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Arts

A kinder, gentler, better America

Over 25 years millions of listeners have fallen in love with Garrison Keillor's folksy, feel-good radio show. **Martin Kettle** meets the man behind the legend

Garrison Keillor is sitting in his dressing room reading sonnets. Three thousand at the latest count, he says, and rising every time the postman calls. All because he suggested on the radio that listeners might try their hand at a Valentine's day poem.

"There are depths of love out there that we barely knew about," Keillor says. "It's not the simplest thing to sit down and write 14 lines. All these people, overcome by the need to write a sonnet. Just imagine that."

Imagining it is easy. A *Prairie Home Companion* - the programme that Keillor hosts each week - inspires levels of devotion that few radio shows can rival.

There are people who plan their holidays around *A Prairie Home Companion* so as never to miss a show, and people who plan their holidays so they can attend live recordings at the Fitzgerald Theatre in St Paul, the show's Minnesota home. So if Keillor asks these people for sonnets, he should expect sonnets.

A *Prairie Home Companion* goes out every Saturday across the US's National Public Radio network, just as it has done since it first started in 1974. This is therefore the silver jubilee season, and, to celebrate, Keillor and his team are bringing the show to Scotland and Ireland over the next couple of weeks, beaming it back live to the US and recording two episodes to be broadcast on Radio 4 and Ireland's RTE.

The show is a mix of all kinds of music and comedy sketches, culminating in a set piece "News From Lake Wobegon" monologue delivered by Keillor to about 3m rapt listeners. The show begins with and returns to Keillor. At 5pm Central Time he starts it, singing "Oh, hear that old piano/ From down the avenue..." Two hours later, as he announces, "And that's the news from Lake Wobegon, where all the women are strong, all the men are good-looking and all the children are

above average," the audience know it's home time.

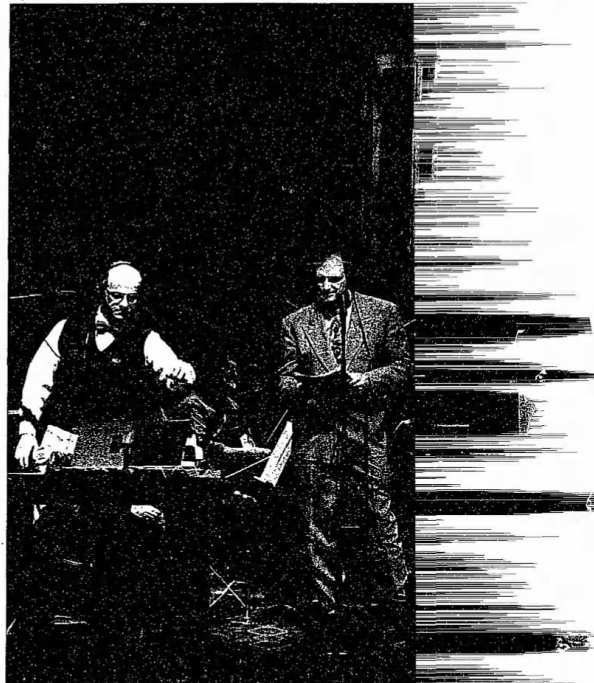
A *Prairie Home Companion* is an expression of Keillor's personality, his imagination and his values. Though the show is very funny, and the music is great, in some ineradicable way it is Keillor's loving and funny evocation of a kinder, simpler, better US that is at the heart of its appeal. "It's based on a kind of show that existed in my youth," says Keillor, who grew up in 50s rural Minnesota. "It's a live variety-show broadcast, but with some important differences." Like the range of its music, which can run from a cappella chorus through jazz, bluegrass, Cajun and Celtic, and occupies at least half of each show. And like the fact that Keillor devised and writes much of the show himself, sometimes finishing his script only just before the show airs.

Watching Keillor in rehearsal and then as he hosts his show, it's hard not to wonder why he subjects himself to it. What would make this bespectacled middle-class Minnesotan gentleman of 67 stand on a stage and perform *Great Balls of Fire* for the millions? What would make a man with a new marriage and young daughter rise every morning at 5am to write? Whatever else Keillor keeps hidden about himself, and there's a sense of a dark side to him, you know that this is a driven man.

He says that doing the show is "good work". He says it's "a little harder than you'd like to be doing ideally in your late 50s", but that it would be "a terrible waste to just drop it". He says he finds it easier to do these days. "One of the great secrets that they don't tell you is that your declining years are really a lot more fun than when you were riding high and you were nervous about losing your touch."

