

'Prairie Home Companion' is 25

By Brita Lambert
SAINT PAUL, PIONEER PRESS WRITER

For his part, Garrison Keillor, has informed the press, he'll be making a special observance of the 25th anniversary of "A Prairie Home Companion."

No self-congratulatory interviews of the People magazine and "Entertainment Tonight" variety, with Keillor expelling personal demons like cartridges from an automatic rifle. No smiling shots of the Keillors at home on their designer-approved settee.

He doesn't do that kind of thing, Thank God.

After 25 years, Saturday evening was just another date, and he celebrated it with another show. You can decide for yourself how much of this is another example of Keillor's quirky contrarian personality. The guy who makes left turns where others invariably go right.

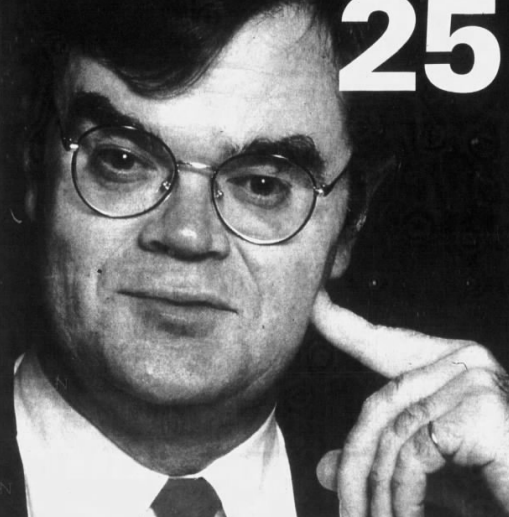
But we can agree he's earned it. A quarter century going your own way is a long ways down roads most other people never dare explore. Much has been written about Keillor's significance to the personality of Minnesota. If it weren't for him, we really would be stuck with Bob Dylan and The Artist Formerly Known as Prince as our primary cultural ambassadors. Imagine that. If you have a problem with quirks and idiosyncrasies.

Likewise, there's not much mystery about his value to the Minnesota Public Radio empire, arguably the most successful entity of its kind in the country. Ditta the entire public radio network, which continues to regard him and "PHC" as one of its two or three most popular programs and influential fund-raising vehicles.

But Keillor's value to what passes for breadth of expression on contemporary American radio itself can't be understated. While a financial success by any estimation, Keillor and "A Prairie Home Companion" hardly compares to the likes of commercial radio cash machines like Howard Stern, Rush Limbaugh and Dr. Laura Schlessinger.

And when you move from there to subjective issues of literary satire, a genuine affinity for American folklore and a resolute determination to build large audiences without pandering, you appreciate Keillor's presence all the more.

That may be like saying, as you stand back for a moment and look at his 25 years of work with



By Casey Saltz
SAINT PAUL, PIONEER PRESS WRITER

Take it from humorist Dave Barry. Do not try to make Garrison Keillor laugh. Barry, a three-time guest on "A Prairie Home Companion," learned this during his first rehearsal with Keillor in the early 1980s in New York.

"I cannot recall ever once making him laugh during that rehearsal," said Barry, a Pulitzer Prize-winning columnist and author. "I remember thinking to myself, 'I am so-not funny. What am I doing on this show?'"

It was no laughing matter when Keillor walked Barry to the elevator after rehearsal.

"He's standing there tall and quiet, getting taller and

Garrison Keillor is not an easy nut to crack up

quieter," Barry said. "And I'm getting shorter and shorter, standing next to this Great American Humorist, and what I mainly produce is booger jokes. I finally said, 'I really don't know what you want me to do on the show.' He looked at me and nodded and said, 'Good night.'"

Just keeps hoeing his row

One thing is clear since the first broadcast of the program in 1974: Barry and millions of other fans who tune in Saturdays still find the prolific author and his radio show funny. But who and what cracks up this 56-year-old tough customer?

The tall, shy guy from Anoka, Minn., is mum on the

Please see Keillor, Page C3

'A Prairie Home Companion' time line

JULY 6, 1974 — Garrison Keillor hosts the first public radio broadcast of "A Prairie Home Companion" in the Wallace Auditorium at Macalester College in St. Paul. Twelve people attend. A ticket cost \$1.50 cents for children. Keillor says writing a story for "The New Yorker" magazine about the Grand Ole Opry inspired him to come up with a musical, variety and comedy show. The show was named after the Prairie Home Cemetery in Moorhead, Minn.

MARCH 4, 1978 — The show moves to the World Theater, 10 E. Exchange St. in downtown St. Paul.

FEB. 17, 1979 — First national broadcast of the show occurs as part of Folk Festival USA in Northrop Auditorium at the University of Minnesota.

1980 — "A Prairie Home Companion" begins weekly national live broadcasts and wins the prestigious George Foster Peabody Award.

1984 — Tenth anniversary celebrated in June with benefit to refurbish World Theater. Show moves temporarily to Orpheum Theater after pieces of World's ceiling start falling onto seats. In the first 10 years, 477 live shows of "A Prairie Home Companion" are produced.

