

AMERICAN RADIO COMPANY OF THE AIR



Photo by Jonette Novak

Garrison Keillor's American Radio Company of the Air premieres today.

Keillor's back – live from New York

Noel Holston/Radio

On the phone from New York City Monday, Garrison Keillor casually mentioned that he had finished the first verse of his new theme song the night before. Which automatically tells you things:

One, that Keillor's new Minnesota Public Radio series, "American Radio Company of the Air," which makes its national debut at 5 p.m. today (KSJN-FM-91.1), is not a revival of "A Prairie Home Companion," and two, that whatever else has changed, Keillor's work habits haven't.

"Preparations are going as they always used to," Keillor said. "All of these other people on the show, who have theater or opera backgrounds, are awfully nervous because they're used to working months in advance. I just don't know how to do that. I need to be up against a deadline to make me get serious."

As of Monday, he hadn't decided what he was going to say in his first "American Radio Company" monologue. "I have a lot of notes and things going around in my head the way writers do, but there isn't any need to put it into a final form or even sit down and write it," he said. "I usually work until late morning, noon (on Saturday).

Meanwhile, there was the matter of Thanksgiving dinner. "I have to cook the Thanksgiving dinner because I'm the American," he said, referring to his Danish wife, Ulla Skaerved. "I'm supposed to know how to do this. If I were in Minnesota, we'd all go my mother's, so I have serious cooking responsibilities."

Keillor sounded not at all worried about the expectations of 3 million listeners who spent a decade hanging on his every word about Lake Wobegon, the fictional Minnesota community that "time forgot."

He said he fully expects some people to tune in, turn up their noses and tune out. "It's sound too something, too New York, I don't know," he said. "But that's all right. For people to tune in at a particular time to a particular radio show is no small thing, and they have a right to expect something. But I guess I have a right not to meet those expectations."

Actually, what Keillor is planning, though it won't have singing commercials for Powdermill Biscuits or tales of Buster the Show Dog, still is essentially of a piece with "A Prairie Home Companion" and the early-morning disc-jockey show (on KSJN-FM in Colesburg, Minn.) from which it evolved. He'll be telling humorous stories and playing great American music neglected by commercial radio stations increasingly reliant on rock and contemporary pop. "Basically, I'm doing the same thing on the same impulse that I wanted to do when I was 13 years old," said Keillor, 47.

On "American Radio Company of the Air," which will originate from the Brooklyn Academy of Music in Brooklyn, N.Y., the music will lean more toward jazz and theater music, so listeners should expect a somewhat different sounding show. Keillor will be abetted by the Broadway Local Theater, a quartet of actor-singers Keillor and coproducer Randall Davidson have assembled, and a 10-to-20 piece orchestra. His musical guests tonight will be soprano Eileen Farrell, one of

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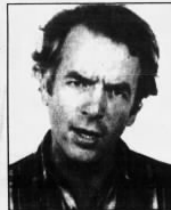
Michael Feldman



Dan Rowles



Tom Bodett



Spalding Gray



Noah Adams

Lake Wobegon's creator opened the door for others

By Ellen Foley/Staff Writer

Whether Garrison Keillor again becomes a radio mainstay or ends his reign after 21 more weeks on the air, his legacy is evident in the number of monologists and radio hosts who are filling the airwaves with top-quality humor and storytelling.

In fact, Keillor's spotty appearances since he left the

airwaves in June 1987 shifted the spotlight to the likes of Tom Bodett, the Motel 6 guy from Alaska; monologist Spalding Gray; folksy comic Dan Rowles, host of Minnesota Public Radio's "The First House on the Right;" and Michael Feldman of Wisconsin Public Radio's "What'd Ya Know?!" — any of whom could become a de facto replacement for Keillor should he find it expeditious to sign off the air for good.

Most of them have been touted as the next Garrison Keillor at various times. And while all of them tip their hats to Keillor, each has a distinctive style that makes him different and even perhaps a little fresher than the Keillor we knew.

Writer/actor/storyteller Gray, for example, uses film, live performance and the written word to disseminate his edgy

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HOLSTON: Keillor plans to be less prominent on show

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those rare opera stars who can shift easily to jazz and pop standards, and Butch Thompson, "A Prairie Home Companion's" house pianist.

Pianist James Tocco will join Keillor and company on the Dec. 2 show, the Manhattan Rhythm Kings vocal group on Dec. 9 and opera star Marilyn Horne on Dec. 16. The Feb. 24 and Mar. 24 broadcasts will originate from the World Theater in St. Paul.

"I'm trying to make it a show of comedy sketches, monologues and musical segments in which the host is less prominent," Keillor said. "I don't need to be as present as I was on 'A Prairie Home Companion.' I think that it was one of the weaknesses of the show — it had this slow-talking guy who was all over the place. So we'll see how it goes."

Of the Broadway Local company, named for New York City's No. 1 subway train, the Broadway Local, Keillor said. "They can all sing and act and do comedy. They seemed to me to be phenomenally talented. Believe me, you sit and do auditions day after day, you see scores of people. When talent walks in the room, you just know it. God, it's lovely. I want to write for them."

According to Tom Voegli, MPR's vice president of national programming, "American Radio Company" initially will be broadcast by 250 public-radio stations, compared to the 325 that were carrying "A Prairie Home Companion" when Keillor stopped that show 2½ years ago.

