

Radio

# Unusual Radio Show Thriving After Decade

©1984, New York Times News Service  
ST. PAUL, Minn. — Here is the news from Lake Wobegon, the little town that time forgot but that is the delight of Saturday night radio:

The infielders on the baseball team complained that they had not had enough to do during the team's recent streak of no-hitters. And nobody can understand why thousands of people crowded into downtown St. Paul wearing red-and-white buttons that said, "I Saved the World (Theater)."

Lake Wobegon is the imaginary backdrop for the jovial public radio show "A Prairie Home Companion," which celebrated its 10th anniversary over the weekend. Its button-wearing fans have been raising money to renovate the 74-year-old World, a onetime vaudeville theater that was the show's home until ceiling plaster cascaded on the audience at a live broadcast several months ago, forcing the theater to close.

Worried that the end of the World was at hand, a coalition of arts groups from St. Paul hired engineers to inspect it. They pronounced it structurally sound, and the coalition mapped a \$1.5 million restoration plan that culminated on the weekend with a \$25-to-\$100-a-seat benefit "Companion" show at the Orpheum, a larger vaudeville house.

With a full orchestra on stage and an audience of listeners who came from as far as Rhode Island and Texas, the show was a bouncier version of what radio listeners have enjoyed every Saturday night since the show's host, Garrison Keillor, first put on his white suit and Panama hat and ushered in what he calls the "tin-foil age" of radio.

Keillor had been a personality on Minnesota Public Radio and a writer for The New Yorker when he got the idea for a homier version of Nashville's Grand Ole Opry, the long-running weekly radio show, that combines a lot of music with a little comedy and a cast of sharp-witted regulars.

The cleverest is Keillor, who delivers monologues, sings an occasional song and does amusing commercials for fictitious

sponsors. After 10 years on the air, most listeners realize that there really is no such thing as Powdermilk Biscuits ("made from whole wheat that give shy persons the strength to get up and do what needs to be done") or the Fearmonger's Shoppe ("for all your phobia needs").

But some listeners do not seem to understand where the fun stops with "A Prairie Home Companion." Tourists have been known to walk into groceries in Minnesota demanding Powdermilk Biscuits. And one listener wrote to WNYC-FM in New York to say she was glad that public radio was finally accepting commercials so that it would not have to pre-empt its programs for fund-raising campaigns.

The show's 3 million listeners are unabashedly loyal. Some said they went to St. Paul last weekend rather than go to high school reunions. In New York, where WNYC-FM broadcasts "A Prairie Home Companion" at 6 p.m. Saturdays, listeners have been seen sitting in driveways with the radios on, so they will not miss Keillor's monologues.

"His show is a regular in our lives, the equalizer," said Cathy Cressy, of Shannock, R.I. She reported that she and her husband had spent \$1,000 on tickets, airline fares and hotels to go to Minnesota last weekend.

The show has become one of the most popular programs on public radio. But Keillor seems uncomfortable with the fame that has come with it.

"I never identified myself as a folk hero, and I doubt that any of the folk did, either," he said. "It was some writer who did that, and then sometimes other writers pick up phrases, you know, from writers they've read, and so these things get going. Like the use of the word nostalgic to describe our show."

The word, he said, "has been used by more writers than you could beat with a stick, though you might like to."

With a band, "the Night o' Rest Motel Orchestra," dancers and Keillor high-kicking his way through the opening number, some people in the audience wondered



Garrison Keillor

whether the show wasn't getting too slick for itself. But Keillor seems preoccupied with preserving the sleaziness of the World.

He said he wanted the refurbished theater to "remind me of home — a little ratty, a little dusty around the edges," so he would not feel out of place talking

about the people in Lake Wobegon. He maintains that he grew up there and left 21 years ago for "life in the big city, if you call St. Paul the big city."

"Those people in Lake Wobegon always wanted to know how I was going to earn a living by talking about them," Keillor said. "And now they are sorry they asked."