"In my view," says producer Christine Tschida, who has worked with Keillor for the past 10 years, "Garrison just has a need to stand up in front of an audience every Saturday".

People in Britain know Keillor mostly as a writer - which is also how he likes to see himself. Lake Wobegon Days, published in 1985, was the first - and in many people's eyes the best - of a succession of novels and comic writings that have appeared at regular intervals ever since. His latest - *Me by Jimmy (Big Boy) Valente as Told to Garrison Keillor* - is a satire on the other iconic Minnesotan of the present era, the state's improbable governor Jesse Ventura, the man they call the Body Politic.



The show is about ordinary things. You don't need to have read books to understand it... Keillor (right) on stage

Like the man himself, the writings may leave Minnesota from time to time, but it is to Minnesota that they always return. And the same is true of *A Prairie Home Companion*. Every year it goes on the road, occasionally, as people don't believe that they are entitled to happiness.

"All these rural people have come to live in the city, but they like to live on the outskirts, and they like to live on an acre of land, two acres, three acres. These are Lake Wobegon people and they are a part of midwestern culture that's describable, and I think that I describe it."

"I write about it with love," he continues, "but I also write about it satir-

ically, because the people themselves have a satiric mind. They're very ironic people. But I think their reticence is funny - their dishonesty, their inability to tell the truth to each other, the great length they go to. And they are stoics. Stoics I think are comical. They never give up. They keep at hopeless tasks. And these people don't believe that they are entitled to happiness."

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Lake Wobegon is Keillor's never-never land. It's both real and imaginary. But it does exist. It very much exists'

overseas. But most of the shows are broadcast live from the Fitzgerald, the century-old theatre in downtown St Paul that Keillor helped to save a few years back, renaming it after the greatest of St Paul's literary sons Keillor is an enthusiast of the author of *The Great Gatsby* - his cat is named F Cat Fitzgerald.

The on-stage understanding between Keillor and his house band (led by keyboard player Rich Dworak), actors Sue Scott and Tim Russell, and sound-effects man Tom Keith, speaks of years of respect. But there's no disputing that the only real place to see the show at the Fitzgerald is in winter, on Keillor's home ground, with snow in the streets and a theatre full of cheering devotees, which is where I saw it earlier this month.

The weather looms large in Minnesota, and thus in the Lake Wobegon fantasy, and thus in *A Prairie Home Companion* too. "It's a neutral place for a conversation to start," Keillor says. "You don't need to have seen movies, or watched TV, or read



PHOTOGRAPH: CHERYL WALSH/BELLEVILLE

books to understand the show."

Winter is a big deal in Minnesota – bigger than anyone in the Britain can really know. "Growing up in a place that has winter," Keillor has written, "you learn to avoid self-pity. Winter is not a personal experience – everybody else is as cold as you – so you shouldn't complain about it too much."

That passage is reprinted on a coffee mug that I bought in what must surely be the only store in the world devoted wholly to a radio show. Lake Wobegon USA is in the largest shopping mall on the planet – the Mall of America, outside Minneapolis airport. Dave Ldin, who runs the shop, will talk Garrison Keillor with customers for as long as they are willing to listen. Which, in most cases, is a long time.

"I think about America every day," Keillor once wrote, "and imagine a town, an avenue of old frame houses, a boulevard of tall trees, a June night, lawn sprinklers swishing across the grass and popping the flower bushes by the porch. A dog on the porch. Lights behind the curtains. Rock n roll in an upstairs bedroom.

Charcoal smoke in the air, a whiff of burgers. A gang of kids skidding around on gravel, giggling. A screen door slaps and a dad marches out to the garage. Yard after yard, block after block, every sight and sound and smell utterly familiar. This is the American neighbourhood of childhood comfort and fantasy, of teenage ambition, and of the tenderness and misery and splendour and comedy of marriage. Movies and novels of brutality and greed may sell a zillion copies, but they're irrelevant to the life of this avenue, which is based on faith, hope, love and humour."

In a sense, that's the key to the appeal of *A Prairie Home Companion*. "I hope you enjoy the show," Keillor tells the Minnesota audience just as they go on air. "And I hope I do too." It is great entertainment with a high purpose – and if you can come up with a better working definition of art, then you're welcome to it.

A *Prairie Home Companion* will be performed in the Queen's Hall, Edinburgh (0131-658 2019), on Friday and Saturday and broadcast on Radio 4 on April 1 and 8.