

# HOPING<sup>to</sup> HEAVEN

Radio star Garrison Keillor brings his gospel quartet and the news from Lake Wobegon to Starlight.

By Steve Hall  
TVRADIO EDITOR

**L**eave the lesbians, the sex talk and the O.J. Simpson jokes to Howard Stern. Garrison Keillor would rather talk about . . . gospel music sing-alongs?

This is the music that was a part of Sunday night meetings at our church and also that our family would sing around the piano," said the host of public radio's *A Prairie Home Companion*. He will perform with the Hopeful Gospel Quartet at Starlight Summerstage at 8 p.m. Friday.

The show will feature Keillor's 40-minute monologue "News from Lake Wobegon" — the mythical small town that we all wish we were from — as well as other humorous material such as a hymn to sweet corn.

## The Hopeful Gospel Quartet

**When:** 8 p.m. Friday  
**Where:** Starlight Summerstage, Butler University  
**Tickets:** \$32 and \$20, (317) 253-8400.

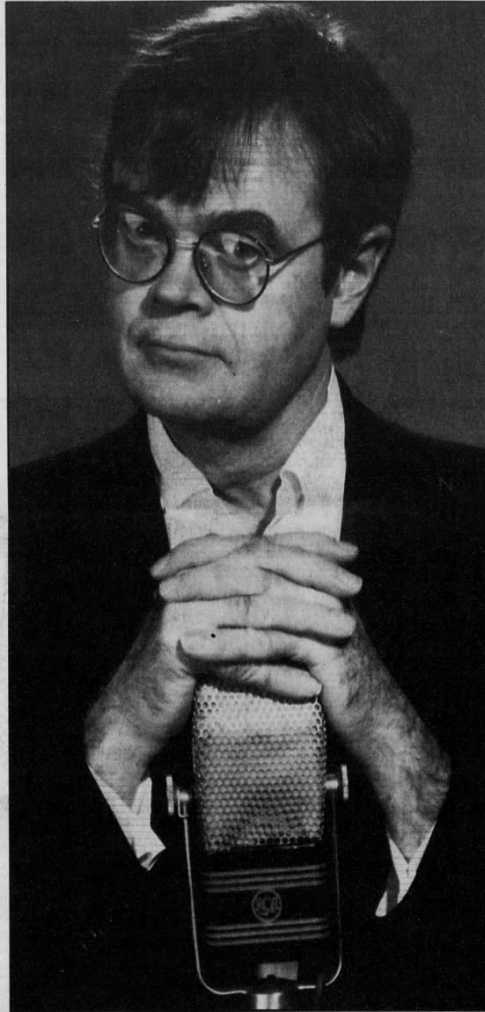
The other half of the concert will feature the singing of Keillor, Kate MacKenzie and husband-and-wife folk singers Robin and Linda Williams. These self-described "masters of stairwell harmony" began appearing together as a quartet on *FHC* 15 years ago, but haven't toured in a decade.

They'll perform Southern gospel songs such as *My Rock* and *Softly and Tenderly* and nontraditional numbers, such as Creedence Clearwater Revival's *Long As I Can See the Light*, in a gospel style.

The tall, reluctant Keillor, 56, sings bass in the quartet. During a telephone interview from a tour stop in San Francisco, he spoke in that same hushed, hesitant voice he uses to kick off each edition of *News from Lake Wobegon*.

"Gospel music is a music of particular kindness and wisdom, a music that believes in there being boundaries in life and a music that is directed away from oneself and feelings and moods and directed toward God," he said, explaining its appeal to him. "This is a great tonic at a time when people are unusually absorbed in themselves."

"And when we sing, we have fun doing it. Most of these songs we only got to do once on *Prairie Home Companion*, because then the next time the quartet



## Keillor History

**Born:** Gary Edward Keillor, Aug. 7, 1942 in Anoka, Minn.

**Host:** Public radio's *A Prairie Home Companion*, (1974-1987, 1993-present). Locally on WFYI-FM, (90.1), from 6-8 p.m. Saturdays, and 10 a.m. to noon Sundays.

**The Writer's Almanac,** heard daily on WFYI-FM. **American Radio Co.,** (1989-1992).

**Books:** (partial list) *Happy to Be Here* (1982), *Lake Wobegon Days* (1985), *Leaving Home* (1987), *We Are Still Married* (1989), *The Book of Guys* (1993), *Wobegon Boy* (1997).

