

Keillor brings Lake Wobegon to Lexington in sold-out show

The moment he picks up the phone, from the very way he answers it, you immediately know that there is little difference between the Garrison Keillor you get on the radio and the Garrison Keillor you get in real life.

The voice has that same weary quality, that sighing sense of glib ennui that Keillor has built an empire upon. You want to stretch out, put the conversation on speakerphone, and let the man hypnotize you into a state of relaxation through drollery.



THOMAS NORD

POP CULTURE

But then you snap to. There is a purpose for this conversation. Keillor and company are coming to Kentucky, and the details must be worked out.

Such as answering the question of why, when things are going so well for "A Prairie Home Companion" up in its home state of Minnesota, would you take this show on the road?

"We get to play in front of an audience that isn't from Minnesota," replies Keillor, not at all tactfully. "Minnesota audiences tend to be somewhat highly controlled. Taciturn. Stoical. If you were to do comedy only in front of Minnesota audiences, you would wind up being a very depressed person."

It's not that they don't have a sense of humor, he quickly adds. They just don't like to show off about it.

"People don't laugh in Minnesota," says Keillor, who will helm a live broadcast of "A Prairie Home Companion" tomorrow at 6 p.m. from the Singletary Center for the Arts in Lexington. "They tend to sit and smile. They sit, look at you and smile."

Keillor is a walking study in self-deprecation, for he is as much a Minnesotan as anyone. A native of Anoka, Minn., he has spent a good part of his life — whether he

See KEILLOR
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On the radio

"A Prairie Home Companion" with Garrison Keillor will be broadcast live at 6 p.m. tomorrow from the Singletary Center for the Arts in Lexington, Ky. The show is sold out, but you can listen to it on Minnesota Public Radio (WFPL 89.3-FM in Louisville, WUKY 91.3-FM in Lexington).

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meant to or not — selling an otherwise forgettable Midwestern state to a world of readers and radio listeners.

He has repeatedly left Minnesota — his most publicized migration came 13 years ago when he moved to his wife's native Denmark to try his hand at living as a Dane — but has always come back.

He had his reasons for leaving.

"I was really tired," he says. "In retrospect, I was very tired. I had worked terribly, terribly hard for three or four years, without any time off at all."

He refers to his Danish sojourn, and his subsequent attempt to live as a writer in New York City, as a "comfortable disaster," the kind of mistake that helps wake you up more than anything.

At the time, Keillor was at the apex of his national celebrity. Books like "Lake Wobegon Days," a satirical, fictionalized account of growing up in small-town Minnesota, put him on the best-seller list and on the guest list of late-night talk shows. He was compared to Mark Twain and appeared on the cover of Newsweek magazine, held out as a literary folk hero of sorts.

Then he quit, telling the world that he wanted to "resume the life of a shy person." Without Keillor, "A Prairie Home Companion" — which he had started in 1974 in St. Paul, Minn., and nurtured from cult status to genuine success — would be no more.

"You really get yourself into a hole and can't find your way out," explains Keillor. "In order to get out, you sometimes have to walk off the cliff. . . . You get some perspective."

That perspective — and his failure to adapt to Danish life — brought him back to the states, where he

started writing short humor pieces for The New Yorker and working on his novels.

He tried to do a radio show from Brooklyn, the clumsily named "Garrison Keillor's American Radio Company of the Air," but that eventually, inevitably, migrated back to St. Paul and morphed into "A Prairie Home Companion," which has resettled comfortably into its Saturday night slot on the public radio dial.

Keillor is less of a celebrity now and seems happier this way. His books continue to sell respectably, but he has ceded the spotlight to others. A self-described "old Northern liberal," he engaged in a brief feud with Minnesota Gov. Jesse Ventura after the wrestler's bizarre ascent to power, but that has died down as Ventura has settled into the mundane role of running the state.

"I don't think people smile reflexively every time his name comes up anymore," Keillor says. "I think the reality (of Ventura) is quite different from the perception. He portrays himself as the Lone Ranger in battle against the entrenched powers, but he is more of a caretaker, someone who is competent but offers no new initiatives. He is far from being a great battler. Instead he is someone who avoids any kind of showdown."

Which leads to the obvious question: Could Keillor see himself running for governor of Minnesota someday? After all, if an ex-wrestler could do it. . . .

"Oh, heavens no," Keillor blurts. "I would lose badly."

At age 58, back home in Minnesota, Keillor seems content being a radio performer. Tomorrow's broadcast will feature the usual mix of music, humor and news from Lake Wobegon.

When the show goes someplace like Kentucky, Keillor says it tries to find guest artists reflective of the re-

gion, in this case bluegrass musicians: the Del McCoury and Sam Bush bands.

And if that fails, Keillor says he has an ace in the hole.

"All we have to do is mention the University of Kentucky, and people will scream for minutes on end," he says confidently. "The mention of Adolph Rupp, and they will go wild. I'm at an age where a man uses any device he can use."

Keillor won't say how much longer he plans to do the show. He has up and left before, and reserves the right to do it again. He seems genuinely afraid of falling into the same rut that many of his Lake Wobegon characters have given themselves over to.

"I never, never thought toward the future at all," he says. "When you do a weekly show, you really fall into a pattern where you never look back, and you never look farther ahead than the next show."

Hence his desire to go on the road a dozen or so times a year.

"You have to leave home to have a good time," he says. "I've known that since I was 16."

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