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TONY BROWN

Keillor has traveled far from Minneapolis and relative obscurity

So there we were yesterday, me and my old buddy Garrison Keillor, in the grand lobby of Radio City Music Hall, chatting about old times.

It was a long way from the last time Garrison and I chatted, on a Saturday night about 12 years ago in a small college lecture hall in St. Paul.

He was then the host of a fledgling local radio program called "A Prairie Home Companion," and I was fledgling student in the audience. He had been untangling microphones and directing traffic in front when he came down to our row — one of about 15 rows in the room — to recruit a chorus to back up one of the evening's singers.

Garrison was at the time beginning to attract some attention in and around the region (feature stories had appeared in the Minneapolis newspapers) for his gently satirical stories about Midwestern sensibilities. He told his stories through his creation — the people of Lake Wobegone, "the little town that time forgot, that the decades cannot improve, where all the women are strong, all the men are good-looking, and the children are above average."

He was doing this on local radio — local public radio — accompanied by folk singers, the odd hymn, and bluegrass music, at 5 o'clock on Saturday afternoons. People have had more promising futures in show business.

All the more amazing, then, to watch Garrison from afar ever since.

America embraced Lake Wobegone

His occasional contributions to The New Yorker became regular. The radio program went national. America discovered and, inexplicably, embraced the humor of Lutheran stoicism. Powdermilk Biscuit T-shirts covered the land. Garrison's book of Lake Wobegone tales — we're talking about church socials, gardening and eccentric neighbors — sold more than 1 million copies in hard-cover. All the right book reviewers wrote all the right things.

Garrison, whose characters were a testament to humility, good manners and a pleasant disposition, and whose pants often ended above his ankles, was chosen by Playgirl magazine as one of the 10 sexiest men in America. The Chronical of Higher Education reported that some university professors had undertaken a study of Lake Wobegone stories to understand their broader sociological insights. Then came the final appointment of American celebrity: Time magazine put Garrison Keillor on its cover.

Just since last fall, after Garrison retired from radio and moved to New York by way of Denmark, I have watched, astonished, as our colleagues at the Times began to cover Garrison Keillor like Lit. Smith covers Barbara Walters. The Garrison-Has-Moved-Here story was followed by a What-Garrison-Eats story, with Garrison quoted at length in each.

Then word arrived that Garrison would be available to reporters yesterday at Radio City "to discuss his future." His future, according to a 20-page press package, complete with bibliography, biography, reviewers' blurbs, a glossy picture and the history of his radio show, was said to include Garrison's Second Annual Farewell Performance at Radio City on June 3 and 4, with Chet Atkins, Leo Klotke and the Everly Brothers, among many.

Had Garrison Keillor sold out?

While that was interesting, I also wanted to know a little about his past, what exactly had happened to this guy between the time he asked me to sing in St. Paul and yesterday, when his agents were posing him for publicity shots on Sixth Avenue. Frankly, some of my sources back in the Midwest had whispered that the man done something of a star-turn.

My question — one I was sure would elicit a spontaneous, candid and revealing answer — was a request that he consider where he stood at that moment in New York and describe how far he felt, spiritually and professionally, from his hometown of Anoka, Minn.

Well, Garrison said Anoka calls itself "The Halloween Capital of the World" and "I don't think I want to be that famous." He asked for the next question. A clean dodge.

Afterward, over by Radio City's coffee urn, I asked Garrison's old friend and piano player, Butch Thompson, if they talk about all the enormous changes in their lives since they started in radio years ago.

"He's the one who's had all the changes," Thompson said. "He's the one who was on the cover of Time, not me. But I've never heard him talk about what all of it means to him. I know that sounds strange, but I've really never heard him talk about it."

How long has Thompson known Garrison Keillor?

"Twenty-five years," he said. "I've known him 25 years."

Tony Brown's column of commentary appears Monday, Wednesday and Friday.