**Recordings:** (partial list) *Gospel Birds and Other Stories of Lake Wobegon* (1987), *Ain't that Good News* (1987), *A Prairie Home Companion 20th Anniversary Collection* (1994), *A Prairie Home Christmas* (1995), *3 Dozen Poems* (1996) and two CDs featuring the Hopeful Gospel Quartet.

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File Photo

## KEILLOR

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got together we felt compelled to have something new. It's quite a luxury for us to do these songs night after night."

The expanded *News from Lake Wobegon* will be welcomed by fans, who endure *PHC* reruns from mid-July until the live broadcast resumes Oct. 4 at the Fitzgerald Theater in St. Paul, Minn. In Indianapolis, the show airs on WFYI-FM (90.1) from 6 p.m. to 8 p.m. Saturdays and 10 a.m. to noon Sundays.

Keillor's fictional stories, drawn from his Minnesota youth, embody why Americans love *PHC*. The humor — about a pastor who wins a prize for "best sermon by a pastor from a town under 2,000 people," church pitch-in dinners and a ne'er-do-well slow-pitch softball team — is gentle, yet wise.

Parents feel utterly comfortable sharing *PHC* with their kids — something you can't say about most radio or TV shows in coarse, cynical 1998 America. And there is a unity and community in the fictional Lake Wobegon that many in our fractionalized society crave.

Steven Beebe, a professor of speech communication at Southwest Texas State University, told the *Washington Post* that Keillor's monologues "provide just enough detail to make us believe in Lake Wobegon, but not too much to make it seem just his . . . He puts up the scaffolding; we have to put up the siding ourselves."

### Imaginations work

Keillor agreed that leaving details to listeners' imaginations is a big reason the monologues work. "In telling a story on the radio, you draw outlines, you hint at some colors and give certain shape to things," he said. "You don't want to do more than that. The sort of descriptive passages that you commonly find in prose fiction would be, in the aural form, tedious and unnecessary."

On radio, *News from Lake Wobegon* normally runs 15 to 25 minutes. Keillor writes the script out at least twice, sometimes more, but when he takes the stage he delivers it without script, sitting on a stool, facing the audience, sometimes closing his eyes to



Carmen Quesada

**REVIVAL:** The Hopeful Gospel Quartet, Garrison Keillor, Linda Williams, Kate Mackenzie and Robin Williams, is touring together for the first time in 15 years.

summon the story.

Keillor never memorizes the monologue. "I put down some free-association images in a kind of structure to give myself an idea of the piece, but then I go out and make it up as I go along, talk my way through it," he said. "The exact words don't matter as long as you know where you're going."

In those rare instances when he hits a snag and loses his train of thought, Keillor "goes into a little circular holding pattern. I double around and repeat myself a little bit, to give myself a half a minute or so to think." (And we thought he did this for effect.)

"If I still can't remember, I just strike out on my own and hope I'll remember where I'm headed. But that almost never happens."

Keillor says he's more comfortable with *PHC* and his role in it than he has been in years. "There's no buzz about the show whatsoever, which means there is no pressure on the show and, thankfully, on me," he said.

By contrast, in the mid-1980s the show was attracting an audience of nearly 5 million listeners and Keillor was on the cover of *Time*. He says now that he got too wrapped up in the show and burned himself out.

"According to Scripture, everyone should take a sabbatical; one is meant to rest," he said. "I went for 13 years without taking a sabbatical, and working much harder for that time than I had any business trying to do. Writers are

not supposed to overwork themselves. Writers need to have time to shut down and walk around the park and look at the ducks."

In 1987, a frustrated Keillor silenced the show and moved to Copenhagen to live with wife number two, a Dane he'd first met when she was a high-school exchange student in his home town of Anoka, Minn. The author of such books as *Leaving Home* and *Lake Wobegon Days* planned to write full time.

### Panic in Copenhagen

"When I walked away, I had money to support myself, all the time in the world and, in Copenhagen, utter privacy," he said. "And yet, in that ideal situation, you start to panic after a few months because all this great stuff you were planning to write is just not coming. I overestimated my own capabilities, like just about every other person who thought they had the talent and ambition to write the Great American Novel."

Two years later, Keillor was back on the air.

Now, living in rural Wisconsin with wife number three and an infant daughter, he makes fewer *PHC* shows a year but enjoys it more. He talks of *PHC* continuing into the next century. He seems to have accepted his role as an American humorist and storyteller in the tradition of Mark Twain and Will Rogers — one whose medium just happens to be the radio.