Far from disappointed, Voegli said, MPR is elated over the stations' enthusiasm for the new, untested variety show. With "A Prairie Home Companion," he said, MPR "had a level of station carriage that is unlike any other program we have produced or probably ever will produce."

"One of our problems at the conclusion of 'A Prairie Home Companion' was that we kind of had a split personality," he said, noting that the success of Keillor's show so overshadowed MPR's other productions that management's expectations were heightened impossibly.

It was during this time that MPR launched "Good Evening," with Noah Adams, cohost of National Public Radio's afternoon magazine "All Things Considered," plopped into a "Prairie Home"-like variety format to which his talents weren't terribly well suited. "Good Evening" was abandoned, Voegli said, because unlike other MPR productions, such as "St. Paul Sunday Morning" and "Sound Money," it wasn't growing. "Good Evening" started with a lineup of about 150 and scarcely moved beyond that, Voegli said.

"We had the time slot (Saturdays, 5 p.m.), incredible production facilities, great people (on staff)," he said. "It was our manifest destiny to try back then."

But Voegli acknowledged that "Good Evening" failed ("We took it off, didn't we?") and that MPR's management learned from the experience. "We had to go back and say, if a program is carried by 100 radio stations, it's really doing well," he said.

As active proof of perspective regained, Voegli cited MPR's successor to "Good Evening," "The First House on the Right," a comedy-variety show hosted by Dan Rowles, a contributor to Adams' show and "Prairie Home." Quietly introduced a few months ago on Friday nights, where it could develop without intense scrutiny, "First House" now is being carried by 70 public-radio stations. Starting today, MPR is moving it into the Saturday, 7 p.m. to 8 p.m. slot, where it will follow "American Radio Company."

"In every way," Voegli said, "we've tried to set a climate for 'First House' that says, 'Just be damned good for a while.'"

Voegli said that getting Keillor back on the air was not a necessity for MPR but, rather, a bonus.

"Nobody at MPR went to Garrison Keillor and said, 'We need a new radio show.' Nobody 'needed' it, except that we need to be creating the best radio we can in a whole variety of ways. There was no financial reason. Garrison wanted to do it."

Keillor's recollection is different. He said he couldn't quite remember the order of events but, "I think Bill (Kling, MPR's president) mentioned it first. He thought it was time to consider coming in with something new."

"I think what had held me back was the idea that I should invent something utterly new," Keillor said. "But there is *nothing* utterly new in this business."

"It seemed to me, on consideration, that doing the show in New York and doing it now would make it new, and that the idea of a live radio variety show is such a simple and perfect idea that only good things can come from it," he said.

"So all I had to do was to clear up my motives a bit. One should never be ambitious out of obligation."

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autobiographical musings. His "Swimming to Cambodia" became a feature film with Gray as the sole cast member.

Still, Keillor's radio work is acclaimed by most observers as one of the most innovative efforts of the era.

"I think one thing that Garrison can take credit for is reminding Americans how nice it is to have a story told to them. I think he opened the door for other storytellers like me and, God knows, hundreds of others," Bodett said.

Keillor brought people back to their radios, Bodett said, but had there never been a Garrison Keillor, one of the others would have done it:

"Obviously, Americans were ready to listen to their storytellers again." Bodett noted that everyone gets compared to people who've been before, adding that Keillor's been compared to Faulkner.

"Garrison is the most accomplished storyteller of our time and anyone who's going to tell stories for the next 10 years is going to be compared to him," Bodett said from his hometown of Homer, Alaska, where his show, "The End of the Road," is produced in the local high school auditorium.

But Bodett and others said they don't feel they are competing with Keillor or even trying to fill his shoes. While they admit that Keillor may have revived storytelling and listening as a national pastime, they say they are just doing what they like to do and feel there is room for everyone.

Bodett, 34, a former contractor, said that when he was in the trade he had to keep close track of what his competitors were doing because there was a limited number of houses to be built.

"In the radio business and the writing business, there is no limit. So I

don't compete," Bodett said.

Rowles, 37, who will appear on Keillor's first New York show, said radio missed Keillor: "As a listener, I miss him," he said, adding "It's good for radio as an art form that he's working on a regular basis."

The comparisons with Keillor irk the established radio comics a bit and Bodett, who spent five years with National Public Radio's "All Things Considered," even said allowing the comparisons can backfire.

He said he wants his style to remain spontaneous and, by constantly analyzing himself, he worries that he will become self-conscious like the kid who comes in late for gym class, suddenly realizes everyone is looking at him, finds that his legs won't work and begins to stumble.

"I'm a very simple storyteller. It's a very spontaneous eruption. I'm not

smart enough to do it differently," he said.

Bodett's style of creating characters is similar to Keillor's Lake Wobegon folks, but he said the material for his 15-month-old show, "The End of the Road," is different. For one thing, Bodett's setting of Homer, Alaska, really is his hometown, not a made-up location like Keillor's. And Bodett's characters in his book, "The End of the Road," continue on in his radio show in a kind of soap-opera format.

The comparisons are even sharper for Rowles, a former stage hand on Keillor's "Prairie Home Companion," and now host of MPR's "The First House on the Right." That program four months ago replaced the troubled "Good Evening" hosted by Noah Adams after Keillor left for Amsterdam and later landed in New York.

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