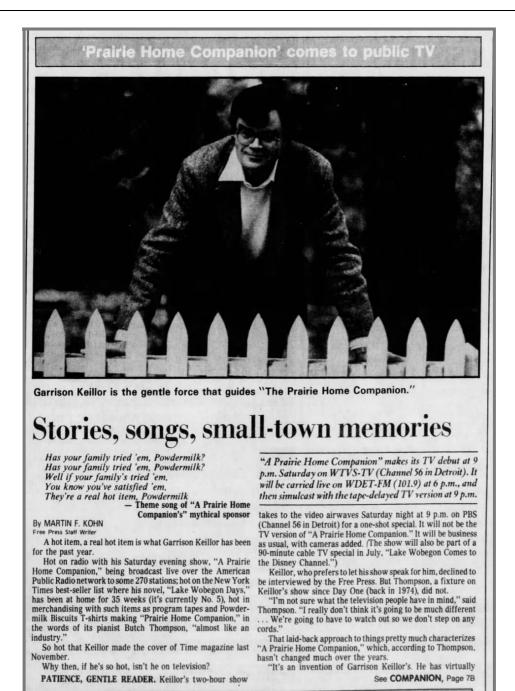
https://www.newspapers.com/image/99316297



https://www.newspapers.com/image/99316319

Garrison Keillor's 'Companion' on public TV

COMPANION, from Page 1B

invented the entire thing out of his mind somehow." The entire thing? In a nutshell, this is it: a little folk The entire thing? In a nutshell, this is it: a little folk music, a little jazz, commercials for stores and products that never existed ("The Fearmonger's Shoppe, serving your phobia needs since 1947;" Raw Bits, the cereal that's available by application only; Ralph's Pretty Good Grocery; Bertha's Kitty Boutique), birthday greetings and similar messages writen by listeners to other listeners, and always a Keillor monologue about Lake Wobegon, Minnesota, the imaginary little town "where all the women are strone. all the men are good-looking and all the strong, all the men are good-looking and all the children are above average."

IT IS, if you remember your high school Latin, suineris— a category unto itself and, like Raw Bits, is generis — a categ

Keillor's "got a cult following all over. People are either wild about him or they've never heard about him," says guitarist Chet Atkins, a frequent guest who will appear on the Saturday show. Atkins counts himself among the wild ones.

himself among the wild ones.

"I love to hear his mental brilliance come through," atkins said. "I always think, I wish I'd said that; that's how I know something is good ... He's a monument to this era we're living in. He's one of the great men in America."

Millions may admire Keillor but few people know him well. Even Thompson, who met Keillor when they were students at the University of Minnesota in the mid-60s, is hard-pressed to come up with reminiscences.

reminiscences.

"We had some classes in common literature class, that was the first time. I remember he called me once and asked me what we were going to

read the next day.

"He was well-known on campus, he was editor of

the literary magazine, the 'Ivory Tower,' but I didn't see a lot of him. He was somebody that I did recognize, we'd say hello, but I didn't see a lot of him. He was interested in radio . . . I think he did something on the campus radio station.

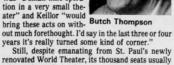
"Later on," said Thompson, skipping the years in which Keillor began his radio career, "it seems to me he asked about a record I had made in the middle '70s, a piano record of Jelly Roll Morton songs. Anyway, he knew who I was and I knew who he was."

ONE THING led to another and Thompson wound

up on the very first "Prai-rie Home Companion" broadcast. In the late '70s Thompson was joined by bassist Bill Evans and drummer Red Maddock, thereafter known as the

Butch Thompson Trio.

In its early days,
Thompson said, the show
was "a small-time opera-



sold out six weeks in advance, and despite having had people like Willie Nelson as guests, Keillor's show hasn't changed that much.

The likes of Willie Nelson and Chet Atkins don't go on "Prairie Home Companion" to get rich. In fact, Atkins remembers being astounded when someone from the show first made contact with him.

ATKINS'S AGENT called him and said "some

radio show" in Minnesota wanted to book him. "He said it pays \$100 or two or three hundred dollars. I said heck, I can't go up there for that.

"Later on, my daughter sent me a clipping from a paper about this show called the 'Prairie Home Companion.' I didn't associate it. She said 'Daddy, I think you'd like this show.' The years went by and think you'd like this show. The years went by and every once in a while I'd read about it in the New York Times or one of those papers that writes about regional things. I was in Boston, visiting Roger Whittaker whom I was producing and (guitarist) Guy Van Duser," who mentioned that he was a guest on

"I wrote myself a note," Atkins said, "and put it in

"I wrote myself a note," Atkins said, "and put it in the pocket where I keep my guitar picks, because I know I'll find it that way."

Back home in Nashville, Atkins and his wife began listening to the show. "We fell in love with it, we started recording it every Saturday" and Atkins called his agent. "I told him I wanted to be on the show."

That was about four years ago, Atkins recalled. "I've spent the past five years explaining to people what the show is. If I were a PR person they'd owe me

a hell of a lot of money."

Although the centerpiece of each show is Keillor's stories about a rural town that never was, "Prairie Home Companion" enjoys an enthusiastic following in college towns like East Lansing and Ann Arbor and

"Keillor knows," Time magazine's John Skow wrote in his cover story, "that childhood is the small town that everyone came from."

Just ask Butch Thompson, who grew up in Marine, Minn., a tiny town (pop. 300) near the

Wisconsin border.

Is it like Lake Wobegon? "I imagine so," said Thompson. "Most places are."



