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DAILY NEWS

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Video

GARRISON KEILLOR MAY BE GONE BUT HIS VIDEO LINGERS ON



AS IT WAS: Garrison Keillor (left) with Linda and Robin Williams.

GARRISON KEILLOR used to be the invisible man. On Saturday evenings, all across America, he was only a voice—a soothing deep voice hosting “A Prairie Home Companion,” the most popular show in the history of public radio. He gently reminded America of smalltown life with his news from Lake

Wobegone, Minn., the “little town that time forgot and decades cannot improve.”

Now, he’s got a body. And it’s a big body. Garrison Keillor—a gentle, silly, perceptive man, hailed as a “radio bard,” compared by Time magazine to Mark Twain—looks like a barroom brawler. He’s one large hulking fellow with a butcher block head.

On stage, he dresses counter to his physique, wearing cherry red or clear oversized glasses,

and always, but always, red socks. The 45-year-old Keillor moves amid the microphones and musicians like a baby rhino trying to maneuver through a field of broken glass.

Now, you can see for yourself. On July 14, Walt Disney Home Video is releasing the last performance of “A Prairie Home Companion” (1987, \$29.95) recorded live June 13 at the World Theater in downtown St. Paul, Minn. (Only two Keillor shows have ever aired on national TV, on PBS.) Disney plans to follow up with three editions of best clips.

The cult of “A Prairie Home Companion” faithful followers includes 4 million radio listeners a week. Sales of his book, “Lake Wobegone Days,” topped \$1.2 million hardcover and \$2.3 million paperback. Now at the height of his fame, Keillor is off to live

in Denmark with his relatively new Danish wife and her three kids, to resume the life of a shy person and write more books.

“It’s better for something to be good and over, than rotten and still going strong,” commented humorist Roy Blount in a poem he delivered on the show’s closing night.

“A Prairie Home Companion” was a baffling, sweet-natured variety show in which Keillor sang corny songs off-key, put on nonmainstream musicians (folk, bluegrass, Scottish balladeers, etc.), introduced an ongoing serial of the adventures of Buster the Showdog and, most importantly, delivered his own 20-minute tales from mythical Lake Wobegone.

Throughout, Keillor dropped in fake commercials, such as Powdermilk Biscuits (“with that whole wheat goodness that gives shy persons the strength to get up and do what needs be done”), Ralph’s Pretty Good Grocery (“If you can’t find it at Ralph’s, you can probably get along without it”), and “Touch & Glo Fertilizer” (“runoff from a nuclear power plant—two drops on a pumpkin and you have a house”).

“This is probably the first time I’ve run across somebody who’s funny without being vitriolic,” says Jean Redpath, Scottish singer and frequent guest. “He sends somebody up with

out putting them down.”

The burning question is why, after years of hearing it, would you want to see “A Prairie Home Companion”? It’s an old-fashioned radio show (microphones on a barren stage, technicians tiptoeing around). Keillor’s monologues goose the imagination to create its own pictures. Wouldn’t video images just intrude?

Watching the Disney cassette is a little like seeing how Houdini performs his tricks. It satisfies a certain curiosity, but it probably spoils some of the magic. The last show featured lots of sad sad songs, “Just a Song at Twilight,” “Tell Me Why,” “Till Then,” “Lay Me Down Carolina,” and “Till We Meet Again.” Keillor was joined by regulars, guitarists Leo Kottke and Chet Atkins, singer Jean Redpath, Vern Sutton and special guests, the Kamehameha School Glee Club from Hawaii.

I attended the show, watching the audience weep and applaud him to perform five encores and lumber 45 minutes over schedule.

Probably the most startling visual discovery—besides Keillor’s appearance—is the sound effects artist, Tom Keith. When listeners at home hear the sound of wheels spinning on ice, viewers see a puckish balding man with hands over his mouth at a microphone.

Keith’s sound effects of fireworks while Vern Sutton boomed out “The Stars and Stripes Forever” ranked as a show highlight. Another was when Keillor cajoled the audience into doing the call of the loon—the Minneso-

ta state bird.

Keillor’s theme that night was, “I’m going to miss you more than you’re going to miss me.” He explains: “See, there’s a lot of funnier people around, a lot of better singers, and you’re going to find another show. But you’re my only audience. When I leave you, I’m all alone.”

PET PEEVES. RECENTLY this column ran complaints from consumers. Now it’s time to turn the tables. The major gripe from the stores about you, is lateness.

“Our pet peeve is people who rent tapes and don’t return them for two weeks or more,” writes Michael Olesvary of Quality Comics and Video. “We go to their houses and you wouldn’t believe how some of them live!”

Audrey Ambrosio of Popcorn Video in Glen Gardner, N.J., was a bit more diplomatic. She wrote a poem about a negligent customer:

*“We called him on the phone:
The movie’s three days late.
He tells us that he knows it,
But we just have to wait.
His car broke down,
His dog is dead.
It snowed this day in June.
He’s going on vacation,
And won’t be back too soon.”*
The point of the poem, of course, is that you’ve got to return the tape.

*Now it can
be seen! ‘A
Prairie Home
Companion’*