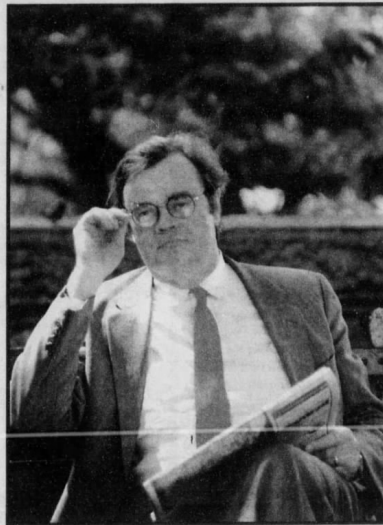


Cover Story



GARRISON KEILLOR

The 'Prairie Home Companion'
wit performs here Sunday —
and if he's lucky, samples
a little lutefisk, too.

BY SENIOR EDITOR

JIM MEMMOTT

There is, as always, news from Lake Wobegon. For one thing, that Keillor boy — you know, Garrison Keillor, the writer and storyteller — has been busy. Really busy.

His weekly public radio show, *A Prairie Home Companion*, is on more than 400 stations, including WXXI-AM and FM in Rochester.

Keillor's new book, *Me, by Jimmy (Big Boy) Valente, Governor of Minnesota. As told to Garrison Keillor* (Viking, \$15.95),

TURN TO PAGE **3**

The following story contains an error. Correction page follows.

Thursday, April 15, 1999 **Weekend 3**

Cover Story

GARRISON KEILLOR

FROM COVER

is doing well. And he's coming here for a special performance at 4:30 p.m. Sunday at the Eastman Theatre. Keillor is donating his services for the show, which benefits the Eastman School of Music scholarship fund. Philip Brunelle, Keillor's longtime friend and collaborator, will lead the New Eastman Symphony, the graduate-student orchestra.

Sunday's performance will be a mix of music and talk, and, you betcha, a Lake Wobegon monologue.

"I want to talk a little bit about growing up in Lake Wobegon," he says in a phone interview.

Keillor actually did his childhood time in Anoka, Minn., but he has been giving the news from the imaginary Lake Wobegon, Minn., "the town that time forgot and the decades can't improve," for so many years that fact and fiction have blended.

"I want to talk about when I started imagining myself as a writer, how I started out writing," Keillor continues in his deep, sleepy voice. "In my memory, which is faulty, the coagulating event was a family scandal. It inspired me to write."

Trouble in paradise

A scandal? Did it involve a Jello mold? Was it something to do with bachelor farmers or ice fishing or Ralph's Pretty Good Grocery Store, where if you can't find it you probably can get along without it?

"It was the usual scandal back then," Keillor explains. "Young people jumping the gun. Young people who couldn't wait to get to the promised land."

Keillor does not make clear where that promised land is. One suspects that it is not Duluth.

"It was a great unforeseen drama in our midst," Keillor adds. "And it was a crisis and drama that moved a person to write. Do that and you get into the habit of writing."

Jesse the Guv

And what a habit it has been. Keillor has written so books,

including *Lake Wobegon Days* (1985), *The Book of Guys* (1993) and *The Man Who Loved Cheese* (1996).

Me, by Jimmy (Big Boy) Valente came out last month. The satire has fun with last year's most unlikely non-Montica political story, the election of professional wrestler Jesse "The Body" Ventura as governor of Minnesota.

"It's kind of a luxury to have a governor who's a loose cannon and something of a lout and rather a disaster," Keillor says.

Before the book came out, Ventura told a newspaper that he was upset that Keillor hadn't asked his permission to take his image in vain. "To me that's cheating," Ventura explained.

Later, Ventura said he was A-OK with the book: "He makes Minnesota proud, you know. I have no problem."

But if a professional wrestler can become governor of Minnesota, why can't a professional storyteller?

Keillor declines the nomination: "I can't imagine a worse life than being a governor. . . Besides, I like my life. I'm able to walk around and look at things and get up in the morning and have no urgent plans whatsoever. I can just hop from one rock to the next rock."

