

Annual farewells to Keillor's liking

By Barbara O'Dair
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LOS ANGELES — Garrison Keillor's low, slow, almost creepily calm voice drips and spreads like some kind of sticky liquid, filling the cracks and crags in the landscape of contemporary American culture.

This voice has wooed adoring radio listeners for over a decade for the tender loving care he awards ordinary folk and their world. But he's no Norman Rockwell. It's the individual unpredictability he endows these folk with that makes him a great deal more than a nostalgic apologist for times gone by.

Now Keillor's poised to cover Southern California with his crazy quilt of reassuring words in "A Prairie Home Companion Third Annual Farewell Tour," which currently tours the U.S. with a show as presented on Minnesota Public Radio.

"I like the idea of an annual farewell," Keillor said in a recent con-

versation. Keillor ended the live weekly broadcasts in June 1987. "I loved 'Prairie Home Companion,' so I can't pass up the chance to come back and do it once a year."

Popular program

Perhaps the best-known creative force from public radio, matter-of-factly, Midwestern Keillor hosted his weekly "Prairie Home Companion" from St. Paul, Minn., beginning in 1974. The show eventually reached 4 million rapt listeners nationwide via 300 or so American Public Radio affiliates. Keillor's distinctive plain speaking, his modulated, homespun American tales, made his departure from the airwaves two years ago an unpleasant fact for those who counted on "Prairie Home Companion's" anecdotes for a good dose of understated wit and simple pleasure.

Now he's decided to come back, fans will be glad to know. Together again for the first time, as it were, not only in his most recent farewell tour but also as a weekly radio per-

sonality, this time broadcasting from New York, where he has gingerly resettled in a second home of sorts.

Back on the air

The nationally syndicated show, tentatively titled "The American Radio Company," will try out for 12 weeks beginning Sept. 30, and then another 12 next spring. "I haven't done this for a while," he said. "We want to ease in."

Not that he's exactly been a slouch these past two years. The native Minnesotan, who will be 47 in August, begrudgingly left his home state in '87. "It was impossible to live in St. Paul so I moved on. There was a newspaper there that wanted to look in my windows — I don't permit that. No sensible person would. I had to go."

"Prairie Home Companion" went into reruns. Keillor hosted a "Farewell from Radio City" show in New York, and then took off abroad. His fictitious little town of Lake Wobegon, which figured prominently

in his stories (he won a Grammy for his recording of excerpts about it), receded to distant shores. What's been going on there since he left the Wobegonites in '87?

"They had a good spring," Keillor confirmed. "In a farm town like Wobegon, when they have a good winter with a lot of snow it gives them hope. The mood in town is upbeat, hopeful."

"There have been rumors, though," he allowed. "of disasters and trouble, about the Lutheran minister and his wife, divorce ... Of course, theirs is the main marriage in town, the marriage that everyone watches."

"I believe in marriage," he said. "I hope they do, too. It makes for a life of humor and loyalty, a good life. All of the alternatives that you occasionally read magazine stories about are rather pretentious compared to the simple old marriages."

"But people do need to slack from time to time, and in a small town that's hard to come by. They don't have the luxury that you have

in a big city. In New York you can have days where you feel practically crazy and nobody notices."

Tried out Denmark

Keillor moved with his wife and children to Manhattan after trying out his wife's native Denmark for a time. During this time he wrote his most recent book, "We Are Still Married," a best-selling collection of stories, poems and letters. He has an office at The New Yorker magazine, to which he has contributed short pieces for many years. And he said he's starting a new novel.

"I made the decision to try to live in Denmark when I was still thinking in the English language," Keillor explained. "But then, in Danish, I found I couldn't make the same decision — I couldn't be quite that romantic. In Danish, all I could think was, 'This is not the right time (to be here).'"

"New York is a foreign city; my wife likes it very much."

Though he is once and always a



Garrison Keillor
a New Yorker now

Minnesotan, he would not go back there.

But radio, ah, radio, is a different thing. As identified as he is with the heartland, Keillor may find his real home on the air.