

Popular Radio Show Hums To MC's Timbre, Rhythms

By SALLY JOHNSON

MIDDLEBURY — Garrison Keillor has the eyes of a cat set in the face of a bulldog and the long, tall frame of a Norwegian bachelor farmer, his limbs strung together with legs of marionette wire.

But, oh, what a voice.

Each week with that chocolate-mousse voice of his, Keillor attracts millions of listeners who settle in with

their radios every Saturday evening to spend two hours with "A Prairie Home Companion."

In the three years the show has been nationally syndicated, Keillor has evolved into a cult figure, with his curious blend of traditional music and gentle reflections on life in the mythical town of Lake Wobegon in Minnesota, "the little town that time

forgot, that the decades cannot improve, where all the women are strong, all the men are good-looking, and all the children are above-average."

"A Prairie Home Companion" is more than Keillor, as he demonstrated when he brought the show to standing-room crowds at Middlebury College Friday and Saturday nights. The Saturday evening

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Garrison Keillor performs in Middlebury.

Radio

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show was broadcast live to 202 National Public Radio stations by means of a satellite transmission system.

With him in Middlebury were several of the show's regulars: the Butch Thompson Trio, Peter Ostroushko and the Stoney Lonesome Bluegrass Band. In addition, Keillor caught the local flavor with performances by La Famille Beaudoin (the French-Canadian musicians from Burlington) and the Word of Mouth Chorus, a Plainfield group that sings music from the Sacred Harp Songbook.

First Keillor's there, and then he's not. He opens every broadcast with his wonderful, basso-profundo rendition of "Hello, Love" and puts in a quick plug for his mythical sponsor: "Powdermilk Biscuits, made from whole wheat raised by Norwegian bachelor farmers in the rich bottomlands of the Wobegon Valley, so you know they're not only good, they're also pure mostly, the biscuit with that whole-wheat goodness that gives shy persons strength to get up and do what needs to be done..."

When the musicians are on, they're on. Keillor shuffles his six-foot-and-then-some frame out of the way and makes room for the music. In this case, it was some powerful foot-stomping fiddle and harmonica tunes from the Beaudoins, Newport-quality jazz and ragtime from the Butch Thompson Trio, professional pickin' from Stoney Lonesome and raw vocal power from the Word of Mouth.

But "A Prairie Home Companion" without Keillor is the Abraham Lincoln Memorial without Abe Lincoln — in one case, a piece of stone; in the other, a run-of-the-mill musical variety act.

The touches are his, the creations are his, dreamed up back in 1974 after he covered the final performance of the original Grand Ol' Opry for the New Yorker magazine. He says he liked the "liveness" in live radio and proposed an idea for a program to Minnesota Public Radio. It went on, the

audiences increased exponentially and the show went national in 1980.

Keillor talks about what he does — life in his native Minnesota, the tribulations of being a shy person: "Middlebury College showed us the kind of generosity and hospitality that makes a shy person cringe."

Saturday night's monologue was on the Lake Wobegon high school prom. Eyes closed, clutching the microphone stand and swaying from side to side, Keillor relived his funny, poignant memory of reading a schlocky Civil War romance to prepare for the event of "style, elegance and grace," then suffering the rejection of his lady love and the humiliation of his first drunk.

The details were just right — perfect visualization of embarrassment under the basketball backboard and vomiting between parked cars.

And, at the end, just a hint of a point to the story of the Lake Wobegon prom: "... which is true of elegance everywhere, it doesn't bear a lot of scrutiny."

Maybe not, but Keillor's elegance seemed invincible Saturday night, even though he was continually hitching up the pants to his well-cut tan suit, which was shown off to advantage by a fire-engine-red tie and matching socks. His style is such that the show looks free-form while he quietly keeps it right on schedule. His elegance comes through as he reads messages from his listeners to his listeners — "real, every single one," he insists. His humor has the sophistication of a New Yorker cartoon superimposed on the small-towns painted by Norman Rockwell.

More music, more messages, two hours are gone and the show is over. The musicians assembled for a grand finale. Keillor joined in on a chorus or two, then the cat eyes go completely professional, checking the clock to make sure the finish is as smooth as a glider landing. Eight o'clock and all is well.

"This has been 'A Prairie Home Companion.'"