

Radio fun, myth at the Surf

Clear Lake, Ia. — When you watch and listen to live radio happening the way Garrison Kellor made it happen in the grand old Surf Ballroom here Saturday night, you can only shake your head and wonder why there isn't more of it.

The 40-year-old Kellor, the tall Minnesotan who has ridden radio fame to New York City and around the world, came into Clear Lake wearing his trademark red socks and talked, sang and shuffled his way into the hearts of the 1,600 people who held the \$40 and \$25 tickets in the sold-out ballroom.

The performance, sponsored by KUNI radio of Cedar Falls, was musical and mythical and fun.

Why, an audience hasn't been so dazzled in these parts since Prof. Harold Hill played nearby River City a few decades ago. (Come to think of it, Kellor and the professor used some of the same songs, the work of the late great Iowa composer Meredith Willson of Mason City.)

Replayed Today

—And 1.5 million more fans at home — the usual Kellor radio audience — were listening to the live two-hour broadcast of his "American Radio Company" show. It's carried on a national network of 227 public radio stations. The show will be replayed today from 2 to 4 p.m. on KIBB FM in northeast Iowa and KRNI AM in northern Iowa and southern Minnesota.

Throughout the show, Kellor and his regular back-up singers, soprano Ivy Austin and baritone Richard Muenz, were silky on every number they did. And their slow, loving treatment of "Iowa Waltz," written by Iowa City's Greg Brown, put goose bumps on everybody in the Surf.

There was another show stopper — the moment when the 54-voice Waldorf College choir from nearby Forest City crowded onto the cramped Surf Stage to join Kellor on Buddy Holly's "Every Day." I mean, how can anybody not love Lutheran rock 'n' roll?

What did Kellor think of the choir? "They were tremendous, a very quick-study, and that's unusual in a choir," he said. "We didn't send them the music for that Holy song until Thursday, and they were great on it."

And what did the choir think of Kellor? "Cool," said Deb Leiding, 19, a Waldorf freshman from Armstrong.

Rockabilly, "Doo-Wop"

There were two other musical acts, a Twin Cities rockabilly band, Jack Knife and The Sharps, and a five-voice Orange, N.J., 14 Karat Soul. Those two groups were Minnesota hick and East Coast slick, in that order.

There were spoof skits about George Bush, and about the "Cafe Boeuf" just around the corner here in Clear Lake, where they offer a "Boeuf" and surf special.

And there was a melancholy skit that focused on the Surf Ballroom back on that February 1959 night when young rock star Holly, Ritchie Valens and the Big Bopper all played their last shows here and then died in a plane crash as they left Clear Lake.

In that pre-show visit with reporters, he said the reason he brought the show to Clear Lake was "because I wanted to come do it in this hall, the Surf. I'd heard it was a great hall, a real old small-town ballroom of a sort that's mostly died out everywhere now. And ours is a radio show of a kind that died out years ago, too, so it seems to fit."

He was making Saturday into one of the Surf's biggest nights ever, which is really saying something when you consider some of the big names of entertainment who played here — Ozzie and Harriet Nelson, Lawrence Welk, Tommy Dorsey, Benny Goodman and Holly.

But those earlier stars weren't at career high points when they were at the Surf the way Kellor is now. And no one ever played a show here with the kind of national radio audience that Kellor has.

Bruce Christensen, 50, who with his wife, Sue, has managed the facility for the past year, was beaming at the thought of the wide new exposure the historic ballroom was getting.

"With the kind of restoration we're trying to do here, we'll take all the new friends we can get," he said.

—Chuck Offenburger