

Audience was all ears at Keillor 'Corn Show'

BY CLIFF RADEL

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In a suit the color of fresh-picked white corn, the tall Minnesotan with the red socks and matching tie squinted into the spotlight and ambled shyly on stage. Garrison Keillor was on his way to work.

His place of business Monday night was Music Hall. For 22 minutes shy of three hours he did his job, running his "Sweet Corn Show" by talking to the audience of 2,580 about people they had never met and places they had never been.

By all accounts the show was misnamed. With tales of leaving home and sad homecomings, of lost loved ones and missed opportunities, it was more like the "Bittersweet Corn Show."

Between these stories, Keillor chitchatted about this and that. He talked about the weather: "March is a month God designed to show people who don't drink what a hangover is like." He talked about Cincinnati. The home of the Mapplethorpe follies has become known far and wide as "a city where art is taken very seriously."

When Keillor wasn't talking, he was singing. Bass. Real low. And rumbling. With the Hopeful Gospel Quartet, Robin and Linda Williams and Kate McKenzie.

When he wasn't singing, he was

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listening to guitarists. One was his son, Jason. A handsome lad, he played new-age guitar that was stirring and wholesome.

The other guitarist was Chet Atkins. The man who got his start at WLW radio way back when played a graceful "Autumn Leaves" to show that even in this loud age the electric guitar can still be an instrument of subtle beauty.

Atkins' performance earned a standing ovation. He thanked the crowd and said he had never "received a good review in this town." He can't say that anymore.

After Atkins' performance came and went like a soft summer breeze, Keillor called for intermission before returning to talk of love, sweet corn and lion's manure in the gardening section of his "News from Lake Wobegon."

Earlier in the evening, Keillor recited a poem, "Oh, What A Luxury," whose watery refrain went, "it's pretty great to urinate."

Between talking about sprinkling number one and spreading number two, Keillor just talked. Whatever he said, he held the audience in that special place known as spellbound.

Cliff Radel is pop music critic for The Cincinnati Enquirer.