perform on Dec. 6. She did.

For her, the appeal of the show lies in its emphasis on creativity. "It's especially important to me because I am a real hard-core advocate of acoustic music rather than electric music, and I have very eclectic tastes." She also appreciates Keillor's attitude about the show. "I think one of the messages of the show is that ordinary people are special and have interesting lives."

Has the show changed her ordinary life? Some. She decided to move to the Twin Cities, which is musically more stimulating than Tallahassee's cultural stupor, and she thought about what she needs to do to put together enough original material for an album. In moving, she ended a relationship, already rocky before the pressure of the summer, but remained friends with the man, a writer and photographer of documentaries.

But most things have stayed the same. She still hires herself out to play at parties. She still borrows clothes from friends and wears plastic flip-flops around town, which show off her red-painted toenails. Keillor, often uneager to

spend time with reporters, granted a telephone interview to reflect on Frye's skills. "There are people I've known 10 years who I haven't sung a duet with, and, I think, I knew her 10 minutes, and I wanted to sing a duet," he said. Frye's appeal for the singing Keillor is that she is not only a strong performer on her own, but she knows how to play second fiddle. "It's a lot of work, doing a radio show. And doing shows. Period. When you find a performer who is just fun to perform with and who you just love to go out on stage with, that's very, very fine," he said. "She is a terrific piano player. She's got an absolutely sure touch. And as a singer, to sing harmony with her is, I think, a great delight."

Director Pollack was also taken with her. "I wanted to hear more of her... I thought she was quite good, originally, musically and lyrically," he said.

Will this be her lucky break? Will the listeners at home stop playing Scrabble long enough to hear the meaning of what she sings? How big a deal is an invitation to perform on "A Prairie Home Companion"?

For some, such as the wood-carver from Iowa whom Keillor invited on the show once, the all-expenses-paid flight to Minneapolis, the accommodations at the historic St. Paul Hotel and the hobnobbing on the show are a lark. For humor writer Blount, the show is a chance to expand into a different medium and visit his good friend. For Chet Atkins, Emmy Lou Harris and other established musicians, an appearance in the historic World Theater—where John Barrymore once performed in the early 1900s, where separate entrances were made for those arriving by motorcar and those arriving by carriage—is pure fun.

For Velma Lee Frye, with not an album to her name, with no gig other than her weekly Friday-night Tallahassee bar appearance planned, the invitation from Rosalie Miller was thunder. Lightning. Frightening.

Jan Godown is a Florida writer and a friend of Velma Frye's.

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