



Garrison Keillor may treat tomorrow night's audience to a couple of songs about cats.

Prairie home companion to open Louisville Orchestra's Bank One Pops season

By **ANDREW ADLER**
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"I BELIEVE IN LOOKING really straight in the eye and denying it," Garrison Keillor once remarked. Millions of listeners probably hope he never stops.

Since his opening broadcast of "A Prairie Home Companion" 24 years ago, in such books as "Lake Wobegon Days" and in countless essays for The New Yorker and other magazines, Keillor has been one of this era's prime commentators on the American landscape. He tells stories that resonate as gently and deeply as the unmistakable voice behind them.

Indeed, some of his fans have compared that voice to an instrument in a symphony orchestra, weaving tales like a soloist in a concerto. Little wonder, then, that he'll be performing tomorrow night when the Louisville Orchestra opens its Bank One Pops season at the Louisville Palace.

His format, however, can be a surprise to patrons accustomed to conventional musical guests. Consider, for example, what the Los Angeles Times' Martin Bernheimer wrote some years ago:

"Did I say Keillor made his debut with the (Los Angeles) Philharmonic? That's not quite accurate. He made his debut in front of the Philharmonic.

"HE DIDN'T CONDUCT the orchestra or play an instrument ... he just did a little talking and a little singing. He was determinedly casual. He talked about music, exuding quiet charm, subtle wit and — though he might not want to admit it — obvious sophistication." Even if Keillor then proceeded to "warble Carmen's 'Habanera' (and) sing two songs about cats."

You also can glean a lot about Keillor by turning on your computer. A recent search of the Internet revealed 4,469 "Garrison Keillor" hits on the Web, including an intriguing transcript from a live "chat" he did on America Online in January 1996. Some excerpts:

"I grew up in Lake Wobegon, a town where the Lutherans drive Fords, the Catholics drive Chevies, and if you drove something else, you were watched pretty closely."

A fan typed, "Mr. Keillor, I love your show. ... I also share your concern about conservatives trying to homogenize society to conform to their values system. Do you think it's a liberal-conservative thing, though, or something

If you go...

Tickets to the Louisville Orchestra's Bank One Pops concert tomorrow at 8 p.m. at the Louisville Palace, 625 S. Fourth St., are \$22-\$49. For reservations, call the orchestra box office at (502) 568-1111.

deeper? How do the arts tie in?"

"It's a religious question," Keillor replied. "And the arts are the major religious expression of our time. If you're a religious person, you have a strong sense of evil. And you don't welcome its spread. I write my monologues to try to get the ACLU (American Civil Liberties Union) to sue me for using public money for a religious purpose. At this point in my career, I desperately need a lawsuit." He followed this up a few moments later by declaring, "The problem isn't censorship, it's how to say anything worthwhile in the first place."

KEILLOR HAS FOUND plenty to say since being born in the Minnesota town of Anoka on Aug. 7, 1942. A veteran of Minnesota Public Radio, which hired him in 1969, he seems perfectly matched to a medium where sound is everything.

This also is a man who cherishes quietness. Consider what he writes in one biographical confession:

"I live with my wife (Jenny Lind Nilsson) in a log cabin in Wisconsin that was built by Swedish immigrants a century ago and sits in a grove of aspen trees, on a dirt road that I walk up every morning to get to my studio, a tiny frame house on stilts. The windows look out at the trees and a meadow that rises to a crest and disappears. It's pretty there, and I find myself becoming more and more of a recluse.

"I sit in there and think about Lake Wobegon and radio, and in the evening I like to cook and open a bottle of red wine and eat and talk and play Scrabble, go for a walk, read a book, doze off, and then the sun comes up and I walk up the road again.

"I can tell that I'm going to be an awfully strange old man someday, grumpy and given to odd habits and strange hours, eating beans out of the can for breakfast and talking to houseplants and compiling a dictionary of Verbal Abuse and Insult and writing a novel with a steam iron as narrator. I hope to postpone this awhile, but it's coming."