

PUBLIC RADIO

An enduring companion

Amid talk of adding fresh faces to the mix, 'A Prairie Home's' longtime host Garrison Keillor shows it's still a prime time for him.

By JAMES RAINEY

Not a single public opinion survey would have hinted at it in the mid-1970s, but it turns out that stories about Norwegian bachelor farmers, mock ads for the American Duct Tape Council and musical sets mashing together bluegrass and bossa nova have a bit of staying power.

Writer and radio host Garrison Keillor has proved, once again, that people don't know what they want until you give it to them. He has serenaded public radio audiences with his vaguely plaintive, bemused voice and id-



TOM WALLACE MCT

TURNING 70 "will be a relief," says Garrison Keillor.

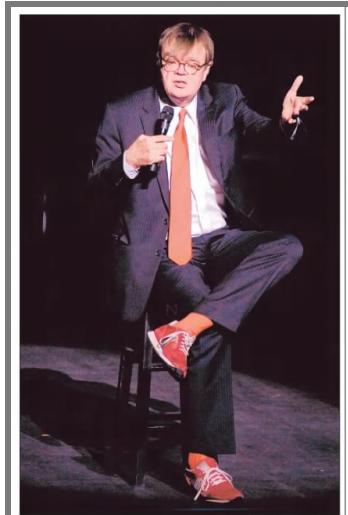
iosyncratic variety show since Gerald Ford sat in the White House.

When Keillor and the cast of "A Prairie Home Companion" return to the Hollywood Bowl on Friday night, it will be with a commitment to keep the indomitable act going, albeit with the recognition that the time for changing ringleaders might not be that far down the turnpike.

"We are a variety show, an absolute variety show," Keillor said. "There are none on television or anywhere else on radio. On a good night on our show, opera can meet jazz can meet bluegrass can meet comedy can meet stories. I just think it's a natural for radio." A few moments later he acknowledged he has been thinking that "for the good of public radio I ought to get this ship prepared to sail on" with someone else at the helm.

The fate of public radio's most venerable personalities became a hot topic in recent weeks, with the announcement that original episodes of "Car Talk" would end this fall. Most NPR member stations are expected to leave reruns of car repair yucksters Tom and Ray Magliozzi in their prime Saturday-morning slot.

But Ira Glass, the popular host of "This American Life," created a stir when he suggested [See Keillor, D9]



GARRISON KEILLOR is working on a Broadway musical and a screenplay.

More tales to tell

[Keillor, from D] that the car repair comedy show should be relegated to off hours — opening the coveted weekend morning slot to newer acts would have a chance to shine. Although he praised the Magliozzi and Keillor for their groundbreaking voices and format, Glass said older shows (including his own 16-year-old program) should go off the air rather than into reruns. He called for new shows, new talent, new ideas.

Among the programs on the horizon as possible next-generation breakfasts for public radio are comedian Marc Maron's interview and commentary show, the NPR quiz show "Ask Me Another," the crowd-generated storytelling show "The Moth Radio Hour" and actor Alec Baldwin's interview program originating at New York's WNYC.

"We are affected in public radio with keeping the audience we have and not so concerned with getting the audience we don't have," said Jennifer Ferro, general manager of KCRW-FM (89.3) in Santa Monica, which doesn't carry Keillor's show. "I don't criticize anyone for that. It's a tough challenge. But growth generally comes from change."

In an interview peppered with wit and laced with melancholy, Keillor did not disagree with those calling for new faces in public radio, though he also argued that old franchises like "Prairie Home" deserve a chance to moonrise and thrive. He said he hoped Glass's show, "Car Talk" and his own risky program would go on and on. "Car Talk" is a small slice of the week," Keillor added. "People love those voices, that Boston hook, and the way they laugh. It's so in public radio."

"A Prairie Home Companion" can be heard on KPCC-FM (88.3) and more than 600 other public radio stations, usually on Saturday evenings. It draws a weekly audience of roughly 15 million people. The live show still packs huge venues such as the Bowl and Tanglewood, in Massachusetts.

Keillor had talked last year about retiring in 2013, then backed away from that plan. He now says he wants to find a replacement to keep the show going but has no timetable for a transition. "I see a lot of people who could do this," he said. "The problem is persuading managers of public radio stations (to accept a new host). And like managers everywhere, they tend to be very conservative."



"THIS AMERICAN LIFE" Ira Glass says newer shows should be given their time in the spotlight.

That is our conflict."

Inside "Prairie Home's" tight-knit family there has even been discussion of a rotating cast of guest hosts, a "Saturday Night Live." But for now Keillor, who turns 70 in August, remains firmly at the helm. Plans for the 33 program, 2012-13 season are being laid and the host looks forward to a 40th-anniversary show in 2014. He evinces a tight devotion to his native St. Paul, Minn., the show's enduring home base.

The program's trademark eclecticism will be on display at the Bowl, with opera soprano Elle Dehn on the psychedelic drug with gospel sisters Feagin and Levett in Steele and actor Martin Sheen, who previously sang on the show and will appear in a couple of sketches this time.

"He is someone who is really robotic, an idealist and an actor," Keillor said of the actor, "so I like to write unadorned, chewy parts for him to play. He does amazingly well with anti-time wasters and crooks and with irritating, posh people."

Keillor has a way of gently bending the conversation that way — from content to showcraze. Noting that some of his friends who live on the Westside of L.A. have moved on, he added, "I have to make new friends, which is not easy for someone who grew up fundamentalist. I'm earnest, silent, disheveled, on the very verge of turning 70 and not that good at friend-making."

Asked why big-city audiences so appreciate his stories of obscure small-town rites, Keillor said his humor has little to do with location. "These are stories about everyday life, about raising children and getting along with people you know too well," he said. "A small town is the perfect literary device for exposing the lives of people and peeling away their

BRUNNEN J. COOPER/OLYMPIA PHOTOGRAPHY

BRUNNEN LOCHMANN

thin veneer of self-regard and pretension... Can we still like each other knowing the worst about each other?"

His age and occasional health scares — he suffered a minor stroke in 2006 — have not shaken Keillor's ambition. He has almost finished a screenplay, "The Loves of the Cowboys." He adds, "There is no market, whatsoever, for a screenplay about cowboys." A couple of anthologies of his writing are in the making, "which is what a person does when one turns 70."

He'll be sitting on the Queen Mary to Europe when the birthday hits next month. Once there he will host a "Prairie Home Companion" cruise for 120 of his closest friends "who will tour Spain and Portugal." He said he welcomes the milestone. "You're 69 1/2 is to live in repudiation," he said. "It will be a relief to get over the line."

Not that the veteran performer isn't conscious of other people watching him for signs of decline. During a recent show at Tanglewood, he was in the midst of a traditional walkabout through the audience when he swerved slightly on the uneven ground. "I didn't fall or even exactly stumble," Keillor said. "It was just a little hitch, and I had to grab the railing. You could hear the whole audience intake. It's 'Oh, sure, this old fella is about to take a tumble.'"

He said he has no intention of pressing on past his due date. "I don't ever, ever want to be in front of an audience and feel them pitying me," he said. "That is the worst."

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