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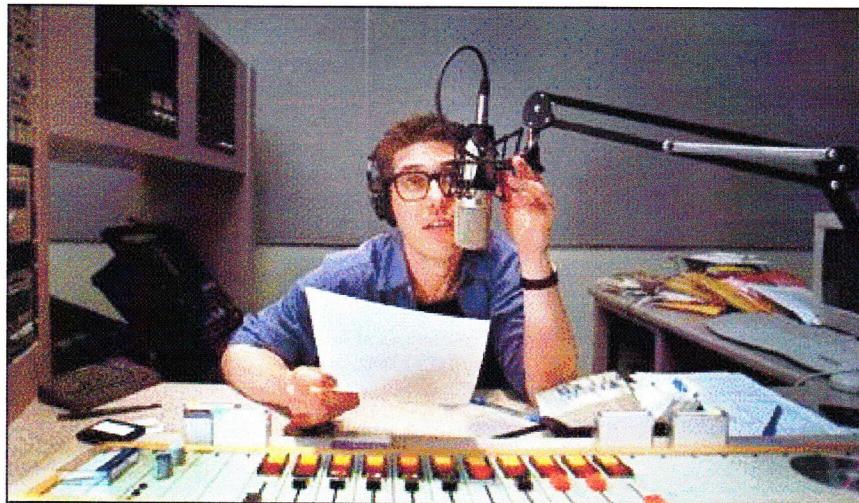
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Scott Olson / Newsmakers

'He's great and all,' says 'This American Life' regular Sarah Vowell, 'but when a girl thinks about her dream boyfriend, she doesn't picture him working 18 hours a day'

## All About Ira

Colleagues, friends and fans sound off on the national obsession with public radio's Ira Glass, the listening woman's pin-up. NEWSWEEK's B. J. Sigesmund tunes in

NEWSWEEK WEB EXCLUSIVE

Nov. 29 — A few months ago, Ira Glass ran into Bob Edwards in Washington. The men hadn't seen each other in a while. Back in his twenties, Glass—then a production assistant at National Public Radio—would write Edwards's intros on "Morning Edition." These days, of course, Glass hosts his own program on NPR, "This American Life," which has now climbed to 1.25 million listeners a week. "How's it going?" Edwards

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asked his colleague. “Are you enjoying being famous?” The men exchanged knowing glances. “There was this feeling that we both know what we’re talking about here,” Glass recalls. “I mean, it’s fame on public radio … any singer in a touring band would get more attention than I do.”

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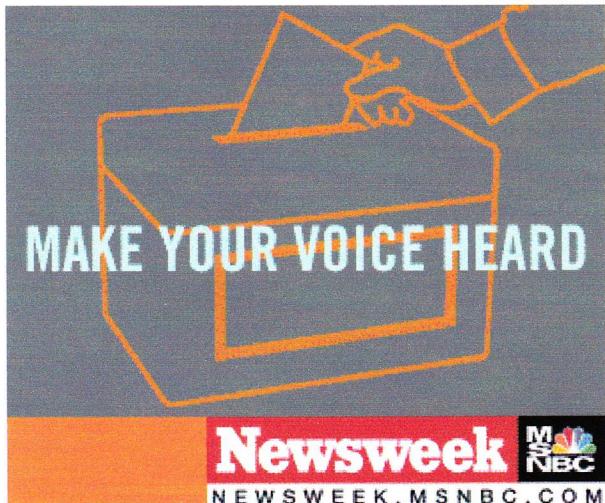
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BUT COULD YOU BRING a rock star home to mom? In the six years since the debut of “TAL,” Glass has developed a devoted cadre of fans hooked on his show’s eccentricity and his compassionate tone. The hourlong program isn’t just journalism; it includes fiction, humor, even poetry. Each show is made up of four separate segments based around one theme. Some examples from earlier this year include shows on babysitting, summer heat and the act of cringing (after September 11, “TAL” got a touch newsier).

Forty-two-year-old Glass, who as host comes off as both cerebral and sensitive, has turned into an object of obsession for many female listeners. “He’s just this inquisitive voice, which allows us to construct all these elaborate fantasies about him,” says Lynn Harris, a 32-year-old Brooklyn writer who with her geek-chic glasses and quirky sensibility (she authored the humor book “Breakup Girl to the Rescue!”) exemplifies the typical Ira admirer.

“Ira is appealing

“Ira is appealing because he seems like he’d listen

because he seems like he'd listen really, really hard to what these women had to say. They think he would pick up on the subtext and themes of their anecdotes. Then he'd interpret their deepest thoughts and feelings."

