

*Garrison Keillor to broadcast his quaint radio show from Bass Concert Hall*

# 'A Prairie Home' for a day

By ROB PATTERSON  
Special to the American-Statesman

When the call comes from Garrison Keillor, you immediately know from the voice that it's him. The voice holds a transportation quality for two million weekly listeners to "A Prairie Home Companion," a voice whose soothing, deep tones summon up a simpler, gentler time and place, a proverbial small town known as Lake Wobegon, Minn.

On Saturday, broadcasting live at 5 p.m., that voice will be coming from the stage at Bass Concert Hall at the University of Texas and going out to the more than 400 public radio stations that carry "A Prairie Home Companion." Lake Wobegon will carry a Texas address for a couple of hours. It's the first visit to Austin by the show in its annual road trip to cities of its affiliate stations (KUT 90.5 FM here), but Keillor remembers fondly a 1992 trip when he taped a segment of "Austin City Limits."

"Unlike Lake Wobegon, where everything pretty much shuts down by 10 p.m., Austin seems to keep going well into the night," he said. "I found places where people are sitting and drinking and talking about all these important things, and then places where people were dancing in the smallest possible spaces, and the music was so loud people couldn't talk if they wanted to."

Welcome to Lake Waterloo, Mr. Keillor.

Fans of "A Prairie Home Companion" might imagine that to call Garrison Keillor one would take the earpiece off the old crank phone on the wall and holler into the horn to Mabel, the operator in the back room of the general store, to connect you with the sage of Lake Wobegon. Instead, it's a more modern summons where one faxes a reminder to Keillor that it's time for him to call an interviewer from the study of his rural Wisconsin home near Minneapolis-St. Paul. It's noon, and he's finishing his morning writing time.

Though Keillor is familiar to radio listeners for his extemporaneous storytelling, his heart is in the ivory-tower solitude of the writer.

"Some writers operate on the theory that everything that ever happened to you in your life is somewhere up in your head, and if you could just have it be quiet long enough, you would start pulling on a string, and an amazing sequence of things would come out attached to it," he said.

Known as a radio personality, best-selling author, storyteller, humorist and even singer (but not much of one, he admits), Keillor basically considers himself a



Frederic Pettersen

Garrison Keillor's soothing voice summons a simpler time and place for listeners who tune into his weekly live broadcasts of 'A Prairie Home Companion' on public radio.

writer. The way he defines that pursuit, however, resembles one of his heroes, Mark Twain — the writer as personality and entertainer.

"Mark Twain was a great entertainer by all accounts. He was able to get up on a lecture stage and just tear people apart," Keillor said. "He loved to have people recognize him. He was really made of two different pieces of cloth."

"I'm just a writer who got sidetracked, and I've never found a way to get back to a monastic life that would suit

me much better. But eventually, eventually ..." he said with a wistful sigh. "And I don't tear anybody apart. I'm not sure that people can be torn apart anymore in the way Mark Twain did it. He just made people laugh until they got dizzy."

Keillor's humor is indeed more gentle and warm, kind of like the fuzzy sweater you love that has an odd pattern that makes people chuckle, yet you wear it anyway because it feels so comforting. Like Twain, when Keillor reads his "News From Lake Wobegon," he finds the universal kernels of truth in American provincialism, a provincialism that is rapidly disappearing in these days of fiber-optic connectivity.

He confesses that he is "so much out of the mainstream, if there is one. I'm not sure that there is anymore. And perhaps there never will be again."

Keillor, 56, admits that in pop cultural terms his audience is relatively small and perhaps off-beat. He describes "A Prairie Home Companion" as "a romantic comedy about the Midwest, as seen in a somewhat skewed way by someone who comes from there, but was brought up in a minority — a minority of evangelical, fundamentalist Christian people."

"I grew up imagining how wonderful it would be to be a part of the mainstream," he said with a chuckle. "As I say, I don't think it exists. And I do think it existed when I was a kid."

"So maybe 'A Prairie Home Companion' is sort of a romantic homage to the mainstream as I imagined it as I was growing up. I talk about high school proms, but I never went to one. I talk about teen-age life in a way that perhaps betrays the fact that I did not quite have one, not in any normal sense at all."

"Anybody who is 14 years old, and desperately wants to be a writer, and wants to write for The New Yorker magazine, and is growing up in Anoka, Minnesota — that is not a normal upbringing. It's such a weird way of growing up, but it's also such a wonderful way to grow up, I think."

