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Laughs, surprises follow Keillor

Humorist, writer stops in Asheville this Tuesday

By Carol Mallett Rifkin | take5 correspondent

The quirky genius of humorist and writer Garrison Keillor has been delighting audiences for more than 30 years. His radio show "A Prairie Home Companion" skyrocketed to fame in the 1970s, creating a national forum for American folk music and delighting audiences with his unique take on Americana.

Virginia-based performers Robin and Linda Williams have worked with Keillor since the fall of 1975. The show, ever evolving and hugely popular, has spawned books, recordings and even a movie. On Tuesday, Keillor, the Williamses and pianist Richard Dvorsky appear at Thomas Wolfe Auditorium in a live show that isn't quite the same as the radio show — but close. In a phone interview, Robin and Linda Williams talked about the show, and their history with Keillor.

Question: You have been on Garrison Keillor's show since 1975?

Linda Williams: That first fall, we went to the Twin Cities to play colleges and Peter Ostroushko, who was playing with us then, told us about a new radio show. We called Garrison and he wanted to see us play live. We were playing about 16 hours away and he drove over to see us. He saw something in our performance he was interested in having on his show. That was the beginning. (The show) was at a variety of places until the Fitzgerald Theatre became its home. When it went national about 1980, we started traveling out there specifically to do the "A Prairie Home Companion" show.

Q: What is Garrison Keillor like to work with?

Robin Williams: He's cordially intense. He is very focused. He's got the big brain. He's always thinking, always trying to make something new out of what is going on. With that in mind, you understand that he is not going to ever have anything the same twice. That's part of the excitement. He's a good guy.



Special to the Citizen-Times
Garrison Keillor, host of the radio variety show "A Prairie Home Companion," will bring music and comedy to town Tuesday at Thomas Wolfe Auditorium, presented by local public radio station WCQS/FM-88.1

Q: Is this show all about Garrison or is it a cooperative effort?

Linda Williams: The live show in Asheville is definitely an idea that Garrison had. We turned a monologue from a book

he is writing into a musical. We've been singing together a long time and have a pretty big repertoire of material the three of us are familiar with. We all suggested songs and Garrison chose songs that

WANT TO GO?

What: An Evening with Garrison Keillor
When: 7:30 p.m. Tuesday
Where: Thomas Wolfe Auditorium
Tickets: limited seating available at the Civic Center box office or through Ticketmaster
Charge by phone: Through Ticketmaster at 251-5505.
On the Net:
www.ticketmaster.com
www.prairiehome.publicradio.org
www.robinandlinda.com

worked with his monologue; we didn't know what the monologue was going to be at first.

Q: Is this show scripted or spontaneous?

Linda Williams: I wouldn't call it scripted. It will be Robin and I and Garrison singing as a trio and Rich Dvorsky on piano. In the past, we've done Garrison talking, then a few songs, then the Hopeful Gospel Quartet or just us, and then he'd do a monologue and close the show. In this show we all go out together, the monologue starts and it unfolds like a musical with the music reinforcing the theme of what we are doing.

Robin Williams: Every night in the show, you think you know what is coming in the monologue and then he just takes off in another direction. We're just on stage following him. It really is funny.

Q: Did the radio show come along at the right time and place?

Robin Williams: To the majority of the country this music was new, even though it was really old. People in Minnesota didn't know about (Asheville folk song collector) Bascom Lamar Lunsford for example, but after the show, they did. He understood the value of this music and why it was important. Consequently, in the mid-1970s when the "Prairie Home" started to take off, the people who sang this kind of music were the people he wanted on his show. He really gave American roots music a place to be heard. Before that, there was no place.

— Carol Mallett Rifkin writes for take5. Contact her at cpmallett@msn.com.