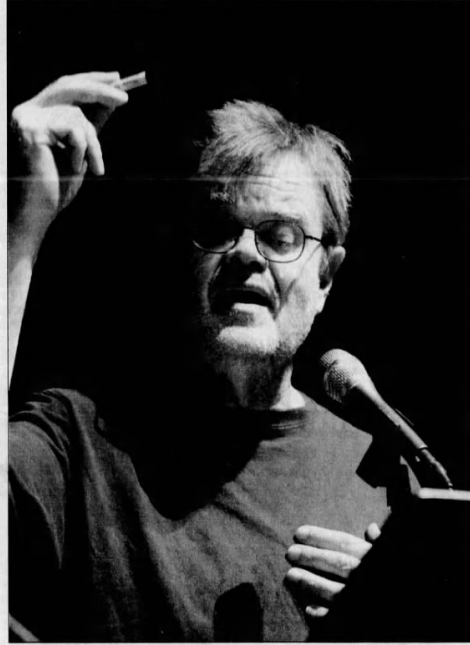


## Prairie Home Companion

# BEHIND THE SCENES



AP PHOTO/ANN HESSEFELI

Garrison Keillor rehearses a song for "A Prairie Home Companion" at the Fitzgerald Theater in St. Paul, Minn., earlier this spring.

## Garrison Keillor still orchestrates his radio show largely by himself

By DEBORAH HASTINGS  
AP National Writer

ST. PAUL, Minn. — During rehearsal, the boss meanders backstage, singing to himself. He doesn't so much wander as he circles like an approaching jet.

When he descends from on high is anybody's guess. He's also the air traffic controller.

And it's his airport.

The boss is Garrison Keillor, the omnipotent and sometimes oblivious creator of "A Prairie Home Companion," the public radio show adored by 4 million fans,

broadcast live from Minnesota's mythical Lake Wobegon — home to Norwegian bachelor farmers, strong women, good-looking men and above-average children.

This is not the gentle narrator you hear on the air — that witty, sensitive observer of triviality and tribulations. This is a complicated and detached ringmaster, issuing orders that change faster than weather. His loyal, highly professional staff stays right in step.

Ditch the script? No problem. Get the mayor of International Falls, Minn., on the phone and patch her into the

live broadcast? Alrighty, then. Fill five minutes of otherwise dead air because he's cut short his much-loved monologue ("Well, it's been a quiet week here in Lake Wobegon...") in the middle of a live broadcast? You betcha, as they say in Minnesota.

He's written books, essays, columns and a screenplay, but he's most revered for what he does on Saturday nights: tender teller of tales from a town that does not exist; impresario of an exceptional house band

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and troupe of actors who deliver a dizzying series of skits, songs and sound effects.

His need for others on a show he's hosted for 31 years appears purely practical. It is impossible to sing every song, play every musical instrument and read each actor's lines — simultaneously, anyway. If he could, he might just do it.

He started hiring writers not too long ago, but virtually the entire two-hour program still comes out of his head. Which is its beauty, or its conceit, depending on one's viewpoint.

But for now, take a moment to enjoy this view: stage right at the Fitzgerald Theater in downtown St. Paul. Dimmed house lights bask the old, refurbished auditorium in burnished gold. The 996 red-upholstered seats are empty. Onstage, the cast and crew are rehearsing.

Linger over images not seen in the mind's-eye of radio. This is the well-oiled and often magical machine that produces "A Prairie Home Companion."

There are two shows this weekend.

Friday's performance won't be broadcast — it's staged only for the program's worshipful hometown audience, and serves as a kind of dress rehearsal for Saturday's regular show, which will be broadcast coast-to-coast on more than 580 stations and later aired in Europe.

At 2 p.m. on Friday, the night's musical lineup is laden with love.

"Devoted to You," the Everly Brothers classic; "Loving You," a 1957 hit by Elvis Presley; "I Can't Stop Loving You," made memorable by Ray Charles, and Freddy Fender's country promise, "Before the Next Teardrop Falls."

Keillor and band leader Rich Dworsky — a short, bubbling, balding man who can lovingly play most any song off the top of his head — are working out



AP PHOTO/ANN HEISENFELT

Garrison Keillor unwinds in his dressing room after a dress rehearsal for "A Prairie Home Companion."

chord changes with the Guy's All-Star Shoe Band.

Keillor has not shaved. His hair stands on end. His body language says: "I Am Thinking. Approach At Your Own Peril."

Keillor, who is about to turn 65, has never cared much about his appearance.

His forehead is a cliff dropping into overgrown eyebrows that hang like swollen rain gutters. His 6-foot-4, gangly frame hangs at odd angles. His legs go on for miles.

"I have a face for radio," he says quite often.

Words are most important to him. Writing, he believes, is rewriting.

He does the latter during rehearsals, after rehearsals and during the broadcast. A song is in. It's out. Likewise for the comedy skits.

The performers learned long ago to roll with it. "This is his show," smiles bassist Gary Raynor, who's recorded with Janet Jackson and played with the Count Basie band. "We put this together very fast. There's not a moment to waste. Everyone just kind of gives him space. He always has a vision, and he knows what it is."

And then the whirlwind happens.

At 3 p.m. stage manager

Albert Webster still doesn't have a script for the night's performance. He never really gets a final one, just a succession of marked-up pages as the day wears on. Webster gets each version to actors Sue Scott, Tim Russell and sound-effects guy Tom Keith.

At 3:45 p.m. Keillor is having second thoughts. "I'm going to scratch 'Teardrop,'" he says. "It's gone."

The actors' call is for 4:30 p.m., but Scott is stuck in a traffic jam. Russell and Keith wait downstairs in the green room.

At 5 p.m. Keillor announces: "I'm thinking of restoring 'Teardrop,'" he says. "Try it."

At 6:30 p.m., the actors are rehearsing. Show time in 90 minutes.

For the next 30 minutes or so, they run through other bits, including a scene from Cafe Boeuf, where the patronizing waiter speaks in bad puns and French-accented gibberish (it says so in the script: "French Gibberish"). "What wine goes with zee pea-nuht buhterr and jellie sandweech? Why zee pea-nuht new-arr, but of course. Heh heh heh."

Keillor listens with a faraway look. His mouth hardens into a perfectly shaped, upside-down U. This happens when he's not crazy about the way his lines

are being read.

Keillor has written his monologue, but he rarely lets anyone see it. It's all in his head.

Ten minutes to show time; the house is full.

In his tiny dressing room, Keillor changes into a white shirt and black pants. Then he paces, fiddling with the knot of his red tie, which matches his red socks and his red shoes — the uniform of every show.

He slips on a black jacket, brushes the lapels and takes a sip of water. He strides across the hardwood floor to center stage and turns to face the Shoe band.

"Tony, white spot please," he says to an unseen light technician. He lifts his arms and nods to Dworsky at the piano, who plunks out the well-known notes that begin the show's theme song.

"Oh, hear that old piano," sings Keillor, "from down the avenue ..."

The audience claps and whistles. The noise grows thunderous.

Curtain up.

The show goes off with nary a hitch, but there were last-minute changes Friday's audience couldn't see:

After dying twice, "Teardrop" rose again. Keillor's monologue ended abruptly, for reasons only he knew.

"That's fun," Webster whispered into his headset. "He's cut it short by five minutes."

And then, in the cold light of Saturday, as rehearsals begin anew for that night's broadcast, here's the question: How much of the show has Keillor changed overnight?

A lot, it turns out. And he's still at it.

He's rewritten the skits. And then there's the matter of the music therapist. No one has seen him, and Keillor has invited him to perform during the broadcast.

And so starts another day.