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Will Jones after last night



Coming back from a vacation of several weeks last winter, I was dismayed to discover that two comforts that helped make life worth living had disappeared from the local scene.

Garrison Kellier was no longer on KSNR/KSNs, the subscription-supported FM radio station, and Gary's Conroy island shop was no longer in 7th St. near the Wind Theater.

These has refilled one of those emptinesses. Kellier came back to be on the radio in the morning again. But Gary's Conroy Island seems to be gone forever.

The two have no other relationship except that, as a fan of Kellier's, I have the feeling that he might care, really care, about Gary's Conroy Island.

Just as he cares about Jack's Auto Repair. Since Kellier is an environmental radio, he lacks the sponsors that keep other morning radio programs bristling with reciprocity. So he invented Jack's Auto Repair, reading blurbs for such money-saving events as a clearance of black snap-on automobile bow ties.

Listening to Kellier helped make the morning drive-to-work traffic seem more benign. We would do our work, picking up news and weather predictions. Then, properly garbed in the Cannon Uniform of the Day, we'd set out and see what surprises Kellier had ready on the car radio.

From records it might be Bach, or footlight favorites in ragtime piano, or Beethoven, or Flinders and Swann, or reflections from "Half a Sixpence," or bluegrass, or whatever else Kellier might be in a mood for. The best mornings were those when he was in a mood to talk, or to read something that had turned him on.

It was the bluegrass that precipitated Kellier's departure from the station, he explained as he prepared last week to return to the air. On many evenings, bluegrass had been his own driving-to-work music. Heading for the studios on the St. John's University campus at Collegeville, he often picked up southern mountain stations on the car radio. Sometimes he arrived at the studio wanting to share similar sounds with his own listeners.

"They put a note in my box one day telling me not to play so much country music," he said. "I didn't like it that they would tell me such a thing in the first place, and I didn't like it that they did it by putting a note in my box. That's the way you fire someone, so I took it that I was fired."

One Kellier version of what he did in his nine-month absence from radio is that he moved to a rented farm at Froppe, Minn., and just sat there.

Shortly before he left he had signed a contract as a contributor to The New Yorker magazine, however. So he sat, he turned out a series of short, humorous pieces that he had been appearing in the magazine with great regularity. Some of them, such as a collection of five "Tape from Sex Agents," are extraneous of fame; he originally created on the air.

"I've really known Harley Peters ever since I was at KUOM," Kellier said. Kellier spent two years at the University of Minnesota station, handling such programs as Public Affairs Forum.

Kellier recalled spending a very long time at the "U," Harley as an English major. Later he worked briefly for a St. Paul newspaper.

Of his college experience ("and that's spelled c-o-l-l-e-g-e," he suggested) he said:

"It's helped me as a humorist, but it's ruined me as a person."

Kellier formerly worked a full announcing shift at KSNR/N, but now he will concentrate on The Morning Program from 6:50 to 9 a.m. and 91.1 on the FM band. It is being fed to the state network of public-supported radio stations. And instead of living in St. Cloud and broadcasting from Collegeville, Kellier now lives in Minneapolis and broadcasts from the KSN station in the St. Paul Arts and Science Center.

A chastened management not only will allow Kellier to play country music if he wants to, but is listening to his suggestions about bringing groups with names such as Uncle Willie and the Brandy Softlers into the studio for live sessions.

It's too early to tell what direction the new Kellier programs will take, but he was fairly gloomy about the prospects last week:

"I've forgotten how to talk. My voice is pitched higher. Oh, I'm sure it will be different. I respond to my environment. There's a lot of memory; I could talk at the window. Now I'll be in some closet down in the basement in St. Paul," he said.

Kellier claimed surprise that some listeners consider him to be weird and far out.

"With the radio program, I set out deliberately to be warm and folksy and Middle America and down to earth. It's the most down-to-earth thing I've ever done, and I have to believe people are putting me on when they say it's far out."

Whatever happens with Kellier back, it won't be dull. Morning business has been the principal complaint of listeners who have written to protest his absence.

The station has been printing some of their letters in its monthly Preview magazine. The most passionate complainant described himself as a red-blooded harvest hand from Froppe, nearly seven feet tall. He sounded ready to come tear apart the "lump-wracked phlebotomists" who run the station if they didn't get rid of those "creaky violin sounds" and "announcers who sound like English undertakers (pending) over the remains of the 19th century."

The listener wrote further: "You are making a bad mistake. When your normal working person wakes up in the now-forgotten dawn he wants his first listening experience to be something with meat in it. . . . Kellier, to me, was like and foremost an American in the tradition of Walt Whitman, Calvin Coolidge, and Ted Ritter, and his program represented the American Experience especially here in the Heartland: strong, friendly, loyal—the sort of person you would want for a pal."

The letter was signed by Buck Snell, who undoubtedly is a friend of the USDA's Harley Peters.