

# Garrison Keillor Spins Out a Spirited Songbook Companion

## POP MUSIC REVIEW

In case anyone stumbled into the Universal Amphitheatre on Wednesday mistakenly expecting a Marilyn Manson concert or something, there was one sure tip-off that they were in the wrong place: A young woman in the audience sat before the show knitting. And though her needles would have been confiscated as weapons at a rock event, they seemed the perfect, peaceful accessory to see Garrison Keillor spin yarns and, as part of his Hopeful Gospel Quartet, sing earthy bass in what was essentially a revival-tent version of his weekly "Prairie Home Companion" public radio show.

With fellow singers Kate MacKenzie and couple Robin and Linda Williams, the statuesque Keillor—who performs at the Irvine Barclay Theatre on Sunday—showed an earnest appreciation for the gospel form, weaving a presentation of harmonized songs from Euro-American Protestant traditions of the Midwest and South, illustrated with tales (some likely as tall as he is) of his fictionalized Lake Wobegon, Minn.

It was spirited, if not exactly

spiritual, more about the aesthetics of the material than the struggles and faith behind it, a typical limitation of his trademark mix of homespun and urbane. And it was largely missing the rough edges that make the originals so compelling.

The ensemble, backed by a pianist and bassist, was strongest in a country-styled medley that closed the show's first half, with MacKenzie's slight twang evoking Patsy Cline.

Most of the depth and edges came instead in Keillor's "News From Lake Wobegon" segment, this time an apparently true reminiscence of his small-town childhood that made full use of his gift for shaggy-dog digressions, sardonic wit and sly punch lines.

It's his devotion to these idyllic yet twisted roots that holds his true spirituality. And on the musical end, oddly, it was in going outside the rural/gospel repertoire for an encore of the Coasters' "Under the Boardwalk" that the foursome—and the sparse crowd, not even halfway filling the 6,200-seat facility—really seemed to get religion.

—STEVE HOCHMAN

■ Garrison Keillor performs Sunday at the Irvine Barclay Theater, 4242 Campus Drive. 7 p.m. SOLD OUT. (949) 854-4646.