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Keillor to part company with 'A Prairie Home Companion'

By Jim McFarlin
Gannett News Service

Goodbye love.

"I want to resume the life of a shy person," Garrison Keillor told his capacity crowd in St. Paul, Minn.'s old World Theatre and a nationwide radio audience on Valentine's Day. "A life in which there are Saturdays."

How selfish of us. We have been greedily drinking in the sweet life from Keillor's Saturday night sagas of Lake Wobegon on "A Prairie Home Companion" for so many years, we'd forgotten that the only person who had to work at enjoying his stories was the storyteller himself.

So public radio is about to lose its most beloved Companion. After preparing listeners for his departure, this Saturday the 44-year-old Keillor will end a 13-year run as creator and host of "APHC," the homey two-hour throwback to classic old-time radio, with his last broadcast from St. Paul.

The show is heard live at 6 p.m. Saturdays on 278 radio stations. Many repeat the broadcast on Sunday.

Saturday's final show, which will include country legend Chet Atkins, guitarist Leo Kottke, Scottish folk singer Jean Redpath and Hawaii's Kamehameha Glee Club among its guests, sold out faster than a Teddy Ruxpin shipment. Tickets were in such demand that a lottery had to be held to distribute the 500 available seats. A special "Prairie Home Companion" benefit for the World Theatre is being held tonight, at prices up to \$1,000 for box seats.

If ever it can be said that a man is getting out while on top, it's Keillor. "A Prairie Home Companion" regularly attracts 4 million listeners from coast to coast and parts of Australia and Canada. The show has won a Peabody Award, broadcasting's highest honor. An abbreviated, tape-delayed TV version of APHC premiered last March on the pay-cable Disney Channel. And "Lake Wobegon Days," an extension of Keillor's radio monologues, was the nation's No. 1 best-selling novel.

Keillor's weekly 20-minute reflections on Lake Wobegon, his make-believe Minnesota hometown "that time forgot and the decades cannot improve," were so good that some people believed they were true. Tour guides and bus drivers called the show asking for directions. The American Automobile Association (AAA), not noted for its sense of humor, lists Lake Wobegon in its Minnesota tourbook. Los Angeles adopted the town as its sister city.

This is near-credible adulation for any radio show in this ultra-tech media age, much less a show that's as simple and innocent as your grade-school sweetheart. At its core, "APHC" is nothing more than a weekly variety program, one whose most thrilling moment is often a rousing sing-along to "Oklahoma!" and whose structure has remained virtually unchanged since it began on Minnesota Public Radio in 1974.

Keillor begins each show by singing "Hello Love," an old Hank Snow tune. He gives thanks to fictitious sponsor Powdermilk Biscuits, which "give shy persons the strength to get up and do what needs to be done." He may plug some of his town's other imaginary merchants, like Bob's Bank, Bertha's Kitty Boutique or Ralph's Pretty Good Grocery ("If you can't find it at Ralph's, you can probably get along without it.")

There may be Keillor-penned poems or sketches, like the recent adventures of Buster the Show Dog. There is always an astonishing variety of guest performers, from folk and blues and jazz to gospel and Broadway and chamber music. (Practically everyone who sings has to do a duet, a trio or a quartet with Keillor sooner or later, an indulgence that has produced some of the show's most memorable music, especially when the host exercises his love for old-time gospel harmonies.) One recent episode even had a woodcarver — on radio.

But at one point in the second hour, the mood grows deliciously still and Keillor will declare, "Well, it's been a quiet week in Lake Wobegon." And then the beauty and brilliance of "APHC" come into clear focus.

Keillor's monologue, written in secrecy and delivered by memory, seems to come from another time and place, a gentler, warmer age. With a somber, rich baritone that distinguishes his program like a tattoo, he paints expressive word pictures of Lake Wobegon and its inhabitants — Father Emil of Our Lady of Perpetual Responsibility Church, poet laureate Margaret Haskins Durber, the town baseball team the Whippets — and somehow arrives at universal truths about our shared humanness.

His setting is rural, but his appeal is all-encompassing. He goes for a chuckle, not a guffaw, misty eyes, not a sob. More than a few media urbanites have used Keillor and Mark Twain in the same breath.

Keillor plans to concentrate on his writing, and will move with his wife of two years, Ulla Skaerved, to her native Denmark.

"I find life over there somewhat as I remember Lake Wobegon," he told his radio audience — which means, one supposes, that in Copenhagen all the women are strong, all the men good-looking and all the children above average. Lake Wobegon is taking its place in America's memory museum alongside such fanciful radio locales as 79 Wistful Vista and Allen's Alley, but it will not disappear entirely. Reruns of Keillor's early shows, previously heard only in Minnesota, will be offered to public radio stations until the Saturday variety show planned to succeed "APHC" (hosted by former "All Things Considered" host Noah Adams) premieres Jan. 8.

"Best of" reruns will still be offered after that, with incentives for stations to air them on Sundays. The rerun will cost as much as did the live broadcasts. Additionally, Walt Disney Home Video will release a series of "Prairie Home Companion" shows on video. Videocassettes of Saturday's finale will be available for \$29.95. Call 1-800-328-5252 Monday through Saturday after June 13.

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