



Globe photo/John Mottern

Garrison Keillor performing at the Wang Center Saturday night.

## Things have changed in Wobegon

GARRISON KEILLOR - In "The News From Home," with pianist Butch Thompson. At the Wang Center, Saturday night.

By Brett Milano  
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How does one explain Garrison Keillor and "A Prairie Home Companion" to a non-believer? The answer is simple: One can't, any more that one can sum up Monty Python or the Fire-sign Theater for an outsider. Keillor's Lake Wobegon may be an imaginary spot, with a nationwide population of 4 million fans, but it's still a small town - and as we all know, small towns don't always take kindly to strangers.

### Music reviews

To this non-cultist, hearing Keillor's "News From Home" over the weekend was like hearing all the latest gossip from somebody else's neighborhood. The sold-out house was evidently composed of people who've followed Keillor's characters for years - folks who've been wondering what became of Darlene the cocktail waitress since she went off to sell cars in Ann Arbor; who giggle at the mention of Bertha's Kitty Boutique or Ralph's Pretty Good Grocery Store; and who think that singing the Gettysburg Address (to the tune of the pop standard "Tell Me Why") is a fun thing to do.

Still, Keillor's celebrated warmth didn't always come through until the second half of the three-hour show, and the first had some surprising dead spots. He began with a lengthy in-joke, delivering the first five minutes of his monologue in Danish. His fans know what that means - he lived in Denmark for a

time after marrying a Danish woman two years ago - but it took him a while to get beyond the self-reference and deal with his newlywed experiences in more universal terms. Worse, the first half closed with a bit where he sang/spoke the smalltown blues, to the accompaniment of Butch Thompson's piano. The piece amounted to a list of petty gripes, including a long section about getting a bad haircut from a young punk rocker; and it just made Keillor sound like a crank.

Things have changed in Lake Wobegon since the radio show went off the air last year. Some of the characters have either changed or moved to the big city; and that theme, the clash of smalltown ways with the outside world, provided Saturday's strongest moments. But it also meant a surprisingly downcast feel to some of his tales. The first half followed a bittersweet story - about the town drunk who storms out of the tavern for good, after feuding with a drinking partner - with a more bitter one, where Darlene the waitress gets abandoned by her cheating husband.

The night wasn't devoid of wit - not when there's a Wobegon church that uses cologne instead of incense - but one sensed Keillor being a bit less gentle with his characters. The stories didn't hit an upbeat tone until the second half, when a feisty grandmother and dog raised havoc at a city wedding.

One suspects that Keillor is on to something: He's recently left his own Minnesota home for New York City, and he seems to be exploring the change of climate through his characters. That opens up a lot of possibilities for storytelling, and it could make Lake Wobegon more accessible to us big-city types.