

'Prairie Home' gets Greg Brown

By TOM HANSEN

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IOWA CITY, IA. — Greg Brown, who gave Iowa a waltz and put lyrics to the harmonies of rural life, is heading north for a new prairie home.



GREG BROWN

After 10 years of playing his combination of folk music, jazz, and blues in clubs across the country from an Iowa City base, Brown has signed on with "A Prairie Home Companion" and its creator, Garrison Keillor, in St. Paul, Minn.

Brown, 34, has been a steady guest performer on the popular Minnesota Public Radio show for more than three years. But fans nationwide, who hear "Prairie Home" on National Public Radio, often have heard Brown's compositions played by other artists on the weekly program.

Brown has long considered joining Keillor's troupe, having been asked to come on board the second time he played the show. "But now seems like a good time to go," he said.

The Ottumwa native took time between sets at The Mill, where his weekend appearances are an Iowa

City institution, to talk about his decision to move north.

His fame as a songwriter has been boosted lately by the success of "They All Went to Mexico," by Santana with a Willie Nelson vocal, which now is doing well on the charts.

Since "Prairie Home" duties will not take Brown's full attention, he will have time to follow up on his song-writing success by sending tapes to other artists, he said.

"I'm not leaving because I'm tired of Iowa City or of Iowa," said the soft-spoken musician. "I'll get the chance to send out to a lot more groups. Now that I have a toe in the door, I would like to get more songs recorded."

Brown also will have the advantage of spending more time at home with his wife Sarah, an artist and calligrapher. Lately, he has been traveling much of the time, playing in Boston, New York, New Hampshire, Maine and elsewhere. Although the "Prairie Home" show does hit the road several times a year, Brown still will be traveling less.

Minneapolis musicians have a "let's-give-it-a-try" attitude, he said, and that will give him the opportunity to experiment with his songs.

Brown said the "Prairie Home" format — two hours of music spliced with Keillor's tales of the imaginary burg of Lake Wobegone and its mostly Norwegian residents — also lends itself to more of his writing.

"If we have a good jazz group, I can try to write in a jazz vein. But in the main, I'll stick with my style; it's mostly with some of the older styles of jazz and blues. I'm not going to try to write Peruvian tunes or something just to be different," he said.

Brown wrote the "Iowa Waltz" three years ago, and the gentle melody has caught on in some corners as the alternative state song. His "Out in the Country," "Walkin' Beans," and "Early," a sweet, sleepy tribute to the town just south of Storm Lake, were products of Iowa Arts Council-sponsored tours in the last four years.

"That job was to go around to small towns and write music with the people there," he said. "All my songs about the Midwest were all written on those tours."

Brown's contract with "Prairie Home" will keep him there "at least six months," he said. "Who knows after that. I may stay on another six months; I may go to Mexico. I just don't know."