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Bangor Daily News

# Entertainment

Sat. Sun., July 7 - 8, 1984

## Garrison Keillor promises 'greatest' fishing song for 'Prairie Home Companion' 10th anniversary

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Of the News Staff

For tonight's special 10th anniversary broadcast of "A Prairie Home Companion" on public radio, Garrison Keillor announced last week via a closed circuit press conference that he had written "the world's greatest song about fishing."

Later, he added that the whole two-hour live production, to be aired over the stations of the Maine Public Broadcasting Network from 6 to 8 p.m., would be nothing less than "the greatest radio show in the history of broadcasting."

Could those be the words of the world's most popular shy person? Well, don't ya see, Keillor has reason to be proud — as well as confident. In the decade since his folksy music-and-story-telling program debuted before a small audience at Macalister College in St. Paul, Minn., the number of American Public Radio affiliates carrying it has jumped from 30 to 225. Though "Prairie Home" producers can't be sure how many fans tune in to each weekly broadcast, they estimate a loyal following of at least 3 million, and they receive approximately 100 letters per day about the show at Minnesota Radio headquarters.

There are probably as many theories to explain the popularity of "Prairie Home" — described by some as the latest pop phenomenon, right up there with broadcasting — as there are quirky residents of Lake Wobegon.

That town is an imaginary settlement Keillor has made so real, through his tall tales and anecdotes, that the American Automobile Association has had to print a disclaimer in its Minnesota tour guide. "In actuality, only existing on a popular Saturday night radio show... Lake Wobegon has become a kind of hometown in the hearts of thousands of listeners."

"Prairie Home" is especially popular among college students: whenever the show goes on tour to campuses around the country, admission tickets routinely are sold out weeks ahead. And for those nights when the program is aired from its home base, the Orpheum Theater in St. Paul, Minn., all 1,600 seats are gone six to eight weeks in advance. (The show's real home is actually the World Theater, temporarily closed for renovations.)

The biggest reason for the program's success probably has to be Keillor himself. The man's down-to-earth humor and silky-voiced deliveries prompted one national magazine to dub him, at 42, one of the most likely American comedians (along with Woody Allen and Richard Pryor) to become "a living monument."

Stepping back into his shy person role, Keillor responded to that compliment, during last week's press conference, with a grain of salt. "Being called a living monument," he said, "makes me feel, well, kind of stiff... and a little worried about pigeons."

Throughout the 30-minute, call-in press briefing, arranged to promote the anniversary special, Keillor made sure he didn't take any question too seriously, sometimes giving the impression that he really is a shy person, hiding behind his humor.

How did he, a successful writer of articles for such national magazines as *The New Yorker*, first become involved with "Prairie Home Companion"? "Well, I had my Saturdays free and I was looking to have a good time." (Actually, the idea for the show came to him while he was writing an article about the Grand Ole Opry, after which he patterned much of the program's musical format.)



GARRISON KEILLOR, billed "the world's most popular shy person," will head the cast of public radio's "Prairie Home Companion" during its 10th anniversary broadcast show from 6 to 8 p.m. Saturday, July 7, on the MPBN radio stations. The popular show, that depicts the lives of various characters in the fictional town of Lake Wobegon, Minn., has a loyal following of 3 million fans and is aired over more than 300 public radio stations.



TOP PHOTO: Host Garrison Keillor, left, and "Prairie Home Companion" regulars Greg Brown, Peter Ostroushko, Vern Sutton, Prudence Johnson and Rudy Darling perform during a 1975 concert tour at Worthington Community College. Bottom photo, Judy Larson, Bill Hinkley, Garrison Keillor (in beard), Bob Douglas and Greg Brown perform during a 1975 concert tour at Worthington Community College.

Does he think the show will ever make the switch to television? "That's pretty unlikely... It's not a whole lot to look at. We don't move very much and when we do we don't move very fast."

In his own words, he's never been "approached" about doing the show for TV, so the question is somewhat irrelevant. He also said he doesn't think television transmissions can do justice to the show. "Most TV sets," he said, have speakers in them that cost "about \$2.25."

Is "Prairie Home Companion" popular because it's nostalgic? "I personally have no particular longing for the good ol' days. They weren't that good." (For the record, Keillor spent a quiet childhood in Anoka, Minn., where he was born and lived at home until his junior year at the University of Minnesota.)

Is it hard to keep the facts straight from one Lake Wobegon story to the next? "I try to be as

accurate as I can, given that I've never been anywhere in my life." (Keillor does lapse, once in a while. His biggest mistake was one time mentioning that a certain Lake Wobegon resident was a smoker, when in an earlier monologue he talked about that same man as a reformed non-smoker.)

What makes him a good storyteller? "I don't think that I know how to tell stories yet." (The show's producer, Margaret Mow, said Keillor's stories "touch people emotionally" and have contributed significantly, in fact, to the program's longevity.)

Fans of "Prairie Home" would argue with Keillor about his storytelling talent too. He not only has made Lake Wobegon ("where all the women are strong, all the men are good-looking and all the children are above average") a real place in their minds, but the program's fictional sponsors as well. His weekly ads for Powdermilk

Biscuits ("the biscuit with the whole wheat goodness that gives shy persons the strength to get up and do what needs to be done") and Bertha's Kitty Boutique ("where cats are treated like rare items") are almost as much fun as the news from Lake Wobegon.

Keillor is obviously as much a lover of cats as he is a patron of Bertha's. When asked why the boutique didn't sell dogs, his response was given with more than a hint that he considered the query an affront. "Why, there are all sorts of stores for dogs," said Keillor. "A dog, why that's nothing anyone would ever pay money for... You can just go out in your yard and you'll probably find one — digging."

Some of Keillor's odes to the feline, "Cat Night Races" and "I Want to Come In/I Want to Go Out," would probably hit the Top 10 if he were ever to record them. But it's understandable why he doesn't have the time to do so. In addition to

writing the bulk of each "Prairie Home" script (though he doesn't read from one and frequently ad lib), he is also finishing up a book which will be a collection of Lake Wobegon stories.

The only time Keillor has to work on that project, he said, is early in the morning. And with an August deadline facing him, he's beginning to feel the pressure. "Writing it," he said, "as one who is a writer of short pieces, is difficult. It's like a guy who's always run the 100-yard dash trying to run a marathon."

Whatever the pace of his life, though, Keillor has a knack for taking everything in stride — including the 10th anniversary of "A Prairie Home Companion," and his own professional evolution. Of the show: "We'll just keep doing it until we do a real good show." Of himself: "Ten years ago, I had a kid who was 5 years old and now I've got a 15-year-old. That's about all that's different."