

# MINNESOTA SOUP FOR THE RADIO SOUL

## Lake Wobegon visits the Black Hills

BY LORI MYRLAND  
JOURNAL STAFF WRITER

On the phone, Garrison Keillor sounds and speaks just like he does on "A Prairie Home Companion." Or at least he did during a recent phone interview.

He told me a couple of stories and answered any question I asked. He was Minnesota nice.

That isn't always the case with big celebrities. Then again, Keillor doesn't seem to truly think of himself as a celebrity, nor does he think of his show as "big."

It's more of a soup. "A radio show is never big," Keillor responds when asked if he could have known, when the show began 25 years ago, it would be as big as it is today.

"A radio show is always the same size. There's nothing large about it. It is a conversation between us and another family — we can't see them — and they're listening to the radio. We don't broadcast to a big audience in our own minds."

Listeners, no doubt, picture in their minds the Minnesota scenes that Keillor paints with his voice each week. How does he perceive his audience?

"I always imagine people in a kitchen, and they're cooking, they're chopping. I like to make supper on the weekend, and I sort of imagine them making a soup, and I sort of imagine that it's one of those soups that you start out with stock and then put in, you know, whatever you have on hand — onions, of course. And that's kind of what our show is, too, it's just kind of a soup of a show, and it's fairly different from week to week."

### Weekend ritual

Keillor sounds a little surprised at his own success, that so many listeners will take the time on a Saturday afternoon to listen to a radio show when there are Internet auctions, Sony PlayStations and professional wrestling all vying for their time. On a recent show, he noted that "A Prairie Home Companion" originally was broadcast at 5 p.m. on

See Keillor on page D6



Longtime Black Hills musicians **Kenny Hamm**, **Buddy Meredith**, **Walt Copeland** and **Jim Lovell** make up **The Cowboys**. They will sing Western favorites such as "Ghost Riders in the Sky" and "Cool Water" when they appear Saturday on "A Prairie Home Companion" from the Rushmore Plaza Civic Center theater stage in Rapid City.

## South Dakotans will play Western, bluegrass on show

BY LORI MYRLAND  
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If you're searching for the difference between country music and Western music — or if you've always thought they were pretty much the same — Jim Lovell wants you to know differently.

The leader of **The Cowboys**, a group of longtime Black Hills musicians who will appear Saturday, Nov. 20, on "A Prairie Home Companion," sings the music of the West, of cowboys, of herding cattle across the range.

Also joining host Garrison Keillor for the broadcast will be **Becky Schlegel & True Blue**, a bluegrass group now based in St. Paul, Minn. Lovell's brand of music stands for "clean living, hard work and personal honor," and country music is about violating those principles, Lovell said. "They retained the hats and the boots to have a little more dignity."

Music from the Western frontier was written to the beat of a walking horse "just to sooth the old longhorn, because he was an angry beast," Lovell explained. "It goes back to our roots, and of course if it dies, so does a part of America."

When **The Cowboys** take the Rushmore Plaza Civic Center theater stage during the internationally broadcast public radio show, they'll perform standards such as "Cool Water," "Tumblin' Tumbleweeds" and "Ghost Riders in the Sky." The four-

See Bands on page D6



# Keillor: Connecting with just one or two radio listeners at a time

Continued from page D1

Saturday afternoons because the time slot was available at Minnesota Public Radio, sandwiched between two other shows. For many people today, listening to "A Prairie Home Companion" — whatever time it comes on the air — has become a weekend ritual.

"We don't think of ourselves as being big. The show reached a sort of apogee of celebrity back in '86-'87, but celebrity is not the same as long pause success. You know, celebrity is just a white-hot flame of attention. There are people who are very celebrated and everybody knows their name, but if you had to say what they mean or what they stand for, what they say, what they think, you wouldn't be able to. With radio, you have this wonderful medium that is completely overlooked. It has none of the glamour of television or the movies, and yet, you have an audience, and the audience can hear what you say, and what the musicians have to say. They can hear this with such clarity. If you're ever on television, people know that you've been on television and that's exciting, but they don't remember what you said.

