

Welcome to Fort Wobegon

Keillor brings relaxed, charming show with stories, songs and sound effects

By Punch Shaw
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FORT WORTH – Welcome to Fort Wobegon.

Garrison Keillor brought A Prairie Home Companion Summer Love Tour 2011 to Bass Hall on Tuesday night – a show that united our fair city with the host's fictional home and made them one for a few lazy, easygoing hours filled with music, humor, memories and some truly weird sound effects.

The evening opened with Keillor's five-piece band bouncing through a couple of toe-tapping numbers without saying a word. Eventually, Keillor ambled out and offered a song that, instead of being about the joys of living in Minnesota (a large Canadian province far north of Oklahoma), was all about us. It was amazing for both its grasp of local geography and the fact that Keillor managed to rhyme "Chisholm" with "Methodism."

This was followed by a wistful tale of teenage passion involving a young lady in a "steel-belted, one-piece swimming suit" that was interrupted sporadically as Keillor slipped into songs that caressed an emotion or bit of a broken dream that fell from his ongoing tale.

And so the evening went. Stories, monologues, character assassinations and even a stray poem or two were gently interwoven with tunes about loves that were almost found, lost altogether or weren't worth the trouble to start with – and a few that shall live forever. The whole affair had a very radio feel as Keillor wandered about the stage, often speaking or singing with his back to the full house of about 2,000 patrons.



Garrison Keillor performs on his A Prairie Home Companion Summer Love Tour at Bass Hall on Tuesday. Star-Telegram/Joyce Marshall

Joining Keillor at times was Sara Watkins, a fine fiddler and vocalist. When she and the host sang duets, they did not harmonize so much as sing the same song at generally the same time. Both of them sounded far better alone than together.

But, of course, that is the charm of Keillor's show, both on radio and in the concert hall. He and Watkins sounded like two old friends singing together on a porch, just for the sheer love of the human voice. There was nothing slick or polished about any of the vocals. They were just real. And that is why even a truly challenging number like *Un-*

chained Melody went over in-credibly well.

The most dazzling aspect of the performance, which was already 2½ hours old and counting when our deadline pushed me out of the hall, was the musicianship of Keillor's band. All were fine players, but mandolinist-fiddler Richard Kriehn was outstanding. He and Watkins squared off for a fiddle-fest late in the show that was a highlight of the concert.

And then there was Fred Newman, the sound-effects machine disguised as a man. As Keillor would reel out some outlandish yarn (one was about a high school chemistry

teacher becoming a novelist, while another dealt with barbecuing an antelope), Newman accompanied the story with the appropriate sound effects. His arsenal included ringing phones, chain saws and dolphin conversations. It was hilarious stuff.

So the show did not disappoint in any way. If anything, it was even more laid-back than the radio show, but every bit as entertaining. Keillor sang, told stories and charmed the audience, coming across like a neo-Jimmy Stewart who had wandered out of a wheat field and onto the stage. It was the little show that time forgot.