

AFTER DARK CONCERT REVIEW



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Garrison Keillor brought "A Prairie Home Companion" for an 11th year to the State Fair grandstand on Friday night.

## Keillor takes State Fair curtain call

He dropped hints that this show could be last at fair.

By JON BREAM  
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He's announced his retirement for next summer. He just completed a 30-city farewell tour. But was Friday night at the Minnesota State Fair, Garrison Keillor's last time at the grandstand with "A Prairie Home Companion"?

He didn't really address the issue specifically or if "Prairie Home" might visit the fair next year with new host Chris Thile. But Keillor dropped enough hints Friday that the end is in sight.

During his "News from Lake Wobegon" monologue, he said at one point, that "I'm talking like an old man now, I realize that."



Keillor sang wistful songs about his grandfather and his father. In the program notes (yes, "Prairie Home" distributes a program at the fair), Keillor wrote an essay reflecting on all his years of going to the fair — with his daughter, his mother, his father. (The essay did not mention that he's appeared at the grandstand more than any other attraction — except the country band Alabama, which did 18 concerts.)

But nothing was more clear than when Keillor reworked Dave Dudley's rock classic "Six Days on the Road" into a tale of his own recent farewell tour: "A man knows when it's time/You want to avoid a decline/You put out the gone-fishing sign."

Well, now, that makes it perfectly clear, doesn't it?

At 73, Keillor still seemed as razor sharp as those slice/dice/julienne knives they sell at the fairgrounds. His Guy Noir skit found the quirky detective flying off to Alaska to search for a wild-game hunting dentist who had his sights set on a sea

lion. The routine was greeted with guffaws.

Keillor's prowess — a word he pronounced Friday as pro-WESS — as a writer of ditties about the fair seemed, well, not above average. Set to the tune of Chris Kenner's 1960s rock classic, "I Like It Like That," a run through of such foods as battered kale and pickle ice cream seemed forced and under-rehearsed.

But when Keillor turned the stage over to his guests, that was something to celebrate. Minneapolis' own the Steele Sisters — Jearlyn and Jevetta — deserve a blue ribbon for their renditions of the Four Tops' "Reach Out and I'll Be There" and Ike & Tina Turner's "Proud Mary," as well as a few gospel numbers.

The Grammy-winning Steep Canyon Rangers earned a red ribbon Friday for their nifty bluegrass rendered without their sometime frontman, Steve Martin (yeah, that wild and crazy banjo guy). Keillor liked their prowess and remarkable skill. The crowd especially liked "Lost in Blue

Velvet Rain."

If the State Fair gave a ribbon for most valuable player, "Prairie Home" keyboardist/music director Richard Dworsky would have to share it with guest vocalist Christine DiGiallonardo, a New Yorker who traveled on the farewell tour. Not many could handle new lyrics to "Over the Rainbow" with lines like "somewhere just north of Brainerd" the way she did.

The show was taped for broadcast on the radio Saturday at 5 p.m. What listeners won't hear is what happened at night's end.

After a couple closing gospel numbers, the crowd of 7,427 insisted on a curtain call, which doesn't usually happen at "A Prairie Home Companion" and never happened at any of Keillor's previous 10 appearances at the grandstand. And the tall man in the white suit, red tie and red running shoes returned and waved — a gesture open to interpretation.

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