

Please see **GEORGETOWN, C2**

Keillor adds local color in UK show

By Todd Pack

Herald-Leader staff writer

About 90 minutes before he went on the air, the host of "Garrison Keillor's American Radio Company" was rehearsing his speech about how great it was to broadcast the program last night from the University of Kentucky.

Keillor, in a warm, friendly voice, cited a few of the things Lexington is known for, including UK basketball and horses.

"And it's the capital of Kentucky, with a lineup of governors with names like W.C. Fields' characters: Beriah Magoffin, Flem P. Sampson, Augustus Stanley ..."



Keillor

The show's producer then whispered to him. "Of course, of course, I knew that," Keillor told her, marking out the part about the state capital from his script. "And the capital of Minnesota is St. John?"

But by the time the small "ON AIR" sign lit up at 6 p.m., those

Please see **KEILLOR, C4**

City/State

KEILLOR: Benefit show celebrates WUKY's 50th year of broadcasting

From Page C1

sorts of problems had been worked out.

About 1,400 listeners paid from \$30 to \$150 to watch the broadcast from UK's Singletary Center for the Arts.

Last night's performance, carried on about 200 stations nationwide, was a benefit for WUKY-FM, UK's public radio station.

Keillor, the author of the best-selling *Lake Wobegon Days* and the former host of "A Prairie Home Companion," told listeners that WUKY was celebrating its 50th anniversary.

"WUKY got into FM before hardly anybody had FM radios," he said. "That's faith."

WUKY general manager Roger Chesser said the benefit was expected to raise \$15,000. The show was sold out.

"We didn't think we had a chance at getting him to come," Chesser said.

"American Radio Company" is produced by Minnesota Public Radio and based in New York. But 14 of this season's 26 programs will be broadcast from other cities.

"We get invitations from lots and lots of cities," producer Christine Tschida said.

"The special thing was that it was WUKY's 50th anniversary," she said.

"Plus there was a musical connection," Tschida said. "With Kentucky, we can do a bluegrass show. We can do that flavor of music."

Instead of the show's usual Coffee Club Orchestra, a jazz band, the music on the show was limited to a piano, a mandolin, fiddles and guitars.

The guests included Grammy winner Allison Krauss and Union Station, bluegrass musician Peter Ostroushko and country-folk singers Robin and Linda Williams.

The Lexington-based Appalachian Association of Sacred Harp Singers also performed on the show.

The group of about 30 singers, led by Ron Pen, a member of the music faculty at UK, sang shape note harmony, a kind of singing with deep roots in Eastern Kentucky.

During rehearsal yesterday, the group sang while standing in its traditional circle around two microphones in the middle of the stage.

Keillor told them, "I don't want people to laugh when you turn your backs on them, and I really don't want to explain it to them."

"Is there any other way that would be comfortable to you?" he asked. The group ended up standing in a semi-circle.

While Keillor worked with the Sacred Harp Singers and the other guests, Tschida timed each song and comedy routine on a digital stopwatch that dangled around her neck.

She kept track of each one to see what would fit into the show.

"Usually we don't have the final rundown as to what's on the show until an hour before the show,"

Tschida said. "Garrison likes to keep things loose, and he likes to keep the options open ... it's exciting, it's live radio."

During a break, Keillor said he liked that spirit of live radio.

"When you tell a story on the radio, you hear them out there in the audience, and they get quieter and quieter," he said. "Writing is what I enjoy doing myself, but with

writing, you never have any idea what happens or where it goes."

The centerpiece of each week's "American Radio Company" is a tale about the fictional town of Lake Wobegon, Minn.

He told last night's 20-minute story without a script.

"I have an outline in my head," he said before the show. "I know where it begins and ends. It's the middle that's the question."

"Radio has a power that television doesn't have," he said. "If I wanted to say something and impart knowledge to people, I would

use radio."

That power of radio — the sound of a familiar voice or old songs sung in front of a live audience — lured many of the people to the show last night.

Steve Keeney of Lexington said everyone in his house listens to "American Radio Company."

"It's very appealing," he said. "We turn the TV off, gather the family around the radio and listen."

The show will be rebroadcast at noon today on WUKY-FM (91.3).

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