



30 minutes with ...

## Garrison Keillor on retiring, the trouble with nostalgia, and the state of America



**Caty Enders**

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**M**ost nights this month, Garrison Keillor, host of the long-running radio show *A Prairie Home Companion*, has put on a white suit, red tie and sneakers, then stepped off his tour bus to perform a version of his weekly program to live audiences around the US.

His *America the Beautiful Tour* features many of the same songs, skits and stories - like *the news from Lake Wobegon* - that listeners to his Saturday night variety show have heard for the last 42 years. His baritone voice, crooning over rhubarb pie and powdermilk biscuits, is as sweet as it has always been. The show's themes - love and family, tragedy and small-town misadventure - are as poignant as ever. Perhaps there are more prostate jokes these days.

And perhaps lately the songs are a little sadder. Last month, Keillor announced that this would be his farewell tour: after wrapping up the 30-city circuit in Alaska on Sunday, he will complete one more season of *A Prairie Home Companion*, then leave Lake Wobegon for good.

For the four million Americans who regularly tune in, it will be the departure of a man many grew up listening to and the loss of a world they are accustomed to inhabiting for a couple of hours each weekend. When he takes the show on the road, Keillor rewrites the stories for each city, leaving audiences feeling the fictional Lake Wobegon is just a stone's throw away, the characters as familiar and eccentric as an extended family.

Keillor says it's time for him to step back and focus on crafting new worlds. Once a staff writer at the New Yorker, he has, on the side, authored or edited 25 books of fiction and three of poetry.

The Guardian caught up with Keillor before a show in Eugene, Oregon - and after he had driven 12 hours from a performance in Salt Lake City.





▲ Garrison Keillor on stage. Photograph: Prairie Home Companion

**I think you should tell your producers to let you keep the dirty jokes you used when the show was in Brooklyn a couple weeks ago.**

Hm. It was not what I would consider a comfortable show, but it was there and we did it. The show has changed a good deal since then. But that's natural, being out on the road. When I was at the [Kings Theater](#), I was still very uncertain about the monologue, and I was still sort of pulling it out of the air. I was pulling from some older monologues, some older Lake Wobegon stories, which I had intended to do, but I still hadn't quite figured out my way.

**You've been riding a tour bus for four decades. When do you find time to write your stories?**

I write on the bus, or I write sitting here in a hotel room. I have a memoir I'm trying to push along the road. And then the show needs to be rewritten somewhat for each venue. People like to hear local references, and so I put those in. I rewrite a couple of songs for each place. Just, you know, steady workman-like work.

**I was worried talking to you would feel like talking to the voice of God.**

No, no, I'm just a writer. I'm just a writer who looked to slip into radio as a way of supporting myself. You know, I just started out writing short fiction for the New Yorker. I wrote a non-fiction piece about the [Grand Ole Opry down in Nashville](#), and that kind of got me on this track, and I've been on it for 41 years, and now I'm getting off it.

**If you're just a writer, you've spent a lot of free time producing a radio show.**

I'm at the end of a very long and pretty happy detour. I am an inventor and an editor, and that's what I enjoy. I love rewriting as much as I like writing. I really do. I love to sit and print out a hard copy of something and go over it and over it.

I'm not an inventor any more with this show; I'm a curator. I'm trying to keep something going that I invented a long time ago.

You invent things for the radio: [Guy Noir](#) and the [Lives of the Cowboys](#). You invent a town with all these characters in it and story lines, and it's been interesting, until you realize that you have created [wry laugh] an obligation to keep it going, for the listener. And it's at that point that your inventiveness wanes. And you feel restless.

**The Ballad of Sgt. Musgrave - 7/28/2015**



▲ Garrison Keillor sings.

**You've threatened to retire before. You mean it this time?**

When you're 73, you really are aware of how you are changing, the good and the bad. And you don't want to stay doing something past the point where you feel confident and presentable.

## **It's hard to think of you off the air. You've reached the point where you seem like the American conscience, popping in every weekend.**

No, I think [Paul Krugman](#), the columnist for the New York Times, is the American conscience. I don't think I am at all.

### **What comes next?**

I want to write a play. That's become the ambition: plays and screenplays. That's entirely new to me, and it feels adventurous.

### **What's the reception been like on your final go round?**

The audiences have been very big, and you notice that especially outdoors, like when you're out at [Red Rocks](#), and there's this great mountain of people. Or last night in Salt Lake City, and this whole grassy hill is just covered with people sitting there with blankets and lawn chairs and so on.

In the show, I go out into the crowd, usually twice, walking around at the beginning, and then during the intermission, I walk out there with just a handheld microphone, and I walk through the crowd in the dark. It's just very mysterious: the spotlight is on you, but it's in your eyes, so you can't really see, and you're trying not to trip over people, and you're walking through the crowd, and you're singing.

You're singing a verse of this and a verse of that - just songs that they would know. And so they're all singing around you, and they sing *My Country 'Tis of Thee* and *America the Beautiful* and *Working on the Railroad* and *Can't Help Falling in Love* and some *Everly Brothers* and *You Are My Sunshine* - and just on and on. And they love to do this. They're singing it a capella, there's no band playing. It's just people's voices around you, in the dark.

