

# FROM BARN DANCE TO BIG TIME

The Barn Owl Band generally plays for about 80 people at its barn dances. Tonight in Ames, the band will have an audience of millions when it appears on 'A Prairie Home Companion' radio show with Garrison Keillor.

By JEFF INMAN

**A**mes, Ia. — Jason Huntley and Roger Alexander can already feel the butterflies building. Like every other fourth Saturday of the month, the two members of The Barn Owl Band will set up their gear tonight at the Collegiate United Methodist Church annex.

Around 8 p.m. or so, Huntley and Alexander, along with the five other Owls, will start playing an informal barn dance for the folks who come out to twirl across the floor and have a good time. Like always, it will be pure, simple fun.

But that's not what is worrying them. It's what will have happened prior to that, when The Barn Owl Band will perform at Iowa State University's C.Y. Stephens Auditorium on "A Prairie Home Companion," Garrison Keillor's nationally syndicated radio show.

At 5 p.m., when the curtain goes up at Stephens, The Barn Owl Band will suddenly have an audience of 3 million — a few more than the 80 or so barn dancers to which the band is accustomed.

"We've all got this feeling of, 'What have we gotten ourselves into?'" Alexander said. "But when we get together and practice and know that we're doing what we've always done and love and that we do it well, I think we all realize it will just be a good time."

"I'm nervous," Huntley said, "probably rightfully so." The Barn Owl Band hasn't had much time to ponder its "Prairie Home" experience. After months of wondering, the group, all of whom are from central Iowa, found out just two weeks ago it would be on the show.

"All of the members of the band thought this would be a big long shot," Huntley said. "There are a lot of great performers on the show. . . . We never thought we'd make it."

Most don't. "Prairie Home" producer and music coordinator Linda Fahey said the show receives 50 to 70 submissions a week. That's more than 3,500 acts trying to score one of roughly 52 slots.

"We're always looking for new and young talent," Fahey said via an e-mail interview. "Generally, the music we present is very much rooted in traditional and folk

## Details

**WHAT:** "A Prairie Home Companion," featuring The Barn Owl Band and other performers.

**WHEN:** Tonight's performance in Ames is sold out, but the show will be broadcast live from 5 to 7 p.m. on WOI-AM 640 and FM 90.1 and on KTPR-FM 91.1.



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MARK MARTINELLO, THE REGISTER

# Barn Owls just having a good time

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music, but we try to mix things up, too — from classical to honky-tonk, choirs to zydeco . . .”

Those who do make it on the show suddenly find themselves part of one of radio's greatest traditions. “Prairie Home” has been on the air in various incarnations since 1969, when Keillor started hosting a morning show on Minnesota Public Radio.

It wasn't until 1974, though, that “Prairie Home” took on its now-familiar format.

Keillor had become interested in variety shows after writing a story for *The New Yorker* about *The Grand Ole Opry*. He thought the idea would also work in his hometown. So, on July 6, 1974, in front of an audience of 12, the first broadcast of the new and improved “Prairie Home” from the Janet Wallace Auditorium on the Macalester College campus in St. Paul hit the airwaves.

Nearly three decades later “Prairie Home” is an institution. Its weekly broadcasts are heard on 511 public radio stations nationwide, as well as abroad on American One and the Armed Forces Network.

That kind of exposure can have a serious impact on an act's career.

While Fahey doubts “Prairie Home” has launched anyone's career, she said it had helped many performers widen their fan bases.

One of those artists is Greg Brown. The Iowa native got a serious boost from “Prairie Home” after he first appeared on the show in 1981. Several other singers had performed some of Brown's songs on “Prairie Home,” so producers thought it was time to give the



SPECIAL TO THE REGISTER

**Just a hobby:** The seven-piece Barn Owl Band plans to continue to play barn dances. From left are Jon Duvick, Bettie Swarts, Merle Hall, Roger Alexander, Mike Bell, Marty Miller and Jason Huntley.

songwriter a shot. Two years later Brown had become a regular, appearing weekly for three years.

“I didn't know what I was getting into,” Brown said. “But for me to be able to go out and tour, it made all the difference in the world. (The show) made it so easy for me to go into a town I had never played in before and get people to come just because they'd heard me on the radio.”

Brown left “Prairie Home” in 1986, but he makes an annual appearance that still helps his career.

“You just send it out there and see what happens. But it definitely can't hurt you,” Brown said.

Dave Moore, another performer at tonight's show, agrees.

The Iowa folk singer made his first appearance on “Prairie Home”

around '83 or '84 as a sideman for Brown. “At that point I was more of just a harmonica man,” Moore said.

A couple years later Moore returned to “A Prairie Home Companion,” this time with his own trio, and made somewhat regular appearances on the show until the early '90s.

Though Moore is unsure of the show's affect on album sales or audience draw, he does know that “Prairie Home” has had a positive impact on roots music in America.

“There's a public awareness of the music (because of the show) that really helps,” he said.

Huntley and Alexander aren't holding out hope that The Barn Owl Band's appearance on “Prairie Home” will lead to a big record contract or even a serious regional

following.

“No one is expecting to get the big call to go to Nashville,” Huntley said, joking.

In fact, once it's all over, the seven-piece band of scientists, professors and Huntley, a graduate student in veterinary medicine, will be happy to go back to things as usual. The Owls will continue to play the barn dances, including the one tonight, just like they have for 11 years.

“What we do is just a hobby and a release,” Huntley said. “We do this just to have a good time. Here we are playing for a national radio show in front of our hometown crowd, and we're just going to have fun with it.”

Jeff Inman is a free-lance writer from Des Moines.