

PERFORMING ARTS

## Keillor's hitching his way back home to Lake Wobegon

By JOHN BORDSEN  
Staff Writer

**I**n the Upper Midwest, where great rivers begin and Great Lakes never leave, it's commonly believed the skies there are somehow bigger and more likely to sport rainbows when the sun slices rain clouds.

And folks there hold that if they go anywhere south or east of Chicago, they'll be lost in a funny-talking, fuzzy-thinking sea of people — at best, doomed to return merely for a midsummer gaze at real sweet corn and duels with mosquitoes as big as loons.

These things are true, as surely as the Devil's Oldsmobile has Illinois plates.

It is a mindset that Garrison Keillor couldn't buck. The broadcaster/writer found fame and fortune in Minneapolis-St. Paul, but packed off to points east. Now this Minnesotan who authored a collection of sketches titled "Leaving Home" is heading home, by way of a roadshow that comes through Charlotte's Spirit Square on Friday (show details, page 4F).

### 'Prairie' gothic

Last year, he topped the best-seller charts with "WLT: A Radio Romance" — a ribald, picaresque novel about Twin Cities radio in the 1940s.

But Keillor remains best-known for disinterring that "golden age" style of radio . . . and making it work. In its '80s heyday, Keillor's "A Prairie Home Companion" was public radio's coast-to-coast toast.

There were novelty music acts and serious folk ones; comic ads for the Chatterbox Cafe, Jack's Auto Repair and other program "sponsors" in Lake Wobegon.

Ah, Lake Wobegon. Keillor's monologues about the heartland hamlet "that time forgot and decades can't improve" were the backbone of each show, sermon-length tales where homespun stoics with names like Clarence and Darlene wrestled Everyman problems

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From left, Robin Williams, Garrison Keillor, Kate McKenzie and Linda Williams join forces and voices on "The Stairwell Tour" at Spirit Square Friday.

4F THE CHARLOTTE OBSERVER Sunday, July 5, 1992 \*\*\*\*\*

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# Keillor heads home, stopping in Charlotte

## Wobegon

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(quite often spritzed with Thurber-Bunstead complications).

People laughed and sniffled. Critics raved. A "Prairie Home Companion" empire spawned T-shirts, cassettes — the works. Other regional story-song programs proliferated on public airwaves from Alaska to Nashville.

Then, in the summer of '87, Keillor abruptly told a radio audience of millions he was going to jetison "PHC" — a show he started 13 years earlier before a live audience of 12.

Depending on who you listen to, he was too oppressed by fame and the media glare — or far too big for his britches.

He moved to Denmark, his new wife's homeland. That locale lasted a year. Then he returned stateside to launch a new radio show — "American Radio Company." It was live, but ... well, from New York instead of St. Paul-as-Wobegon.

In its virtues and foibles, Lake Wobegon, Minn., wasn't and isn't much different from a Gaffney or Statesville — just frost-bitten for half the year; its characters and situations are universal. But New York? No entertainment wholesomely humorous or remotely real has come from there since "The Honeymooners."

Public radio stations felt the difference. The airing fees for "American Radio Company" were high, but unlike "Prairie Home" the new show didn't cost-justify itself at pledge time, despite continued Wobegon monologues. At its peak, 275 stations carried "ARC"; now, about 230 do. Charlotte's WFAE dropped it a year ago. It is still carried by Rock Hill's WNSC (88.9 FM), whose signal reaches a good portion of metro Charlotte; this past season's reruns are aired from 6 to 8 p.m. Saturdays.

Keillor announced this spring that come October he was moving "ARC" to the World Theater in St. Paul — his "Prairie" home for a dozen years.

Keillor spoke by phone recently from the Shangri-La Motel. It sounded mid-American, all right — down the highway, perhaps, from the Flame Room steak house — but it was in Santa Monica, Calif. "It does seem a little seedy, though," he offered.

Typical. A serious guy who writes humor seriously. A man perhaps excessively shy puts his voice, face and byline in front of as many people as possible. A low-key contradiction.

Keillor is not an easy talker, and was vague when asked how moving "American Radio Company" to the Midwest would affect it.

### Shy answers

"I'll be challenged to find out," he said, as slowly as melting snow. "We don't plan the show in advance — it is affected a great deal ... by the audience that comes."

"The reason for going back is that this last season I was on the road an awful lot, and I don't want to do that for a while. I can do some of that — but not 21 tour shows a year again. So I need to plant myself somewhere. And I think I can do a better radio show from St. Paul than I can from the road."

Sure. But the show could just as easily stay planted in New York, right?

"Well, I'll still do eight shows there this season. I like New York a lot."

