

The Country Today

country life

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Prairie humor, music find home on radio

Well, look who's coming through that door, I think we've met somewhere before. Hello love, hello love. Well, where in the world you been so long? I've missed you so since you been gone. Hello love, hello love, hello love.

St. Paul, Minn. came back here with the idea of starting up a live show. Live radio has an excitement about it that's real hard to get if you're recording.

Mr. Keller presented the idea for the show to Bill King, president of Minnesota Public Radio. By July 6 of 1971, "A Prairie Home Companion" was on the air.

That first summer the show went out to Minnesota Public Radio listeners from the Jazz Wallace Concert Hall at Macalester College. It then moved through larger and larger concert halls, ending up in 1978 at its current location, the World Theater in downtown St. Paul.

Minnesota residents (and Wisconsin within range of the signal) have been listening to the show for six years, but the rest of the country was able to hear it only once before this spring — as part of a "Folk Festival USA" program on National Public Radio in February 1979. That program received "the largest single response to any folk-related program we had ever done," according to Tom Martin Erickson, co-producer of "Simply Folk" on Wisconsin Public Radio.

He noted many listeners wrote in that they "await the day we will be able to listen directly every week." Mr. Martin Erickson said Wisconsin Public Radio did begin negotiations to carry the program, but technical difficulties in picking up the live signal from Minnesota soon quashed that idea.

But now, all of Wisconsin (and much of the rest of the country) can hear the program. On May 3 of this year, "A Prairie Home Companion" went out across the nation via satellite.

Funding from Cargill Inc. has enabled Minnesota Public Radio to offer the program free to public radio stations throughout the country — and the stations have responded enthusiastically. On May 3, PHC was carried on 45 stations; now more than 80 of the nation's 223 public radio stations carry the show, which also receives funding from the National Endowment for the Arts.

In northwestern Wisconsin, "A Prairie Home Companion" can be heard on stations WHWC-Menomonie (88.3 FM), WFLA-La Crosse (90.3 FM), WESA-Superior (88.3 FM) and WERN-Wausau (90.9 FM).

Producer Margaret Moos notes response to the show has been good from all parts of the country — rural areas, such as Iowa, North and South Dakota, Wisconsin, remote fishing cabins in Alaska, and even New York City and other metropolitan areas. The show originated from Madison one Saturday in September and more than 1,000 people came to the broadcast — after only four months of being on the air there.

The show's appeal comes from several areas.

"For one thing, there's the 'live' aspect. There's a certain kind of excitement to a live radio show that you don't get in a studio," Ms. Moos said. "The audience feels it and the performers feel it."

The live audience, in fact, is an integral part of the show. "It does make a difference," she said. "There's a certain quality to doing something live. There's a certain dynamism involved in having a live audience, in having their reactions to everything that's going on. You know, it's not a laugh track that was added later."

And then there's the music, a rich conglomeration of styles — folk, country, gospel, ethnic, light opera, jazz — played by fiddlers, blue pickers, guitar strummers, piano players and on and on.

"We do mix it up," Ms. Moos says. "We have a chance of providing a little bit of something for a wide variety of people, rather than get so into country, for example, that we lose a whole area of listenership."

Garrison Keller concurs: "We have our listeners find a good part of what we do entertaining in itself. We do a variety show, and we do it on purpose. If they don't like one thing an awful lot, then they might like something else better."

Many of the entertainers are from the Twin Cities and surrounding area, including western Wisconsin. Others are in town for concerts and take time to do the show. PHC probably is the only radio production between here and Nashville to feature local performers — something the show was committed to from the start.

"One of my big complaints about radio is that it never pays enough attention to the musicians around them," Mr. Keller says. "Our children grow up with homogenized, top of the charts music."

While new performers continually appear on the show, one of its strengths and blessings is a strong base of top-notch regulars — like the New Prairie Ramblers (featured most weeks) and Claudia Schmidt, Vera Sutton, Philip Brunelle, Butch Thompson, Gene Beck, Pop Wagner and many others. The future may hold even more involvement for these and other musicians.

"One of my goals for the show," Mr. Keller said, "is to keep on doing it — but also I would like out of all these musicians who are on the show, who play on the show from time to time, I'd like to come up with more of a group, more of a family, a cast of regular performers who do well on radio. I'd like to have them on more often."

But despite the music, despite the novelty of live radio, the secret of the show's success probably comes down to — Garrison Keller.

"My personal opinion is that he's brilliant," said Wisconsin Public Radio's Tom Martin Erickson. "And he's very quick. A large percentage of the things he does come to him right at that moment; he's that smooth and quick. There are very few people who can do what he does and do it."

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Garrison Keller, host of "A Prairie Home Companion," takes his microphone out on the sidewalk during a broadcast of the live public radio show.



