

Now content to stay with "A Prairie Home Companion," the public radio star is taking his show across America this summer.



Garrison Keillor lives in Wisconsin, but his fame rests on memories of Minnesota.

"Wobegon Boy", Keillor's latest book, was published last year.

# ON THE ROAD WITH Garrison Keillor

By MARC FISHER  
WASHTON POST

It's been nearly a quarter-century now since Garrison Keillor began to report the news from Lake Wobegon, play music you don't normally hear on the radio and recall for listeners the stories of the hometown they remember fondly, yet have never set foot in.

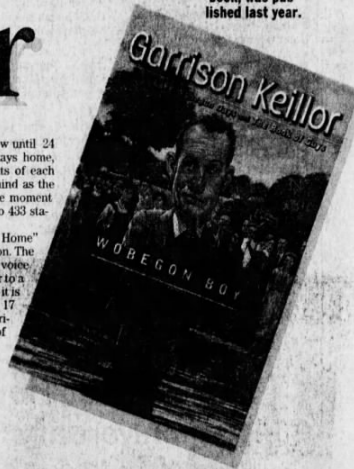
This summer, Keillor is again taking "A Prairie Home Companion," his public radio variety show, to college auditoriums, civic centers and grand old theaters in small towns and big cities, to audiences of graying hippies and proper, silver couples, graduate students and young professionals.

The tall, reluctant man, whose tales have changed the way many parents tell their kids

stories, doesn't join his cast and crew until 24 hours before show time. Keillor stays home, deep in composition, the ingredients of each week's monologue shifting in his mind as the hours slip toward Saturday at 5, the moment the satellite sends "Prairie Home" to 433 stations and 2.5 million listeners.

In a way unique to radio, "Prairie Home" is the reflection of a single imagination. The show is Keillor, a single, hesitant voice that ranges from a thin upper register to a baritone rumble. But in another way, it is a theatrical extravaganza. It takes 17 people, a semi full of crates, five Oriental rugs, a cardboard box full of

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The Rest

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gravel and coconut shells, and assorted bands, writers, producers and stagehands to put "Prairie Home Companion" on the air each week. And it is another member of the Keillor clan who is in charge here.

While the elder Keillor, now 55, struggled to summon stories from his increasingly thin memories of a Minnesota youth, his son Jason, the "Prairie Home" stage manager, is in Austin, Texas, this particular week, preparing the set.

"I was born and bred to be on the show," says the younger Keillor, who discusses his father with a mix of pride and resentment. "When my parents divorced in '76, I only saw my dad on weekends, so I'd get picked up on Friday and spend the weekend with the show." At 9, Jason was making popcorn and selling concessions; at 16, he was typing scripts. Now, at 29, he directs traffic onstage, records some sound effects and on his own writes some prose—but not for publication.

"I love the medium of radio," he says. "It's something from my childhood, and I love the idea that 3,000 people will get on their feet shouting for something that 3 million people are listening to on the radio."

## Still Ambivalent

"The father, so dear, so doubting about himself and his creation, still seems ambivalent about the show and its following."

Keillor silenced "Prairie Home" in 1987, closed up shop and moved to Copenhagen to live with wife No. 2, a Dane he'd first met when she was a high school exchange student in his home town of Anoka, Minn. Two years later, Keillor was back on the air. Now, happy with wife No. 3 and

an infant daughter, he talks about continuing well into the new century, but there is more than a little reluctance in his voice.

If in the mid-1980s "Prairie Home" was attracting an audience of nearly 5 million listeners and Keillor was on the cover of Time, hailed as some kind of new American bard, these days the show and its father are content to be what they are—a live oasis in the arid, canned soundscapes of radio, a show, gentle, acoustic show in an era of frenzied, electric entertainment spectacles.

"There's no buzz about the show whatsoever," Keillor says, "and that's actually much better for the audience and, God knows, for me. It's not a steppingstone to anything."

"Prairie Home" is a constant, a standby, a dependable. It is one of public radio's biggest moneymakers, lagging behind only "Car Talk" and "Marketplace" in its ability to wrangle contributions from listeners. It is a ratings powerhouse, the flagship of an American subculture, far outdrawing Keith Obermann's nightly scandal wrap-up on MSNBC, sometimes matching the audience of Fox's Saturday baseball Game of the Week.

