

REVIEW

# Keillor, companions dial up radio show

American icon brings farewell tour from Lake Wobegon to C.R. shore at McGrath Amphitheatre

By Diana Nollen, The Gazette

CEDAR RAPIDS — “Only remembered for what we have done.” As these lyrics trailed off into Thursday’s perfect night air, this prophetic parting sentiment from Garrison Keillor and his Prairie Home Companions brought their three-hour show nostalgically full circle.

I wish that circle could be unbroken, but alas, this amazing arc at the McGrath Amphitheatre was part of Keillor’s farewell tour. Next July, the American icon who turned 73 this month will sign off after 42 years of spinning yarns, singing songs and delivering the news from Lake Wobegon over public radio airwaves, in live Town Hall presentations and on cross-country tours.

He will be sorely missed. We’ll get a sneak peek at his hand-picked successor when musician Chris Thile performs a Hancher concert Nov. 4 at the Englert Theatre in downtown Iowa City.

Keillor’s red tennis shoes and red socks will be impossible to fill. His homespun humor, delivered with a whistling S, and his quaky, heart-felt baritone tones cannot be replicated. How lucky we were to have him grace the shores of the Cedar River, holding us spellbound from 7 to 10:07 p.m.

Confession: I have never tuned in to “A Prairie Home Companion.” I’m strictly a rock radio listener, unless I need to chill to classical music or show tunes on a long drive. Had I experienced “The America the Beautiful Tour” 10 or 20 years ago, I would have become a loyal listener. It was that enchanting.

Keillor isn’t a perfect singer. He rambles when he



Garrison Keillor sings from the stage during his performance of “A Prairie Home Companion: The America the Beautiful Tour” on Thursday night at the McGrath Amphitheatre in southwest Cedar Rapids.

speaks. And he’s a little randy in his many mentions of lost swimsuits and comely women. But he is utterly mesmerizing, immediately reeling in his 1,886 audience members by strolling through the rows, singing “I’ll never be better than I am right now. ... I have no regrets, thanks to memory loss.”

He made plenty of memories — and plenty of friends — by weaving Cedar River and Cedar Rapids references throughout his many songs and dialogue, as well as singing lots of rootsy songs by Iowa City tunesmiths Greg Brown and Iris DeMent. Keillor seemed to genuinely enjoy

Cedar Rapids and the beauty of the river, although he can’t figure out where the rapids went. “Did they smooth them out?” And while he didn’t mention this in his show, the veteran storyteller donated an undisclosed sum to the public library in the wake of the Floods of 2008.

Just a few minutes into the production, and after his first political discourse, he stopped and said, “We should sing a song,” then launched into “My Country ‘Tis of Thee.” Sing-alongs dotted the program, but the highlight came during intermission, when he invited the audience to stand and sing more than half a dozen

“river” songs. Beginning with “O’ Man River” from the Broadway musical “Showboat,” we worked our way through “Way Down Upon the Cedar River,” “Moon River,” a couple of old-timey hymns and “The Battle Hymn of the Republic,” ending with an “Amen” chorus.

A special nod goes to Keillor’s Radio Rhubarb Band, dishing up a tart blend of Americana roots, bluegrass, honky tonk and boogie, led by Richard Dworsky on piano, organ and keyboards, with Larry Kohut on bass, Chris Siebold on guitar, Richard Kriehn on fiddle and mandolin, and Bernie Dresel on drums. Extraor-

dinary alone in solo spotlights, they’re explosive when united. Singer and string player Sarah Jarosz, just 24, sings with an old soulful blend of guts and sweetness. Keillor towers over her, but bends down to sing on their duets, left hand behind his back.

It’s that kind of expressiveness that makes Keillor so engaging when speaking, singing or springing to life his beloved character Guy Noir. The intrepid private eye was on the trail of a Minnesota dentist hiding in Cedar Rapids after slaying named animals, from Dumbo to Flipper and Winnie the Pooh. When Noir tracks down the dentist, he exacts revenge by torturing him in a dental chair. It’s Keillor’s uncanny way of planting today’s headlines into old-time radio shows.

Faithful sidekick Fred Newman nearly stole the show, turning in an impossible array of sound effects based on Keillor’s stream-of-consciousness patter. It’s not enough to mimic whales, birds, helicopters and submarines; Keillor also tasks him with creating rapid-fire sounds of processing corn, Quaker Oats cereal and Rockwell aeronautics equipment. Even more amazing is the way Newman can sing while playing a mouth harp.

Everything about the evening was amazing, but nothing more so than the way Keillor’s preposterous small-town tales that began with a lost baseball legend and veered off on the strangest tangents all came back to that boomerang ball. Keillor loads the bases, then hits a home run completely deserving of his standing ovation.

● Comments: (319) 368-8508; diana.nollen@thegazette.com