

The Sacramento Bee • Sunday, July 22, 1990 C5

Keillor, Atkins serve up Americana

By Robert A. Masullo
Bee Arts Critic

CONCORD — It's hard to imagine a deeper trip into Americana than Garrison Keillor and Chet Atkins under the stars at the Concord Pavilion. And Friday, taking that trip on a perfect summer night, made me feel proud to be an American.

That's a feeling that's been hard to come by recently. When greed, meanness and reaction have wrap themselves in the flag, even the idea of Americana might make some want to retch.

But not Keillor and company. His Americana is attractive. Generous, kind and progressive, it's 180 degrees from the philosophical/spiritual thrust of the past decade. What's more, it's funny.

Keillor came out, at precisely the announced starting time, wearing a red tie, white suit and blue shirt. A patriotic color scheme, to be sure. But the tie was a bit too long, the suit began to rumple in minutes and almost as quickly the shirt was drenched in perspiration.

To the tune of "Get Along Little Doggies," he yodeled lines about people at the concession stands or walking to their seats, and his lack of credentials for singing a cowboy song: "I have no manure on my boots."

His Norwegian ancestors came in early and often for teasing: "They wouldn't have been happy with this (pointing to the rolling hills), with California. They were seafaring folk. They weren't happy unless they were cold, wet and sick to their stomach. So they settled on Minnesota."

Keillor ran what could be considered an elongated, less inhibited version of "A Prairie Home Companion." It lasted three hours and included a few things he wouldn't have said on the radio — notably a poem about the joys of urinating.

There was some handsome harmonizing by the Hopeful Gospel Quartet (Keillor, another man and two women). "This is the kind of music I start to miss when I'm in Denmark, where my wife comes from," he explained. Their tunes were hand-clapping, uplifting ones of the type you'd expect in a Baptist church. Keillor's fondness for them seems strange, especially in light of his severe Lutheran upbringing, which he bemoaned constantly. "We (Lutherans) lived in con-

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stant fear that someone, somewhere, might be having fun," he said.

But Keillor sang with enthusiasm and a voice a summer cold had turned from baritone to bass. Bragging that he was able to reach low notes he ordinarily could not, at the end of a discursive song introduction he said, "I'd better sing before I get well." His four-piece Sweet Corn Band backed him with finesse all evening. Its musical excellence shone most brilliantly, however, when joined by Chet Atkins.

Atkins did with the guitar much what Keillor did with words. He played cleanly, gently, melodically in an assortment of styles — jazz, classical and country. He also contributed a little to the humor, singing "Would Jesus Wear a Rolex on His TV Show?," a ditty he wrote and Ray Stevens made a hit a few years back. Among other things, the song asks if Jesus would admit talking to all the TV preachers "who claim they talk to

him."

Keillor and Atkins did a few numbers together. They expressed fondness for each other. "I really like him, even if he is a wild-eyed liberal," Atkins said at one point.

The de rigueur report from Lake Wobegon, Minn., Keillor's mythical hometown, was delivered after intermission. It told of renegades who, like himself, have left Lake Wobegon, such as the woman who "married a pet orthodontist from Ventura." Gentle jibes and pathos.

More music. A song in Danish "for my wife" and a pacifist tune from Australia. On a few numbers he was accompanied by his son, Jason, on the guitar. "It's really something to be on stage with your own son," he mused.

And finally, with the accompaniment of the Hopeful Gospel Quartet, Chet Atkins and the Sweet Corn Band, he concluded with "A Fool Such As I."

A gentle, genteel, delightful show. It was Americana at its best.

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