'Hymns of complaint'

Keillor does have an assignment for his performance here. For the past few months he's been working long-distance with Tellif Johnson, an Eastman School of Music composition student.

Johnson is writing the music for a 15- to 20-minute work to be performed by the New Eastman Symphony Sunday. Keillor is supplying the words that he'll read along to the music.

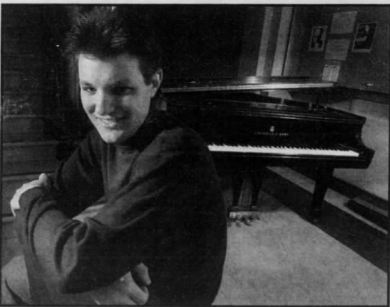
"He's a very responsible young man," Keillor says of Johnson. "He's been coaxing me to do my part. He's like the teacher, and I'm late with my work. But I'll come through."

Coaxed and prompted, Keillor gives away some details of that yet untitled work:

"It's about winter," Keillor says. "He's written some storm music, and I've written some new words to some old hymns to



Courtesy of A Prairie Home Companion



ANDREA MELENDEZ, staff photographer

Words and music Tellif Johnson (above), an Eastman School of Music composition student, is writing a 15- to 20-minute work to accompany a monologue that Garrison Keillor (top) will deliver when he performs here on Sunday. "It's about winter," says Keillor.

make them hymns of complaint rather than praise."

Johnson, 21, has no complaints about his famous co-author.

"He's such a great artist," says Johnson, who is from Brookings, S.D. "I really relate to what he writes. It's part of my culture and where I grew up. But I like the way he blends folksy Midwestern humor with high art. . . There are a lot of different layers to his work."

Lutherans everywhere

Ralph Anderson, pastor of the Lutheran Church of the Incarnate Word on East Avenue in Rochester, also relates to Keillor's work.

"I grew up in a small Swedish community in central Kansas that's almost identical to Lake Wobegon," Anderson says. "I just feel like I know what he's talking about."

Like the residents of Lake

Companionable

What: A special performance by Garrison Keillor, host of *A Prairie Home Companion*, the public radio variety show.

Where: The Eastman Theatre, 60 Gibbs St.

When: Sunday, 4:30 p.m.

Helping out: The New Eastman Symphony, guest-conducted by Philip Brunelle, will play several pieces. Included will be a new work for narrator and orchestra written by Tellif Johnson, an Eastman School of Music senior. Keillor will narrate.

Proceeds: The show is a benefit for the Eastman School of Music Scholarship Fund.

Tickets: Prices range from \$15 to \$35 (\$60 tickets are sold out), with a \$10 discount on most tickets for current University of Rochester faculty, staff and students. All tickets are available at Ticket Express, 100 East Ave. (222-5000).

On the air

What: *A Prairie Home Companion*, Garrison Keillor's weekly public radio show.

Where: WXXI-FM (91.5) and WXXI-AM (1370).

When: From 6 to 8 p.m. Saturdays on WXXI-FM, and rebroadcast from noon to 2 p.m. Sundays on WXXI-AM.

Wobegon, many of the people in Anderson's hometown (Lindsborg, Kan.) are Lutherans.

Rochester doesn't seem to be full of Lutherans, but appearances can be deceiving, Keillor suggests.

"You could have them and just not be aware of them," he says. "They are very modest people and believe in self-denial and humility. They are also people who know how to make themselves invisible. It's their peculiar gift."

That and lutefisk. Scandinavians — many of them Lutherans — have a thing about lutefisk, cod that's dried in lye and then boiled for consumption around Christmastime.

"I grew up with it," Anderson says. "I like a lot of Swedish food. Lutefisk wasn't my favorite. You participate out of tradition. I eat as little as possible."

Nonetheless, Anderson helps his church put together a lutefisk dinner every year at Christmastime, a celebration that Keillor has noted at least twice on *A Prairie Home Companion*.

Anderson isn't sure how Keillor found out, but he's going to invite Keillor to drop over when he's in Rochester.

Maybe Tellif Johnson could come, too.

Three Midwestern guys, eating lutefisk, trading tales, singing hymns, right here in Rochester, not all that far, really, from Lake Wobegon, Keillor's hometown. □