What seems to have redeemed Keillor, who started the show in 1974, is the power to dream, to speculate. An interview with him is like a conversation, one that languidly meanders like a small river with twists and curves. His dreams have come true, and he was even a columnist for The New Yorker before he resigned in protest when Tina Brown was named editor of the esteemed publication.

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LIFE & A

## Austin musicians to join Keillor onstage

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The archetypal small town he dreamed up, Lake Wobegon, has been very good to Keillor as the centerpiece of his "Prairie Home Companion" shows and novels. He said that its genesis "didn't begin in any sort of noble way whatsoever."

"I was doing this radio show, 'Prairie Home Companion,' a live musical variety on Saturday afternoons. And I could see that as simply the founder and father figure and emcee of the show, I didn't have much future. How long can you go on delivering a concise piece of flattery for each performer and engaging in little chit-chat with those who are willing, and asking the audience to put their hands together for somebody? You have to find something you can do.

"I wasn't confident about my singing, and I love to tell jokes, but my heart really isn't in doing a stand-up routine," he said. "So I had to come up with something I could do, and all that was really remaining to me in radio was to try and create some characters.

"So I came up with a fictitious sponsor, and then I had the sponsor write letters to the show complaining about the show, and that was a nice gimmick. But then I needed to expand on that, so I created characters that were at first relatives of his. And then I dropped him and kept the relatives.

"It began as kind of rube humor — making fun of country people — and then it switched 180 degrees and became this kind of romantic monologue. I think at some point one no longer needs to set one's self above and apart from one's characters. It becomes uncomfortable to do that, and in the end it's boring to do put-down comedy."

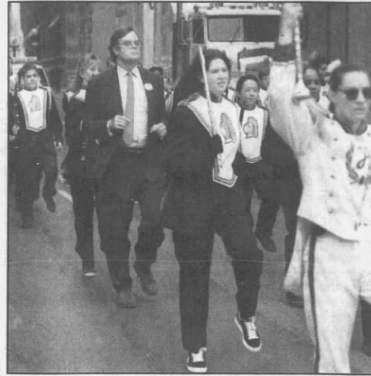
He's come "to love and resent" the folks who people Lake Wobegon, "just like one does one's own family."

Keillor is bringing his gang of regulars to Austin: actor Tim Russell, Richard Dworsky and the Guy's All-Star Shoe Band, and sound-effects wizard Tom Keith. Writer Roy Blount Jr., a frequent "Prairie Home Companion" guest, also will appear. The show will feature as well some of the cream of the Austin music crop — the Derailers, Don Walser and the Pure Texas Band and Tish Hinojosa — all of whom Keillor had a hand in choosing.

"I listened to them all," he said. "I was very taken by this group the Derailers. They really pick up that old rockabilly music and make it go. Don Walser, I love his voice, and he's an artist. I think you really have to go to Texas to get. Tish Hinojosa we've had on a couple of

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— Garrison Keillor,  
creator of 'A Prairie Home Companion'



Richard Sennott/Minneapolis Star Tribune

Keillor's fame for creating the fictional all-American town of Lake Wobegon won him an invitation to march in a parade inaugurating new trolley service in St. Paul, Minn.

### Ticket information

A very limited number of tickets that had been blocked off for technical equipment have been released for the live taping of "A Prairie Home Companion," as presented by Minnesota Public Radio and Austin's KUT Radio. The tickets will be sold in a rush line at the UT Bass Concert Hall box office at noon Saturday for the 4:45 p.m. show, which will air on KUT 90.5 FM at 5 p.m.

times before, so the show is really heavy on talent."

"A Prairie Home Companion" has become an American radio institution and perhaps the last major vestige of a time when radio was the nation's source for variety entertainment. There will come a day when Keillor finally leaves Lake Wobegon, but don't expect that to happen soon.

He tried to end "Prairie Home Companion" in 1987, "but I

realized very quickly once I had walked away from it that I had left for the wrong reasons, and that I really had a lot more that I wanted to do, and I wasn't content with letting it be at that point." The show resumed in 1989 as "The American Radio Company" broadcasting from New York City, where the rural-life humorist exercised his more urbane tendencies. (Keillor still maintains an apartment on the Upper West Side.) In 1993 he returned to Minnesota, and the show resumed its original name.

"I'm sort of an indolent person, and I'm looking forward to the time when I can indulge that," he said. "But I want to let go of the show, of course, when it is my idea, and I want to do it before the posse arrives. I don't want to leave it with regret, and I would really like to have somebody else take it over."

Until that day, Lake Wobegon and its lovably odd populace will continue to live on in the imagination of Keillor and his listeners and readers, reminding us of the glory days of radio, and as well, perhaps, even America itself.