

Garrison Keillor stalks life's 'Sweet Corn'

By KEVIN COURTNEY
Register Staff Writer

CONCORD – The sweetest corn of the summer was to be found at the Concord Pavilion last weekend.

Garrison Keillor and Chet Atkins brought their "Sweet Corn Show" to the Bay Area, mixing Keillor's patented brand of "Prairie Home Companion" nostalgia with Atkins' deft guitar and fiddle music.

There's no one like Keillor on the American entertainment scene.

In his immaculate white suit, this lanky, owlish man has the demeanor of a very elegant college professor.

For 13 years, his "Prairie Home Companion" served up the best of American folk music and home-spun comedy to a national Public Radio audience.

The show ended in 1987, but the mythical world of Keillor's Lake Wobegon past lives on.

The audience, many of whom wore T-shirts for "Raw Bits" and "Power Milk Biscuits" – two of Prairie Home's make-believe sponsors – got what they came for.

Keillor sang a little gospel, recited some whimsical poetry and mused about the magic of sweet corn.

"Sweet corn is the most wonderful experience that a person can have in life," said Keillor.

"Lightly buttered and briefly

Register Review

"Lightly buttered and briefly prayed over, just one bite (of sweet corn) taught you more than any sermon could have about how much God loves us."

– Garrison Keillor

prayed over, just one bite taught you more than any sermon could have about how much God loves us," he said.

This was a three-hour show, capped by Keillor's closing monologue on recent doings at Lake Wobegon.

"Gardening is a competitive sport in our town," said Keillor. Residents vie to see who can "grow the biggest tomatoes, the fewest zucchini."

Since shutting down "Prairie Home" three years ago, Keillor tried life in Copenhagen, Denmark – the home of his second wife – then returned to the U.S. to launch "The American Radio Company of the Air," heard Saturday evenings on KQED-FM.

(Since American Radio is on summer holiday, KQED has substituted reruns of "A Prairie Home," heard from 6 to 8 p.m. and again Sundays from 11 a.m. to 1 p.m.)

Atkins, the legendary guitarist, was a Prairie Home regular. He and Keillor have formed a mutual admiration society. On stage, their affection for one another is evident.

Atkins walks on stage looking like a buttoned-down banker...until he picks up his guitar.

He did a medley of Beatles hits, some country tunes and his surprising hit song, "Would Jesus Wear a Rolex on his Television Show"?

Rounding out the "Sweet Corn" entourage were gospel singers Robin and Linda Williams and Kate MacKenzie who formed a gospel quartet with Keillor.

Keillor's son, Jason, provided guitar background while Keillor sang a hauntingly sad poem, "And the Band Played Waltzing Matilda" about a young Australian who experienced the slaughter of World War I.

The Concord Pavilion was an ideal setting for the "Sweet Corn" show.

Families picnicked before the show, then settled down for an evening of warm breezes and the season's sweetest music and humor.