



Garrison Keillor presents his first "official" Utah performance on Saturday.

KEILLOR BRINGS 'SWEET CORN' TO PARKWEST

By Scott Rivers
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Though his "A Prairie Home Companion" variety series enjoyed a healthy 13-year run on public radio from 1974 to 1987, Garrison Keillor never had the opportunity to pay a visit to Utah during the program's occasional concert tours.

Not until last February did the Minnesota storyteller and *Lake Wobegon Days* author give his first Utah performance near Provo. For Keillor, it was a memorable experience.

"I was visiting a friend who has a small house in the mountains . . . the snow was four feet deep," he recalled in a recent telephone interview from Rochester, Mich. "I went out on the deck to get into the hot tub, and I forgot my towel — I had locked myself out without a stitch of clothing on."

Keillor continued to recount this adventure with the same soft-spoken dry humor that has entertained radio listeners for the past 16 years.

"I had to walk a quarter-mile with a piece of blue plastic tarp on me. When some people saw me com-

ing, they looked in another direction. Finally, I found a man who was willing to go into his house and make (a) call for me. However, he didn't invite me inside. That was my only performance in Utah and I hope not to repeat it. I will be fully dressed for the next show."

Keillor's "The Sweet Corn Show," a traveling version of "A Prairie Home Companion," with legendary guitarist Chet Atkins, will arrive at ParkWest on Saturday at 7:30 p.m.

Currently in the midst of a 19-city tour (which began July 5 in Cohasset, Mass., and ends Sunday in Santa Fe, N.M.), Keillor said that "Prairie Home Companion" fans can expect a looser show unbound by time constraints.

"We do a few pitches for some of the old sponsors, such as Powdermilk Biscuits and Bertha's Kitty Boutique," he mentioned. "I sing a cat song or two, among other new songs that are funny and odd. Chet and I perform a few songs together. I do a poem with my son Jason — he's a new wave guitarist, but he'll be old wave for this. I also do a story about Lake Wobegon . . . a story about summertime, sweet corn and passion — the mysteries of passion in a little town."

During the interview, Keillor explained his unending love affair and fascination with sweet corn in detail.

"The sweet corn I get now is a bare shadow of what I remember. Growing up, we had a garden that was a half-acre. . . Sweet corn was the real delicacy. We husked it as fast as we could, boiled it and put it on the table. It was so stunningly good in a way that meat cannot be. This was a food that was sweet and tender. It really had sunshine in it. It made you happy to eat it. I've always said that sweet corn was better than sex, but I haven't had any of it lately — sweet corn, that is."

ParkWest's outdoor environment will be a nice change of pace for Keillor, who generally performs in small theaters and concert halls. It appears likely that the humorist selected this locale after he visited Park City last February.

"My wife and I found Park City (to be) beautiful," he mentioned. "We walked a lot, but didn't ski. I bought a piece of art in Park City and they also have a nice bookstore there (Dolly's). I bought a carving of a cowboy with a beer in his hand and a woman in a bikini standing in front of a jukebox. Cowboys, beer, rock and roll, and a hint of the erotic. That's American. I also bought a porcelain piece of a cat wearing a beautiful pink sportcoat. It was a buying streak I could have spent my inheritance on."

Live performance represents an immediate, spontaneous experience for Keillor. Unlike radio, the concert tour enables him to perfect his material for an extended period.

"When doing radio, you're working so hard to create the material that there is hardly time to rehearse — hardly the time to perform it the way you like. See M-3, Column 1



Garrison Keillor first met Chet Atkins in 1983. The guitarist was a semi-regular on "A Prairie Home Companion."

Keillor brings 'Sweet Corn' to ParkWest on Saturday

Continued From M-1

Sometimes, it's good when you don't think about it," Keillor explained.

"Doing this tour, you work with roughly the same material for three weeks and you get to enjoy it more. I still like to sing my theme song, 'Hello, Love.' I like doing this for a month, but I couldn't tour as long as most performers do."

