

Prairie Home leads to song

Keillor's Hopeful Gospel group on 'Austin City Limits' stage

‘We started singing in a 1956 Ford in Lake Wobegon. Those were the only songs we knew all the words to with four parts . . .’

— Garrison Keillor
former host of 'A Prairie Home Companion'

‘H’ e’s going to tune up now,” said Johnny Gimble, cocking his thumb over his shoulder at the aging gent with the custom-made Gretsch guitar slung over his shoulder.

“It wouldn’t hurt you to do the same,” riposted Chet Atkins as he twiddled the tuning pegs on his guitar.

An abashed look momentarily darkening his normally sunny disposition, Gimble pretended to comply, plucking a fiddle string or two to test the resonance. “Say,” he said, his face brightening once more, “it does sound better this way!”

And thus events proceeded Tuesday night on the sound stage on the University of Texas campus that is the home of *Austin City Limits*. Even for blasé *ACL* staffers, this particular episode (which will air in January, during the show’s 18th season) was something other than Business As Usual. Atkins — one of the world’s most celebrated guitarists, one of the architects of the 1960s-era “Nashville Sound,” a member of the Country Music Hall of Fame, and a guy to whom even Elvis Presley deferred — was present and accounted for, but only as a sideman. Attending in a similar capacity was Gimble, the fiddler and mandolinist who probably holds the record for guest shots at *ACL* tapings.

The centerpiece of the evening was a group with the unassuming name of the Hopeful Gospel Quartet. . . . and the focal point of that group was a tall, dark-visaged guy with bat-wing eyebrows and eyes sunk deep behind rimless spectacles. If his face, which has been banded about often in magazines and on television, had not given him away, his soft, beckoning, mellifluous speaking voice most certainly would have.

That voice, and its proprietor, Garrison Keillor, spent 13 years guiding public radio listeners through the rural Minnesota precincts of Lake Wobegon via his show, *A Prairie Home Companion*.



Author and radio personality Garrison Keillor led his gospel quartet during a recent taping of *Austin City Limits*.



Celebrated guitarist Chet Atkins, above, and Johnny Gimble joined in on several sets with Keillor’s group.

Chet Atkins — one of the world’s most celebrated guitarists and one of the architects of the 1960s-era “Nashville Sound,” a guy to whom even Elvis Presley deferred . . .

“And we always enjoyed those beautiful echoes bouncing off the windshield. It was the most wonderful place to hear echoes outside of a tile shower stall. And the possibility of four mixed members of the Sanctified Brethren ending up in a tile shower stall together were remote . . .”

The evening was not entirely devoted to gospel sentiments, however. Keillor also sang homespun tributes to draft horses and sweet corn. And Atkins — who was making at least his third visit to *ACL* (his first, in the show’s third season, was a watershed event, serving as a Nashville benediction to the fledgling show) — and Gimble bounced on and off the stage. One interlude found them swapping notes furiously on a trio of instrumentals.

As for the Williamses and MacKenzie, they received their share of the spotlight as well. The former sang a rousing version of their *Rollin’ and Ramblin’* (which Emmylou Harris has covered), the latter a smoky-voiced duet with Keillor on *Southbound Train*. In all, the evening was quite unlike any *ACL* has ever sponsored. Or, doubtless, any Keillor has ever hosted. Or any session Atkins and Gimble have ever contributed to. All in all, a winning hand for all concerned.

Waiting For Bordeaux Dept.: No one was more astonished than Your Humble Correspondent to find an “Official Festival Wine” in evidence at this year’s Kerrville Folk Festival. I would have thought that to most of the Festival habitués, “blush” was what you did when a Kerr County rancher caught you skinny-dipping in his stock tanks, and Zinfandel was one of them new Eastern European republics. Tell most folks in the Hill Country that you are an oenophile, and they are apt to look at you funny and move to the other side of the street. You might think there’s no confounding the Guadalupe River with the Loire.

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Country/
acoustic

John T. Davis

ion. Though he has gone on to other endeavors in radio (his new show is entitled *American Radio Company*) and publishing, he seems destined to be best remembered as the chronicler of the life and times of the most celebrated fictional landscape since *Brigadoon*.

A Prairie Home Companion, in its way, gave birth to the Hopeful Gospel Quartet which, besides Keillor, includes singer/songwriters Robin and Linda Williams and Kate MacKenzie (who also served as members of *Prairie Home Companion*’s house band).

The program was taped in a Minnesota theater and, to pass the time and quiet the jitters, the four members used to harmonize in a backstage stairwell. Gospel music soon became the genre of choice.

“This is music I’ve been singing since before I could talk,” Keillor told the *ACL* audience. “I learned it sitting on the laps of large women in print dress-

es.” Today, he added, although the group can boast appearances at Carnegie Hall and Los Angeles’ Universal Amphitheatre to its credit, “we’re still a stairwell quartet at heart.”

And with that, the group launched into a series of stately hymns, not the fiery Pentecostal stuff with which Southerners are accustomed to jump-starting their gospel, but rather the staid Protestant variety of hymn, designed to celebrate the Almighty in measure, and to take the sting out of a steely Minnesota winter: *When I Wake, Move On Top of That Mountain, Walking In Jerusalem Just Like John, The Lord Will Make A Way* . . .

The group shuffled on and off the stage in various configurations, with Keillor holding his own well enough, confining himself mostly to the bass harmonies, but occasionally reaching for a quavering tenor.

“We started singing in a 1956 Ford in Lake Wobegon,” said Keillor, adopting his *Prairie Home Companion* persona for a moment. “I was a member of the Sanctified Brethren congregation, and between Bible study and prayer service, we would drive around singing gospel music. Those were the only songs we knew all the words to with four parts . . .”