

Persuasions tune up for 'Prairie Home'

Autoharps, fiddles, mandolins, jew's-harps, git-tars, upright basses and Garrison Keillor's pleasant voice customarily fill the airways during "A Prairie Home Companion."

This Saturday's show on KJSN-FM (and National Public Radio) promises something a little different: the ultimate acoustic sound, the a cappella singing of the Persuasions.

Those time-tested street-corner harmonies. Heavenly sounds that



Jon Bream

Anticipation

beg for no accompanying instruments. Four voices that breathe new life into tunes you've heard many, many times.

"We encompass a wide variety of music," said Margaret Moos, "Companion" producer who arranged for the Persuasions' appearance. "The Persuasions are American folk musicians in my book. Just like old pop-jazz or old rock 'n' roll that we've had on the show. In general, we have primarily acoustic and traditional music. And they are certainly acoustic."

And, of course, the Persuasions are special—special enough to warrant a post-"Companion" concert Saturday night at the World Theater in St. Paul. The concert is sold out.

"I've never heard the radio show," said Persuasions bass singer Jimmy Hayes this week from his New York home. "But I've been reading a brochure about it. We'll have something for 'em to get into."

The Persuasions are constantly adding material to their repertoire of 700-plus tunes. Among the recent additions, Hayes said, are renditions of the Pointer Sisters' "Slow Hand"; the Four Tops' "Be My Girl"; Kenny Rogers' "Gambler" and "Coward of the County"; and the Oak Ridge Boys' "Elvira."

Hayes said the singers work out new songs all the time—in rehearsals, in cars, on airplanes. "If somebody knows the words and starts in, we just break into song," he said. "If we don't know the words, we just improvise."

The Persuasions have been im-



The Persuasions

Their street-corner harmonies have rescued a lost art of the '50s. The a cappella singing of Jayotis Wash-

ington, left, Jimmy Hayes, Jerry Lawson and Herbert Rhoad breathes new life into old songs.

provising on songs for 20 years. They started as buddies on the street corners and subway stations of Brooklyn. After a while, people hired them to sing at parties. One day a man heard them singing at a record shop. He taped them and took the tape to his friend Frank Zappa on the West Coast. Three days later, the Persuasions were on a 747, heading for California and Zappa's record company.

Their 1970 debut album, "A Cappella," is considered a classic. Last month, Hayes ran across a copy in a Greenwich Village record shop. He doesn't own a copy (he has a tape of it), so he inquired about buying it.

"The guy said it cost \$75," he recalled. "I said, 'This is me on the album.' The guy said, 'I know. It's still \$75. It's a collector's item.'"

That disc, and the Persuasions, have helped rescue a lost art from the 1950s. The group has since recorded about a dozen albums, including an experiment with a

backup band that went nowhere. The singers also have contributed background vocals on albums for scores of singers, most recently Arlo Guthrie and Ronnie Hawkins. A couple of years ago, the Persuasions toured with folk-jazz star Joni Mitchell, opening her show and accompanying her.

Since their first recording, the Persuasions have been the lone a cappella group on the circuit. However, in the past year, several such aggregations have surfaced on the East Coast. There's even a female a cappella outfit in Boston called the Persuasionettes.

"I dig it," said Hayes, 39. "Let's get more. This is a feather in our own cap. This was a dying art. We feel grateful that we kept this art alive."

Although the Persuasions have never had a hit record, they continue to record regularly (a new album on Rounder Records featuring "Cupid" is due next month) and they perform enough so they don't

have to take 9-to-5 jobs. "Even if we had 9-to-5s, we'd still get together at 6 and sing all night for nothing," Hayes said. "We love it—the love it generates and the love we get from the people. So what if we have no hits? We're gonna end up like the Mills Brothers. We'll be legendary. People will think about us for years to come."

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