

Can you make a living as a ventriloquist? This St. Paul man can speak to that

Decades after a St. Paul man started making dummies talk, ventriloquism is cool again.

By Richard Chin (<https://www.startribune.com/richard-chin/417082793/>) Star Tribune |

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The scene: a stage in an American Legion post in southeastern Minnesota. The players: longtime comic duo David Malmberg and Simon Spencer.

“What is it that you get when you mix holy water with prune juice?” asks Malmberg.

“A religious movement,” says Spencer.

Bah-da-bing!

Sounds corny on paper, but as part of the after-dinner entertainment at a holiday party for employees of a grocery store in Plainview, Minn., this joke killed.

It could be because Malmberg and Spencer have been working together for decades. Their material has been honed by thousands of performances. Their comic timing is sharp, as if the partners can read each other’s minds. Well, they could if Spencer’s head weren’t made of wood.

“I’m a ventriloquist,” Malmberg, the brains of the outfit, explains to the audience.

“You’re a hypnotist,” replies Spencer.

“No, I’m a ventriloquist. Hypnotists put people to sleep,” says Malmberg.

“What do you think you’re doing?” says Spencer.

Bah-da-bing!

This is how Malmberg makes a living.

For the past 26 years, he’s been one of only a few dozen people in the country working as a full-time ventriloquist. Malmberg makes his home in St. Paul, but he often lives out of a suitcase, working up to 100 gigs a year from the Dakotas to the Dells. Spencer, who’s close to 60, lives in the suitcase.

Bah-da-bing!

It seems like an old-fashioned way to earn a paycheck because it is. Ventriloquism was a staple of 19th-century English music halls and early-20th-century American vaudeville shows. But amazing an audience by throwing your voice is even older than that.

Gastromancy, the ancient Greek practice of divining the future from noises coming out of a prophet’s stomach, is considered an early form of ventriloquism. The roots of the word “ventriloquist” are derived from Latin meaning “belly talker.”

Malmberg isn’t an oracle from Delphi, although Spencer does play a soothsayer named Swami Simon.

Malmberg: “Swami Simon, I don’t drink, I don’t smoke and I don’t fool around. Will I live a long time?”

Spencer: “No, but it will sure seem like it.”

Bah-da-bing!



Video (01:55): Ventriloquist David Malmberg has been perfecting his art for 60 years.

Malmberg, 70, grew up in a showbiz family. His father, Larry Malmberg, was a world-class accordionist who played for presidents and kings and was inducted into the Minnesota Music Hall of Fame. His brother, Denny, is a jazz accordionist. Another brother, Al, was a longtime WCCO Radio talk show host.

As a kid, Malmberg learned how to play the accordion and guitar, performed magic tricks and escape acts. "I was forever being tied up and thrown in the neighbor's swimming pool," he said.

Naturally, he was also fascinated by ventriloquists.

"It spoke to me when I was 10 years old," he said. "I was watching these guys on TV, and I thought, 'I gotta do that.'"

After all, he was growing up in the golden age of ventriloquism when stars like Edgar Bergen, Shari Lewis and Señor Wences were household names.

He started haunting magic stores and bookshops to look for how-to books on ventriloquism. He practiced with a black sock (named White Jaw Harry) that he accented with white paint. He mowed lawns to earn money to buy a ventriloquist doll from the Sears Roebuck catalog. And he started performing in talent shows.

Eventually, he met an old vaudeville ventriloquist named Ken Spencer who had set up shop in Minneapolis carving custom, professional dummies. (They're also called "figures" or "dolls" by ventriloquists, who sometimes refer to themselves as "vents.")

Spencer carved a youthful, smart-alecky doll with moving eyes and eyebrows that Malmberg named Simon Spencer, after its creator. It cost \$115, a birthday present from Malmberg's parents. (Today, professional vent dolls can cost thousands.)

Malmberg picked up a paisley tuxedo for his teenage self, a Beatles suit for Simon and began to charge for performances.

Malmberg: "Swami Simon, some people say that I'm getting a beer belly. What do you think?"

Spencer: "You're not getting a beer belly. You're just creating a liquid grain storage facility."

Bah-da-bing!

But Malmberg's budding career in showbiz was interrupted by the Vietnam War.

He got drafted and was about to be shipped off to serve on a minesweeper when a chief petty officer heard him doing a ventriloquism bit.

That was enough to convince the Navy that Malmberg's talents could better be used entertaining the troops. He became a disc jockey for American Forces Radio and was stationed in Guantanamo Bay, Cuba, and Spain.