"The Sweet Corn Show" also gives Keillor an opportunity to perform with Atkins, who was a semi-regular on "A Prairie Home Companion" during its last four seasons. Keillor first met the Nashville guitarist in 1983, and they have teamed up on previous tours.

Keillor revealed that Atkins also plays the fiddle on this jaunt, which he rarely does anywhere else. Though Atkins generally performs no more than 20 dates a year, "The Sweet Corn Show" proved to be an exception.

"Chet is a performer who my audience really loves to see," Keillor said. "He's funny onstage, but funnier in a different way offstage. Chet loves the studio and would rather stay home. Once he gets out on the road, however, he likes it. He plays some old hoedown tunes on his fiddle and does them awfully well. The audience just bursts out of the gates. Well, you don't get that sitting in a studio with your 85-track mixing board — it doesn't clap for you."

Music plays an important role in Keillor's radio programs and concerts — enabling him to perform with artists ranging from the Everly Brothers to Leo Kottke. In a February 1987 "Prairie Home Companion" broadcast, Keillor told a moving story about his reaction to the Feb. 3, 1956 plane crash that killed Buddy Holly in Ames, Iowa.

"Had Holly lived, I think he would have become the president of a huge recording conglomerate. He was awfully smart. . . . The Everly Brothers were so much fun to work with. I loved their music when I was in high school; my friends and I would try to sing that style of harmony. Eventually, I got to be the third Everly brother on a few songs. They were very bright people — just the way you want your heroes to be in the flesh," he stated.

Keillor lists among his most influential humorists such famous authors as Mark Twain, E.B. White and Charles Fortis. Among radio comedians, he particularly admires Jack Benny, Fred Allen, and Jim and Marian Jordan of "Fibber McGee and Molly" fame.

In terms of radio listening, Keillor admitted that he doesn't tune in as often as he used to "because my car was stolen in New York — I was shocked, then grateful. I listened to the radio faithfully when I drove." However, Keillor did express his

views on the radio medium.

"There's a lot of talk radio, which is really the big thing. Somehow, that doesn't interest me — there's an anger and vehemence that I don't quite share and feel. Country music seems to be pretty dead at the moment. Every once in a while, you'll come across a few surprises. Unfortunately, there aren't many eccentrics left in radio."

Now residing in New York, the transplanted Minnesotan returned to public radio last November as the host of a new live series, "American Radio Company of the Air." In addition to Keillor monologues and comedy sketches, the program also showcases performances of "classic American music."

First broadcast from the Brooklyn Academy of Music, "American Radio Company of the Air" will begin its second season from the Lamb's Theater in Manhattan. The most expensive show in public-radio history (it went several hundred thousand dollars over its first-season budget of \$2.6 million), the second season has been budgeted at \$3.2 million and will include 26 new programs interspersed with 26 reruns.

(KUER FM-90 will air "Prairie Home Companion" reruns on Saturdays from 5 to 7 p.m. through September. "American Radio Company of the Air" will return Oct. 6, continuing Saturdays from 5 to 7 p.m.)

"I thought the first season was a bold step," Keillor commented. "I never worked so hard on a show in my life. We made several mistakes, but there were a lot of good things that were funny and surprising. For our second season, we'll try to take that leap from preparation into performance. We're putting out a cassette of some stuff from the first season."

Apart from resuming "American Radio Comedy of the Air," Keillor will prepare a concert at Carnegie Hall next January, record an album of his stories and readings, and write a novel. If that isn't enough to keep him busy, Keillor also listed other projects he hopes to complete by September of next year.

"I'll be working on the Danish language — trying to swallow my Rs and speak in the past perfect tense. I have an album of cat songs I'm supposed to do with an opera singer named Frederica von Slade. Cats are an interesting concept; they are God's creation by showing that not everything has to be useful. . . . I'm also working on a project called 100 Stories That Everyone Needs to Know, stories that I think are fundamental to our culture."

Tickets for "The Sweet Corn Show" are \$25 for reserved seating, \$17 general admission, and on sale at the Salt Palace and all Smith's Tix outlets.