

June 27, 1994
Vol. 41, No. 24



▲ "I am not an idle whistler," says Ullman (teaching Tchaikovsky to a cockatiel near the Capitol).

WHISTLING A HAPPY TUNE

Capitol Hill is alive with the sound of Christopher Ullman

HE DOESN'T WHISTLE WHILE HE works—as press secretary to Rep. Rod Grams (R-Minn.). But when he does put his lips together and blow, Christopher Ullman is the nation's best. His pitch-perfect renditions of Handel's "The Arrival of the Queen of Sheba" and Clint Black's "This Nightlife" at April's National Whistling Contest in Louisburg, N.C., made him the new U.S. champion and won him \$500. "It's the only thing I do better than anyone," says Ullman, 31. "I knew if I ever became famous, it would be because of whistling."

Indeed, Ullman recently jammed with Branford Marsalis on *The Tonight Show* and will solo with two local orchestras this fall. Says Rhino Rec-

ords exec James Austin, who is considering an Ullman album: "People underrate whistling, and Chris is the best I've heard."

Ullman first puckered up at age 6, inspired by his father, Joseph, a CBS business manager, who whistled Gilbert and Sullivan tunes around the family's Massapequa Park, N.Y., home. But Ullman credits his childhood paper route with turning that interest into a passion. "My feet were pedaling, but my mind and lips weren't doing much," says Ullman. By the time he was studying political science at the State University of New York at Binghamton, his reputation had won him invitations to improvise with local jazz and blues bands.

Now that he's competitive, Ullman

trains hard; he takes the stairs to Grams's seventh-floor office to increase lung capacity and practices daily for 90 minutes, whistling on the subways or at the Capitol Hill townhouse he shares with four roommates. So far, Ullman has no plans to whistle full-time, but he's pursuing his dream of soloing with the National Symphony Orchestra. The executive director, Stephen Klein, calls Ullman's talent "staggering" but feels whistling is still a novelty. Ullman remains hopeful. There's no drawback, he says—except for the crimp it puts in his love life. "I've got a self-imposed 24-hour prohibition on kissing before a performance," he says. "Intense kissing makes your lips soft, so you can't make the right sounds." ■