

## Tony Kiss 'Shy Person' Garrison Keillor Back In Limelight

□ **Home, Sweet Home Department** — Garrison Keillor, the writer and radio wit, rolled through the area last week, and his timing couldn't have been better.

Keillor, host of the old "A Prairie Home Companion" radio show, made headlines 10 days ago, announcing his return to the national airwaves in a new program this fall.

It was two years ago that Keillor pulled the plug on his super-popular "Companion," claiming he was sick of publicity, of being hounded by the press, and that he was moving to Copenhagen to resume life as a "shy person."

That was strange enough, since "Companion" was the hottest thing on public radio with 5 million weekly listeners. But what happened next was even stranger.

Keillor quickly returned to the U.S., set up shop in New York and began doing "Companion" reunion shows. Repeats of the old programs continued on many stations. And last week in 'Frisco, he made it official: he's back.

Two days later, Keillor and the "Companion" gang turned up in Greenville, S.C., kicking off a 12-city tour. As a loyal fan, I was psyched. Here was a chance to see Keillor and Company in the flesh.

I also wondered how he could possibly explain his change of mind.

The show was booked at Furman University's McAlister Auditorium. It's a small but plush room that seats about 1,900. Tickets were an instant sell-out.

The audience was, well, older than I expected. There were a few youngsters, a few more yups. But most were middle-aged or older. And many were

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## Keillor

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senior citizens. Some wore Lake Wobegon t-shirts. Some came in suit-and-tie.

Finally, they opened the inner doors and the crowd poured in, sort of like those rock concerts where they'd keep the gate closed until just before showtime.

A few minutes later, Keillor and his radio sidekicks — singer Kate MacKenzie and the husband-wife duo of Robin and Linda Williams — strolled on stage.

The crowd went wild as they ran through a few musical numbers on the set, which resembled the front porch of some midwestern home.

Then, Keillor took the mike. In mock anger, he fumed that he hated New York, that quitting the "Companion" was the "biggest mistake" he'd ever made.

And then, he roared at the audience for not preventing this foolhardy move. The crowd ate it up. And for the next two hours-plus, Keillor had them in his control.

It was a typical "Companion" show — lots of sweet music, an episode of "Buster The Show Dog,"

bogus commercials, even an audience sing-along.

Keillor's crew included two real standouts: Tom Keith and Dan Rowles, two of the best actors/sound effects men in radio. Keith provided the voices of Buster, Father Finian and Timmy, the Sad-Rich Teenage Boy. Rowles filled in with bit parts (he's still on radio on the "Good Evening" variety show, which replaced "Companion" on many stations).

It was a trip to watch these guys work, using assorted gadgets to make every imaginable sound. The cast read their parts from scripts, huddled 'round the mike like something out of the 1940s.

The band — pianist Rich Dworsky, bassist Molly Mason and drummer Randy Hauser — was incredible.

For "Companion" fans, every-

body went home happy. For the "Companion" cast, the reunion tour was off to a rousing start. For "Companion" critics, well, there was nothing to criticize.

And for those who missed it, the show was taped and will be broadcast on the South Carolina Education Radio Network (7-9 p.m. July 28 on WEPR-FM/90.3, Greenville).

What the future holds for Keillor is uncertain. His new show — "American Radio Company Of The Air" — will include music, comedy, sketches. No word yet if it will be heard in Asheville.

Of course, coming back in showbiz is never easy, but for Keillor, that shouldn't be much of a problem. He was never really away.

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