FALL 1985 — Viking publishes "Lake Wobegon Days" in October. Keillor makes the cover of Time magazine Nov. 4. "Heartland Humor: Let's Hear It for Lake Wobegon."

APRIL 26, 1988 — The reopening of the World Theater is celebrated, and "A Prairie Home Companion" is televised for the first time.

FEB. 14, 1987 — Keillor announces he is quitting the show and moving to Denmark with his second wife, claiming the St. Paul Pioneer Press had invaded his privacy and he wished to spend more time writing books.

JUNE 13, 1987 — Keillor and crew broadcast the last show, with such guests as Chet Atkins and Newey's Kammamaba Glee Club. After a short stay in Denmark, he moves to New York City in November. His "Lake Wobegon Days" set of cassettes wins a Grammy for best spoken word recording.

JUNE 1988 — Radio City Music Hall is the site for a "second annual farewell performance" of "PHC." "It was so much fun leaving that we're coming back to say goodbye again," Keillor said at the time.

NOVEMBER 1989 — The radio band starts a show called "The American Radio Company" at the Brooklyn Academy of Music. More than 200 public radio stations eventually carry the show.

MARCH 28, 1992 — Keillor announces the program will return to Minnesota.

1993 — The show resumes using the name "A Prairie Home Companion."

1994 — During the show's 20th anniversary year, Keillor leads a successful drive to rename the World Theater after St. Paul native and author F. Scott Fitzgerald. Nearly two-thirds of each season's 30-plus shows are still performed at the Fitzgerald Theater.

1995 — The show starts its own Internet home page (<http://phc.mpr.org>) in fall. The site has weekly program archives and breaking news about the show. Keillor also uses the site to ask for input or information such as jokes and New Year's resolutions. He writes a monthly online Q&A, "Post to the Host." Fans can e-mail questions (phc@mpr.org). Keillor also has an advice column called "Dear Mr. Blue" for the lovelorn and writers (<http://laion.com>).

APRIL 1986 — "A Prairie Home Companion" launches its first Joke Show. Listeners submit many of the jokes for the popular show. Now there are four volumes of "The Prairie Home Companion Pretty Good Joke Book."

1988 — Keillor and the "PHC" crew begin having a field day with Jesse Ventura, particularly after the former wrestler is elected governor in November.

JULY 3, 1990 — "A Prairie Home Companion" broadcasts live starting at 8 p.m. from Washington, D.C. In the show's 20th year, about 2.7 million U.S. listeners tune in each week for the two-hour broadcast. Nearly 475 public radio stations carry "A Prairie Home Companion," and it's heard abroad on America One and the Armed Forces Network in Europe and the Far East. "When the show started, it was something funny to do with my friends, and then it became an achievement that I hoped would be successful, and now it is a good way of life," says Keillor.

SOURCES: The biography "Garrison Keillor" by Peter A. Scholl (1993), Twayne Publishers, University of Iowa Press; "A Prairie Home Companion" archives and Minnesota Public Radio archives; Pioneer Press archives

THE TRIBUNE, SCRANTON, PA MONDAY, JULY 5, 1999 C3

'Prairie Home Companion'

KEILLOR: Laughing on the inside?

FROM PAGE C1

matter. He declined to be interviewed about the show's quarter-century mark and has yet to arrange a celebration. In a nutshell, he doesn't want to push his luck or test his horn.

He just wants to keep hoeing his row.

Associates and friends say Barry's slapstick style occasionally delights the deadpan storyteller, despite that disastrous first date.

"Deadpan is his thing," Barry quips, "and he has one of the dearest pans around."

Keillor also appreciates a witty turn of phrase or a discomfited version of a quotation or joke. He likes pretty good jokes — even knock-knock jokes — judging from his annual Joke Show each April.

"That's when I see him laugh the most," said "Prairie Home Companion" actor Sue Scott, whose character voices include the American Duct Tape Council spokeswoman and Guy Noir's gal, Sugar. "The show is very loose, and we all just laugh and laugh and laugh."

A chuckle of chuckles

Keillor's best buddies, Southern humorist Roy Blount Jr., hasn't eyeballed a big belly laugh from the radio bard, but he has heard an "extremely interesting chuckle."

"There are chuckles and chuckles, just like there are wines and wines," drawled Blount, a Georgia native who has appeared on "A Prairie Home Companion" as a "foolish, virgin" and national president of the Singing Impaired, among other characters.

"Some people's gravity is much richer and interesting than other people's gravity. Garrison's chuckle is rich and interesting."

But he's not a demonstrative dude, said Stevie Beck, who taught Keillor to play the auto-harp way-back-when and is now associate producer of "A Prairie Home Companion."

"I've never seen him fall down

and pee in his drawers," she said. "He's just not a big knee-slapper."

Operatic singer Vern Sutton, one of the main music men behind "A Prairie Home Companion" over the years, describes a Garrison giggle.

"He starts silently. He usually pulls his chin, then there's a big grin and kind of a giggle in the back of his throat," said Sutton, a professor at the University of Minnesota and former U music school director. "Then he tries to talk through that giggle and build upon" whatever amused him with a comeback.

