

Shyest man on Minnesota radio

He's chronicler of Lake Wobegon

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Garrison Keillor

CEDAR FALLS—Garrison Keillor, host and announcer for the *Prairie Home Companion*, had just about had it for the evening. He'd already gone through a two-hour performance, a radio interview, numerous chats with well-wishers, and a newspaper reporter wanted to talk to him.

"Sorry I kept you waiting," he says as he massages his eyelids in the white glare of an empty dressing room. "What do you want to know?"

WITH HIS tan suit and close-cropped hair, Keillor, who occasionally writes for the "New Yorker," looks like a stockbroker. When he speaks backstage at the University of Northern Iowa auditorium, his look suggests that of a concerned English professor.

But, every Saturday evening, he is Garrison Keillor, the shyest man on Minnesota radio, the chronicler of the mythical small town, Lake Wobegon, (as in woebegone).

He is moderator of a live radio show that recalls barn dance programs of the '30s and '40s and whose sponsors are non-existent.

"And, remember folks. It's the *Chat-terbox Cafe*. The place to go that's just like home."

KEILLOR STARTED six years ago on a show in St. Paul, Minn. The *Prairie Home Companion* is now syndicated on the National Public Radio network, and is heard on public radio KUNI. The station's support group, Friends of KUNI, co-sponsored the performance, with the Affiliated State Arts Agencies of the Upper Midwest, which includes the Iowa Arts Council.

"I'd be the last one to ask as to why it's so popular," says Keillor.

"We've always intended the show to be strictly entertainment, but, of course, there is more to it than that. But, I'd rather not talk about meanings. It's enough that people just enjoy the show."

When Keillor ran through his slogans for *Powdermilk Biscuits*, or told a tale about a dog who loved to chase cars, the audience roared with good-natured laughter.

Or, when Iowa City's Greg Brown or Pop Wagner, a regular cast member, asked for a sing-along, the crowd responded with enthusiasm.

IN AN age of advanced television paralysis, how does this happen?

"It's good to see, but I couldn't tell you why it occurs," says Keillor.

"That's why folk music and folklore is so important," he adds as he changes into a pair of dirty white corduroys and a pair of old Red Wing boots. "Not only does it pass on culture, but it encourages people to participate."

"With most entertainment and art today, people just sit back and let it hit them. Through folk arts, people become actively engaged. They are more a part of that art."

"I think there is a real chance of us losing our culture, of being fed on a culture via mass media that comes from Los Angeles and New York."

KEILLOR SAYS the *Prairie Home Companion* is taken from the barn dance radio shows he used to hear as a kid in Minnesota. Although the locale of the show is fictitious, he maintains there's nothing phony about the show at all.

"If the *Prairie Home Companion* is good for nothing else, it gives a lot of good people a place to play," says Keillor. "There are a lot of honest musicians out there, who, because of the type of music they play, are not heard by many people."

"Our show exposes them to a lot larger audience and that, in itself, is a very nice and honest deed."