

# Garrison Keillor says umpteenth goodbye

By JIM POLLOCK

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**G**arrison Keillor drove from St. Paul to Iowa City one time to hear the poet Gary Snyder. Then he went right back to St. Paul, driving all night "with his poems residing in my head." Somewhere in northern Iowa, he learned romanticizing and driving don't mix. He got stopped for speeding.

During this week's visit to Iowa City, he is the one who will be the center of attention. He's flying in from New York, N.Y., to give the fourth annual farewell performance of his late, great radio show, "A Prairie Home Companion."

A lot of listeners will be eagerly awaiting the results, measuring him against their treasured memories of shows past, but he makes it all sound much less stressful than an Iowa State Patrol light flashing in your rearview mirror.

He said in a telephone interview a few days before show time he actually was looking forward to three shows in two days. The pressure of recreating the old atmosphere?

"I haven't written a thing," he said. "Deadlines don't upset me much anymore. The problem is a shortage of adrenaline."

He had begun the thinking process, however. "The sermon on Sunday didn't make sense from about the third sentence on, so I started working on the monologue in my head," he said. "(The minister) must have gotten a lot of phone calls while he was working on that sermon."

The shows will take place in Hancher Auditorium on the University of Iowa campus. They're at 8 tonight, 4-45 p.m. Saturday and 9 p.m. Saturday. The Saturday matinee will be

## RADIO ON STAGE

**Garrison Keillor** — 8 tonight, 4-45 and 9 p.m. Saturday, Hancher Auditorium on the University of Iowa campus. Saturday radio broadcast matinee is sold out. Tickets cost \$22, \$19 and \$15. Call (800) 426-2437.

shot via satellite to a network of public radio stations.

Past "farewell" performances have been staged in cities such as New York and Los Angeles, Calif. This time, he wanted to "come back to the center," he said. "The Midwest is a sweet, dear place to many Americans, including many who have never been there," he said.

No doubt some local color will find its way into the show, but "I can't go out to Iowa and claim to have much knowledge of it," he said.

"Everything I know about Iowa is sort of accidental. I won't be trying to explain Iowa to the nation."

Despite his credentials as a writer — best-selling books, articles in *The New Yorker* — and despite the fact that some of his friends have attended the Writers' Workshop in Iowa City, Keillor "never thought of going there. I couldn't bear the thought of competition," he said.

"I'm the kind of writer who holes up in his room or goes off to the end of a gravel road. Most writers, and poets especially, are intensely competitive. I'm not competitive at all."

His new radio show, "American Radio Company," recently ended its first season and will



Lake Wobegon's wayward son, Garrison Keillor, gives his fourth annual farewell performance of "A Prairie Home Companion" Saturday in Iowa City.

return next fall. The audience was estimated at 2 million listeners, compared to an estimated audience of 4 million during the heyday of "A Prairie Home Companion."

"The size of the audience is not important the first year," he said. "In the second year it becomes very important. The first year, you just kind of mark your place, put your flag in the ground, but we need to be a bigger success the second year, because stations are paying a lot of money for the show."

"We set out to do a faster-paced, more ambitious show, and it's full of astoundingly good things," he said, "but we didn't quite make

contact with the audience, and that's my fault. I hope to start having fun. That's when it becomes a show."

His old PHC crowd is supposed to be on hand in Iowa City, including Jean Redpath, Peter Ostroushko, Kate MacKenzie, Richard Dworsky, Dan Rowles, Tom Keith, Dave Moore and Iowa native Greg Brown.

"There isn't a songwriter in America who has touched me more than Greg Brown," Keillor said. "The Iowa Waltz" was the first thing of his I ever heard, and I still think of it."

An idea popped into his head. "I want to promote that as the Iowa state song."