

THE AGE  
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Each week three million people tune into Garrison Keillor's nostalgic satire of small-town US life, *News from Lake Wobegon*, making his one of the most devoted radio followings in the world. By **Martin Kettle**.

# And all the children are above-average...

GARRISON Keillor is sitting in his dressing room reading sonnets. Three thousand at the latest count, he says, and (using every time the postman calls. All because he suggested on the radio that listeners might try their hand at a Valentine's day poem.

There are depths of love out there that we barely knew about," Keillor says. "It's not the simplest thing to sit down and write 14 lines. All these people, overcome by the need to write a sonnet. Just imagine that."

Imagining it is easy. *A Prairie Home Companion* — the program Keillor hosts each week — inspires levels of devotion few radio shows can rival.

There are people who plan their holidays around *A Prairie Home Companion* as never to miss a show, and people who plan their holidays so they can attend live recordings at the Fitzgerald Theatre in St Paul, the show's Minnesota home. So if Keillor asks these people for sonnets, he should expect sonnets.

*A Prairie Home Companion* goes out every Saturday across the US's National Public Radio network, just as it has done since it first started in 1974.

The show is a mix of music and comedy sketches, culminating in a set piece *News from Lake Wobegon* monologue delivered by Keillor to about three million rapt listeners. The show begins with and returns to Keillor. At 5pm (US central time) he

starts, singing "Oh, bear that old piano! From down the avenue... Two hours later, he finishes with: "And that's the news from Lake Wobegon, where all the women are strong, all the men are good-looking and all the children are above average."

*A Prairie Home Companion* is an expression of Keillor's personality, his imagination and his values. Though the show is very funny, and the music is great, in some ineradicable way it is Keillor's loving and funny evocation of a kinder, simpler, better US that is at the heart of its appeal. "It's based on a kind of

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show that existed in my youth," says Keillor, who grew up in '50s rural Minnesota.

"It's a live variety-show broadcast, but with some important differences." Like the range of its music, which can run from an appella chorus through jazz, blue grass, Cajun and Celtic. And the fact that Keillor composed and writes much of the show himself, sometimes finishing his scripts just before it airs.

What would make this respected middle-class Minnesotan gentleman of 57 stand on a stage and perform *Great Balls of Fire* for the millions? What would make a man with a new marriage

and young daughter rise every morning at five to write? Whatever else Keillor keeps hidden about himself — and there's a sense of a dark side — you know that this is a driven man.

He says that doing the show is "good work". He says it's "a little harder than you'd like to be doing ideally in your late 50s", but that it would be "a terrible waste to just drop it". He says he finds it easier to do these days. "One of the great secrets that they don't tell you is that your declining years are really a lot more fun than when you were riding high and you were nervous about

state's improbable governor, Jesse Ventura, the man they call the Body Politic.

Lake Wobegon is Keillor's Minnesota never-never land. It permeates his books, and it has the honored place in *A Prairie Home Companion*. "It's both real and imaginary," he explains. "But it does exist. It very much exists. Even here in Minneapolis and St Paul."

"All these rural people have come to live in the city, but they like to live on the outskirts, and they like to have an acre of land, two acres, three acres. These are Lake Wobegon people and they are a part of mid-western culture that's describable, and I think that I describe it.

"I write about it with love," he continues, "but I also write about it satirically, because the people themselves have a satiric mind. They're very ironic people. But I think their resilience is funny — their dishonesty, their inability to tell the truth to each other, the great length they go to. And they are stoics. Stoics I think are comical. They never give up. They keep at hopeless tasks. And these people don't believe that they are entitled to happiness."

Like the man himself, the writings may leave Minnesota from time to time, but it is to Minnesota that they always return. And the same is true of *A Prairie Home Companion*. Every year it goes on the road — occasionally overseas. But most of the shows are broadcast live from the Fitzgerald, the century-old theatre in downtown St Paul that Keillor helped to save a few years back.



**Faith, hope, love and humor:** Keillor creates a loving evocation of a kinder, simpler US. Picture: CARMEN QUEDA

remaining it after the greatest of St Paul's literary sons. Even Keillor's cat is named F Cat Fitzgerald.

The on-stage understanding between Keillor and his house band (led by keyboard player Rich Donnelly), actors Sue Scott and Tim Russell, and sound-effects man Tom Keith, speaks of years of respect. But the only real place to see the show is at the Fitz, in winter, on Keillor's home ground, with snow in the streets and a theatre full of cheering devotees.

The weather looms large in Minnesota, and thus in the Lake Wobegon fantasy, and in *A Prairie Home Companion* too. "It's a neutral place for a conversation to start," Keillor says. "The show is about ordinary things. You don't need to have seen movies, or watched TV, or read books to understand the show."

Writer is a big deal in Minnesota. "Growing up in a place that has winter," Keillor has written, "you learn to avoid self-pity. Winter is not a personal experience — everybody else is as cold as you — so you shouldn't complain about it too much."

That passage is reprinted on a coffee mug that I bought in what must surely be the only store in the world devoted wholly to a radio show. Lake Wobegon USA is in the largest shopping mall on the planet, the Mall of America, outside Minneapolis airport. Dave Edin, who runs the shop, will talk Garrison Keillor with customers for as long as they are willing to listen.

"I think about America every day," Keillor once wrote, "and imagine a town, an avenue of old frame houses, a boulevard of tall trees, a June night, lawn sprinklers swishing across the grass and popping the flower bushes by the porch. A dog on the porch. Lights behind the curtains."

"Rock 'n' roll in an upstairs bedroom. Charcoal smoke in the air, a whiff of burgers. A gang of kids skidding around on gravel, digging. A screen door slaps and a dad marches out to the garage. Yard after yard, block after block, every night — and sound and smell utterly familiar. This is the American neighborhood of childhood comfort and fantasy, of teenage ambition, and of the tenderness and mystery and splendour and comeliness of marriage. Movies and novels of brutality and greed may sell a zillion copies, but they're irrelevant to the life of this avenue, which is based on faith, hope, love and humor."

In a sense, that's the key to the appeal of *A Prairie Home Companion*. "I hope you enjoy the show," Keillor tells the Minnesota audience just as the show goes to air. "And I hope I do too." It is great entertainment with a high purpose — and if you can come up with a better working definition of art, then you're welcome to it.

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