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# Lake Wobegon revisited: Garrison Keillor's greatest hits

"A Prairie Home Companion Anniversary Album." Garrison Keillor, et al. (two discs).

Returns with us now to those thrilling days of yesteryear when kids and oldsters alike sat attentively each evening in front of the big radio console, to the days when there really was radio. Live shows with singers and bands and actual folks pronouncing words at one another.

Journey with us to Lake Wobegon, the little town that, if you didn't grow up there, you at least have a bit of the town in your heart. Lake Wobegon, where the women are strong, the men are good-looking and all the children above average. Lake Wobegon, the home of Ralph's Pretty Good Grocery, Our Lady of Perpetual Responsibility Church and the Statue of the Unknown Norwegian.

Take your time walking down Main St. Stop in at the Mist County Historical Society Museum and view the Boston Fern of 1922 (bronzed), the

## Records

Michael Anthony

only houseplant to survive "The Winter of Discontent." Or walk over to Jack's Auto Repair. Jack sells everything, including the famous Deep Valley Beds, "the bed with the built-in sag." It is the bed, promises Jack, "that brings people together. If you enjoy hammocks, you'll enjoy a Deep Valley Bed from Jack's."

We speak of the creations of Garrison Keillor, who for the past six years, has been the chronicler of life in Lake Wobegon on Minnesota Public Radio's "Prairie Home Companion." In a sense, it is a "greatest hits" package, but the easy-going pace of the show itself is faithfully reproduced.

National Public Radio stations. The audience of 12 has grown — 11,000 people came to watch the show being broadcast at Lake Harriet one summer's day in 1979.

A compilation album was a likely idea. To produce a two-disc album as carefully and lovingly put together as this is a positively delicious idea. Originally planned as a fifth anniversary album, the set took a year to get done, so the title is simply the "Anniversary Album."

Included are about 30 tracks culled from tapes of various shows over the years, some performed before big audiences, some before small ones. Producer Margaret Moose (who also produces the show each week) has managed, nonetheless, to convey the sense of a typical early Saturday evening with the "Prairie Home Companion." In a sense, it is a "greatest hits" package, but the easy-going pace of the show itself is faithfully reproduced.



Record producers are taking Dolly Parton out of the country and the country out of Dolly Parton.

The musical selections, all introduced by Keillor, range widely from Butch Thompson's elegant stride piano ("Little Brother Montgomery's 'Sunday Rag'") to the warm blues singing of Judy Larson ("I Know You Rider") to the virtuosic yodeling of Bill Staines ("The Ballad of the Mules"). Jim Craig sings a vaudeville novelty, "The Cat Came Back," Vern Sifton sings "The Teddy Bear's Picnic" and Theima Buckner and the Minnesota Gospel Twins sing a rousing gospel number, "All God's Children."

And, of course, there is the house band, the Powdermill Biscuits Band, named (as was the fashion in old-time radio) for the show's sponsor, the ubiquitous Powdermill Biscuits, the wheat of which is "raised by those Norwegian bachelor farmers, so you know they're not only good for you, but they're pure — mostly."

The word nostalgia, however, has never been sufficient in describing what Keillor and his colleagues do in "Prairie Home Companion." For one thing, while the show does purport to be a recreation of an old-style radio variety show (and there were a lot of them emanating from the Twin Cities and purities in earlier times), the music featured regularly is surely more diverse than what one would have heard on such a show in the '30s and '40s. Moreover, Keillor salutes small-town sensibility as readily as he evokes it. And some of his targets are very up to date, his tax-accountant ad, for example (presented by Dakota Dave Hull): "If you have extra income on the side, our lips are sealed... If the IRS calls



From a dozen fans for "A Prairie Home Companion" in 1974, Garrison Keillor's show has grown so popular that 11,000 people were on hand for a show broadcast from Lake Harriet in 1979.

you in, I go with you, not to act as an attorney, but just to act dumb."

In the case of the Fearmonger's Shop (which Jack probably owns a piece of, too), Keillor surely is ahead of his time. This is the shop that sells, among other things, Safety Seats for toilets to keep "deadly snakes," who as we all know, reside in large numbers in the sewers of our cities, from rising to the occasion and giving us a bad time.

Still, the over-all tone is gentle. We can take as a statement of credo Keillor's words between choruses of "Supper-time," his evocation of home life, where one didn't need to be perfect to be loved. "We've all left that home, though we tend to go back to it. We keep finding it in other people. One of the pieces I find it in is this radio show." That sentiment — "affection for what's good and tolerance for what isn't, necessarily" — also can be found in this record. If you buy it, you will keep going back to it.

"9 To 5 and Odd Jobs." Dolly Parton, RCA Victor AH11-3852. "Porter and Dolly." Porter Wagoner and Dolly Parton, RCA Victor AH11-3798.

Is there any more revealing symbol of how far country music has moved in the direction of the pop mainstream than the cover of the new (and final) Porter Wagoner-Dolly Parton duet album? Gone is Wagoner's familiar pompadour. The man's hair has been curried! Land o' Goshen.

Still, there is a good deal more country in the duet album than in Parton's new solo effort, which, among

other things, contains a medium-tempo disco version of "The House of the Rising Sun." Parton has expanded into other musical idioms in recent years, with varying (meaning uneven) results. Idioms that even her beguiling personality can't transcend. Here is not a voice for rock, in other words.

"9 To 5 and Odd Jobs" is, nonetheless, the best of her recent albums. It is a lie-in, obviously, with the film "9 To 5" in which Parton makes her screen debut opposite the formidable Jane Fonda and Lily Tomlin, though it is not the soundtrack album (which is another record altogether). She does do the title song here, however, a catchy song of her own about the life of a 9-to-5 office worker who is "barely getting by." The populist sentiment of the song ("It's a rich man's game! No matter what they call it! And you spend your life/ Putting money in his wallet" runs through the entire album).

The tone is not as feisty as Johnny Paycheck's "Take This Job and Shine It." But the spirit is there, the notion of relief for the down-trodden, whether it be in the rural settings of "Hush-a-Bye Hard Times" and Woody Guthrie's "Deportee" or the urban locales of "Working Girl" and "Detroit City." The latter, one of Mel Tillis's earliest hits, is a poignant tale about a country boy/girl pining away for home in the big city, and it gets a wonderful reading from Parton, who projects a real sense of desperation in the final refrain: "Oh how I want to go home."

But for those who want to hear Parton sing country (well... as country as anyone gets in these days of Opy-

land theme parks) or for those who think that is what she does best, the "Porter and Dolly" album ought to be the choice.

This was the album that Wagoner had to go to court in order to get finished. His long-term contract with Parton had just one album to go, and she, being a big star these days, needs Porter Wagoner about as much as she needs a monthly welfare check. But "the thin man from West Plains," as Wagoner used to be called, won his case. Gritting her teeth, presumably, Parton went into the studio and did the songs that Wagoner arranged and produced for her. They may not even have sung together in the studio. The fine print on the back of the record jacket indicates they weren't photographed together, either. There were two photographers.

It is a good album, in any case. Wagoner (being anywhere from 48 to 53, depending on one's sources) has lost none of his vocal velvet. And Parton does some fervent singing in "Hide Me Away" (approaching the skill of a good gospel singer) and most notably in "Little David's Harp," a Gothic tearjerker in the best Parton tradition of old. "Making Plans," the opening track, could be the song that made Wagoner decide to go to court. "I'm making plans for heartaches because you're making plans to leave."

**SPECTACULAR EXHIBIT OF WATERCOLORS**