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E5

CoverStory

Radio takes center stage

Garrison Keillor brings traveling 'A Prairie Home Companion' to Asheville

By Jill Ingram
STAFF WRITER

The way Fred Newman describes it, he's got the perfect face for radio. "My face looks like a prune, like I held it underwater for a few days," he said.

OK, but you should hear his voice. All smooth and elastic, ready at any moment to break into the shriek of a passing loon or a slamming prison door.

Newman, 51, is a sound effects man, one of the few in a profession consumed by computers. Since 2000, he's traveled with "A Prairie Home Companion," starring Garrison Keillor and produced by Minnesota Public Radio for Public Radio International. Keillor and his crew are making a stop in Asheville on Monday for a show at the Thomas Wolfe Auditorium. The event is a fund-raiser for public radio station WCQS-FM 88.1.

"We've been trying to get the show here for about seven years," said Ed Subkis, the station's general manager. It's part of the "Rhubarb Tour," which Keillor and the gang do at smaller venues. The show is not scheduled for national broadcast, but WCQS will air it locally this spring.

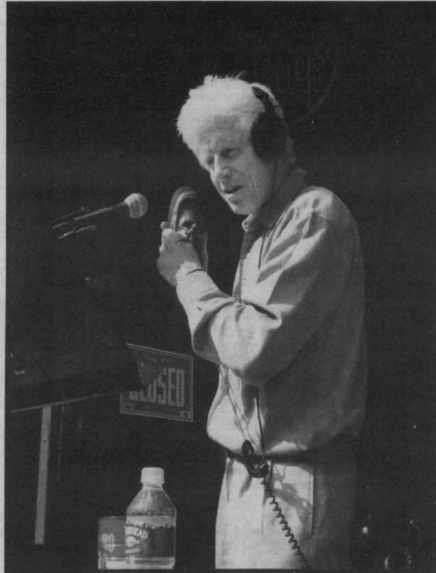
Keillor, Newman and radio regulars The Guy's All-Star Shoe Band will all be there. Mandolin showman Sam Bush is also scheduled to appear. The show will make a few other "Rhubarb" stops in South Carolina and Florida and then arrive in Spartanburg, S.C., on Feb. 14 for a live, national broadcast of "A Prairie Home Companion."

That show will feature Doc Watson. Newman said "Rhubarb Tour" stops offer audiences an opportunity to see something special, a spontaneous exchange between Keillor and the rest of the Prairie Home actors and musicians. "The sand shifts constantly around Garrison," said Newman.

Newman compared what happens onstage to improvisational jazz. "I have no doubts that on this tour, whatever comes out will be the first time it ever comes out," he said.

He said his own role on the show is mostly that of comic relief. "You got to have the gravediggers in 'Hamlet,'" he said.

Newman's repertoire of characters includes Baby Elizabeth, a toddler with the blues; Lurleen Cheatwood, a trailer park Martha Stewart who has three daughters, Lather, Rinse and Repeat; a team of weasels pulling a cart and more.



Sound effects man Fred Newman will help make the magic when radio personality Garrison Keillor brings his "Rhubarb Tour" show to town Monday night at Wolfe Auditorium. The performance features some of the cast from his radio variety show "A Prairie Home Companion," plus musical guest Sam Bush.

You get a sense of Newman's playfulness right away (as he does the sound effect of a giant bird: "I'm flapping my wings. I can't do the timing right unless I'm flapping my wings") but he respects radio and Keillor's firm grasp of the medium. "His vision has been so clean and so pure," Newman said.

He described Keillor as "someone with one foot on this planet and one on another." "He's a big, brilliant nerd. And he wears these red socks. And I mean that in the best sense," Newman said.

There's not much left in radio like

"A Prairie Home Companion." Keillor saw "The Grand Ole Opry" as a young man and made it a model for "A Prairie Home Companion," which first went on the air in 1974 and airs every Saturday night (in Asheville it also repeats on Sunday mornings).

"It was meant to be your companion on the prairie on a cold winter night," Newman said. The show features skits and music, but it's famous for "the news from Lake Wobegon," a place where the women are strong, the men are good-looking and the children are above average. During this segment, always during the sec-

About the show

WHAT: Garrison Keillor's "Rhubarb Tour" with performers from radio's "A Prairie Home Companion."

WHEN: 7:30 p.m. Monday

WHERE: Thomas Wolfe Auditorium.

HOW MUCH: Show is sold out, but will be taped and broadcast at a later date on public radio station WCQS/88.1-FM

ON THE NET: www.prairiehome.org

ond half of the two-hour show, Keillor tells stories that usually center on the people of this fictitious community.

The stories can be sad, funny, ridiculous or touching, and Keillor's voice adapts to the corresponding emotion.

This is part of Keillor's genius, Newman says.

"There's something about a radio voice," Newman said. "His voice is as close as your lover."

After a quick impersonation of Keillor describing to an audience the experience of eating a tomato, Newman said, "He's feeding people over the radio a tomato, and people are tasting it at home."

Newman grew up in LaGrange, Ga., and used to visit an aunt who lived in Asheville. "I have wonderful memories," he said. He visited the city again in mid-January on a trip through with his family.

He recently finished work on an update of a book about noise-making that he wrote more than 20 years ago, "MouthSounds: How to Whistle, Pop, Click, and Honk Your Way to Social Success." It's scheduled for release this fall.

Newman's film work includes "Harry and the Hendersons," "Cocoon," "Gremlins," "Bright Lights, Big City," "Who Framed Roger Rabbit" and "Radio Days." He also appears on the PBS show "Between the Lions."

The age of computer sampling has made a lot of people like Newman obsolete. This makes his "Prairie Home Companion" job that much sweeter.

"There's no other live sound effects gigs," he said.

But it's more than that. Newman is a true admirer of the airwaves. Take your Internet, your newspaper or your television: When you want to get close to your audience, Newman said, "Radio still does it better."

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