

'Sweet Corn Show' goes much better without the corn

By Howard Reich
Entertainment writer

It was called "The Sweet Corn Show," and it genuinely lived up to its billing.

Master guitarist Chet Atkins provided the sweet sounds, and storyteller Garrison Keillor served up the corn.

And though Keillor's long-winded opening segment of the show ought to be marketed as a cure for insomnia, Atkins' appearance instantly enlivened the performance Sunday evening at Poplar Creek.

The man can do more with a guitar

Variety

than is supposed to be possible: intricate counterpoint, subtly bent pitches, vast and complex harmonies—they're all at Atkins' fingertips. The marvel is not only the elegance of Atkins' art, but the effortlessness it suggests.

Watching this soft-spoken guitarist work a cavernous pop den such as Poplar Creek proved instructional, for Atkins offered a suave brand of showmanship one rarely encounters in any entertainment field these days. Though countless rock guitarists have preened their way across this ample stage, playing at volume levels that can be heard for miles, Atkins treated the place as if it were simply another quaint little country saloon. No histrionics, no high-decibel overkill.

Like many of the best guitarists—particularly the late Andres Segovia, to whom Atkins has been often and justly compared—Atkins makes the audience come to him. He plays so softly, shapes phrases so delicately, that the listener leans forward a bit to catch every note. It takes a certain audacity to play so intimately in so large a space, and only gifted performers attempt it.

Atkins was in superb form throughout his set, which juxtaposed purely instrumental numbers with a few vocal ones. For guitar purists, the fast-picking, virtuosic pieces were particularly satisfying, with Atkins tossing off thirty-second notes at remarkable velocity, yet with unassailable evenness and tonal beauty.

Such is Atkins' versatility that the high point of his guitar playing came not in the expected country fare but in a sweet Beatles medley. Though the guitarist seemed hard-pressed to remember the titles of the particular tunes he was working with, he spun complex and deeply musical variations on tunes such as "Something," "Lady Madonna" and "All My Loving."

Atkins was equally appealing, if not quite so accomplished, as a singer, especially in "I Still Can't Say Goodbye." He recorded the jewel in 1988 in memory of his father, who left the Atkins family when Chet was 6. Donning a wide-brimmed, Depression-era hat, Atkins poignantly evoked that long-ago era, meanwhile rekindling universal sentiments most folks feel about their own fathers.

Keillor, too, was attempting to create a certain nostalgia in his portion of the show, and for the first few minutes he indeed set a pleasant, easy-going mood. But, at least for this listener's taste, Keillor remains a creature of radio, where his famed "Prairie Home Companion" show was born.

Left alone on stage to spin seemingly endless, wearying tales of Lake Wobegon does not make for vibrant live entertainment (as Sunday's small audience suggested).

As Keillor rambled on into the second hour of this dull and self-congratulatory performance, at least one member of the audience yearned for a radio dial to switch off.