## Neighborhood of the Air

"Prairie Home" has become a neighborhood of the air, an answer to an American desire to fence off a small portion of the cultural landscape as a refuge from the coarseness, cynicism and irony that are postmodern life. Keillor's America is one of jokes you can tell your kids, and camp songs and sing-alongs and "Talent From Towns Under 2,000," of fiddlers, polka dancers, rockabilly bands, jazz trios and classical cellists, poets and playwrights, accordionists and humorists, and radio men such as sturdy storyteller Studs Terkel and the dazzling and

dependable sound effects guy Tom Keith.

At 6:30 p.m. on a recent Friday, Keillor arrives at the Austin airport, his lanky, slightly stooped body shrouded in a heavily wrinkled black suit, his long feet exposed by Birkenstock sandals. He is unshaven, hurried from travel, heavy of brow, utterly without pleasantries.

The "Prairie Home" staff is fiercely protective of Keillor, eager to explain to outsiders why he seems distant, grumpy, even rude.

"You see, he's always writing in his head, so any time you're talking to Garrison, you're interrupting his writing," says Katy Reckdahl, the show's marketing director.

## Quick Rehearsal

At 7:35, actor Tim Russell, sound effects man Keith, pianist Rich Dworsky, producer Christine Tschida and assorted others gather for their first look at the sketches, ad parodies and other bits Keillor has written on the plane.

Quickly, the actors try out the bits, including a "Lives of the Cowboys" sketched in which a renegade is lynched by being locked in the out-house with the works of Thomas Pynchon; an ad for ketchup in which a husband and wife rediscover love and the simple life by forsaking seven kinds of salsa and coming home to "ketchup on a piece of white bread"; and an ad for Bebobareep Rihuhar Pie, in which Keith will bark like a dog, screech like a grackle, squeak like a bat, yell like a mob of teenagers and rumble like a pack of Harley-Davidsons.

The rehearsal is over in 35 minutes.

Saturday begins with bad news. One of the three musical guests, Texas singer Don Walser, has canceled because of laryngitis. At the morning production meeting, Tschida is unfazed. The show always has too much material anyway.

## No-Script Monologue

Back at his hotel, Keillor writes his monologue. "The News From Lake Wobegon," a staple of the show's second hour, runs 15 to 25 minutes and is delivered without script, just Keillor on a stool, facing the audience, occasionally closing his eyes to summon the story.

He looks as if he is spinning the tale as he speaks, but in fact he has written the story out at least twice, sometimes more. It is the hardest part of the show, and the most important.

"With this show," Keillor says, "you're writing in these several different veins—a song lyric, some commercials, each with its own distinct form, and then you get this little odd, off-balance, prelude, and then there's the 'News From Lake Wobegon.' It's all you can do to get the stuff to come out decent, just to try not to be fatuous and dorky. And try to make the 'News From Lake Wobegon' as faithful as possible to a town, even though you're sitting in a Marriott in Austin, Texas."

Three hours before the broadcast, there's a lull. Keillor is still at the hotel. The stage crew sits around trading inside jokes.



Garrison Keillor autographs a copy of his new book, "Wobegon Boy," for Tom Lundvall of West Des Moines. Lundvall's daughter, Alexandra, waits atop her father's shoulders.

## Guided Missile

Suddenly, Keillor, who looks as though he's slept in his clothes, rushes onstage, straight to the microphone front and center. He sees Tejuano singer Tish Hinojosa and asks if she'll read a part in the ketchup ad.

"I'll try my best," the singer says. Keillor whips out a disk containing new versions of several scripts. While copies are made, he hurries through a rewritten song with his band. The ditty is still wobbly after four rehearsals, but time is short, so Keillor says, "Well, nothing can go wrong with that, right? It's like a guided missile," and moves on.

Tschida, stopwatch in hand, times

"You see, he's always writing in his head, so any time you're talking to Garrison, you're interrupting his writing."

—Katy Reckdahl

"Prairie Home"

Marketing director

each rehearsal. On her laptop, she adds up the songs and bits and, less than 90 minutes before performance, she shapes the order of the show—which, if he is true to form, Keillor will juggle dramatically even as the show progresses.

A little more than an hour to go, and Keillor has an idea. "Just gonna make a few cuts," he says, and now he is slashing paragraphs and lines out of scripts, leaving actors to peer over his shoulder for some notion of what they will soon perform for millions.

