

## Keillor escapes from New York with corny tour

Once upon a time, a man from Lake Wobegon, Minn., traded all of his quiet weeks for a bustling New York minute.

He got a raw deal.

Not only was he shortchanged on time, he traded peace of mind for unrest, success for disappointment, happy songs like "Hello, Love" for the blues and, worst of all for a son of the Midwest, sweet corn for corned beef.

"I haven't had a good ear of sweet corn since I've been in New York City," moans Garrison Keillor. "Imagine, a city that prides itself on its cuisine, and it doesn't offer the best food there is."

He says this, pauses and then releases a steamy sigh that could melt a pat of butter over an ear of tender sweet corn, the kind that squirts geysers of its milky juice into the air when you bite its kernels.

Since sweet corn won't come to him, Keillor is going to it. This summer he's mounting his "Sweet Corn" tour with Chet Atkins, the Hopeful Gospel Quartet and Mavis & Marvin Smiley — a.k.a. Robin & Linda Williams. One of their stops along the sweet-corn belt includes Monday night's concert at Music Hall.

"We're hoping to run into some sweet corn along the way," Keillor says. "Actually the tour is a brazen bid to get some vegetables."

Actually, the tour is a bid to escape the New York blues. Keillor's new radio show, *American Radio Company of the Air*, the replacement for his beloved and award-win-



Cliff Radel

ning *A Prairie Home Companion*, is not working. Keillor has found that doing a radio show in New York is not like doing one in St. Paul, Minn., the home of *Prairie Home*.

In New York, the people laugh quicker. And they laugh at anything. When Keillor would tell a joke in St. Paul's World Theatre, the crowd would take it in, warm up to it, chew on it, chuckle, snort, giggle, snicker, then — KAPOW! — laugh out loud and even applaud.

In New York, he has trouble delivering a punch line at the Brooklyn Academy of Music. While he's still in his windup and before he's thrown his pitch, the crowd is catching his fastball and laughing . . . and saying "I get it, OK, what's next?" But that's New York. Everybody in the audience wants to be the first one in their row to get the joke.

"I seem to have trouble performing in New York," Keillor says. "It's hard to figure out. I just don't feel comfortable on stage."

He refuses to blame the audience. "Whatever goes wrong in my business, it ain't the fault of the people in the seats."

(Please see KEILLOR, Page D-8)



Garrison Keillor, here Monday.

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# Keillor

CONTINUED FROM PAGE D-1

The fault lies, instead, with "the tall, older guy talking slow."

Keillor says that guy "tried too hard. I worked awfully hard on the show... and it went the worse for all the hard work I put into it."

"You see, the secret to doing a show like that is having a good time. If you get too intent and too industrious, you can dig a deep hole for yourself."

His digging done, Keillor plans to put his shovel aside and grab a ladder. When his show's new season begins Oct. 6, it will be in a new home — the Lamb's Theater. The off-Broadway house seats 330 compared to the Brooklyn Academy's Opera House, "which holds 2,400 and is a big old barn, too big to put on a radio show."

## On the road

Even with his new location, Keillor won't be there much. He only plans to do 13 of the 26 shows he has slated for the 1990-91 season in New York. The rest will be on the road, "which worked awfully well for us this year. The shows we did in Atlanta and Memphis were among the best I've ever done. I just wish there had been a radio audience for them."

Keillor had a radio audience for those shows. *American Radio Company*, which signed on Nov. 25, 1989, is heard over 248 stations (including WGUC-FM, 90.9 MHz, on Saturdays at 6 p.m.) by 1.27 million listeners. That's nothing like the days when 4 million people across the country tuned in 275 radio stations and spent their dinner hour every Saturday night with *A Prairie Home Companion*.

That crowd tuned out when Keillor signed off June 13, 1987. Amid squabbles with the St. Paul press over invasion of privacy claims, the breakup of his long-time relationship with his producer, Margaret Moos, a whirlwind courtship and marriage of a former exchange student from Denmark that he met at his high school reunion, Keillor closed up shop and headed for Denmark.

That lasted all of a summer. By the fall, he was back in the states, but not in the Midwest. He landed in exile in New York. Like a tall Napoleon on an Elba the size of Manhattan, he plotted his return to

radio. He made his move in November of 1989. He came back with a slicker *Prairie Home* and called his citified creation *American Radio Company of the Air*. Keillor was back all right. But his radio audience wasn't.

"Perhaps *A Prairie Home* said goodbye too well," he muses. "This leaving was a terrible mistake. It made it seem as if I had retired or died."

"I was so tired in the spring of '87, the idea of leaping off the ledge had a certain attraction. But I never meant to do it."

Meaning it or not, Keillor did say goodbye. He said it early... and often. Maybe he said it too often. Every summer after he said a goodbye that left lots of tear-stained kitchen radios, he would stage an "annual" farewell tour. It was a cute joke at first. Then it got to be a bad joke. People starting saying goodbye to Keillor instead of the other way around.

It's to the point where Keillor wonders whether he did the right thing. Is a New York minute worth a quiet week in Lake Wobegon?

"I often have second thoughts," he admits, "I enjoy them. Any

storyteller would. You think, what if, instead of doing that, the story would have gone in this direction?"

With the story of the man who left St. Paul for the big city, Keillor "can easily imagine it being different. I can imagine having stayed in St. Paul. I can imagine taking that summer off and resuming *A Prairie Home* in the fall. I can imagine it all having bubbled along very nice."

He can also imagine it leading to "a life that is deeply unhappy and depressing. You see, it's very complicated being a Midwesterner. We seem like such simple people — unaffected, honest — but in truth it's very complicated."

"See, I have these bachelor farmer tendencies in me — these fears — that would lead me to the place where I don't want to go."

These bachelor farmer fears of crowds and strange places would take him to a small-town life where "there is a strong code of beliefs — tribal beliefs — that make people pay a high price for individuality where the main code of the law is that you should not think you are somebody."

In these parts, they call that

"puttin' on airs." Anybody who acts out of place, who acts up, who acts on stage for a radio show, can be accused of puttin' on airs.

Garrison Keillor, native of Anoka, Minn., creator of Lake Wobegon, "the little town that time forgot and the decades cannot improve," knows if he returns to the Midwest he would be "following those fears."

"That's why I have to trust something that is not fear and is what I call grace. That's why,

when I go out on stage, I think that the thing that happens won't be the worst, but the best."

That's a good story. Pass that man an ear of sweet corn. He's earned it.

Garrison Keillor's "Sweet Corn Show" starring Chet Atkins, the Hopeful Gospel Quartet and Mavis & Marvin Smiley plays Music Hall 8 p.m. Monday. Tickets are \$20 at Ticketron and the charge-by-phone number, 621-1110.

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