

Garrison Keillor

By Jack Garner
Democrat and Chronicle

In a society in which so many people are absorbed by the biggest, the most spectacular, and the most extravagant, Garrison Keillor has described himself as "a champion of small pleasures."

In a droll, charmingly unassuming manner, Keillor has become one of America's most popular storytellers. In his *New Yorker* short stories, his collections of tales and essays, and particularly in his long-running *Prairie Home Companion* Public Radio program, Keillor has become one of America's least-likely but most appealing celebrities.

Even though he's closed down the weekly *Prairie Home Companion*, and moved on to other things, his *Prairie* days are with him always, in plentiful, on-going audio cassette sales, in radio reruns, and in frequent encore shows.

Keillor's the raconteur of mid-west memories and middle American values, the poet laureate of a Lake Wobegon of the mind, "where all the women are strong, all the men are good-looking, and all the children are above average."

And now, Keillor's bringing that distinctive storytelling style and his low-key musical aspirations to the Finger Lakes Performing Arts Center for a performance Friday night in Canastota.

Being no dummy, Keillor's also bringing along as his co-performer, Chet Atkins, one of the greatest of modern guitarists, a country music legend, and another artist for whom the adjective "unassuming" was created.

"Yes, it's an ambitious tour that we'll have started the night before in Boston," Keillor said. "It'll go through July 29 — about 20 shows — and ends in Santa Fe."

Why does a guy who has always said he's more comfortable behind a radio mike or a typewriter want to hit the road for a string of one-nighters, like a gonk-dam rock star? "It's because I'm absolutely anxious to see more of this country. Seeing these different communities is one reason to do tours."

"We charter a plane for the tour," he said. "You fly low in charter, land at smaller airports. And you get to see a lot of the land."

"Once on stage, we'll do some songs together. I'll sing, and he'll play."

"I'll do a few camp songs or two," Keillor said. "Things like *The Cold War Is Over*. I'll also take a jab at politicians, which is a comedian's obligation."

In a telephone interview from New York, Keillor added that he'll also recite a few poems. "Mine and other people's. I also talk about shyness, and the life of a shy person in New York."

For Keillor, the emotional high point of the tour is the opportunity

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to work on stage with his offspring. "I do a few things with my son who's a guitarist — Jason Keillor. It's been kind of my life-long dream to work with my kid."

Most of the guitar playing, though, will be handled by Chet Atkins, the notable studio musician and Nashville recording artist who remains one of the most admired of all guitar players. His association with Keillor began in the last years of *The Prairie Home Companion*.

The show's highlight for Keillor's fans, though, will probably be that moment late in the show when Keillor will approach the mike and use his quiet, quirky baritone voice to report on the week's happenings at Lake Wobegon.

"Yes, I give the news from Lake Wobegon. The people there are all a little older now, but still as nutty and hopeful as they always were. You know those Lutherans, who manage to be both sentimental and cynical."

The rustic characters and warped whimsy of Lake Wobegon remain Keillor's most appealing creations, and come from his personal experiences, growing up in the Minneapolis suburb of Anoka, where he was born 47 years ago.

Among the factors influencing his writing and humor were a strict midwestern religious family life, his position as the third of six children, the storytelling traditions of earlier generations of his family and friends, the imagination generated by the voices and exploits that came over the radio, and the writing in *The New Yorker*, a magazine he discovered as a 14-year-old in the Anoka public library.

"My people weren't much for literature," Keillor wrote in his collection *Happy to Be Here*. "And they were dead set against conspicuous wealth, so a magazine

in which classy paragraphs marched down the aisle between columns of diamond necklaces and French cognacs was not a magazine they welcomed in their home.

"I was more easily dazzled, and to me *The New Yorker* was a fabulous sight, an immense, glittering ocean liner off the coast of Minnesota, and I loved to read it. I bought copies and smuggled them home, though with a clear conscience, for what I most admired was not the decor or the tone of the thing but rather the work of some writers, particularly *The New Yorker's* great infield of Thurber, Liebling, Perelman and White. They were my heroes . . . and in my mind they took the field against the big mazumbos of American literature, and I cheered for them.

"I cheer for them now . . . and still think that it more worthy in the eyes of God and better for us as a people if a writer makes three pages sharp and funny about the lives of geese than to make 300 fat and flabby about God or the American people."

Another influential factor for Garrison Keillor was his height. At 6-foot-4-inches, he stands out, even when he isn't trying.

"I sort of thrust up like a weed when I was in junior high school," he said. "I was walking to school one morning, and I heard somebody laugh behind me, and it was a boy, and he was imitating my stride, bouncing off the balls of my feet — *boing, boing, boing*. I didn't think I looked as dumb as that. He was making fun of my like I was a yokel or a bozo.

"Something like that really stings. I don't feel bitter about it, I feel grateful, because these little slights, and this agonizing self-consciousness, can all work to your good. Some of the gentlest and most humorist people I've met are tall people. People expect fat people to be funny, but I've found it's tall people who are humorous. It might be because tall people are always performing, whether they want to or not.

"I'd rather be tall than the al-

ternative."

Now that's he left the Midwest to live and work in Manhattan, an office at *The New Yorker* is where he writes.

"I enjoy going down to *The New Yorker* office every other day, and writing there. I like riding the subway," Keillor said.

"You come to appreciate tabloids living in New York. Most of us newspaper readers are a little snobby, and you think you'll automatically prefer the *Times* to the *Daily News*. I read the *Times* every day, but when you read it every day you get mad at it because it's so stuffy and full of itself. *The Daily News* seems like they're having more fun."

After the summer tour, Keillor said he'll return home, start work on a novel, and begin preparations for a second season of *American Radio Company of the Air*, the Public Broadcasting radio show that he began last year. It airs in Rochester on WXXI-FM from 6 to 8 p.m. on Saturdays, in rotation with reruns of *The Prairie Home Companion*.

Garrison Keillor and Chet Atkins are at the Finger Lakes Performing Arts Center, Canandaigua, at 8 p.m. Friday. Tickets are \$22.50 in the shell and \$14 on the lawn, and can be purchased at the RPO Box Office, 100 East Ave., at the Finger Lakes Box Office, Lincoln Hill Road, Canandaigua, or through Ticketron.

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