

RADIO

Keillor can't escape Lake Wobegon days

Icon of Americana lives on

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SAN FRANCISCO — The banner goes up, the rug goes down, and the stage is ready. The banner says: Garrison Keillor's *Minnesota Radio Company*. The rug is an oriental, in red, orange and gold. It travels with the company. "It's nice and warm, don't you think?" That's producer Christine Tschida.

At the back of the hall, the technical people have piled the machinery needed to "uplink" the show to National Public Radio's satellite, transmitter, mixer boards, and so on. Looped and coiled around are about four miles of tangled wires and cables.

In a dressing room, a writer frowns into the screen of a lap-top computer, polishing his rewrites.

It's 11 a.m. Saturday at San Francisco's Masonic Auditorium — five hours until the show "tapes up" to the satellite.

Music detective

The Coffee Club Orchestra warms up on the small stage: 11 musicians lined locally plus violin, cello, first woodwind, and drummer from New York. Conductor Rob Fisher is the show's music-detective and arranger. No matter how small (a chirping doo-wop duet for *What a Wonderful World* or how immense (The Nutcracker ballet compressed into eight minutes and re-scored for a 13-piece band), it's up to Fisher to find it, adapt it, make it sound good.

This particular show is music-heavy. In addition to Nutcracker and *Wonderful World*, it has the Pachelbel canon, a new Tom Lehrer song and more. The day Fisher left New York for the West Coast, 91 pages of music arrived by fax. "They have to be good tracks," he says of the musicians.

Every song must be re-worked to suit the singers, versatile soprano Fry Austin, who can be Joan Baez one minute and Lily Tomlin's brawny Edie Ann the next; Richard Moore, who croons like Bing Crosby and also reads mock public-service announcements in the voice of God; and, of course, Garrison Keillor, creator and star, whose pleasant, nondescript baritone opens every broadcast with the nostalgic *I Hear That Old Piano*, just as it used to open *Pratt's Home Companion* with Hank Snow's *Hello, Love*. "My singing voice anybody can," Keillor says.

17 pairs of red socks

Keillor arrives on stage at 11 in an old black sweater, off-white pants, moccasins, and his trademark red socks (he has 17 pairs). He's been wearing them ever since he told the world, in one of his Lake Wobegon monologues, about wearing red socks to a nerd in high school. He's 48, 6-foot-4, with baby-fine brown hair.

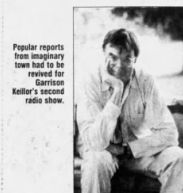
Today he also has an absconded tooth. He's stung, going ahead with rehearsal, checking every musical and sound-effects cue, even listening to the station breaks, the fillers, and other people's songs.

But he doesn't rehearse the monologue. "It's been a quiet week in Lake Wobegon, my home town. . . ."

As on *A Prairie Home Companion*, forerunner of this show, Keillor takes about 20 minutes of the two-hour show (each week) to chronicle the people and events of Lake Wobegon, Minn., a loose recasting of his own home town of Ancker, Minn.

He had thought to leave it behind when he closed that show in 1987, but the Lake Wobegon sketches kept their grip on his listeners. Last fall, in the second year of American Radio Company, he brought back the monologue by popular demand.

The show is normally aired from New York, but does several road trips each season. Ken Diller, station manager for Vermont Public Radio in Colchester, says Keillor's show is among their most popular, with about 30,000 listeners in Vermont and an unknown number in Quebec.



Popular reports from imaginary town had to be revised for Garrison Keillor's second radio show.

A red neon sign lights up: "On the air." Four bars of Bach's Brandenburg Concerto No. 6 announce a Minnesota Public Radio production. Keillor, standing at an on-stage mixer, sings the "old piano" song.

The show packs a lot into two hours: music of all kinds, very comedy, jokes, satire. Keillor mixes high and low culture carefully. For a parody bakery commercial, for instance, he sings *When the Rolls Are Served Up Yonder*, a takeoff on the fine-odd or wretched hymn *When the Rolls in Called Up Yonder*.

Rich, meaningful lives

Tonight, highlights include *Lonesome Radio Theatre*, a skit about two lonely people, Pete and Jane, who meet in a San Francisco bookstore.

Keillor didn't write this one, but it bears one of his trademarks: the affectionate skewer. Jane tells Pete about her alternative diet, "Pete's Mocha," for those who aren't ready to be vegetarians but want to be reassured that the animals they were going to eat had led rich, meaningful lives. Who could resist?

At last, after the *Late Show* commercial and the *Voicestra's African* chart and the Nutcracker parody ("Not the kind of the music you keep discovering more things in"), the audience gets what it's waiting for.

The lights go down, except for one spot. Keillor pulls up a stool and begins: "It's been a quiet week. . . ."

Like most of his Lake Wobegon tales, this one is neither comedy nor tragedy but a gentle mix of both, tempered with compassion and very detachment.

There's no script. He simply sits alone on stage and talks to the audience, a born storyteller.

One senses from the undertone of resignation in his voice the ambivalence Keillor feels of returning to Lake Wobegon. He has made Lake Wobegon into an unlikely icon of Americana, but he wanted to move on, to make American Radio Company different. But his public wants him to stay on Lake Wobegon and Keillor, a polite Midwesterner, is obliging.

American Radio Company is based in Montreal on Vermont Public Radio, 107.9 FM p.m. Saturdays.