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'Prairie' town folk coming to the big city

By DAVID HINCKLEY

THE SHOW is called "A Prairie Home Companion," and it's radio like radio used to be in the days when everybody would come in on Saturday night after a hard week in the fields, take a bath whether they needed it or not, and pull up a chair to listen to a chunk of music, a bit of chatter, and 'bout a cup and a half of wisdom.

"A Prairie Home Companion" began in 1974 as the semi-whimsical child of Garrison Keillor, a writer who remembered listening to the Grand Ole Opry on the Saturday nights of his youth. First he created Lake Wobegon, Minn., "the little town where all the women are strong, all the men are good-looking and all the children are above average," and, over the years, he has populated it with prairie folk, prairie places and prairie lives.



Garrison Keillor

Tales of Lake Wobegon, mixed with a liberal dose of folksy music, have made the live broadcasts of "A Prairie Home Companion," 6 o'clock every Saturday, one of National Public Radio's most popular programs.

And, no, that's not just in Sioux City, either. "Prairie" listeners are all over, it seems, in places that even surprise Keillor. Like New York City. "It always amazes me," he says, "to think of people in 12th-floor apartments on the upper West Side of Manhattan listening to this show. But I guess they do. They write us letters."

This weekend, they won't have to. "A Prairie Home Companion" is coming to them, with four concerts Friday through Monday at Town Hall, 123 W. 43d St. Keillor takes the show away from its St.



Keillor with Robin and Linda Williams during live broadcast of "A Prairie Home Companion"

Paul base a few weeks each year, and this is its first trip to New York.

The 5:45 p.m. show Saturday will be broadcast live, with Keillor and the Butch Thompson Trio, his house band, plus Stoney Lonesome, a bluegrass band, and fiddler/mandolinist Peter Ostroushko, a long-time "Prairie Home" player. There may be other guests, too, but Bruce Springsteen probably won't be among them. "This is a fragile little boat," says Keillor. "We take care not to swamp it."

THE FRIDAY, Sunday and Monday shows, all at 8 p.m. and all starting with the same musical lineup, will be taped for future broadcast.

What's certain is that Keillor will not change the show for New York. Its charm comes from his consistently hitting the same right note—somewhere between indisputable and droll—for his whole cast of characters, including himself.

Some listeners prefer the ads: "Ralph's Pretty

Good Grocery... If you can't get it at Ralph's, you can probably get along without it," or "The Chatterbox Cafe, the place that's just like home... Take what you want and eat what you take," or "The Sidetrack Tap... Don't sleep at our bar, we don't drink in your bed."

Others like the monologues, wherein Keillor's seemingly rambling remarks on the terrors of learning to swim or the trials of having a 13-year-old son ("He wants his own apartment") actually make many points, some witty, all true.

IN THE END, he uses the rural image to disprove its own negatives. This is no rube on the radio, despite his rumpled-bear looks. This is one sharp fellow, author of 25 articles for The New Yorker, one of the best word craftsmen working today. That he also does a radio show is a happy thing for radio, and for his listeners.

Including the ones who, in five of the most densely populated towns on earth, can use all the prairie spirit they can get.

TODAY

Senior Concert Orchestra of New York. Emill Kahn, conductor. Carnegie Hall, 2:30
My Astonishing Self. Donal Donnelly's one-man show, opening. Players Theater, 6:30
City Ballet. "Swan Lake," "Souvenir de Florence" and a new ballet. State Theater, 8
New York Philharmonic. Andrew Davis, conductor. Avery Fisher Hall, 8
Promises, Promises. Musical revived, opening. Equity Library Theater, 8
Alfred Brendel. Pianist. Beethoven Sonatas Nos. 4, 8, 16 and 30. Carnegie Hall, 8
American Ballet Theater. "Giselle," "Prodigal Son." Met Opera House, 8
Gordon Lightfoot. Westbury Music Fair, 8:30
The Spinners. Pop/soul group. The Red Parrot (617 W. 57th St.), 9 and midnight

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