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# Author, radio comedian promotes his latest book

'Happy To Be Here' is the title, but that doesn't mean he found happiness on his visit to Hollywood

By MATT DAMSKER  
Copley News Service

HOLLYWOOD — Garrison Keillor, author and, in his publisher's words, "America's Tallest Radio Comedian" — squirts into the sunlit swank of an outdoor cafe on Rodeo Drive, sips at a glass of white wine and twists his lips into an amused grin.

His bulky, conservatively tweeded torso could not seem more out of place than here in this cash-green garden of high, sveite style, and he seems to be savoring the irony.

"I'm a tourist," he reflects, as if this needed explaining. "And lots of tourists come here to Rodeo Drive. We don't go to Bismarck, or to Des Moines."

Keillor is actually on a promo tour for his first book, a collection of short pieces called "Happy To Be Here," and by now he's laughing. "This is utterly different from what I know, and I know I'll go straight back where I came from and not stop along the way."

So much for the seductions of Southern California. Obviously Keillor belongs to another America: heartland America, the flatlands and 10,000 lakes of his home state, Minnesota, from which he broadcasts each week on Minnesota Public Radio. His 8-year-old show, "A Prairie Home Companion," airs live from the World Theater in St. Paul to about 200 public radio stations nationwide. If you've ever heard it, you probably haven't forgotten it.

Keillor's show is a rarity — a slice of Americana that harkens back to radio's fireside heyday, before TV opened and then anesthetized our eyes. Full of folksy, eclectic music performed live by a weekly kaleidoscope of traditional jazz, bluegrass, C and W and even light classical acts, "A Prairie Home Companion" is distinguished mainly by Keillor's soothing, masterfully measured baritone and his droll, dry reportage from a fictional place he calls Lake Wobegon.

Described by Keillor as "the town time forgot and decades cannot improve, where all the women are strong, all the men good-looking and all the children above average," Lake Wobegon has become the radio signature of a great American humorist. The Los Angeles Times recently tagged Keillor among our 10 best comedians, but he stands well apart from the L.A.-N.Y. axis of TV, film and touring funny-men.

Indeed, Keillor is more a satiric inventor, having given an almost palpable life not only to Lake Wobe-

gon but to its imaginary landmarks. For example, there's Bob's Bank ("Our motto: 'Neither a borrower nor a lender be'"), Ralph's Pretty Good Grocery ("If you can't find it at Ralph's, you can probably get along without it"), or Bertha's Kitty Boutique ("for persons who care about cats"). Lake Wobegon even houses the fictional sponsor of the show, a wholesome staple called Powdermilk Biscuits. ("Heavens, they're tasty — and expeditious. Look for them in the big blue box, or ready-made in the brown bag with the dark stains that indicate freshness.")

What emerges from all this Minnesota mythmaking, of course, is a cheering and often poignant sense of humanity moving blessedly slower than the speed-freaking mainstream of modern life. "A Prairie Home Companion" is the sort of show that caresses its heartland roots, which may explain why it appeals to so many far-flung Americans.

"I don't know what happens to the radio signal once we let go of it, I really don't," says Keillor, who chooses his words deliberately and often delivers them with an eye-avoiding diffidence that defines the shy Midwestern stereotype. "But I'm always surprised to come out here and find anyone at all who listens to the show. I would think, with the weather you have in Southern California, that listening to a radio show on Saturday when the sun is still shining would be the last thing that would occur to a person. I think of 'A Prairie Home Companion' as a show for the snowbound."

In that sense, Keillor, 42, has been snowbound for nearly two decades, ever since he began broadcasting a "morning drive" show for Minnesota Public Radio. For someone who had been born in the tiny town of Anoka, Minn., a morning show in more metropolitan St. Paul — where, divorced, he now lives with his son — was something of a dream come true.

His writerly ambitions finally came true in 1969, when in August, The New Yorker magazine finally bought one of a batch of short satiric pieces he had sent them after failing to land a job there during an East Coast trip. His satire began appearing regularly in The New Yorker, and in 1974 the magazine assigned him to do a piece on Nashville's Grand Old Opry. The Opry's nationally broadcast homeliness helped spark the creation of "A Prairie Home Companion."

"The idea for the show came, as so many ideas do, out of things remembered from childhood — in my case, radio, which was a big part of my youth, since

we didn't get a television in my house until I was already in high school," recalls Keillor. "But it's amazing how, for so many artists and writers, there's a period of a person's first 12 years or so that really yields up so much in all the years following."

"For example, I had talked about Lake Wobegon on my morning show, simply as a way of putting my relatives and people I had grown up with in a fictional context, so as not to hurt their feelings. I liked the word 'wobegone.' To me it sounded vaguely like an Indian word, so I could use it and also get some of the English meaning of the word — you know, 'bedraggled' — and still claim that it meant something else. And compared to Rodeo Drive, Lake Wobegon is 'wobegone.' We wouldn't be sitting on a terrace like this in Lake Wobegon. We might be out in somebody's back yard, at a card table slanted in the dirt, drinking cider from jelly glasses."

Unquestionably, Keillor's small-town fixations seem a long way from the urbane heights of such other forums as The New Yorker. But perhaps not.

"There's something in my mind that ties The New Yorker and my early radio memories together," he observes. "I mean, so many think of The New Yorker as a sophisticated magazine, a worldly magazine, a magazine of wealth and position and status. They look on prose style as an expression of one's social and economic class, that as you improve yourself in the world, you're supposed to improve your style. But to me, The New Yorker and the many different styles of The New Yorker represented artists trying to say exactly what they meant and exactly who they were, which is a lifelong task. If you're interested in expression, in just trying to get something out that bears a resemblance to what you feel and think, to tell stories that bear resemblance to what you remember, then you have to prefer radio."

As Keillor points out, everyone he encounters seems to want to talk about "A Prairie Home Companion,"

but that's not why he's doing the tourist bit on Rodeo Drive. Penguin Books is picking up the tab in order to beat the drums for its fresh paperback edition of "Happy To Be Here," which collects the best of Keillor's New Yorker and Atlantic Monthly pieces, along with five new stories.

These range widely, from lovingly detailed fantasies about radio to savagely civilized swipes at government. For example, "The Slim Graves Show" tells of a small-time country-and-western radio show whose stars try to solve their marital problems via a listener poll. And in "The New Washington: An Inside Story," Keillor follows a busload of tourists through Washington, D.C., as they glimpse the "luxurious way of life of the Reagan administration," clatching their issues of "Federal Romance" and "U.S. Government Confidential" in hopes of a Cabinet-level autograph.

There's also "Jack Schmidt, Arts Administrator," a send-up of the hard-boiled detective genre in which an ex-private eye finds a new career prying art grant money out of federal agencies. ("My first big hit was a National Endowment for the Arts grant for a walk-up tap school run by a dishwasher blonde named Bonnie Marie Beebe. . . . We called the school The American Conservatory of Jazz Dance. A hundred and fifty thousand clams. 'Seed money,' they called it, but it was good crisp lettuce to me.")

Keillor's other gems include "Don: The True Story of a Young Person," about a punk-rock band that invents a chicken-biting brand of "geek rock."

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