With 56 minutes left, and the host crumpled, unshaven and mid-rehearsal, reluctantly moves offstage, looks at the rundown Tschida has prepared, and starts crossing out some items and moving others. "I want to put the cowboys here, get the other Dealers here son-in."

## Jalapeno Eating Champ

The first members of the audience file in, and those with seats onstage walk right past the bedraggled host. "My goodness, the choir's arrived,"

Keillor deadpans.

One audience member introduces himself to Keillor as Smokey Joe Milan.

"The world jalapeno eating champion?" Keillor asks.

"Yes."

"How many is that?"

"At 138 in an hour."

"What's that like?"

"Difficult."

"I think I'm going to have you stand up and take a bow," Keillor says, and finally he steps away to shave, dress and go over his monologue.

The curtain rises and he steps off the front porch, resplendent in trademark red tie, red socks and black suit. He is closely shaven now, though the stubborn black forelock already droops to his brow. He looks onto a sea of smiles.

He compliments the audience for its home town's "handsome" trees and parks. Austin, he says, "is a designated refuge for liberals," a line that wins cheers of pride. He pokes fun at the backwardness of the Texas Legislature, Smokey Joe the jalapeno eater gets his moment of fame, and the bands play their tunes.

Keillor is a distant, if polite, host. He neither lingers onstage with his guests nor speaks to anyone offstage. He introduces humorist Roy Blount Jr., a friend and frequent guest, to read from his new memoir. "People are going to read that book and think they know you," Keillor says in mock, but quite real, shock. Keillor would no sooner write a memoir than share the stage with Howard Stern.

At the start of the second hour, Keillor reads the greetings—scraps of paper on which the live audience has scribbled birthday wishes and parental admonitions—including this to Ross in Chicago: "Please do not write any more letters to editors of alternative newspapers. The Lord and I are not amused. Love, Mom."

## Four Pleasures

A few seconds before he must step back onstage, he walks past Tschida and says, "Out at 9:45," meaning he will finish in exactly 23 minutes 49 seconds. He tucks the script back in his pocket, strolls on, positions the red stool and says in that soft, airy

voice, "It's been a quiet week in Lake Wobegon, my home town."

A wave of applause is rewarded with a story that weaves together the tale of a young girl desperate to move on, a pastor who just won recognition for "best sermon by a pastor from a town of under 2,000 people," a prom date, a ne'er-do-well slo-pitch softball team, a beauty salon where the ladies sat under beehive dryers, and, always, "topo, hope."

Along the way, Keillor slips in a crack about the Unitarian Church, "which is sort of like (cable's) Fishing Channel, or like the Fishing Channel would be if they didn't actually put hooks in the fish, but just talked about it." And he lists the four chief pleasures in life—walking through a field of fresh sweet corn; the love of learning; "the one you thought of first"; and the "joy of following in the Lord's will."

Keillor's monologues are not perfect, not classics, but they are the product of a single voice, one made of a story that has become rare in a culture dominated by the collaborative storytelling of film and TV. "A simple narrative has power," Keillor says. "That's when radio comes into its close-up."

The show ends, as ever, with a shower of applause. Keillor dismounts backstage to change clothes while his fans linger at the foot of the stage, hoping for an autograph. In an hour, the stage will be struck, and driver Russ Engsbak's semi will be packed, ready to roll on into the Rockies. In the morning, Keillor will fly home, to his place in rural Wisconsin, where he will mill next Saturday's story.

## Keillor on retirement

On four occasions, Garrison Keillor has stepped away from "A Prairie Home Companion," intent on devoting himself entirely to writing.

"The time I really quit big time, 1987, I had what just about every writer would claim that he wanted," he said. "When I walked away, I had money to support myself, all the time in the world, I was living in Copenhagen, utter privacy. And yet you find yourself in that ideal situation, and after a few months you start to panic. Where's the great stuff you were going to write under those conditions? You learn things about yourself you were hoping not to find out. You overestimate your own capabilities, and I certainly did, like just about every other person ever ignited by an ambition to be a writer and write the Great American Novel."

"I'm not going to."

And so he came back. And he will stay, at least for the foreseeable future. He has spent the bulk of his adult life on the radio, and while he continues to publish books—the latest, "Wobegon Boy," is the first in 13 years to return to the characters made famous by his radio monologues—Keillor now seems comfortable being what he is, a distinctive American voice, a humorist and storyteller in the tradition of Mark Twain and Will Rogers, and a writer whose best medium is radio.

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