

'Prairie Home' is thinker's 'Ole Opry'

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Commentary

The *Prairie Home Companion*, a weekly, two-hour music-and-comedy program broadcast nationally by American Public Radio, celebrates its 10th anniversary tonight and tomorrow. Most weeks it emanates from St. Paul, Minn., but first-time listeners might think that it comes from a time warp — or from Mars.

The music and talk on *Prairie Home Companion* (Saturdays at 6 p.m. on WHY-FM) has as much in common with today's FM talk and music stations as Mitch Miller has in common with MTV. *Prairie Home Companion* is a thinking person's *Grand Ole Opry*. It has one foot in the past, its heart on its sleeve and its tongue firmly in cheek.

The creator and host of the show is Garrison Keillor, who in 10 years has not identified himself on the radio. A listener from Texas wrote to ask him about that, and Keillor paused during one broadcast to explain why.

"Well, I suppose if you're from Texas, you might use your name all the time," Keillor said. "Up here in Minnesota, we, uh, pull back just a little bit."

"I didn't start to use my name on the broadcast when the show started [in 1974], because I wasn't sure it was going to be the sort of show I would want my name associated with. Since then I have come to believe that if something works, don't fix it."

Prairie Home Companion works for three main reasons, all traceable to Keillor: his imagination, his memory and his voice.

His imagination is responsible for the fictional town of Lake Wobegon, Minn., whose residents, merchants and products populate *Prairie Home Companion's* monologues and commercials. Lake Wobegon is the center of Keillor's universe, a delightful symbol of the times and values of an earlier age.

His memory is responsible for much of what purportedly happens in Lake Wobegon, since Keillor was born and raised in the Wobegon-ish town of Anoka, Minn. His stories, transferred to fictional settings and families, have the resounding ring of truth — he brings beauty and laughter even to such topics as duck hunting and the "ritual slaughter" of a hog.

His voice, though, is the key. What Keillor does on *A Prairie Home Companion*, basically, is read bedtime stories to adults. Lake Wobegon is the setting of his moralistic fairy tales, and Keillor's voice is enchanting: warm, deep, slow, soothing. He's so quiet and quieting, you can hear him breathe between sentences.

Keillor has published some of his

monologues in the New Yorker and in book form, and appeared as a guest on NBC-TV's *Late Night With David Letterman*, but radio is the medium to which Keillor is most suited. On television, he's nervous; in print, he's amusing. On radio, though, he's a charmer — an aural tranquilizer who makes you think, laugh and relax at the same time.

But *A Prairie Home Companion* isn't all talk. It's music, too, and the emphasis on bluegrass and folk music, to many, is an acquired taste — and one that they're in no hurry to acquire. Keillor's regular musicians (the Butch Thompson Trio and others) and guests make the experience entertainingly eclectic, though, by showcasing and assimilating a wide range of musical genres.

The typical *Prairie Home Companion* broadcast, if there is such a thing, is likely to include Russian or Scandinavian folk music played on original instruments. Classical compositions and rock songs, too, get the bluegrass treatment on occasion. (It was The Seldom Seen's breathless, down-home version of Eric Clapton's *After Midnight* that finally won me over.)

The more you listen to *A Prairie Home Companion*, the more fun it is to hear. The musicians, like the make-believe inhabitants of Lake Wobegon, become familiar friends. Before long, you'll be singing along with the Powdermilk Biscuits commercials and lapping up new details about the mechanics at Jack's Auto Repair, where Duke and Fats treat your car like a musical instrument — and improvise.

Tomorrow's 10th anniversary show, broadcast live, is a perfect opportunity to visit Lake Wobegon for the first time. Without doubt, you'll hear music by the Butch Thompson Trio, commercials for Bob's Bank (where the motto is "Neither a borrower nor a lender be") and Keillor's rambling, sentimental "News From Lake Wobegon." The rest of the show's contents, however, are anybody's guess.

My guess is that it'll be a lot of fun. I wouldn't want to live there, but Lake Wobegon certainly is a nice place to visit.

Lee Winfrey has the day off.