

Time, it seems, hasn't forgotten Lake Wobegon

By STEVE MILLBURG
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NEW YORK — Garrison Keillor, sage of Lake Wobegon and spokesman for shy persons everywhere, is back where he belongs.

Not in his native Minnesota. On stage.

After a year spent mostly out of the public eye, Keillor returned to show business in a big way last weekend with *A Prairie Home Companion: The Second Annual Farewell Performance*.

For three sold-out shows Friday and Saturday in the art deco splendor of Radio City Music Hall, he resurrected the radio show he had laid aside almost a year ago. The Saturday night performance was a national live broadcast over the American Public Radio Network and cable television's The Disney Channel.

"I'm so glad you came tonight," Keillor said at the beginning of Friday's performance. "I'm so glad to see you. I'm glad you're not mad at me."

Many fans had been mad, or at least greatly disappointed, when Keillor announced last year that he was ending the weekly Saturday night performances of *A Prairie Home Companion*, a live music and humor program that he started in 1974 in St. Paul, Minn.

It featured an eccentric lineup of musical performers — from folk singers Robin and Linda Williams to country guitarist Chet Atkins to traditional-jazz pianist Butch Thompson. They, as well as Broadway singer Karen Morrow and rock 'n' roll hall of famers the Everly Brothers, appeared in the "second annual farewell."

But Keillor's dry, affectionate humor was the key to *A Prairie Home Companion's* appeal. His "news from Lake Wobegon" monologues, based on his childhood in the small town of Anoka, near Minneapolis, were so popular that they spawned two best-selling Keillor books, *Lake Wobegon Days* and *Leaving Home*, and two audio cassette tape collections.

Toward the end of *A Prairie Home Companion's* run, however, an occasional testiness crept into Keillor's commentaries — uncharacteristic for someone whose most-used descriptive adjective is "sweet."

A self-described shy person, he complained of the pressure associated with being virtually the only national celebrity in town.

But perhaps the real problem was that the weekly grind of the show and other demands on his time



GARRISON KEILLOR
... *Prairie redux.*

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Wobegon

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increasingly kept him from pursuing his first love, writing. As Keillor said in announcing on the air that *A Prairie Home Companion* would be ending, it was "simply time to go."

It seems to have been the right decision for him. On stage at Radio City Friday and Saturday nights, he was warm, gentle, funny.

"I've looked forward to this show for a year," he said.

(Since the June 13, 1987, "first annual farewell," as he now refers to it, he moved to his wife's native Denmark, moved to New York in September and became a regular contributor to *New Yorker* magazine.)

He sang bass on some gospel songs and with the Everly Brothers on *Long Time Gone*. He read commercials for such familiar "sponsors" as Bob's Bank, Bertha's Kitty Boutique and, of course, "Powdermilk Biscuits, made from the good whole wheat raised by Norwegian bachelor farmers in the rich bottomlands of the Lake Wobegon River Valley, so you know they're not only good for you, but also pure, mostly."

Returning also was "The Adventures of Buster the Show Dog," an episodic radio "drama" that was a staple of the original show's final year. This time, Buster, Timmy the sad, rich teen-ager, Sheila the Christian jungle girl and Father Finian explored the wilds of Keillor's current home, New York City.

"If the good Lord got angry and sent the seven plagues down on New York," said Father Finian (Tom Keith), "I don't think New York would even notice."

The "news from Lake Wobegon" segment conjured up again the "little town that time forgot, that the decades cannot improve." The highlight was a sort of shaggy-cat story involving a deceased pet, a dropped storm window, the town's most narrow-minded man, the pastor's wife, a freezer and a troupe of Spanish Lutheran flamenco dancers.

It seems likely that Lake Wobegon will be around as long as Keillor is. Requested in the printed program for the "second annual farewell" are suggestions for sites and performers for the "third annual farewell" on June 10, 1989. (Mail to: The Third Farewell, Minnesota Public Radio, 45 E Seventh St., St. Paul, Minn. 55101.)

Minnesota Public Radio publicist Christelle Langer said Keillor probably would do one or two *A Prairie Home Companion* specials a year, the next probably a Christmas show. Keillor also has talked about other TV projects and even a movie about Lake Wobegon.

American Public Radio offers weekly "archive" broadcasts of old *Prairie Home Companion* shows; new shows would be inserted into the schedule of repeats.

(Local listeners can catch the rebroadcasts at 8 p.m. Sundays on WUSF-FM (89.7) in Tampa or at 8 p.m. Saturdays on WUFT-FM (89.1) in Gainesville.

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