

'Prairie Home Companion' comes to public TV



Garrison Keillor is the gentle force that guides "The Prairie Home Companion."

## Stories, songs, small-town memories

*Has your family tried 'em, Powdermilk?  
Has your family tried 'em, Powdermilk?  
Well if your family's tried 'em,  
You know you've satisfied 'em,  
They're a real hot item, Powdermilk*

— Theme song of "A Prairie Home Companion's" mythical sponsor

By MARTIN F. KOHN  
Free Press Staff Writer

A hot item, a real hot item is what Garrison Keillor has been for the past year.

Hot on radio with his Saturday evening show, "A Prairie Home Companion," being broadcast live over the American Public Radio network to some 270 stations; hot on the New York Times best-seller list where his novel, "Lake Wobegon Days," has been at home for 35 weeks (it's currently No. 5), hot in merchandising with such items as program tapes and Powdermilk Biscuits T-shirts making "Prairie Home Companion," in the words of its pianist Butch Thompson, "almost like an industry."

So hot that Keillor made the cover of Time magazine last November.

Why then, if he's so hot, isn't he on television?

**PATIENCE, GENTLE READER.** Keillor's two-hour show

*"A Prairie Home Companion" makes its TV debut at 9 p.m. Saturday on WTVS-TV (Channel 56 in Detroit). It will be carried live on WDET-FM (101.9) at 6 p.m., and then simulcast with the tape-delayed TV version at 9 p.m.*

takes to the video airwaves Saturday night at 9 p.m. on PBS (Channel 56 in Detroit) for a one-shot special. It will not be the TV version of "A Prairie Home Companion." It will be business as usual, with cameras added. (The show will also be part of a 90-minute cable TV special in July, "Lake Wobegon Comes to the Disney Channel.")

Keillor, who prefers to let his show speak for him, declined to be interviewed by the Free Press. But Thompson, a fixture on Keillor's show since Day One (back in 1974), did not.

"I'm not sure what the television people have in mind," said Thompson. "I really don't think it's going to be much different . . . We're going to have to watch out so we don't step on any cords."

That laid-back approach to things pretty much characterizes "A Prairie Home Companion," which, according to Thompson, hasn't changed much over the years.

"It's an invention of Garrison Keillor's. He has virtually

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# Garrison Keillor's 'Companion' on public TV

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invented the entire thing out of his mind somehow."

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 written by listeners to other listeners, and always a Keillor monologue about Lake Wobegon, Minnesota, the imaginary little town "where all the women are strong, all the men are good-looking and all the children are above average."

IT IS, if you remember your high school Latin, *sui generis* — a category unto itself and, like Raw Bits, is not for everyone.

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.

"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.

"We had some classes in common — an English 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 "Prairie 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 operation in a very small theater" and Keillor "would bring these acts on without much forethought. I'd say in the last three or four years it's really turned some kind of corner."

Still, despite emanating from St. Paul's newly renovated World Theater, its thousand seats usually 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 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 the show.

"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 big cities like Detroit.

"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."



Butch Thompson