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Karl Vick

Radio America hears our 'Prairie Home'

Garrison Keillor is not for the morning. His voice is too melodious, too mellifluous and too comforting. "Laid back" is the last thing you need when trying to get vertical.

Keillor is for the time of day when shadows preside, when the day props up its feet and not so much cools itself as ceases to be hot. All sounds and edges soften. Passing cars move peacefully, with definite destinations in mind. There is usually a light breeze.

This is a homey time. "A Prairie Home Companion," as Keillor announces his Saturday evening show on KSNJ-FM (91.1), could not be more appropriately named. Or placed. It is a Saturday evening radio wonder.

Just sitting and staring at 5 o'clock on a Saturday might make you feel a bit lonely if you have nothing planned for 7 or 8. "Prairie Home" is a pleasantly entertaining Companion, a purveyor of you-name-it music and homespun humor to get you over the shank of the evening.

Or, if you are heading out later, "Prairie Home" is an excellent primer. Undress to the bluegrass of the Red Clay Ramblers. Turn a fast two-step in the bedroom to the flying hands of jazz piano man Butch Thompson. Sing in the shower with Minnesota Opera tenor Vern Sutton.

Above all, be assured that when Garrison croons "Hello Love" at that coolly glowing time of day, all is right and comfortable. And not just on the prairie anymore, in the legendary Lake Wobegon, but across the land.

Lone holdout

Saturday, "A Prairie Home Companion" became the first National Public Radio series to originate from a member station. It was broadcast live, as usual, from the World Theatre in St. Paul and beamed off the NPR satellite to more than 60 stations outside the Minnesota Public Radio network. Nearly everyone was impressed.

The lone holdout was formerly the show's most loyal backer: Jack, of Jack's Auto Repair and Dry Goods Emporium. He sent Keillor an indignant letter complaining that a national audience would not necessarily deliver a bigger bang for the \$2.50 he pays per audio mention.

"People aren't gonna drive a thousand miles for their thousand-mile checkup," the letter read. "You know it and I know it, so let's not kid ourselves."

Keillor bristled at this ("the bitter old man"), but took every subsequent opportunity to introduce the Lake Wobegon sponsors without whom "Companion" would not be possible. . . . Jack's, Bertha's Kitty Boutique, Ralph's Pretty Good Grocery (if you can't find it at Ralph's, you can probably get along without it) . . .

National audiences may have met these advertisers and the main sponsor, Powdermilk Biscuits, in two previous national shows—one

Companion
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Garrison Keillor, host of 'A Prairie Home Companion'

★ VARIETY

Radio America now hears 'Prairie Home Companion'

(Companion, from Page 1B)

a rather stiff broadcast from Northrop Auditorium in February 1979, the other a hoedown at the NPR convention in Kansas City this year. But Saturday's broadcast, heralded by a Cargill Corporation-funded publicity package, clearly inaugurated the series.

And, except for being a bit tighter, brighter and more musically mainstream than usual, the show fulfilled producer Margaret Moos' intention to "keep doing what we have been doing over the years and hope that other people will enjoy it."

"We intend to keep booking Minnesota musicians, and we expect to hear from out of town, too," Moos said, glancing at jammed desk calendar. "Radio is so great at communicating informality. We don't have any intention of formalizing [the show] and typing it out in triplicate and sending it out."

At the same time, Moos said, "We're wondering how this show would translate in sophisticated New York City, where folk music is not exactly flourishing. And the humor is definitely Minnesotan and regional." The general man-

ager at New York's WNYC-FM didn't return two calls from The Star.

They love it in Murfreesboro, Tenn. "I was sold on the program long before it was available systemwide," said John L. High, general manager of the town's WMOT-FM. "We had a phone call Saturday from one fellow who was just superexcited."

About a third of the subscribing stations are in the South. It's tempting to attribute the program's appeal there to the region's proclivity for banjos and zithers.

"The music has something to do with it," High agreed. "But I think the format, the kind of Grand Ole Opry, that kind of old-time live radio show, I think, is kind of appealing. And it may be a kind of nostalgia trip, along with the music itself."

It may be. Kellor started "Companion" in 1974 after a visit to Nashville to write about WSM's "Grand Ole Opry" broadcasts for The New Yorker.

Yet the appeal is not all country-western. Comments that were sent in about the show during a recent KSJN fund-raising drive came from the same middle- and upper-

middle-class urban dwellers who listen to MPR's classical music programs. (At least 40 percent of the cards returned after a recent KSJN fund-raising drive contained comments about "Companion.")

Note, too, that Gene Moore, MPR national program marketing director, plans a strategy relying on big city stations such as WNYC, Los Angeles' KUSC-FM and Boston's WGBH-FM (which will pick it up in June) to make the program so popular that NPR stations in smaller markets will be compelled to subscribe, too.

In other words, Moore aims to ride what has become a trend. You know it's a trend because Kellor read a letter from a listener denouncing him on his 6 to 9 a.m. "Prairie Home Morning Show" this past week. The writer decried what he discerned to be a distressingly broad "bib-overall mentality and anti-sophistication fad."

Kellor responded by introducing a record by a group with Ramblers in its name. "Well," he whispered into the morning brightness, "kick off your shoes, boys and girls, and watch where you step. We're gonna kick up our heels."