Fiddler Peter Ostroushko of the New Prairie Ramblers concentrates on a tune during a concert by the group at the Mabel Tainter Theater in Menomonie.



Music usual and unusual is featured on "A Prairie Home Companion." Here a steam calliope from the Winona County Historical Society toots out a melody.

Listeners share Lake Wobegon life

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consistently — he's managed to tie it all together."

Mr. Keillor's tales of the fictional Lake Wobegon, Minn., its people and the businesses that "sponsor" the show are the ties that bind the show together. Listeners share in the ups and (mostly) downs of the Lake Wobegon Wippets baseball team, study the menu of Dorothy's Chatterbox Cafe, wonder how Lake Wobegon's favorite daughter, Barbara Ann Bunson, is going at the University of Minnesota, cheer the attributes of Powdermilk Biscuits (made from whole wheat grown in the rich bottomlands of the Lake Wobegon valley by Norwegian bachelor farmers).

Lake Wobegon began long before "A Prairie Home Companion" was an idea. Mr. Keillor started telling stories of Lake Wobegon on a morning program he hosted on Minnesota Public Radio in the mid-1960s, and continues the tales today on his new morning program, "A Prairie



Home Morning."

"Garrison invented Lake Wobegon and it spiraled off from there," Ms. Moos said. "He added individuals, businesses — the whole fantasy is quite entangled. It's just been added to over the years."

Mr. Keillor explains Lake Wobegon this way:

"I grew up listening to commercial radio, and when I started doing a show in the morning, it just seemed more like a radio to

me if I could do commercials...so I did. As I was doing them, I had to find a place for them to be. Since most of the sponsors I'd come up with were sort of small-town outfits, I put them in one town and populated it with some of my relatives, people I'd met here and there, people I'd heard about...."

"I grew up near Anoka, Minn., which used to be a small town...it's become so big that I don't hardly recognize it, so I had to create a home town for myself — Lake Wobegon."

Mr. Keillor knows small-town life, farm life; he knows its foibles and virtues and can point out the humor in both.

"The purpose of talking about Lake Wobegon and telling the stories and so on is not nostalgic for me," Mr. Keillor says, "so much as it is upholding and defending a certain style of humor, and also a way of life that I identify with the Midwest and that I see as under attack by the national media and by television. It's a way of life and it's a culture that is based in the family and to some extent based on rural or small-town values...I see it as being under attack by the national media, who see it as irrelevant or passe or outdated."

Presenting a program so different from anything else on radio can be both challenging and nerve-racking for the PHC staff. And yet...

"Once you relax and decide to say it, play it, do the best you can, it's wonderful for the performers, too," Mr. Keillor said. "You realize there's a mysterious, invisible audience out there, all over the country, people you've never met, never will meet, but who are listening under all sorts of circumstances."

—Wendy Kinderman



Tim Hennessy, left, and Bob Douglas, two members of the New Prairie Ramblers, perform in concert.

Bookbus presents regional literature

Eau Claire

The first collection of contemporary Midwestern writing on wheels rolls into Eau Claire on Oct. 18 for a two-day visit at UW-Eau Claire.

The Plains Bookbus, described as "an innovation in bringing regional literature to the people," is carrying more than 200 "small press" books and magazines to more than 70 towns in the upper Midwest in its first year.

Poet Louis Jenkins of Duluth, Minn., will join the bookbus on Thursday for workshops and also for a poetry reading from 9 to 10 p.m. in the Cabin in Davies Center. The reading follows an open

reading sponsored by NOTA, the campus arts magazine. Both are open to the public without charge. Mr. Jenkins and the bookbus are sponsored by NOTA and the Plains Distribution Service of Fargo, N.D.

According to bookbus coordinator Paul Brown, "small press" is a general term for independent, non-commercial publishers and literary magazines.

The Plains Bookbus will be open to the public from 2 to 4 p.m. Oct. 18 and 10 a.m. to 4 p.m. Oct. 17. The books and magazines on board are for sale.

International Folk Fair planned for Sunday

Eau Claire

There will be an international atmosphere in Davies Center at UW-Eau Claire on Oct. 19. Foods, dances, costumes and customs of more than 20 countries will be part of the annual International Folk Fair there.

Japanese karate and calligraphy, a Vienna cafe, a French

Rooms, displays and entertainment are planned and presented by students, faculty and interested community members. This year Italians, Irish and Laotians are represented by community members, Ms. Werner said.

Some of the other peoples represented at the fair are Germans, Slovaks, Czechs, Poles, and

"There is no admission charge and the public is invited. It's for anyone who wants to see and experience aspects of different cultures and peoples," Ms. Werner said.

The folk fair at UW-Eau Claire is annually held in observance of United Nations Day and involves participation of the foreign lan-