

Garrison Keillor busy as he nears 75

Ex-'Prairie Home' host to embark on final comedy tour

JEFF BAENEN
Associated Press

ST. PAUL, Minn. — Garrison Keillor is not spending his retirement baking Powdermilk Biscuits or drinking coffee down at the Chatterbox Cafe now that he's hung up his microphone as host of his popular public radio show, "A Prairie Home Companion."

He turns 75 on Monday and boards a bus the next day for a 28-city "Prairie Home Love & Comedy Tour — 2017," which he vows will be his last.

"I don't think you should go out onstage after the age of 76," Keillor told The Associated Press during a recent interview at his St. Paul office. "You don't want to fall down out there and then all of these people, you know, there's a sudden intake of breath.

And men in white jackets come in from the wings and put an oxygen mask on you.

"You don't want that to happen. It's too much entertainment for the dollar," he adds. "An entertainer is supposed to go away and have a quiet dotage, and you know, lose your marbles in private and not do this out where people can see you."

Keillor started his Saturday-evening radio variety show featuring tales of his fictional Minnesota hometown of Lake Wobegon — "where all the women are strong, all the men are good-looking, and all the children are above average" — in 1974. He went out with a final show at the Hollywood Bowl in July 2016 and turned the show over to mandolinist extraordinaire Chris Thile, who starts his second season as "Prairie Home" host on Oct. 7.

Keillor admits he misses being on the air and says he hasn't listened to "Prairie Home" since Thile took over.



JEFF BAENEN, ASSOCIATED PRESS

Garrison Keillor, creator and former host of, "A Prairie Home Companion," talks at his St. Paul office. Now that he has hung up his microphone as host of his popular public radio show, Keillor, who turns 75 this month, will embark on the 28-city "Prairie Home Love & Comedy Tour 2017," which he vows will be his last.

"I keep my distance because I was given tremendous freedom when I did the show and it took a while for me to even get a grasp of

what was involved. Made a lot of mistakes in the course of all those

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years. So the new people really should be given the same freedom and allowed to make their own mistakes," he said.

"I would miss it too much, I think. I really would feel a big loss, I think, if I listened to it," he said. "I really have to turn my back. When the bishop steps down, the bishop is supposed to leave town. You're not supposed to, you know, keep going back to the church."

Wearing his signature red tennis shoes without socks and his gray hair freshly cut as he prepares to hit the road, Keillor talks about his projects, which include finishing a screenplay about Lake Wobegon. The plot involves a New York weatherman coming back to town for his father's funeral. It's based on a character from Keillor's 1997 novel, "Wobegon Boy."

Keillor hopes the movie

will be filmed in Minnesota. Keillor's radio show characters were the basis of director Robert Altman's last movie, "A Prairie Home Companion."

"We just have to find a town that can be Lake Wobegon, and then I think we should be all set to go," Keillor said. "And we have to teach people to talk, you know, we have to teach actors to talk, and not talk as they did in the movie ' Fargo,' which is not quite right."

Humorist Calvin Trillin, who has appeared on "Prairie Home" about a half-dozen times, said the stories Keillor told in his weekly monologue, "The News From Lake Wobegon," are timeless tales that anyone can identify with.

"I think he's captured something there," Trillin told the AP. "I always say Garrison, I think, is some sort of genius, and just what sort of genius is something we're still working on."

Keillor said he's about 100,000 words into a

memoir about growing up in Minnesota. He's also started writing a weekly syndicated newspaper column. While Donald Trump has given the avowed Democrat some material — a recent column opened by referring to Trump as "a vulgar, unstable yo-yo with an attention-deficit problem," the humorist said writing about the new president "keeps going along in the same road, and it gets wearisome. Because it doesn't really add up to anything. It's all distraction."

Keillor has survived heart surgery, a minor stroke and seizures, and recently had surgery on his left eye for cataracts and glaucoma. A former chain-smoker, he gave up cigarettes and alcohol years ago, and muses about how modern medicine has given him a second chance.

"You have all of these miracles," he said. "It's an enormous luxury."

Keillor kicks off his tour Aug. 8 in Appleton, Wis., makes his lone Minne-

sota stop at the state fair on Sept. 1 and wraps it up Sept. 15 in Cary, N.C. The show, a looser re-creation of "Prairie Home," features regulars such as sound-effects whiz Fred Newman and pianist Richard Dworsky, private eye Guy Noir and The Cowboys, and Keillor duet partners Heather Masse and Aoife O'Donovan splitting the tour. Keillor opens each show by humming a tone, and the audience joins him in singing standards such as "My Country, 'Tis of Thee" and the "Battle Hymn of the Republic" a cappella.

"Sometimes you see teenagers there with their cellphones and they're Googling the lyrics. But they're singing. It's really a marvelous show. It's hard to describe the feeling of it. But it's not an audience sitting and watching a pop star or sitting and watching, you know, brilliant virtuosity. I'm no genius. But people feel a collective pleasure," Keillor said.