"Every so often, a person will come up and say, 'Do you remember a story that you told?' It was 10 years ago, and it was about your Aunt Marie coming to Thanksgiving dinner and sitting there and weeping about her sad life as she ate her turkey and mashed potatoes.' And they recall this story in great detail. This is the utterly stunning thing about radio. But it's not a medium that is big because you're always just connecting to one person or two at a time.

## Stage fright

In reality, "A Prairie Home Companion" connects each week with an estimated 2.7 million people listening on more than 70 public radio stations in the United States. It's also heard abroad and on the Armed Forces Network in Europe and Asia. That's a lot of pressure for the writers, and a little stage fright is certainly understandable.

"Even for someone with a 25-year-old, highly successful radio show, butterflies in the stomach are still a problem. I went for years without stage fright. I had it starting out, of course, so much so that it was hard for me to walk out through the stage door to walk out on stage. It felt like I was walking through a pane of glass. Then it went away for a long time, and it's returned now, in the last, oh, I'd say the last year or two."



Performing during a live broadcast of "A Prairie Home Companion" are sound effects man Tom Keith, actors Tim Russell and Sue Scott, and host Garrison Keillor.

He doesn't know why it's returned, but doesn't look for it in his voice.

"You can be terrified within an inch of your life and not show it in your voice. And that's the whole thing, because whether you're scared or not, you still know that as long as you keep it out of your voice and you don't betray it in your face, the audience will be OK. The last thing you want is to show it, because then the audience starts to feel sorry for you, and this is a killer when it comes to having a good time," he noted with a chuckle.

Keillor writes the show on deadline, so to speak.

"I try to start on Monday. I don't always succeed. Sometimes, the writing gets done at the very end of the week, and

those are the weeks that are quite memorable and anxious. I would love to start two weeks ahead, but that doesn't seem to be in my makeup. Writing is a difficult thing to marshal, to organize, for me anyway. But I'm an older writer, so my faculties are not so acute. I've kind of gotten sluggish in my mind, so it's kind of hit-and-miss with me. I wish I were in my mid-30s again in some respects, and yet, if I were I wouldn't have nearly so much to write about."

## A full life

Keillor is 57. He was born in Anoka, Minn., and graduated from the University of Minnesota in 1969. He has written 11 books — he's working on two more — and

has won a Grammy, two cable ACE awards and a Peabody. He's in the Radio Hall of Fame at Chicago's Museum of Broadcast Communications. He's performed with the Chicago, Milwaukee, San Francisco, Pittsburgh, Minnesota, Dallas and National symphonies. He's also the father of Maia Grace, who's almost 2, and Jason Keillor, 30, stage manager for "A Prairie Home Companion."

Of Maia, Keillor says she wears him out and makes him want to get to bed early, but also makes him feel settled in his beloved St. Paul.

Of Jason: "I like to work with him. He's very capable and he's very honest, and honesty is a trait I prize since I work in a line of work in which there is so much promotion and so much b.s. and flattery. I like to

work with somebody who writes up a critique of the show every week and sends it around and says, 'That sketch was not one of your best, it just seemed to lack a reason for being there. It was too long, and I don't know why you did that.' It's good to have somebody who will tell you the truth. I do think it's good to get an honest critique of your work, and how amazing to get it from your own child."

## Expert advice

He may feel worn out and a little slacker these days, but that hasn't kept Keillor from taking on new projects. His latest is a weekly advice column about love and writing for the online magazine Salon. When he started it in May 1998, Keillor had this to say to Salon readers: "I'm writing this column because I've been up and I've been down. I've known modest success and abysmal failure. I've gone through 50-some Minnesota winters and numerous romantic rejections, two divorces, a fundamentalist upbringing, bad reviews, disastrous book tours, the adolescence of a male child, and now I'm the father of a cranky 4-month-old. I've been around."

