

## The Wit Of Lake Wobegon Brings His Tales To Tampa

By KURT LOFT  
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**TAMPA** — It might be a quiet week in Lake Wobegon, but it won't be here when Garrison Keillor pays a much-awaited first visit to the Bay area.

Tuesday night, the longtime host of National Public Radio's "A Prairie Home Companion" is featured guest for a special concert by The Florida Orchestra. The 60-year-old storyteller, comedian, writer and singer temporarily uproots himself from his beloved Minnesota and the award-winning show he has been doing since 1974.

The Florida Orchestra tried for years to book Keillor, but the radio icon apparently doesn't like traveling south any more than he enjoys doing interviews.

"We pushed and pushed and pushed, and the stars must have been aligned because he came through," says Jan Hickin, the orchestra's director of marketing. "As far as we know he's never been to Florida. But it's a thrill that he's coming because he's one of America's great characters."

Keillor is a master of character and creator of many of the colorful residents of Lake Wobegon. This is the mythical town of "Prairie Home," where "all the women are strong, the men good-looking

*The popular host of radio's "A Prairie Home Companion" tunes up his act with The Florida Orchestra.*

and the children above average."

"Prairie Home" reaches more than 3 million listeners each weekend through 500 radio stations. That includes WUSF, 89.7 FM, in Tampa, which airs the show Saturdays at 6 p.m. and Sundays at 3 p.m.

"The show has always remained one of our listeners' favorites," says Robert Peterson, WUSF's program director. "It has a charming, warm and friendly feel. You hear these stories and they make you feel like you're part of them."

"Prairie Home" is part of radio lore. During its first 10 years, it logged 477 shows in front of a live audience. In 1978 it moved to The World Theater in St. Paul, later renovated and renamed the Fitzgerald Theater.

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Tampa show will feature music and monologue.



Tribune illustration  
by DAVID O'KEEFE

### CONCERT PREVIEW

#### The Florida Orchestra

WITH Garrison Keillor

WHERE: Tuesday, 8 p.m.

WHERE: Tampa Bay Performing Arts Center,  
Morsani Hall, 1010 N.  
MacDunn Place, Tampa

TICKETS: \$26, \$38, \$48  
and \$60; (813) 286-3403



The Associated Press

Garrison Keillor's show with The Florida Orchestra on Tuesday will resemble his popular radio show, with musical numbers and a monologue, "My Love Is Like a Red, Red Rose."

## GARRISON KEILLOR

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The show ended in June 1987 after a run of 13 years. Keillor said at the time that "the decision to close is mine — the sort of simple, painful decision that our parents taught us to make cheerfully. It is simply time to go."

Two years later, Keillor began again in New York's Brooklyn Academy of Music, calling his show the American Radio Company. It was picked up by 200 public radio stations, and in 1992, Keillor returned the program to Minnesota and resumed the name "A Prairie Home Companion."

"When the show started, it was something funny to do with my friends," Keillor once said, "and then it became an achievement that I hoped would be successful, and now it's a good way of life."

### Variety Show With Strong Writing

"Prairie Home" is an old-fashioned variety show that features musical guests, jokes, lots of sound effects, short sketches — and strong writing. When he was young, Keillor wanted to be a famous novelist, but found it hard work. Instead, he relaxed his style, and it became "simply something I do every day, as some people attend Mass and others tend gardens."

For someone who "abandoned" life as a novelist, Keillor managed to publish a dozen books, including "Lake Wobegon Days," "The Book of Guys" and "Talk Radio."

Tuesday's concert will reflect much of what Keillor does on the show. The centerpiece is a new piece set to music by Randall Davidson, "A Young Lutheran's Guide to the Or-

chestra." Commissioned by Keillor, the half-hour work is a fantasia based on two hymns, and it offers a satirical caution to young people — especially young Lutherans — on a career in orchestras.

The program also includes works by Bizet and Argento, a piece called "Aunt Eva Suite," the "Hymn to Sweet Corn" and Keillor's own monologue, "My Love Is Like a Red, Red Rose."

### 'Our Mark Twain'

Keillor writes a monologue each week for "Prairie Home" and commits it to memory. This allows him to relax listeners by improvising, says Philip Brunelle, guest conductor for the program and a friend of Keillor's.

Brunelle was music director for the Minnesota Opera at the time Keillor launched "Prairie Home," and the two worked on the very first show. Brunelle says Keillor isn't just an entertainer — he's a bonafide American storyteller, and there aren't many of his kind left.

"Garrison has this incredible sense for being able to weave a story," Brunelle says. "He's our Mark Twain, our Will Rogers. But he's also been blessed with an absolutely beautiful speaking voice, so people listening to the radio have something that draws them in. That's part of his allure, along with his sense of humor and wit."

Keillor's storytelling works because everyone feels part of it, says Allen Frechtman, a "Prairie Home" spokesman.

"The stories hit home because they're about family and about small towns," he says. "Every place you go has its own Lake Wobegon. The stories connect. They're universal."

Reporter Kurt Loft can be reached at (813) 259-7570.

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