

## 'A Prairie Home Companion' grows into a national phenomenon



Garrison Keillor autographs copies of his book *Happy to be Here*. Keillor is host of a live radio broadcast called *A Prairie Home Companion*.

**S**T. PAUL, Minn. — The crowds of people outside the Orpheum Theatre in downtown St. Paul last Saturday might have been hard to explain to Minnesota Public Radio executives 16 years ago.

In 1974, those executives probably would have found it difficult to believe that Garrison Keillor's small-time radio broadcast, *A Prairie Home Companion*, would become the national phenomenon that it is in 1984.

Their disbelief would have multiplied if someone had predicted in 1974 that 18 years later, Keillor's following would increase to the point that each one of the 1,500 seats in the Orpheum Theatre would be filled for the two-hour broadcast, and that 2 million listeners would hear the show weekly on 215 radio stations.

But for devotees of *A Prairie Home Companion* and all of its comfortably eccentric accompaniments, the folk hero status of Keillor and his show are no surprise at all.

*A Prairie Home Companion*, which offers a whimsical chronicle of the weekly events in the fictitious Lake Wobegon, Minn., is one of the last live radio shows in the country today.

Each week at 4:45 p.m., 15 minutes before air time, Keillor and his musical cohorts appear onstage to warm up a crowd eager for news and anecdotes about Lake Wobegon — "the little town that time forgot, that the decades cannot improve,



**Betsy Gerboth**

where all the women are strong, all the men are good-looking, and all the children are above-average." The soft-spoken Keillor, who has described himself as so shy he can hardly bear to be looked at, offers philosophical observations on life during the 15-minute warmup. "I know that a lot of people are afraid to come to a show like this one," he said last week. "I know I am, for one."

The program itself offers gently humorous monologues by Keillor, and bluegrass and folk songs by a group of regular entertainers. These regular features are interspersed with commercials for such imaginary Lake Wobegon concerns as Bertha's Kitty Boutique, Bob's Bank, The Fearmonger's Shoppe ("serving all your phobia needs"), and Powdermilk Biscuits, made from whole wheat raised by Norwegian bachelor farmers in the rich bottomlands of the Wobegon valley. ("Heavens, they're tasty and expeditious!" the ads exclaim.)

Until Jan. 21, the program was performed live each week in St. Paul's World Theatre, which seats 900. The move to the Orpheum became a necessity when plaster began falling from the ceiling of the World onto the unsuspecting heads of audience members, Cathy de Moll, director of public relations for Minnesota Public Radio, said

"It was not a healthy situation," she said. "We've torn the plaster down now so it's safe, but the theater looks like Beirut. And while it is safe, people would never be convinced of that."

So the program was moved to the Orpheum, which hasn't proved to be the ideal setting for the show.

"The problem is that it's a little too big, too impersonal," de Moll said. "The acoustics aren't what we're used to, and it doesn't make for good radio. So it's not adequate as a permanent home."

Because of the Orpheum's unsuitability, Minnesota Public Radio is about to launch its Save the World campaign, a fund drive which is expected to raise \$1.5 million toward renovation of the World.

Additional money for restoring the World to its former glory come from sales of *A Prairie Home Companion* products, including Powdermilk Biscuits T-shirts and cassette tapes of some of Keillor's best stories. One dollar from each ticket sold also goes toward the fund, and canisters that read "Save the World" line the concession counter at the Orpheum.

People interested in becoming audience members at future broadcasts of *A Prairie Home Companion* must order tickets at least six weeks in advance. The cost for Minnesota Public Radio members is \$4 a ticket; non-members pay \$5.

Supporters of the Save the World campaign, prospective audience members or people who would like catalogs of *A Prairie Home Companion* products can direct inquiries to 45 E. Eighth St., St. Paul, Minn. 55101.

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