

EVENT • CONCERT

Garrison Keillor brings a bit of Wobegon to Austin

By Michael Barnes

AMERICAN-STATESMAN STAFF

Weirdly, Garrison Keillor waited for me around every corner. Perhaps because the prolific writer and entertainer has given so many interviews, or maybe because my questions were just plain obvious, but Keillor, who brings his touring circus to ACL Live on Wednesday, anticipated each topic. I wanted to talk about Molly Ivins, he brings up Ivins. I planned to quiz him on particular Texas musicians; he beats me to the punch, thoughtfully and elegantly.

If you go on Wednesday, you won't witness a "Prairie Home Companion" broadcast show, but it will look and sound a lot

Garrison Keillor's A Prairie Home Companion 'Summer Love' Tour

When: 7:30 p.m. Wednesday

Where: ACL Live, 310 W. Second St.

Tickets: \$39-\$85

Information: www.acl-live.com; 877-435-9849

like one, given the musical acts, sound effects, a full cast, and characters like Guy Noir, Private Eye, and cowboys Dusty and Lefty, plus, as always, the latest from Lake Wobegon.

American-Statesman: You're

about to get on another plane. Does all this travel weary you?

Keillor: I don't think so. I feel a little guilty about it because I have a 13-year-old girl at home. But she seems well provided for. She starts school tomorrow. I'm sorry I won't be there to have breakfast with her and see her off. Being on the road is a secret pleasure for me and I think most performers. We don't want our loved ones to know how fun it is. We pretend to be tired of it. We feign. But it's actually a beautiful world out there. The daily world, the difficult one to live with, disappears. You live a simple, tribal life with your tribe of performers. You stay in hotels — we don't stay in particularly fancy ones — that are comfort-

ing. Holiday Inn is really a comfortable sort of dormitory. You don't need to pick up after yourself or cook. Even though you carry a cellphone, your friends don't call you. Dentists, urologists, the IRS, they just disappear. You do not get any older. Time does not exist. You forget what day it is. It's lovely.

Your sense of place is exceedingly precise. What are your thoughts on Austin's sense of place?

I don't have that much experience with Austin. People keep telling me that Austin is proud of weirdness. I don't notice weirdness. That's mythology. I remember coming down to do the TV show. Loved doing "Austin City Limits." It's the easiest show in the world to

do. I associate TV with highly neurotic people who have a certain arrogance and whose exact function you can't figure out. But I was down there with Chet Atkins and Charlie Gimble and the Hopeful Gospel Quartet. Another time, I attended an amazing event, a wake for Molly Ivins at which she was present. It was in a big ballroom. You could see the Capitol from there. It was packed with Texas Democrats, also Republicans, legislators of all stripes, musicians and writers. It was the most comfortable group of people I've been with in a long time. It was just so warm, as if they were all Jewish and related to each other. Everybody

See **TOUR, D3**



PRAIRIE HOME COMPANION
Radio celebrity Garrison Keillor is touring the country with A Prairie Home Companion "Summer Love" Tour. He stops in Austin Wednesday.

TOUR: Music, Molly Ivins define Austin for Keillor

Continued from D1

ignored that she was nearing the end of her life. I remember seeing Dan Rather alone at a table. One of the most famous Texans ever. Nobody made a big fuss over him. I sang a duet with Joe Ely. That kind of made my evening. I can't imagine that sort of party taking place anywhere else. I can't imagine Molly being from anywhere else but Texas. ... Once she drove me in a pickup truck to a party at a house. Not a big house, not a party for big donors. A party for people who knew other people. You hung around kitchen and got beer out of the fridge. You made yourself a burrito out of a burrito tray. It was hot. Dogs were wandering around. I had a great time. I've never had a bad time in Austin.

Why do you think there are so few authentic originals like Ivins out there?

She sort of created herself. I can't attribute it to place. One creates a persona. The rest of the world looks on it as an act of deception. I suppose it is. It's necessary for a writer. It makes everything easier. I think Molly was born to high society, as I understand it. So then she could have gone off in another direction. She looked down that road and didn't see anything she wanted. She created this hard-edged satirist with a heart of gold and a Texas accent. She could have become

a Californian or a New Yorker or a Minnesotan. Instead she was this Texan. ... She was able to say some pretty sharp things under that big hat. She gave encouragement to a lot of fainting liberals during Bush years. That's a worthy thing. I'm sure she regrets not being around for Perry's presidential campaign. An opportunity of a lifetime to go after Gov. Good-hair.

Your connection to Texas music is deep and abiding. What sets the state's artists apart?

I don't know anything other than what I've heard. The Mexican aspect to it is mysterious and sets it apart. With the songwriters that I love, like Joe Ely — I think he is a giant — and Lyle Lovett and Guy Clark, there's a freewheeling aspect that you don't find elsewhere, especially in country music. It might not be true of Van Cliburn. Willie Nelson is a case apart. There's only one. But in Waylon Jennings and Buddy Holly there's an adventurousness, a joy in the music. I think about northern songwriters, who are dark, conflicted, troubled, for whom this song is an anguished confession. I don't think there's that much anguish in the songwriters I mentioned. I think they go right at it to attract women or to hold onto the ones they have. Might be the best way to write poems. That's probably why Shakespeare wrote poems. I've always thought there was

more than just one "dark lady." You write to earn money and impress women.

After so many years of regular and microscopic attention, how do you keep the Lake Wobegon news so fresh?

I have to keep tugging at it. I don't hesitate to make dramatic changes. I got rid of Pastor Ingqvist. He hadn't developed. He had a pale and troubled consciousness. His wife was more interesting. But there was not much I could do with her. So I brought in Pastor Liz and gave her certain qualities. (Here, Keillor falls into the closely cropped rhythms of his Wobegon reports.) She had felt a mystical call, so she hitchhiked to town with a backpack on her back. She took off her clothes and bathed in the lake. One of the members of church board was fishing and saw a naked figure. He didn't row toward her, but he drifted. The wind pushed him. He didn't know what to do. So he lay down in the bottom of the boat. She took hold of its edge. She tapped him on the shoulder, said, "Are you all right?" She's a little different from the usual Lutheran pastor. It's difficult to pin her down politically — liberal or conservative. I like that.

When you retire from American Public Media in 2013, as you have announced, will you continue to write?

Oh sure, as long as I can. As

long as anybody wants to read it. I would still write if I didn't have readers, though. I think I'm done writing fiction. I don't read fiction anymore. It just ended for me, oddly. I maybe read two or three novels a year that I don't necessarily enjoy. Used to read The New Yorker short stories, but I stopped. The people I was interested in died. I'm very interested in the long essay form. Essayists like Edward Hoagland. It's a good form for an older man. And I would very much like to write a play. I've tried to write plays, and I'd like to write movies, of course. I think writing changes as you get older. If you are not locked into one form or genre, you're lucky. There are young people who want to be poets and they only want to be poets — or poets only; this strikes me as utterly insane. Why would you only write poetry and not write silly things? I don't get that. But they are very serious about it. I guess they figure if they are going to be considered serious, they should write seriously. I wish I could tell them otherwise.

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