Let's try that again: *Why move?* "At least (in St. Paul) I'll be able to get the weather right. And the 'News from Lake Wobegon' part of the show always begins with the weather. And sometimes I'm wildly wrong."

At a different point in the interview Keillor said he was drawn to acreage some 45 miles east of the Twin Cities — across the St. Croix River in northwestern Wisconsin. Never seen it? Pick up a Metropolitan Museum of Art gift catalogue and flip to the "Wisconsin Landscape" print by regionalist painter John Steuart Curry. Note the rolling, green corduroy hills and wall-to-wall sky.

"I never had plans to move back there at all until I saw the land and I really loved it."

Just a year ago Keillor was saying how he enjoyed the anonymity that life in Manhattan



Quiet week in Lake Wobegon: Garrison Keillor plays Spirit Square Friday. The author/broadcaster turns 50 next month.

means. (Keep in mind he left the Midwest in a my-private-life-is-my-own huff.) He still wants to lie low: "I hope I can hang around and drink coffee and have dinner and listen to people again."

### Going home

Sinclair Lewis, James Thurber, Booth Tarkington, Edgar Lee Masters ... the list of Midwest writers who leave for good once they've clicked big time is long. Doesn't seem to stretch from Lake Wobegon to Denmark, though.

Keillor: "I don't think in terms of other writers. I don't compare other people's careers. To me it's just my life, you know? I have pretty much always done what I enjoyed doing. Never was terribly ambitious."

Nonetheless, he said he has five projects on the burners: A couple of scripts for TV shows he'd like to do later this year; "a screenplay

based on a story of mine about a boy who goes to a rock 'n' roll concert against his parents' better judgment; a children's book based on a song I wrote called 'Cat, You Better Come Home'; a collection of stories called "The Book of Guys"; and a novel about Lake Wobegon people going to Europe."

Do Lake Wobegon expatriates ever return home?

Keillor thought for a minute. He's logged hundreds of tales on the radio and written two books — "Lake Wobegon Days" (1985) and "Leaving Home" (1987) about those staidy folks.

"Well, I can't think of anybody, offhand. ... I guess, the mayor — Eloise Krebsbach. She left home when she married her husband, Chuck. They married and moved to the Cities. They had children, split up, and she moved back home. Almost two years now."

# 'Hopeful Gospel Quartet' show sings, talks

By JOHN BORDSEN

Staff Writer

The show Garrison Keillor is bringing to Spirit Square twice on Friday is part "Prairie Home Companion," part "American Radio Company" and part conventional concert.

It's billed as an appearance by the Hopeful Gospel Quartet — Keillor plus radio show stalwarts Robin and Linda Williams and Kate McKenzie. The foursome first performed under the Hopeful name four years ago at Carnegie Hall.

A Hopeful Gospel Quartet disc will be coming out soon on Sony Columbia, but Keillor says playing products isn't what this show is all about.

"We're coming out for fun,

which is why we sing," he said recently.

"We all have other jobs, but were a quartet that began backstage at 'Prairie Home Companion,' where we all used to perform as ourselves. Hanging around, you know, we started to sing — in stairwells, actually. Which is why we gave the tour that name: The Stairwell Tour."

That's a little Keillorism there: Since "Prairie Home Companion" left the airwaves almost five years ago, he's taken his show on cable and the road in a series of farewell concerts.

This gig follows suit, Keillor says: "We're doing about five nights in July and about a week in August. Then we'll go down to

Texas and tape 'Austin City Limits.'"

"Is this different from the show? Yes, it's a concert. I'll still talk a little bit about Lake Wobegon — not so much — and some people will get something different from the broadcast. Something a little more relaxed. But, I think a little more fun, especially if you like gospel music."

The show is loosely structured and will run about 90 minutes.

Though he has a sister living in Greenville, S.C., Keillor has spent little time in the Carolinas ("I did a show once in Winston-Salem and I did a show in ... where the University of South Carolina is.")

No matter. He's readying neither "Minnesota, Hail to Thee" nor

"The Two to Duluth Polka."

As he put it, "the music the quartet sings is much more Southern than Midwestern, so we think at least the music will be of people's liking. We'll just get along as best we can."

### If you're going

What: Garrison Keillor and The Hopeful Gospel Quartet  
When: 7 p.m. and 8:30 p.m. Friday  
Where: Spirit Square Center for the Arts (NationsBank Performance Place), 345 N. College St.  
Tickets: \$18. The 7 p.m. show is sold out. A limited number of tickets are available for the other show.  
Details: 372-7469 or (800) 922-6431, 9 a.m.-5:30 p.m. weekdays, noon-6 p.m. Saturdays.

THEATER