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Garrison Keillor, 62, founded *A Prairie Home Companion* on Minnesota Public Radio 30 years ago. His "News From Lake Wobegon" monologue is the heart of the show.

Script isn't necessary for Garrison Keillor

Radio host delivers 'Prairie Home Companion' for 30 years

By David Carr
New York Times

NEW YORK: On the second floor of the Adore, a cozy little coffee shop just below Union Square, a large man was snuggled into a corner. He appeared every inch the writer, with a clutch of papers, a steaming cup of cafe au lait and a look of intense concentration beneath bushy eyebrows, even though he was just staring at the menu.

Garrison Keillor, 62, is an accomplished writer. A former staff member at the New Yorker and author of several novels, he takes his role as a writer very seriously.

But he has this side job, as ringmaster of *A Prairie Home Companion*, a live radio show he founded on Minnesota Public Radio 30 years ago, and at its very center is a monologue: "The News From Lake Wobegon," that he makes up each week on the fly. There is never a written script.

Keillor left the radio show in Minnesota in 1987, moved abroad, then settled back in New York, where he still has an apartment. He was sincere in his effort to leave *A Prairie Home Companion*, but quickly found he missed the weekly grind of building a show from scratch.

"I knew almost right away," he said. "I had the idea that I had really made a bonhead move - one of the great bonhead moves of my life. . . . But I managed to find my way back."

Keillor now lives in St. Paul, where he is married to a Minnesotan, Jenny Lind Nilsson, and 33 weeks out of the year, he spends the week coming up with a live radio show.

Four million people tune in each week for *A Prairie Home Companion*, a show that in addition to its genre-defying musical selections - bluegrass, folk, gospel and classical all show up - uses the prism of Lake Wobegon, a mythical Minnesota town full of taciturn Norwegian bachelors, to talk about life for the rest of us.

Keillor first broadcast the show on July 6, 1974, in front of 12 people. Now, each year, 100,000 people buy tickets to see the program live at its base in the Fitzgerald Theater in St. Paul, or in sold-out performances around the country.

Keillor is a charming, winning radio

host, mixing self-effacement and an increasingly musical bass ("I just like to sing harmony with younger women") to make a show that swings through all sorts of improbable musical collaborations and the kind of radio drama that died everywhere else 50 years ago.

"It's keeping something alive that otherwise might perish," Keillor said. "And that is the idea of live variety entertainment on the radio. But it's also the separate parts of it. I think. Some of the dramatic sketches, the cowboys and Guy Noir, keep alive a certain kind of comedy on radio that otherwise might disappear. And so we're keeping our finger in the page for other younger, finer, handsomer people to come along and discover and make something really good out of it."

Keillor is a version of the American personality who ends up stapled to something bigger than he is. "In the beginning, your career is all about you," he said. "You crave awards and recognition. But then you come to realize that you played some small part in bringing up people. Small people went to sleep to the sound of your voice, riding their cars with their parents. They looked forward to the monologue because when it began, the parents stopped arguing and turned up the radio."

And indeed there is something about that monologue - his voice is an amazing instrument, powerful enough for him to step up to the microphone and simply wing it, knowing only that it will always end the same way: "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."

Keillor, who is not prone to bragging (he is a Minnesotan, after all), is convinced that spoken words are what most people remember best.

"What appeals to me about Minnesota is that it has a stubbornness, it has a persistence. It treasures its own landscape," he said. "People who live in Minnesota really love to stay. They're not migrants. They're not people who are going to fold their tent in another year and go elsewhere."

Or even when they do, they will always be back.

A Prairie Home Companion airs at 6 p.m. Saturdays and is repeated at 10 a.m. Sundays on WNSU (89.7-FM).