

The voluble Ira Glass comes clean

about his mother, hi

his american life

by claudia pearce

American Life may be more artsy than *ATC*, but it still documents contemporary American life. Each week there's a theme—teen girls, people who lead double lives, Frank Sinatra, all-night hot-dog stands, blue-collar voters. Glass does a story or two and invites a variety of writers and performers to take a whack at the theme as well—using “stories, monologues, short radio plays and found recordings.” Though uneven at times, *TAL* is generally compelling stuff—funny, poignant and sometimes even shocking or painful (and occasionally all of the above—such as the show where an overweight teen told the travails of being used by her thin, gorgeous, bulimic best friend as a kind of side-kick for boy catching). All in all, Glass usually finds a way to keep his listeners riveted.

After struggling to finance *TAL* for the last year, the golden-voiced producer/host recently got word that the Corporation for Public Broadcasting had committed funding to keep him on the air for the next three years. Since competition for CPB funds is extremely fierce, this is a major coup for *TAL*, especially since Glass had only requested funding for one year. In honor of the felicitous occasion, we interviewed Glass in his Chicago studio by phone. What follows is a slice of *his American Life*.

Ira Glass is a kind of public radio Jack of All Trades. Since he started working for National Public Radio at age 19, he's done tape cutting, reporting, writing, editing, producing and even hosting for most of NPR's news programs at one time or another. He covered the fall of the Berlin Wall with Robert Siegel, the Exxon Valdez oil spill with Daniel Zwerdling, and produced several award-winning series on education for *All Things Considered*. And his hilarious pledge breaks during the last radio membership campaign (where Glass accosted coffee shop denizens and bookstore salesclerks) not only helped raise substantial funds, but actually garnered kudos from listeners—something almost unheard of for a pledge break. And now Glass has his own show—*This American Life*—airing Sunday nights at 10 o'clock.

While the quirky four-act program may seem like a departure from Glass's more news-oriented past, it really isn't. *This*

Claudia Pearce: Back when you reported for *All Things Considered*, you did a year-long series on high schoolers. Now you continue to feature high school students on *This American Life*. What is it about you and teens?

Ira Glass: To do the kind of story-telling we like to do on the show, you need people who are pretty open about what's going on in their lives, and who are actually going through something where there are big stakes. You get that with high school kids.

CP: What kind of high school experience did you have?

s love life and his suddenly hot Sunday-night radio show.

IG: I went to a mediocre suburban public school. And I was a brainy, nerdy kid—I was in what few honors classes they had. And in all the school plays. And I was a geek. Yeah. And basically, except for a slightly hipper set of glasses, it's not that different from where I am now, sadly. (He laughs.) At 38 years old, you can just play the whole thing a little more gracefully.

CP: Thank goodness for that. Did you plan to go into radio from an early age? Listening to *This American Life*, it sounds like you're doing the job you were meant to do.

IG: Thank you. It feels like that to me too. But no, I didn't grow up thinking about radio at all. My parents were very intent on me becoming a doctor.

CP: Really?

IG: Yeah, really. When I was 18, I had two summer jobs. One in the shock-trauma unit of the University of Maryland Hospital and one at National Public Radio's headquarters in Washington, D.C. And at the end of the summer I just chose.

CP: So NPR beat the trauma unit?

IG: Yes it did. [The trauma unit] was a high-tech, high-pressure situation. If I had been at a family practice or a neighborhood clinic, I think it would have been more interesting and I could have actually ended up being a doctor. Though I don't regret it.

CP: Recently, I read a *New York Times* article quoting a Baltimore psychologist named Shirley Glass who studies "extra-marital liaisons." Is that your mom?

IG: That's her. That is one of her fields—"sexpertise."

CP: Has it always been one of her fields?

IG: What she says, and I've chosen to believe her, is that she became interested in it when she did research for her Ph.D. She got her Ph.D. the same month I graduated from college.

CP: So she wasn't a sexpert while you were growing up.

IG: She was, however, in psychology graduate school when I was in [my early teens]. It was a perfect time to have an adult around you who's learning psychology. Not because they do that much better of a job raising you, but because all the stuff she was reading was intensely interesting to me as a 14- and 15-year-old. She'd tell me about the Oedipus Complex and what it means when somebody's passive aggressive, and I remember she was

very big on pointing out reaction formation. Which I don't even remember what it is.

CP: Since you're single, does your mom ever give you advice on your "extra-marital liaisons"?

IG: Well, I mean, does she? Both my parents are very intent on the idea that I will get married. And [my mother] has a tremendous amount of interest, more interest, perhaps, than I am willing to indulge, in whoever I'm going out with. And I go through this, "I have nothing to hide, if she wants to know, I am bigger than this, it's no problem."

CP: What about other subjects—since she's a psychologist, do you ask her advice on non-romantic subjects?

IG: I don't. I think one of the struggles kids with psychologist parents have is that the parent gets in default mode and becomes your psychologist. And you'll tell them something, and they'll say, "Um hmm, and how did you feel about that?" or, "Um hmm, so that must have felt pretty bad?" And you just have to yell, "Mom, cut it out!"

CP: Do you think you will ever get married?

IG: I would like to get married very much.

CP: Is being married to your job what has held you up so far?

IG: You know, I work a lot of hours, but I do believe that I would be able to sustain a job and have somebody to be close to. I'm not like some sea captain, you know, "I'm sorry, I be settin' out fer port in th' morning, I just cahnt see havin' a woman in my life." It's not like that at all.

