

Keillor looks at Berkshires he bypassed for St. Paul

By Seth Rogovay
Special to The Eagle

POWNAH, Vt. — Garrison Keillor, who bypassed the Berkshires last spring by opting to take his popular "American Radio Company" weekly variety show out of New York and back to Minnesota — will be at the Berkshire Performing Arts Center in Lenox tonight.

But before making plans to pack a sack of eggs and rotten tomatoes for his show — a gospel-oriented program featuring Keillor, Robin and Linda Williams and Kate MacKenzie, who are collectively known as the Hopeful Gospel Quartet — hear him out on the subject of why he chose Minnesota over the Berkshires.

"I had no idea whatsoever that the people up there had their hopes up," he said, speaking by phone last week from New York City.

"This is the first I've heard of it. That's one of the prettiest parts of the country. It's a beautiful place. I have friends up there, and I go up there every time I'm invited and I always love it.

"It's quite prettier than Minnesota, so one could enjoy that. But I had no idea they wanted [the show]."

A number of area politicians and businesspeople had sought to entice

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— Garrison Keillor

Keillor to bring his show, heard on 225 public radio stations across the nation, to the Berkshires. But he announced last spring that he would return to St. Paul, whence for 13 years he broadcast his pioneering "A Prairie Home Companion."

Not that Keillor is suggesting that had he known the key to the community was his for the asking he would have jumped at the opportunity to base his show here.

Practical decision

His decision to return to Minnesota, he said, was primarily a practical one.

"It's easy to do," said Keillor, who in real life speaks in the same, soft, carefully measured cadences that are the trademark of his radio persona.

"I just turned 50 about a week ago, and



Photo by Jonette Hovath

Garrison Keillor, left, with his 'Hopeful Gospel Quartet' will be performing in Lenox tonight.

KEILLOR, continued on G3

Keillor sees Berkshires

■ KEILLOR, from G1

somehow ease begins to appeal to me. I have all these things I want to do before I turn 60, and I don't want to spend any time unnecessarily.

"Every time you move to a new place it always takes a year just to figure out where things are. In St. Paul, I still know enough about where things are that I can just walk in and put my hands on them.

"This is not a noble reason. I wish it were for some great, noble thing like loyalty.

"But I'm not a particularly loyal person. I am pretty practical. I just don't know if I have the depth of character to move to a new place. I'd have to figure out everything all over again."

If Keillor seems stubbornly set in his ways, it comes as no surprise to those who are familiar with the steadfast narrator of tales from the mythical Lake Wobegon, "where all the women are strong, all the men are good-looking, and all the children are above average."

As it turns out, it's a place not unlike the one where Keillor himself grew up.

"I have a hard time having fun, thanks to growing up with the people I grew up with," he said. "A child was encouraged to adopt, a pretty serious view of life, so I had a hard time having fun."

Looking for fun

Having fun was his goal when Keillor decided in 1974 to go on the air with an anachronistic, decidedly unhip program that harkened back to radio's golden era.

"I simply thought it would be fun to do," said Keillor.

"To do a live radio show seemed to be then and still seems to me now the opposite of ambitious, since these shows died a long time ago, and it is an industry that does not exist.

"All of my friends want to write movies or they want to write books, or they wouldn't mind having a television show. But nobody has the ambition of doing a live radio show. Nobody I know.

"So it's sort of rescued from ambition by this, rescued from committee meetings and management and spending hours in a room with guys in suits who present you with the results of focus group interviews indicating that if our comedy centered more on children and less on politics we'd get more people in the 25-to-35-year-old group.



Associated Press

Garrison Keillor is the only one he knows whose ambition has been to have his own live radio show.

"We don't have to do any of that. Never did. That's a big part of what people in television do, sit and talk about these things. And it's the one thing that would make this show not a whole lot of fun to do.

"There are awfully smart people in expensive jeans who know an awful lot about marketing, and if you ever sit in a meeting with them, they can tell you why this show will not succeed and will never get an audience and something else will."

While Keillor puts little stock in such conventional wisdom, he does admit he is totally perplexed by the success of his chosen calling.

"It's hard for me to believe that people actually sit down and turn on a radio at six o'clock on Saturday evening and listen to parts of a two-hour broadcast. It's very difficult for me to believe, but apparently some people do."

Keillor's suspicion about tailoring his radio performances to marketing demographics is matched by his doubts about the recent editorial shakeup at The New Yorker magazine, to which he has been a regular contributor since 1969.

Add Keillor's eyebrows to those

raised recently by the news that Vanity Fair editor Tina Brown will replace Robert Gottlieb at the helm of the venerable weekly.

"If you're from the Midwest, you're always prepared for the things you love to be destroyed. Great things get driven into the ground by cynical people.

"The New Yorker is a beautiful magazine. I daresay that if they had offered the editorship of Vanity Fair to Bob Gottlieb, I don't think he'd have wanted it. But a lot of people would have wanted the editorship of the New Yorker, including people who also enjoy sneering at it.

"We'll see what [Tina Brown] does with it. She's inheriting Carnegie Hall. If she turns it into a disco, she's making a big mistake."

As for mistakes, Keillor hopes he hasn't made one by passing up the chance to move to the Berkshires. It's only stretching it a bit to detect a slight ray of hope that an accommodation could still be made.

"I dread the thought of disappointing the people of the Berkshires," said Keillor before signing off the phone. "I look forward to going up there and having another look at the place."