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A *Prairie Home Companion*'s stage during a live radio broadcast from the World Theater in St. Paul, Minn.

## A first for radio show: TV

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On Saturday nights, the stage of the World Theater in St. Paul, Minn., is nothing much to look at. As the point of origination for Public Radio's *A Prairie Home Companion*, there's not much more to it than a bandstand and the usual confusing array of microphones typical of a weekend concert anywhere.

Yet, for the average 3 to 4 million *Prairie Home Companion* listeners, the setting is very much a theater. Founder, host and storyteller Garrison Keillor has, for 12 years, wielded radio's most powerful, elusive tool with consummate skill.

Keillor's stage is a *Theater of the Mind*, a title officially used for a General Electric-sponsored mystery radio show some years ago but which applies, by dint of accomplishment, to anyone capable of earning it. Not many have — at least not since the heyday of radio's golden era of mystery and adventure.

Whether or not *Companion*'s fragile sense of time and place can translate to television is uncertain. The test occurs Saturday at 9 p.m. on WPBT-Ch. 2, WLRN-Ch. 17 and WXEL-Ch. 42, when a special broadcast celebrating a renovation of the World Theater takes place. The two-hour show goes on in St. Paul at its usual time, 5 p.m. Central (6 p.m.

### A *Prairie Home Companion* brings its lively mix of humor, music and stories to PBS on Saturday night.

Eastern). It's aired live on radio each week on WXEL (FM 90.7) and WLRN (FM 91.3); this Saturday, PBS television crews will be taping the show for a stereo broadcast three hours later. WXEL will simulcast via its television and FM stations; WPBT will air the show in TV stereo.

In the most basic sense, *Companion* is a radio variety show. However, its blend of humor, storytelling, song and music has evolved into something far more cohesive. Keillor's folk stories depict the descendants of Norwegian settlers in his native Minnesota. Those tales have come to be regarded as a living, gently humorous echo of the traditional American ethic.

The setting is Lake Wobegon, "where the men are strong, the women good looking and the children above average." It is a mythical place, yet so powerful have Keillor's images become in recent years that tourists passing

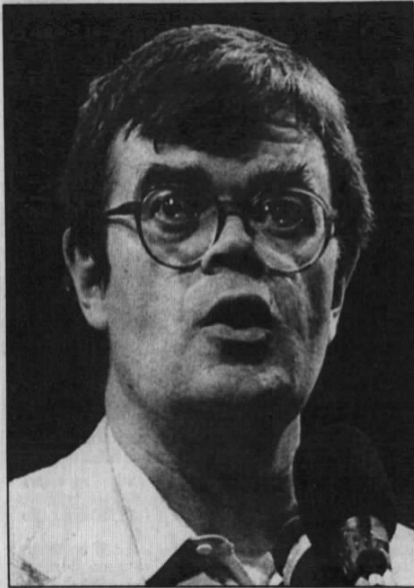
through the state have tried to find the town.

There have even been suggestions that a Lake Wobegon tourist village be established. The townsfolk of Keillor's monologues would probably go for the idea, inasmuch as Lake Wobegon is said to have been founded "by greedy land speculators." Keillor and his sponsors appear to be satisfied with what they have.

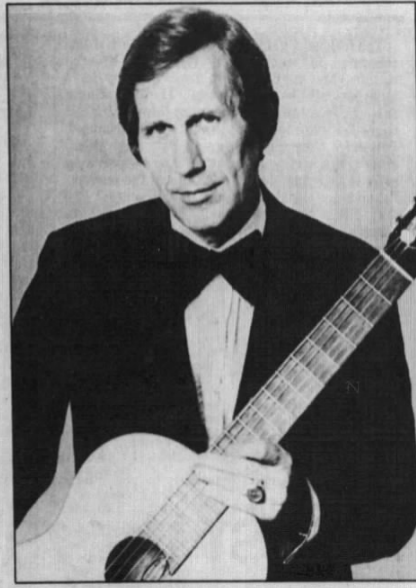
There was some early talk, and hope, that the *Companion* TV special might be picked up by a commercial network with a larger audience potential. There was never any indication, however, that the show would be more than a one-time peek (especially for fans who may never be able to visit St. Paul).

In addition to Keillor's stories, *Companion* offers a pastiche of American folk music traditions. There have been special guests since the beginning in 1974, but the show's increasing popularity in recent years has attracted participation from a surprising array of superstar talent — Willie Nelson to Tom Jones.

A tour last year, coinciding with Keillor's promotion of his *Lake Wobegon Days* book, allowed *Companion* to tap more heavily than usual into various regional musical idioms. Among the more interesting examples



Keillor the storyteller: approaching comparisons with Mark Twain.



Chet Atkins, a frequent guest, tops the list of visitors to the TV special.

was a series of Saturday nights featuring a hefty dose of Louisiana Cajun music.

Saturday's program, not surprisingly, offers a careful grouping of musical guest artists. Chet Atkins, an occasional visitor, tops the list. Familiar to country music purists is Johnny Gimble, generally regarded as Nashville's premiere fiddler and a man with the awards to prove it. Regular contributors Butch Thompson, Peter Ostroushko, Philip Brunelle and Scottish folk singer Jean Redpath will also be on hand.

Keillor's stories have generated the lion's share of attention for the show, but they are just a small part of each week's broadcast. The rest of the show is an interesting, complex weave of music and humor.

The ubiquitous commercial is a prime target. *Companion* is essentially commercial-free except at the start and end of the program; the pitches during the show are carefully sculpted fakes for both national and "local" sponsors such as the Fearmonger's Shoppe ("serving your phobia needs since 1947"). Nothing on *Saturday Night Live*,

*SCTV* or their ilk wields irony and satire as gingerly.

Keillor has been described as one of America's great humorists, even approaching comparisons with Mark Twain. There is something more at work in *Companion*, however — a directness and determination to involve its audience in the show's philosophy. *Companion* celebrates the anniversaries of its listeners, sometimes offers communiques among them, and tips its hat to fans tuning in from specific stations all over the country. Those plugs blend seamlessly with the show's fantasy, identifiable by their hue rather than physical attempts to thresh out the reality.

News commentator Paul Harvey uses listeners in similar fashion. Harvey also has made a career out of selecting events and commenting on them in a way that gives the news a human (and decidedly middle-American) perspective. There are times when Keillor's imaginary Lake Wobegon and Harvey's tower headquarters in Chicago don't seem far apart at all.

*Companion* was launched 12 years ago, but the phenomenon didn't start until 1980 when the show was beamed

via satellite to any public radio station that wanted it. It took six years to evolve from an initial live audience of 20 Minnesotans to the point where 33 stations picked up the initial satellite feed. Over the next six years, *Companion* expanded its radio client list to 260 stations.

Popularity began to snowball on a national scale over the past few years, at which point Keillor's Lake Wobegon townfolk had already become firmly entrenched in their own history and traditions.

He excels in his vocal delivery, being a master of the pause, choosing carefully the verbal shadings of both whisper and shout. Television can't improve upon that core of radio's "theater of the imagination."

However, TV can add such things as eye contact and facial expression, which accomplished comedians and actors use all the time to at least give an audience's imagination somewhere to start. If TV's *Companion* can do that, it's sure to lure more people back to the program's home on the radio. That would be an interesting turnabout, since it was television that otherwise spelled the end of the radio story so long ago.