SOUND MAN

Garrison Keillor's effects wizard will work magic at Madison show

By Rob Thomas
The Capital Times

If Garrison Keillor needs the sound of breaking glass, a ping pong match or a pig belly-flopping into a vat of Jell-O, he calls on Tom Keith.

A St. Paul native, Keith has been working with Keillor, host of public radio's "A Prairie Home Companion," since the two were together at Minnesota Public Radio in the mid-1970s. He does character voices and vocal sound effects, but he's best known for using an array of props, including coconut shells, a box of cornstarch and a pair of wingtips purchased at the Salvation Army, to make his sounds.

Keith usually performs just on the episodes recorded at St. Paul's Fitzgerald Theater and leaves the road shows to fellow sound effects maestro Fred Newman. But he'll make the trip down to the Oscar Mayer Theatre at 5 p.m. Saturday to participate in the taping of this week's episode. The show — which will be broadcast live from 5 to 7 p.m. Saturday by Wisconsin Public Radio on WERN/FM 88.7 — is sold out.

The Capital Times recently spoke via telephone with Keith:

How did you amass your collection of props?

It's over a period of time. I really accumulated a lot when Garrison was doing his shows out of New York. He quit for a while and then was doing his shows in New York, and then he came back and was writing a lot of stuff that required prop sounds. That's my main interest, producing the sounds using props, where Fred Newman likes to do it vocally.

What has drawn you to doing props?

If I can make a sound with a prop, I'd rather do that than vocally. It's a stage show, so it's more visual that way. With Fred, he's really good at the vocal sounds, and they're amazed at what he can do with just his voice.

Have these sound effects secrets been handed down since the Golden Age of Radio, or did you discover them on your own?

Some you have to, because they don't make the props anymore. For example, for breaking wood they used to use peach crates and raspberry crates made of balsa wood. They don't make those, but I came across egg cartons, which used to be made of Styrofoam and had a nice crisp cracking sound. So I asked people to save theirs and started collecting them.

They stopped making those out of Styrofoam and went back to cardboard, and then I discovered Hefty picnic plates, the one with the compartments in them.

Chuga chuga chuga chuga chuga

Lake Wobegon storyteller Garrison Keillor is the heart of "A Prairie Home Companion."

Sounds

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They make a nice loud cracking sound, so I use those for wood.

It's funny, when Garrison required the sound of dialing a number on a phone, I had a rotary phone. I found a nice one that made a loud, grinding sound whenever you turned the rotary. But then people said "What are you using that for? Nobody uses those anymore." So now you have to do the vocal "beep-boop" sound.

I also wonder if some sound effects, even if they're technically accurate, don't work because they don't sound like what people think they should sound like.

That happens a lot too, where you can actually get the item that makes the sound, and you use it, and it doesn't sound right. And you get something totally unrelated, and people are like, "Oh, it's perfect."

Can you give me an example?

Garrison needed the sound of skiing. We used a sound effects CD, but it didn't sound right to him, the actual recording of a skier. So I did it vocally, and it was good enough. When you do things like that, you have to actually move like you're skiing. You can't just stand there and make the sound. You have to move, be the ski.

Are you ever deliberately tested in the script with a difficult sound effect assignment?

Over the years, I've accumulated so much stuff that I can pretty much cover things. But there is some stuff that I'll have to know where a good hardware store is. Garrison knows what I can do, so he writes toward that.

Do you have your set of instruments pretty set, or are you constantly looking around for new items to use?

I'm always looking for something. This isn't my full-time job, so I'm more apt to stumble onto something, or somebody might suggest something.

How did you get into this?

I always liked radio and thought it was a nice, intimate medium. I went to the University of Minnesota and took some broadcasting courses, and in the process I met somebody who worked at Minnesota Public Radio part-time. I graduated, and this guy left a message that he was quitting his part-time job, so there would be an opening. I went down there and turned in my resume, heard nothing, and finally just went down and sat in the lobby. The guy who hired showed up and said, "Oh, I haven't had time to look at your resume. But can you start working this Saturday?" This is when Minnesota Public Radio was very small and didn't check resumes very closely.

Lucky for you.

Right. So many of my experiences have been about being in the right place at the right time. I was the engineer on duty in the morning when Garrison started doing his morning show. I was the only one in the building with him, and he would require another voice, so he'd ask me to read something. I had a minor in theater, so it wasn't difficult for me to do. I think I did it well enough that he gave me more and more to do.

When Garrison started writing scripts that required sound effects, I did mainly vocal stuff. And then he started giving me lines to read and sound effects at the same time, so I had to come up with props. And it just kept going and going.

Why do you think the show, which has such a regional sense of humor and sensibility, appeals to people all over the world?

I think mainly people listen to it for Garrison. I know when people buy tickets to the show in advance, they don't know who is going to be on, but they know Garrison will be there. That's the main thing. You can almost hear the audience settle down when he starts talking about Lake Wobegon.

When Garrison was doing the show regionally, of course people identified with Lake Wobegon. When people suggested that he take the show nationally, he thought it wouldn't work because it was so localized. But I thought it would be good, because people may listen to it differently, and it works for them. If you live in New York City and hear it, you think that's the way rural Minnesota really is. And the people who actually live in rural Minnesota get the joke in a different way.

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