

Nightbeat



Garrison Keillor will appear Friday, May 6, at Chastain Park with Chet Atkins.

A light burns for Lake Wobegon

Garrison Keillor now calls the Big Apple home

BY RUSS CAVALLI ■ STAFF WRITER

Despite finding New York City a "magical" place that at times seems "bathed in a golden light," Minnesota expatriate Garrison Keillor keeps a lamp in his window.

It burns for Lake Wobegon, the mythical little Minnesota village of Keillor's creation that for 13 years was the setting of his highly successful radio program, "A Prairie Home Companion." And it will burn even brighter June 3 and 4 when Keillor stages Second Annual Farewell Performance shows at Radio City Music Hall.

Keillor last June ended his live Saturday-night broadcasts for American Public Radio from the World Theater in St. Paul, saying he was tired and wanted to devote more time to his wife, his son and his writing. Now he stops just short of saying he would like to revive the two-hour variety show, which centered on monologues Keillor began by saying, "It's been a quiet week in Lake Wobegon, my hometown . . ."

Keillor, author of the best-selling book "Lake Wobegon Days," is slow to answer when asked about the possibility of resuming the show, which reached more than 3 million listeners weekly through about 280 public radio stations. "I don't know . . . I don't know what will happen to it. I do know I want to keep a light in the window . . ."

do this annual farewell show and see what happens," he says during a telephone interview before a recent storytelling performance with the National Symphony in Washington, D.C.

He is quick to admit his absence from the airwaves has been troublesome. "I miss the show, because I think I was good at it. I miss the contact with that audience, which I now have no way of talking to."

The sold-out farewell performances — one on Friday, June 3, and two on Saturday, June 4 — will re-connect Keillor with his fans aurally and visually. In addition to being broadcast by American Public Radio, the second show June 4 will be made available to basic cable-television subscribers by The Disney Channel.

The shows will present regulars — real and fictional — from "A Prairie Home Companion" and the cast at Radio City Music Hall also will include the Everly Brothers, guitarist Leo Kottke and guitarist Chet Atkins, who will co-headline with Keillor at the Chastain Park amphitheater Friday, May 6.

Atkins is no stranger to "A Prairie Home Companion." He was a frequent performer on the show at the World Theater, and he accompanied Keillor to Allanta

for a live broadcast from Symphony Hall in 1985. Although the pairing is a natural one — the 45-year-old Keillor grew up listening to the Grand Ole Opry on radio, and the 63-year-old Atkins first performed on the Nashville show in 1946 — it didn't come readily.

"For years, my agent kept telling me about some radio show in St. Paul that wanted me to come up there and play on it for about \$300. I'd say, 'Hell, I can't go up there for that' and forget about it until the next time," Atkins recalls.

Then, in 1961, Atkins listened to "A Prairie Home Companion" and became a dedicated fan who keeps tapes of shows in his car to listen to on long drives. "I'd follow him anywhere," Atkins says of Keillor. "I like to be associated with him. He's a great man."

Keillor, in return, praises Atkins and says he wants to do "a couple of gospel songs" with the Nashville legend before the solo portion of Keillor's Atlanta appearance. "I'll stand up and talk about Lake Wobegon . . . recite a poem," says Keillor, who regularly opened "A Prairie Home Companion" by singing "Hello, Love," an original song.

Keillor, a baritone, isn't a bad singer. But he's a master of spoken and written words — his "Lake Wobegon Days" album won the Best Non-Musical Grammy this year, and sales of his book are at about 1 million. Success and celebrity status for the 6-foot-4, bespectacled Keillor haven't erased the shyness that caused him to forgo the use of Gary, his real name, in favor of Garrison on his initial literary efforts while in the eighth grade.

"I never imagined that I could stand up in front of an audience," says Keillor, a native of the Minneapolis suburb of Anoka who grew up in a home where the chief reading materials were the Bible, Reader's Digest, National Geographic and Boy's Life. He says he was slow to learn to read but became a voracious reader who dreamed of writing for the New Yorker magazine.

After receiving a bachelor's degree from the University of Minnesota and completing part of the work for a master's in English, Keillor went to work for Minnesota Public Radio in 1968 as host of a classical music program while continuing to develop his writing. He sold his first story to the New Yorker the following year, and it was an assignment from the magazine to write about the Grand Ole Opry in 1974 that sparked the creation of "A Prairie Home Companion."

Reminded by his visit to Nashville of the pleasure given him by Opry broadcasts, Keillor convinced Minnesota Public Radio officials to let him try a Saturday-night variety show in May '74. The combination of his real guests and the Lake Wobegon setting and characters he created carried Keillor and his show from Minnesota Public Radio to American Public Radio in 1978.

Along the way, Keillor won a Peabody Award, funding from the National Endowment for the Arts and a huge following. In February '87, however, he announced he was quitting. "I want to resume the life of a shy person and live with my affectionate family, a more peaceful life, a life in which there are Saturdays," he said.

He and Ulla, his second wife, moved briefly to her native Denmark last year and then returned to the United States, settling in New York City because Keillor no longer feels at home in St. Paul. His departure, in fact, was marked by a protest staged by pickets upset by Keillor's comment that being one of four celebrities there — the others, he said, were the governor, the mayor and a TV weatherman — made life difficult.

"I didn't actually see their signs. I was away from the house," Keillor says. "But I thought it was just one more of many, many signs that life was getting too strange in St. Paul. It was a great disappointment to me, because I really wanted to live there."

He says he's happy in New York City, where he keeps an office at the New Yorker. "I've been writing and doing things I didn't used to do, like reading books," he says. "I think New York is such a constant fascination . . . New York is a city of new arrivals and the city of people who didn't fit in back where they came from."

Does that category include him? "I'm sure that it does," he says. "But it's not of any particular importance . . . nothing I have strong feelings about. It's such a common thing."

Briefly . . . Garrison Keillor, Performing with Chet Atkins, at the Chastain Park amphitheater, 8 p.m. Friday, May 6. Tickets \$15.50-\$18.50 at Tic-X-Press outlets. To charge: 231-5888, Powers Ferry Road at Stella Drive.