



GARRISON KEILLOR

The man who introduced America to Lake Wobegon is back, bringing more music, warmth and laughter

By MIKE HUGHES
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In the final days before his new world begins, Garrison Keillor is finding some surprises. And the happiest is this: The people in Lake Wobegon are alive and well.

"I guess I've known them too long," he said quietly. "I couldn't just cast them aside."

For years, those mythical people were included in "Prairie Home Companion" monologues. Keillor, a towering Minnesotan with a voice just this side of a yawn, described their lives in loving detail.

This was classic American humor. The show was embraced quickly by the Lansing area (where it visited twice) and eventually by the nation. It vanished in 1987, when Keillor moved to Denmark and then to New York.

Now "American Radio Company of the Air" premieres from 6 p.m. to 8 p.m. Saturday on public stations, including WKAR-FM (90.5). It will be live from New York, with signs that Keillor has gone uptown and upscale, he humor will be quicker, the music classier.

"We're leaning away from the guitar and toward the piano," he says.

Keillor had planned to eliminate his Wobegon monologues. He developed an alternate world, with Minnesotans buying a building in New York. He labored diligently, developed 22 characters . . . and then dropped the idea.

"It just seemed like a long way to get to where I wanted to be," he said. "I'm glad I tried and failed."

All of that was still being hatched during the final days, as Keillor struggled with the usual start-up blues.

"These things are never easy," he said. "Writing is a most inefficient activity. You spend all day on something that you then throw out without a moment's regret."

He was talking by phone Tuesday, just five days before the debut. It was 7:30 p.m., after a long day of rehearsals and rewrites and meetings;

On the air

- Garrison Keillor.
- "American Radio Company of the Air" premieres at 6 p.m. Saturday on WKAR-FM (90.5).
- "Lake Wobegon Loyal Days" reruns at 10 p.m. Sunday on pay-cable Disney Channel. That's the first of eight days in which the channel will be unscrambled by United Cable.

another meeting would be starting in a half-hour.

Through it all, trends had emerged:

- The humor will be in quicker bursts. The monologue will only semi-ramble — "gosh, that thing was getting long" — and the other bits will be scattered throughout. "I like short sketches. It turns out to be 2-3 pages of script. It starts with a simple premise, winds up in a surprising place, and ends abruptly."

- The performers will be newcomers who auditioned in New York. For old time's sake, Butch Thompson will show up on Saturday's premiere.

- The music will range afar.

"New York, for all of its difficulties and problems, attracts all of the most fabulous musical talent."

That music helps answer the question of why Keillor has become the consummate American folk humorist: He is the ultimate observer, a man who admires everything — music, people, life — from a comfortable distance.

"I think I'm a pretty good listener," he said. "Maybe that's because I'm a passive person . . . I do enjoy a great, wide swath of stuff."

The show will persist at a rather leisurely pace. Keillor will do four, then pause for "Prairie Home Companion" reruns. By June, he'll have done 20.

But it will be a chance for audiences to catch up. Our friends from the Wobegon world have been returned to life.

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