

Keillor at home with song

'Prairie Home Companion'
host satisfies soul with Pops

By Larry Nager
The Cincinnati Enquirer

Broadcasting out of Minneapolis-St. Paul, Garrison Keillor changed the face of radio in the '80s, when *A Prairie Home Companion*, the program he started in 1974 about the bucolic town of Lake Wobegon, went national. In just a few years of spinning tales and hosting his eclectic live show, he went from regional favorite to *Time* cover boy.

He left the show in 1987 but couldn't stay away and resumed his host duties in 1989.

Mr. Keillor, who turned 60 on Aug. 7, has recently been expanding his empire from books, magazine articles and the airwaves. Friday through Sunday, he'll sing with the Cincinnati Pops at Music Hall. He recently took a few minutes to answer some questions.

Question: Who told you you could sing? How did radio's premier monologist make the jump to crooner?

Answer: I started out singing the theme song, which it seems to me a host is supposed to do. The show is only a party, and the refusal to sing at a party is a bad sign you are taking yourself too seriously. From there, I went on to singing harmony backup to people.

I don't reckon that I have a big future doing Gershwin and Porter. But singing is what Americans do. Our country produced all this

gorgeous song. Are we supposed to hire someone to sing for us? Heck, no.

Q: Who are your favorite singers?

A: Jorma Kaukonen has a fabulous CD out of old-time country blues (*Blue Country Heart*), and it's my favorite thing right now. Gillian Welch and David Rawlings. Iris DeMent. Robin and Linda Williams

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have an album, *Visions of Love*, that is simply great singing. (I produced it, by the way.) And then I have a secret shameful love of opera and of sitting in the dark in the mezzanine.

I plan to sing Bizet's "Habenera" with the Pops, by the way. I'm just warning you in advance. I do the cadenza and everything. It's not for the timid.

Q: You are bringing a bunch of your Prairie Home cronies along with you, including Robin and Linda Williams and the wonderful Mollie O'Brien. How will your concert with the Cincinnati Pops differ from a Prairie Home Companion broadcast, other than that really big house band behind you?

A: The Pops is a classy orchestra and so we can't get away with doing the usual cheesy material. We're going to do Mendelssohn's "Midsummer Night's Dream" for one thing. Gorgeous music, and during it, I'll talk about marriage. I used to write an advice column, you know,



Photo courtesy Cincinnati Pops Orchestra

"Singing is what Americans do," Garrison Keillor says.

under the name "Mr. Blue," and am an authority on love. And then the orchestra and Quartet will come together in a piece Bill McLaughlin wrote for me. *The Aunt Eva Suite*, which is about my forebears and lets the orchestra play "When I Survey The Wondrous Cross," a glorious hymn. And then there's other stuff. The News from Lake Wobegon and some gospel music and whatever we're moved to do.

Q: After all these years delivering the news from Lake Wobegon, how do you keep yourself engaged?

A: Standing alone without a script in front of an audience for 20 minutes has a way of engaging a guy's attention, and stage fright keeps the experience very fresh in one's mind. I have never walked out on-stage without that "Oh-my-God-what-am-I-going-to-

If you go

Who: Garrison Keillor and the Cincinnati Pops

When: 8 p.m. Friday and Saturday; 7 p.m. Sunday

Where: Music Hall

Tickets: \$17-\$47; 381-3300

Book signing: 1 p.m. Saturday at Joseph-Beth Booksellers, Norwood

do?" feeling, and terror is a great stimulant, believe me. And then there is unremitting self-criticism, which was instilled in me by my fundamentalist forebears. . . . You walk onstage in terror and you walk off in abject shame. It's quite an exercise, week after week.

Q: Where would you like your musical career to take you?

A: I have no goals in music. Music is not my career; writing is. Music is spiritual; it feeds the life of the

soul; it gives us hope and courage; it's our humanity. My forebears gave me a few songs that are precious to me and I've added to them and I'll do my best to give them to my daughter:

"O Beautiful for Spacious Skies" and "Silent Night" and "Jesus, Lover of My Soul" and "I Ride An Old Paint" and "Frankie and Johnny" and "Nearer My God to Thee" and maybe "Great Balls of Fire" and "Nobody Knows You When You're Down and Out."

Q: What other projects are you working on?

A: Working on a novel, called *The Meaning of Life?* and making some revisions in an opera that premiered last spring, *Mr. and Mrs. Olson*, and planning the new season of *A Prairie Home Companion*, which launches on Oct. 5.

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