— SARAH VOWELL  
author and prolific "TAL" contributor

really, really hard to what these women had to say," says author and prolific "TAL" contributor Sarah Vowell. "They think he would pick up on the subtext and themes of their anecdotes. Then he'd interpret their deepest thoughts and feelings." She laughs. "It makes me kind of sad for these women, like the men in their lives aren't listening to them." Another friend and "TAL" regular, David Rakoff, says "anyone with a brain in his head would go for Ira." The gay writer, whose celebrated 2001 book "Fraud" contains seven stories that were originally produced on "TAL," sees "a kind of introspection to Ira, qualities that are somewhat feminized ... he's straight, but he's a big fag."

Neither Vowell nor Rakoff can do a public reading without someone asking, "What's Ira Glass really like?" Vowell has seen women become speechless in conversations with Glass "countless" times. (How does Glass himself feel during these sort of crushy interactions? "I get instantly protective of her and feel I must save her," he says, in his typical self-effacing style.) Of course, says Rakoff, "face-to-face contact with anyone usually ruins any erotic scenarios." Vowell simply proclaims that meeting any of the people behind the "TAL" voices "is a flat-out disappointment." In real life, she says, "we don't know exactly what to say all the time and we're not always paying attention. We're not as funny or generous or intelligent. Real life is a rough draft. The radio is like draft 22."

Dave Elfving, a "TAL" listener since its inception, met Glass at a reading by Rakoff and author David Sedaris ("TAL's" most famous veteran) earlier this year in Chicago. "Most of the people were there to get a glimpse of Ira," says 24-year-old Elfving, the one-time general manager of his college radio station. After the talk, Elfving got up the gumption to approach Glass, who had provided the evenings introductions. "I was nervous talking to him because it was like meeting the master," he says. "If I were to meet the president, it would be intimidating, but I wouldn't be nervous." Glass "was polite and asked me about myself," he remembers. "Ira doesn't drink in these things as a celebrity," says Torey Malatia, the president and general manager of Chicago's WBEZ, the NPR affiliate where "TAL" got its start and is produced each week. "He feels delighted and surprised that people like the show as much as they do. He always seems stunned that someone's complimenting him."



The 'TAL' Web site, [thislife.org](http://thislife.org), contains a 32-page comic book called 'Radio: An Illustrated Guide' that lays out how to produce a show



Twice a year, Glass takes his act on the road, giving listeners around the country a chance to see how

“TAL” comes together. “He’ll have as many fans at a date in the middle of nowhere as at an event in Chicago or Boston,” says Steven Barclay, his lecture agent. In fact, Glass is even more popular in smaller locales. “People get determined to see him because there’s so little of his perspective—call it a side view of culture—in their areas,” says Barclay. At these gigs, Glass stands on stage with a table, a mike and a few CD players, and mixes a program live. “I went to one of his shows a couple months ago and was moved to tears,” says Bayard Russell, a 22-year-old musician who had never heard of Glass before his girlfriend bought tickets to the event. Since then, Russell’s been catching up on past shows, which are cataloged on “TAL’s” Web site, [thislife.org](http://thislife.org). The site receives 25,000 hits a week, with people listening for an astounding 40 minutes on average.



Mind you, a show this compelling doesn’t just write itself. There’s one downside to Glass: he’s a famous workaholic. “He’s the executive producer, the host and he reports his own stories,” says Vowell. “When I listen to the credits on other shows, I think, ‘Ira does that. Ira does that. Ira, Ira, Ira. He’s great and all, but when a girl thinks about her dream boyfriend, she doesn’t picture him working 18 hours a day.’” Indeed, regarding his relationships, Glass admits, “As a boyfriend, I tend to be kind of a work in progress.” There are times he’s tried to spend fewer hours at the office. “Then I go through a defiant period where I’m like, ‘But I *like* editing.’”

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- Ira Glass on Storytelling
- Ira Glass on His Reporting Style

Will he do it forever? Glass occasionally considers taking his radio show to TV, and in 1999 he walked away from two separate offers. “It wasn’t the right thing,” he says. “It was too much of a wild card.” TV would also mean more speechless admirers at parties—and maybe even full-fledged celebrityhood. “There’s a lot to be said for being largely invisible and I’m sure Ira

feels that way, too," says Terry Gross, the host of NPR's blockbuster "Fresh Air" and a longtime colleague of Glass. "But if Ira decided to do TV, I'm confident he'd find a way to do it in the language of TV. It wouldn't be radio in a box."

Glass and his staff remain uncertain. "I do not want to be on television," he says, "but I would if it were the right show. We'd have to find a host. We even have talked about ways of doing it without my being seen." A TV program as good as "This American Life" with an off-camera host? Hmm. Keep talking. We're listening.



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