The point of all this - so obvious that you don't even need to point it out - is that we are one country, and this is the basis of everything.



▲ Garrison Keillor performs with Meryl Streep and Lindsay Lohan in the 2006 movie *A Prairie Home Companion*. Photograph: AP

## Is there a reason you called the last tour *America the Beautiful*?

Coming to the end of intermission, I start the audience on the Battle Hymn of the Republic, and I make a little speech, and it's a one-minute speech and it is that every few years, we need to take back the country. The values for which the civil war was fought are still at issue and always will be, and the issue of justice and equality and liberty still need to be fought for by every generation, and people are emotional about this. I don't know - ha - what they think I mean, but I just mean that it never was settled, and so then we launch into:

I have seen Him in the watchfires  
Of a hundred circling camps ...

He has sounded forth the trumpet  
That shall never sound retreat ...

Mine eyes have seen the glory  
Of the coming of the Lord ...

In beauty of the lilies,  
Christ was born across the sea...

... They do all four verses a cappella, and they do this rousing chorus, in four-part harmony. It just gets stronger and stronger as the song goes on. And it's a very powerful moment. People are moved by it. It's not political as people understand "political"; it is just very, very basic.

There's no place else that people get a chance to do that.

### **So you've been touring the country for decades. Are we in a sorry state?**

What seems to me to be unchanging is the ambition of young people. When I go and have a chance to mingle with high school and college students - not to stand up and lecture to them, but to be among them and to talk to them - if anything, I find them much more socially aware, much more ambitious, and much more articulate than we were back in the 1960s.

People my age, I don't know who they are - I don't know them, any of them, anymore. But when I get a chance to hang out with the future, I feel pretty good about it.

**// It produced an awful lot of crap and an awful lot of fluff. And, you know, I'm not fond of that.**

**Hasn't Prairie Home always been on a farewell tour? It seems like the show has always been saying goodbye to the America that we used to know.**

I don't think so. I'm aware that people look on it as a show of nostalgia. I don't exactly feel that way. I was kind of launched on doing the show by an affection for what I considered to be classic American music. Now it's called

"roots" music, I guess.

Pop music of my era was trying to create obsolescence, as a business strategy. I'm not nostalgic for that era, because, in addition to producing a few things that I think are permanent, it produced an awful lot of crap and an awful lot of fluff. And, you know, I'm not fond of that. I'm not.

I never was into kitsch, and that's really the basis of nostalgia: it's being sentimental about the ordinary. And I don't feel that way. The America that I feel strongly about is a sort of classic America. I feel very attached to figures in the 19th century long before I came along - writers: Thoreau, Whitman, Dickinson. I feel moved by them, more than by people of my own time.

So to me that's not an America that has gone away. That's an America that is permanent. I think Thoreau is permanent, I think Emily Dickinson is permanent, and ... I'm an English major. I'm talking like an English major.

**It's cool. I'm an English major, too.**

Hm.

**I know you've named your successor on the show, [Chris Thile](#), who's a musician. What about all the stories? Have you considered trying to cultivate someone to take that side of it over as a podcast?**

Well, I'm not interested in podcasts. Other people are, and I wish them well, but that's not my line of work. I'm interested in the show continuing as a live broadcast for the time being, from the Midwest.

The alternative would be to carry on the show in reruns, which could be done. I'm not in favor of that. I would rather the show be carried on by younger people to use this platform - which we've worked hard to establish - and this staff and crew - who are tremendously capable and loyal - and use it as a springboard for something new: a live, acoustic American music show with some new spoken elements to be named later.

And that's what I like: I like the idea of paving the way for performers in their 20s and 30s to come in and take this over. This seems to me to be utterly natural and the way it should be.

**It sounds like your days are so full that it would be a difficult transition to retirement.**

No, I would always find things to work on. Work is really what I do. I don't have any hobbies. I guess I intend to ride trains more. I really love trains, and I need to get out and walk more, for my own good. You know, you become a little monastic in this work life.

So I won't change some things, but I have no end of things to work on. I have a memoir, and it's due, and I have a novel that I have to do, and it's not Lake Wobegon. It's kind of a darker novel.

**When do we tune in for your last show?**

My last show, I believe, will be at the [Hollywood Bowl](#), the first Saturday in July 2016. And then we'll have kind of a dizzying moment, realizing that life is changing after all these years.



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### Guardian Pick

Nothing beats listening to PHC while driving through the cornfields of Central Illinois on a beautiful crisp autumn evening. I will miss that after 2016 but thank Mr. Keillor for his many decades of wit, inspiration, and companionship. You've been a great friend, sir.

[Jump to comment](#)**User824583**

30 Aug 2015 10:08

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**Guardian Pick**

"And that's what I like: I like the idea of paving the way for performers in their 20s and 30s to come in and take this over. This seems to me to be utterly natural and the way it should be."

Fantastic idea. Prairie Home Companion has exposed huge audiences to many new musical voices and talents over the years, many of whom listeners like myself might not have ever heard of.

I loved the seasonal aspect of his shows--win...

[Jump to comment](#)**Tamarack418**

30 Aug 2015 11:01

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