The column lets readers ask questions about serious issues, the type of issues that usually aren't broached during the mostly lighthearted radio show. Divorce, adultery, burnout — issues Keillor might briefly touch on during "The News from Lake Wobegon" but that many Midwesterners talk about only in hushed tones.

One recent letter sounds like the basis for a great "News from Lake Wobegon" monologue:

"A man this week who a few years ago left his wife for a younger woman because the younger woman, he felt, was his soul mate, and it didn't work out. And his wife, gracious soul that she was, took him back. And now he's happy to be back with his wife, and he is appreciating normal life. But the problem is that his wife is a writer. She writes mystery novels, and he has just read the first chapter of her new book. It's a story about a man who leaves his wife for a younger woman, and he has a lot of remorse about the younger woman being his soul mate and so on, and he has a pretty good idea that it's going to be the husband that winds up getting killed in the book. So he wants to know, 'What should I do about this?'"

"I said this, 'You are the victim of a very witty joke, and it is richly deserved, and so you be gracious, and if anybody asks you, tell them you think it's the best book your wife has ever written.'"

# Show quickly sold out Bands: It ain't country

Author, advice columnist and radio personality Garrison Keillor and his regular cast of musicians, actors and writers will broadcast his popular Minnesota Public Radio program live from the Rushmore Plaza Civic Center theater at 4 p.m. on Saturday, Nov. 20. Those fortunate enough to have gotten tickets to the sold-out performance must be seated no later than 3:45.

The show is rebroadcast at 11 a.m. Sundays on KRBE on the Black Hills, 89.3 on the FM dial.

It's the first time "A Prairie Home Companion" has visited the Black Hills, and response from fans has been tremendous, according to Margaret Skillman, sales and marketing director for the civic center.

The show virtually sold out the day tickets went on sale, Saturday, Oct. 9. Some people got pairs of tickets by pledging \$250 to South Dakota Public Radio, which had 82 seats available. About 100 more seats have been released since then — including 62 that will be at the stage behind the performers — and have gone to people on a waiting list, Skillman said. The theater has a capacity of 1,774.

South Dakota Public Radio and the civic center have been trying to lure the show for several years. Rapid City was chosen to fill a slot

on the touring schedule when a planned broadcast from Milwaukee fell through.

Keillor said organizers in Milwaukee "just decided at the last minute that they weren't up to putting on a show. They got stage fright." He said he knew South Dakota Public Broadcasting had been inviting him here for some time, "and they were fearless about putting on the show."

As always, joining Keillor will be actors Tim Russell and Sue Scott, along with sound effects wizard Tom Keith, a regular on the show since 1976. Keyboardist Rich Dworsky heads The Guy's All-Star Show Band.

It's been a long time since Keillor visited the Black Hills. "I haven't been through there since I was a child," he said. "We used to go west every summer. Our family would drive on our way out to Bible camp out in Idaho, and usually we would take the northerly route through North Dakota — I don't know why — but then we prevailed on our parents to go through South Dakota so we could see DeSmet. I was reading the Little House on the Prairie books back then, so that was like mecca to me, and then Mount Rushmore and Rapid City and on into Wyoming."

It's wonderful," Lovell said of

the opportunity to be heard by about 3 million people on "A Prairie Home Companion." "It'll be a great experience for us, for the Black Hills, for the entire area."

Schlegel is a Kimball native who used to sing with the Mountain Music Show in Custer while attending Black Hills State University.

She has lived in the Twin Cities area since 1994 and helped form True Blue in 1997. The band's first CD, "This Lonesome Song," was released in December 1998.

In a phone interview, Schlegel, who last performed in the Black Hills in the summer of 1996, said she's excited to perform on "A Prairie Home Companion" and is looking forward to returning to the Black Hills, where she also has relatives.

One could say The Cowboys are veterans of public broadcasting shows in Rapid City. The band also performed on "Whad'Ya Know?" with Michael Feldman when that show broadcast from the civic center a few years ago.

"It's wonderful," Lovell said of

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