After he got out of the service, he returned to Minnesota and stayed in radio, becoming operations director of two stations, K102 and WDGY. While he was successful, he missed performing — spinning records and telling jokes. He decided to give that ventriloquism thing a try again.

With a wife and a kid, it may not have seemed like the most prudent thing to do, especially since it was 1990. By then, ventriloquism was considered a bit old-fashioned, maybe even a little creepy.

For example, in unsettling episodes of "The Twilight Zone" and the 1978 horror movie "Magic," starring Anthony Hopkins, ventriloquist's dummies were given a malevolent will of their own. The term "automatonophobia" surfaced to describe fear of ventriloquist's dummies.

"Sally, who has automatonophobia, had a nightmare about ventriloquist's dummies chasing her and killing her. She had a heart attack and died," is the way [Urban Dictionary](https://www.urbandictionary.com/define.php?) used it in a sentence (<https://www.urbandictionary.com/define.php?>

term=Automatonophobia).

“We went through a period of the weird ventriloquist,” Malmberg admitted.

Spencer: “Good grief! The stage!”

Malmberg: “What about the stage?”

Spencer: “It’s made out of wood.”

Malmberg: “So?”

Spencer: “It’s my uncle.”

Bah-da-bing!

Over the years, Malmberg crafted a career by landing variety show gigs at places like the Hesper-Mabel Steam Engine Days and the Kellogg Watermelon Festival. He’s performed on a pool table and a flatbed truck, in churches, schools, sheep barns and slaughterhouses. One time, four guys attending a Canadian Dental Association event in Minneapolis hired him to give a performance in a hotel suite while their wives watched from home via Skype.

“I killed. I mean I even thought I was funny and I had heard the jokes thousands of times,” Malmberg wrote about the experience in a 2018 memoir he published called “BellyTalker: The Life and Times of a Ventriloquist (<https://www.amazon.com/BellyTalker-Times-Ventriloquist-David-Malmberg/dp/1543947581>).

A funny thing happened while Malmberg was entertaining at small-town fairs and fundraisers: Ventriloquism became popular again.

Don’t believe it? Witness the rise of ventriloquist superstar Jeff Dunham, who now packs arenas and stars on Comedy Central shows. Three out of the 14 winners of “America’s Got Talent” show have been ventriloquists, including 2007 winner Terry Fator, whom Forbes ranked as the eighth-highest-paid comedian in 2019, with an estimated \$17 million in earnings. (Dunham was in ninth place with \$15 million.)

Another “America’s Got Talent” winner, teenager Darci Lynne Farmer, will be appearing at the Minnesota State Fair grandstand this summer.

“It’s hugely popular,” Malmberg said. “We’re in the midst of a renaissance right now.”

Still, Malmberg knows of only one other full-time ventriloquist in Minnesota.

Like Malmberg, James Wedgwood (https://www.glberg.com/james_wedgwood), who lives near Alexandria, became fascinated with ventriloquism as a child. He got a real job as an adult, but then decided later in life to pick up the dummy again. Wedgwood, 64, has been a full-time ventriloquist since 1988. Both men are represented by the same talent agency, G.L. Berg Entertainment (<https://www.glberg.com/>).

They both do a lot of fairs and corporate events, often in rural areas, far removed from urban comedy clubs.

“Everyone comes in after they milk the cows, and you do the show,” Wedgwood said.

Many who see Malmberg perform have never seen a live ventriloquist before. At the Plainview American Legion, Malmberg got a laugh just for taking the dummy out of its suitcase.

“It’s a phenomenal connection with the audience,” he said. “People become children again.”

But ventriloquism is more than just putting words in the mouth of a dummy.

For 50 minutes in Plainview, Malmberg, Spencer and two other figures, the dimwitted Lars Gunderson and Leonard Cribble, “America’s grouchiest farmer,” kept up a rapid-fire stream of gags, trying to trigger eight to 10 laughs a minute.

“I’m creating a character and I myself am a character,” Malmberg said. “Our job is to make people laugh.”

Malmberg, who studied classical guitar in Spain, sang a goofy song about a colorectal surgeon. He and the dummies called out members of the audience by name, getting people to laugh about their bosses and co-workers.

He’s well aware that he’s in the service industry — the entertainment hired to boost company morale at \$1,500 to \$3,500 per show. But he’s also trying to keep alive what he describes as an ancient and noble folk art.

“As long as the phone keeps ringing, I’m going to keep doing it,” he said.

Malmberg: “One of these days, my name’s going to be in lights.”

Spencer: “What are you going to do? Change your name to Exit?”

Bah-da-bing!

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