

**RADIO**

# *Keillor brings his show to IU*

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STAR STAFF WRITER

**W**hat brings The World's Tallest Radio Comedian to the hill-and-hollow country of Indiana University? Love of basketball? Lutefisk dinners along Lake Monroe?

"One word: music," Garrison Keillor said over the phone from his office at *The New Yorker* magazine in Manhattan. "Their music school is one of the best in the country."

"I'm not flattering you. I wanted to do a show and I wanted it to be in the Midwest but I wanted it to be with some student musicians, and they have a great program there. You discover that when you start talking to musicians."

So, IU music students and faculty will sit in with the Coffee Club Orchestra in a live, two-hour broadcast of Keillor's *American Radio Company* from the I.U. Auditorium, starting at 6 p.m. Saturday. Guitarist Chet Atkins will be the special guest. The event is sold out.

Bloomington is the second stop on a 15-city road stint for the New York-based weekly music and comedy show. The host is WFIU-FM, the university's public radio station and one of 20 American Public

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## Keillor

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Radio affiliates that carry Keillor's sophisticated seance for his lost love, live radio.

No Indianapolis station is in the fold. WFYI-FM, which aired the show's predecessor, *A Prairie Home Companion*, ran *American Radio Company* its first year (1989-'90) but found it extremely expensive with dismal listener response, station manager Douglas Dillon said.

The New York flavor seemed to sour a lot of local people who had been *Prairie Home* fans, Dillon observed. Interestingly, Keillor now is dropping broad hints that he may move his production base out of the big city.

### Needs "a place to sit"

"I think the show is on the road this season and next season it will find a place to roost," he said in the same whispery sofa of a voice he uses on stage. "I think I need at least a year off from touring. I need to find a place to sit and not be in so many airports."

Has he developed a short list of prospective roosts? "Yes, a very short list — East, Midwest, West."

Some communities (not including Bloomington) have courted Keillor's company as if it were a Japanese carmaker. His response is a warning.

"They'll come to realize that to have a storyteller and satirist in your midst is not a great honor when all is said and done. The people of Minnesota can tell you that. It's kind of a pain in the neck. Satirists do not promote their home areas."

Keillor's departure in 1987 from his lifelong home area of Minnesota came with some hard feelings. While his writing and his radio tales from the mythical Lake Wobegon always had betrayed ambivalence about small-town life, the self-described "shy person" said he found even the sizable St. Paul stifling when fame stole his privacy.

His sins against obscurity were a best-selling book, *Lake Wobegon Days*, and one of the most popular programs in public radio history, *A Prairie Home Companion*. He stunned his de-

voted audience by going off the air in 1987 after 13 years, saying he needed a rest, wanted more time to write and feared wearing out his welcome.

### Brief respite from radio

He fled first to his new wife's country, Denmark. Unable to cope with the language barrier, he soon moved with her to New York, where the privacy of multitudes, the opera, and the magazine of his boyhood ambition awaited.

His hiatus from radio was brief. He did three years of *PHC* farewell shows and tours, then launched *American Radio Company* three years ago. It carries on the "News from Lake Wobegon" from its predecessor and offers new versions of *PHC*'s trademark serial dramas and whimsical "sponsors" (for Powdermilk Biscuits and Bertha's Kitty Boutique, substitute Cafe Boeuf and Guy's Shoes).

"It wasn't what I would have predicted," Keillor said of his return to radio. "But I didn't have any idea what was going to happen to me except that I was going to be a writer."

"A writer has to be free to follow his own vagaries, his own inclinations, and when a writer gets to working too hard, and has too many commitments, you start to become a caricature of yourself. Your writing loses its freshness. It becomes shallow and obligatory. I'm not saying *A Prairie Home Companion* became shallow and obligatory, but it was heading in that direction."

The current show, like the previous one, finds Keillor writing reams of script every week, often at the eleventh hour, before being "pushed off a cliff" into two hours of live performance.

### Dabbles in ribald humor

"Radio has certain limits, a certain decorum, that you learn to accept and that I enjoyed escaping through my *WLT* novel. I enjoyed dabbling in ribald humor, which some people were shocked I was capable of. And I was, of course, pleased to be able to shock them," he says.

"Radio is a natural medium for drama and for comedy. Standup comedy on television seems to be so limp and so much under a handicap. I think Jay Leno would be twice as funny on radio."