About three months ago I started seeing someone who I'm falling in love with. And the lack of time is a problem. But what tends to be a bigger problem, is that, from the moment I come into work at 7 in the morning, to the moment I go home, which is at least after 8 p.m., and often after 10, things are happening really fast. There are a lot of decisions—marketing, fund-raising. Do we want this story or that story, and once we've chosen, do we cut it down or have the writer write more? Four stories a week is four massive edits. There are a million tiny, tiny decisions, all happening very fast.

So, when I go see Nina, it is hard to deal with someone who's leading a civilian life. You know, they aren't giving you information that quickly. I feel like, "Come on, c'mon, c'mon."

And it takes me a full day to come down. Usually around Sunday I turn back into a person who can sit and have a normal conversation without being in production mode. It's very hard.

CP: I can see where that could be stifling.

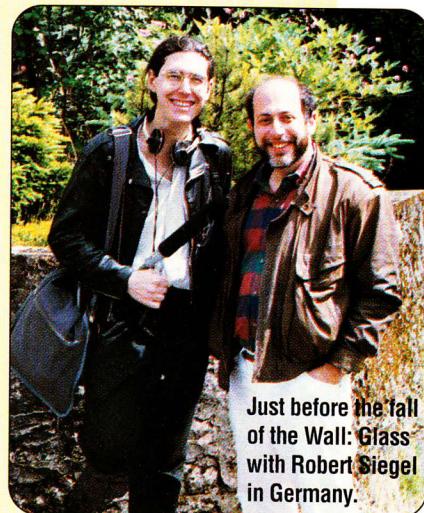
IG: I know! And when it's happening, I know that it's happening, and I know to just shut up about it. Shut up, and in four or five hours, I'll be a little calmer.

CP: Maybe you should drink a glass of wine first.

IG: That's really true.

CP: Do you and the staff take many vacations to make up for the long hours?

IG: Maybe if I had a different personality, I could. But I don't, so we don't. We took a week off at Christmas, and there's occasional time off. Generally, though, if we throw on a rerun, it's because we're working on a very ambitious show that will happen the week after that. For example, we're [rerunning] a show on compulsive liars right before Valentine's Day—what a weird Freudian slip that is! I mean, right



Just before the fall of the Wall: Glass with Robert Siegel in Germany.

before April Fools' Day.

CP: So, should Nina know about that slip?

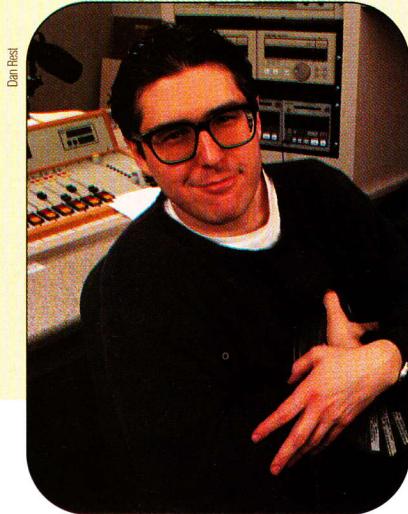
IG: I don't even want to think about it. Right before April Fools' Day. Actually, it does make sense, because a lot of the stories are about people lying in their love relationships. I'll just choose to believe that that's what that slip was about.

And, so we're airing the re-run so we can do this very ambitious show where this reporter and producer went out to a Single Farmers of America event for a weekend, and got really

incredible tape of these farmers trying to hook up [romantically]. And it's really poignant and funny, and it's going to be beautiful. But it's going to take days to turn 26 hours of tape into a 15-minute story. And that's just one of the stories.

CP: What's in store for *This American Life* in the future?

IG: I think more live events. We just go somewhere with some of the people who read well, like David Sedaris, and do our stuff before an audience. It



Brian Ries

works as theater as well as radio, and it would get us out of Chicago.

CP: How did you discover David Sedaris?

IG: I saw him reading here in Chicago, in this tiny little club called Lower Links. And the very first time I saw him, I thought he'd be really great on radio. But I thought that, since he was so formed as a writer, he would have no interest, and I was shy about approaching him. Whereas he, from his point of view, had been waiting all of his life for somebody from public radio to approach him. He's a public radio junkie. But not the sort of person who would ever aggressively go out and try to get himself on public radio.

CP: That is hilarious!

IG: In fact, I didn't even have the nerve to call him, because I felt so in awe of what he was doing. I had a mutual friend named Paula call him for me.

CP: So you've gone from being too shy to even call Sedaris to performing in front of a live audience with him.

IG: It's funny. Up until November, I hated being in front of a live audience. It seemed to have all the difficulty of radio with none of the advantages. If you're in the radio studio and you're losing the audience you don't know. And it's better not to know!

When you're live, you can feel it when they're not with you. That's a really terrible feeling! And it's not like, at that point, you can do it any differently anyway. If they're not with you, it's better that 200,000 of them simply turn off the radio. And cassette sales drop a little that week and that's how you find out.

But then in November I had a wonderful experience being on stage. It was really, really fun. I want to do more of it, but I feel like it's wrong, like I shouldn't want to.

CP: Why? Do you have qualms about the attention?

IG: Yeah, I think there's something too public about it. Part of me really, really wants it, but part of me feels more comfortable thinking of myself as invisible.

CP: Do you hope *This American Life* will go on to become a public radio tradition?

IG: I would like the show to stick around. Now that we're on 93 stations and have grant money extending out three years, there's tremendous interest in picking us up. Which I love. I would like it to be a regular public radio show that is on for years and years.

This American Life airs Sundays from 10 p.m. to 11, on KPBS Radio (89.5 FM).

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