Another Anoka native amuses the man with her "wickedly sly" sense of humor, according to a Keillor commentary available on the show's Web site (phc.mpr.org). She is violinist and co-author Jenny Lind Nilsson, Keillor's third spouse and mother of their toddler, Maia.

Tempted to tickle fancy

Nilsson, who has performed on the show, co-wrote with Keillor a novel for young adults, "The Sandy Bottom Orchestra."

"She very definitely makes him laugh, not that she always intends to," said Sutton. "She has kind of a high voice and does a strange inflection with certain words that are very funny. ... But that's just the way she says it, and she accepts that it makes him laugh."

It's tough, though, to tame the temptation to tickle the man's fancy.

"You must never try to make him laugh," Sutton said. "He's so astute; he knows when he's being manipulated. He likes to discover the humor himself. He likes to see the humor in life that others don't see and then point it out."

"Prairie Home Companion" actors and guests unwittingly provide comic relief for Keillor, says Scott.

Sometimes the voices don't match what Keillor envisioned when he wrote the scripts, she said. "He gets a chuckle out of the choices we're making, whether it's a wrong choice or such a good choice that it's funnier than he hoped."

During rehearsals Keillor gets a kick out of sound-effects wizard Tom Keith, whose props occasionally misbehave, Scott said. One time Keillor expected to hear the scratch-scratch of a razor while he intoned, "As I was shaving to go to work ..."

Alas, this was not to be, she recalled.

"Without missing a beat, Garrison says, 'As I was buttering my toast with a saber — because it doesn't sound like I'm shaving my face,'" Scott said.

Keith, whose deadpan face rivals the boss's, says he is sometimes taken aback when Keillor finds humor in something he says or does.

"I'm usually surprised it was that funny," said Keith, who started as a sound engineer for Keillor. "But I don't try to make him laugh, because you can be sobered quite quickly."

A dead-on Ventura grin

"Prairie Home Companion" actor Tim Russell's dead-on imitation of Gov. Jesse Ventura is a pretty sure bet to get a grin at least, Keith and others say.

"Ventura has been a godsend," says Russell, a native Minnesotan whose voices include President Clinton, anchorman Ted Koppel, Julia Child, Mister Rogers and Henry Kissinger. "It's a fun voice to do because it's so-o Minn-a-sob-t'n, ya know?"

But there's one voice Russell says he has yet to master — the master's. Did Keillor find it funny?

"I'm doing G.K. was less than efficient," as Russell puts it. "I came out sounding like Bing Crosby on Valium."

Philip Brunelle, artistic director of the Plymouth Music Series of Minnesota, performed on the first-ever show with Keillor and still does occasionally.

"Garrison called and said he wanted someone to help out from time to time who knew classical music and hymns, and I said, 'Well, that's me,'" said Brunelle who, like Keillor, had a conservative Protestant upbringing.

"Then he asked if I really knew hymns. I said, 'I know every hymn you know — it's only a question of who knows more verses.'"

Brunelle and Keillor went on to strike a chord with the public by taking some liberties with hymns and other classical pieces.

But it was mezzo-soprano Janis Hardy and a dog named Freckles who nearly made Keillor keel over once during the show, said Brunelle.

"Janis and her dog came on to do a duet of 'Indian Love Call,' and Garrison just lost it," Brunelle said. "To hear Janis start to sing and the dog start to howl, the audience was up for grabs. But Garrison couldn't speak, he was laughing so hard. It was one of those great moments."

PHC: Marks its 25th year

FROM PAGE C1

"Prairie Home Companion," that he's as valuable for what he hasn't done as for what he has. The Rivertown Trading merchandise machinery notwithstanding, Keillor has by and large avoided transforming himself into a caricature via the kind of cultish, celebrity worship other personalities have manufactured for themselves in such aggressive, calculated ways.

It may be that Keillor's core audience is too smart for that kind of thing. They can get all the rule, "I got mine" know-it-alls they'll ever want at a dozen other stops on the dial. We suspect "PHC" fans remain loyal to Keillor, in part, because, after 25 years, he continues to provide a stark alternative to the crassness and bland hucksterism that blares from so much of commercial radio.

Keillor may be quirky and idiosyncratic, but he's survived all this time with his dignity intact. In the modern marketplace, where people of talent so commonly and willingly sacrifice their dignity for commercial success, that may be the most commendable aspect of his silver anniversary.

www.nepanews.com
NE PA News
Get the Paper Online.

ALASKA CRUISE SALE
CALL FOR DETAILS
963-2020
PROFESSIONAL TRAVEL & TOURS
433 E. DRINKER ST., DUNMORE

TWO ORECK® VACUUMS-ONE LOW PRICE
THE BONUS CORD FREE SPEED IRON
Take the Oreck Challenge. Try it risk free for 15 days. If you don't love it, you don't keep it. There's nothing to lose but the hidden dirt that's embedded in your carpet.
FREE \$99
REGULAR PRICE \$199
ORECK CORD FREE SPEED IRON
ORECK®
FLOOR CARE CENTER
RT. 6 SCR.-C'DALE HIGHWAY
ACROSS FROM BURGER KING
(570) 342-2434
Pine Mall W-8 - (570) 821-0959