

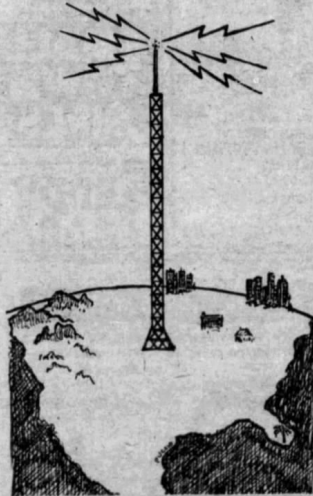
I listen to this show on the radio and it seems like a friend to me

Has your family tried 'em, Powder Milk?
Has your family tried 'em, Powder Milk?
If your family's tried 'em,
you know you've satisfied 'em.
They're a real hot item, Powder Milk.

That's not exactly a household jingle, but it ought to be, because it's the opening theme for one of the most satisfying and heartwarming shows on the air.

If you've never heard it before, it's probably because you spend your early Saturday evenings watching the news or getting ready to go out to boogie. If you spent them sitting in front of your radio listening to "Prairie Home Companion," the Powder Milk Biscuit jingle would be as familiar to you as the Pepsi or Mr. Clean ditties.

"Prairie Home Companion," which comes out of Minneapolis each Saturday at six, is one of the few



vestiges of the old-time sing-along-hootenanny-amateur show-fiddling bee that you can still find on the national airwaves. There are plenty of local varieties out there in the heartland, but if you're stuck on the Eastern seaboard with an out-of-tune banjo and a hankering for traditional music, you're pretty much out of luck, unless you think Kenny Rogers is a folk singer.

I'm not talking about Nashville here, or Austin, or any of them other city-slicker hangouts where you can parlay a guitar and a honey-tenor into a million if you know how to shake your sequins. What I'm talking about is folk music, which is to say the music of plain folks, the way it was played in honky-tonks and general stores a hundred years ago and the way it's still

played, if you can spare two hours of prime time, out in a Minnesota theater every Saturday night.

The fare is wonderfully varied. On a given night you might hear an Irish jig played by a lost Derry minstrel, then some Chicago blues harp, and finally a German oom-pah band from somewhere around the Great Lakes.

On another night you might catch bluegrass for the first half hour, then some Appalachian mountain music, and end up with a round of Texas swing.

I have heard ballads that were three hundred years old and original lyrics on which the ink wasn't yet dry. I've heard Norwegian love songs and ragtime piano, Scottish laments and even a selection of carnival tunes played on an ancient steam organ.

Not to mention the work of several local poets, and the ad-lib fantasies of the show's host, Garrison Kiehler, the drollest stand-up emcee since Herb Shriner. When he starts talking about how Powder Milk biscuits "give shy people what it takes to get up and do what needs to be done," I stop running the dish water and just listen.

The show also has an excellent house band, the New Prairie Ramblers, who favor bluegrass but can fake it just fine on everything from French airs to a capella yodeling.

When I was a kid we used to sit around the piano every so often, running through "My Gal Sal" and "Red River Valley" and "A Mighty Fortress Is Our God" without ever noticing that we were mixing all kinds of traditions. It didn't seem like a mish-mash to us, just a collection of tunes we liked and liked to sing together. "Prairie Home Companion" brings back some of the diffuse hominess of that time. It's like it was still OK to keep your door unlocked, so some wandering mandolin-player from Oshkosh or San Diego could sashay in and say, "Have you all heard this one?"

"Prairie Home Companion" has pretty much everything you could ask for from a live variety show: great acts, a genial host, and an audience that's obviously tickled pink to be there. The applause is loud and earnest, and it doesn't come from a machine. When Kiehler starts announcing where the folks have come from, you begin to realize how diverse and strongly-colored our traditions and origins have been. It may be broadcast from Minneapolis, but it sounds like a national living-room.

What the show doesn't have is a string section, sex jokes, mindless chitchat, skits, or detergent ads. Which sets it apart from every TV variety show you've ever seen and makes you wonder, disconsolately, why radio ever died. With the New Prairie Ramblers bringing us such good times, why are we watching Susan Anton specials?

The show airs in these parts on WNYC-FM (94 on your radio dial). It follows "All Things Considered," which National Public Radio, which handles both shows, rightly calls the best news and public affairs show on the air. That makes two winners in a row.

Powder Milk sponsors the first segment of the show. The second is sponsored by the Chatterbox Cafe, in nearby Lake Woebegone, "the little town that time forgot but the years cannot improve." Much the same could be said of the show. For which, a nation's thanks, and amen.



Folkways

a blend of observation and comment

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