

# Garrison Keillor back to tell the latest from Lake Wobegon

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There's a storm brewing on Lake Wobegon.

That's the word from the little Minnesota town's inventor, Garrison Keillor, who'll be dropping by Nashville next Sunday for a concert with his friend Chet Atkins.

"I'm gonna do about as many songs with Chet as he and the audience will permit and then tell a story about my hometown and its various difficulties since the last time I spoke about it," Keillor said during a recent telephone interview from his office at the *New Yorker* magazine.

Lake Wobegon became familiar territory to millions of Americans through its exposure on Keillor's *Prairie Home Companion* radio show and in his best-selling *Lake Wobegon Days* novel. Can it be that there's bad news from the "little town that time forgot and the decades could not improve?"

"I'm afraid so," Keillor said. "I'm sorry for them, but glad for myself. If there were no bad news there wouldn't be much comedy."

"It's the timeless problem of waste disposal. It's resulted in bad feelings and there are people who don't speak to each other and it's... difficult."

Even though Keillor bid farewell to 13 years of hosting *A Prairie Home Companion* last June, his Lake Wobegon tales have remained before the public through reruns of the nationally syndicated public radio. The village and its stout Norwegian farm folk have continued to dwell on Keillor's mind through his much-publicized departure from the show, a move to Norway with his wife Ulla Skerred, and his return to the U.S.

"It's where I'm from," he said of Lake Wobegon. "It's my family and the people who, as I get older, I'm surprised to hear myself sound more and more like them."

"I have just a couple of years to become a semi-sophisticated New Yorker and as I get older I begin to sound more and more like my father."

A native of Anoka, Minn., Keillor says he finds residency in the Big Apple appealing "in all sorts of unexpected ways." With no more weekly radio show to prepare for, he's still got plenty to keep him occupied. "I'm not looking for regular work these days, but I have a lot of projects," he said. "I could name as many as you like."

How about the best five?

"My best five are... this show in June — the second *Prairie Home Companion* farewell performance," he said. "Somehow I just like the idea of repeated farewells — it's funny and maudlin at the same time, like myself."

The Radio City Music Hall show will star Keillor, Atkins and guest stars including Atkins, The Everly Brothers, Robin and Linda Williams and Butch Thompson. It will be broadcast live over the Disney Channel and broadcast locally over WPLN-FM (90) at 7 p.m. June 4.

"Two, I have plans to do a live Christmas TV show from Denmark that I'm looking forward to," Keillor said.

Project three for Keillor is a novel about a radio station of the late '40s and early '50s which is trying to keep radio performance alive.

Project four is a screenplay of a Lake Wobegon movie. "It's a project that's not far along. I've got 20 pages of script and it's taken me a long time."

"My fifth project is writing for the *New Yorker*. I have an office here and a tele-



*Prairie Home Companion* star and Lake Wobegon correspondent Garrison Keillor appears with guitar legend Chet Atkins at 7:30 p.m. next Sunday in a concert at Vanderbilt

University's Langford Auditorium. Tickets for reserved seats are \$20 and may be purchased from Vanderbilt's Sarratt box office or at TicketMaster outlets.

phone. When I submit things, I don't have to take them far."

Despite Keillor's frequent performances as a vocalist on his radio show, he has no illusions about pursuing a music career.

"I started singing because I thought the host of a show ought to extend himself a little bit, not play safe, not read words off a page, but stick your neck out," he said.

"If you're in entertainment you've got to stick your neck out."

"I don't have a career in music. I made one record with Chet that sank and disappeared without a trace."

"I'm not trying to break into making personal appearances, any more than he is. But he's a lot of fun to do shows with."

Keillor's friendship with Atkins began after the famed guitarist accepted an invitation to appear on *Prairie Home Companion*, then became a regular guest on the show. Keillor provides an unusual insight on Atkins as a raconteur and man of letters.

"He's a great storyteller," he said. "Chet is a great mimic — he does great Hank Snow and Eddy Arnold, their speaking voices, and you can hear their singing voices in it."

"He's a funny man. He's read so much Mark Twain, and I think from having read Twain over and over he's really educated himself as far as writing. His letters are collectible — I hope that all of his friends are saving them."

Atkins' expert, dancing style of guitar fingerpicking is just one American music mode that Keillor presented to *Prairie Home Companion* listeners. A host of country and folksy acts got valuable nationwide exposure over the show, which also fea-

tured Keillor's monologues, skits and songs.

"I wouldn't think of it as a traditional music show; it really covered much more ground than that," he said.

"Folk music was the place where it began. We always tried to stay close to music that the people themselves would be able to make. I always liked it when the audience was able to sing on things."

The *Prairie Home Companion* version of folk music includes the sort of songs that folk sing around campgrounds and kitchens as well as the Appalachian or Delta varieties. Some of the tunes that listeners sent into the show's "Department of Folk Music" are being collected in book form, Keillor said.

"I didn't have a term for folk music until I went to college and started reading books about it and seeing people like Doc Watson and Mississippi John Hurt and the New Lost City Ramblers and Flatt and Scruggs — I remember Flatt and Scruggs came up to Minnesota in the early '60s and caused quite a stir."

"If I sort of peeled off the lyrics of a lot of that music, it came pretty close to the music I grew up with, which was gospel music. To me that's the basis of traditional music as far as I'm concerned."

Keillor's affection for gospel music stems from his upbringing in a religious family, he said.

"We didn't dance in my family. We were part of fundamentalist group called the Plymouth Brethren, which didn't hold with dancing or even tapping your toes or even walking in a rhythmic manner."

Keillor's affection for country music was nurtured by the powerful signal of WSM,

which makes Grand Ole Opry broadcasts available to listeners across the U.S. Like many fans, Keillor built up a mental picture of Music City before he ever coming here in person.

"Broadway down in Nashville used to be my street of dreams," he said. "Nashville was quite a gorgeous place in my imagination."

"I came out there to see the Grand Ole Opry. I came later to write about it, but the first time I came, I just came to see it."

"I never knew you had to write ahead to get tickets. So my friend and I got in my car in Minnesota on an early Friday evening and got into Nashville about 24 hours later."

"We never got inside, but we had a great time peering in the windows and hanging around the Ryman, watching Loretta Lynn get off her bus and seeing the people out on the street."

The folksy, variety-show format of *A Prairie Home Companion* has often been compared to the free-wheeling Opry presentation. Keillor acknowledges a debt of sorts to the older program.

"It really was the inspiration, if the inspiration is the thing that makes you think you can do it," he said.

"I guess I wish that we could have been like the Opry. If we had been like the Opry we still would have been going on, because the Opry doesn't depend on any one person."

Keillor said he has no basis on which to make a judgement on the new *Good Evening* radio show, which was touted as the replacement for *Prairie Home Companion*.

"I haven't listened to that," he said. "Saturday nights tend to be sort of busy around here; I like to go out on Saturday nights." ■

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