

'Prairie Home Companion' Creator Recalls Grand Ole Opry's Inspiration

By TOM ROGERS

ST. PAUL, Minn.—Garrison Keillor's mellow humor and midwest drawl are becoming hallmarks of Saturday night radio across the country.

So are the residents of his imaginary Lake Wobegon, "the town that time forgot and couldn't improve."

Keillor's Grand Ole Opry-inspired live show, "A Prairie Home Companion," has sidled into the lineups of more than 100 National Public Radio stations since syndication began last May. Nashville's WPLN-FM (90.3 on the dial) starts airing the two-hour show Saturday at 8 p.m.

WMOT-FM in Murfreesboro has aired "A Prairie Home Companion" since Minnesota Public Radio (MPR) began syndication. WMOT general manager John High says the show has been "very successful" and approaches NPR stalwarts "All Things Considered" and "Morning Edition" in popularity. WMOT (89.5 on the FM dial) uses a "live feed" to air "A Prairie Home Companion" Saturdays at 5 p.m.

For Keillor, going on the air in Nashville is like a homecoming. Just back from vacation, he draped his long frame over a suddenly undersize chair, sipped new coffee and thought back to his last visit to Nashville.

"It's very clear in my mind, the time I was down there in 1974, in March, when President Nixon came to dedicate the new Opry House," he said.

"I had gone to see the last Opry show at the Ryman, on Friday night. On Saturday night I decided I didn't want to go and see some of my favorite performers be so deferential to a president. It was clear at that time was a crook."

"So I went to a pawn shop, got a pocket radio, and went back to my hotel—the Sam Davis Hotel, a tall, skinny building...

"I listened to the Opry. It was the first time I had heard it on radio since I was a kid. We used

to get it here during the winter months, on a Zenith floor model radio.

"I realized the Opry was a very good radio show."

Keillor had come to Nashville to write a story about the Opry for *The New Yorker* magazine. He still is a regular contributor to the magazine. He said next fall Atheneum will publish a collection of his *New Yorker* stories, called *Happy To Be Here*.

"When I went to write about it I went to write about something nostalgic for me," he said. "But when I went to write I was surprised. It is a good radio show, not a museum piece, a show I could sit in my hotel room and enjoy listening to."

"So at that point I think I started thinking about coming back home and doing something like that here. Not a country music show—just no point here in Minnesota—more a variety show."

"I came back and wrote the piece. And we did two shows, sort of a trial run that we taped in May. And then went on the air as a live show every Saturday in July. And then Nixon resigned in August. Yes, it was a month before he resigned."

"In my mind it was the inspiration because I had made a couple of trips down to Nashville to see the Opry before, for no reason," Keillor said of the Opry's influence on his own "Prairie Home Companion."

"The first time I drove down with a friend because I had heard it was still on the air, which amazed me, because I hadn't heard it since I was a kid."

"So we drove down, a 20-hour drive."

"It was sold out. We didn't get in to the Friday show, didn't get in on Saturday either. But that was enough."

Keillor said he listened from outside the Ryman Auditorium, where the Opry was performed at that time. He said by pushing himself against a wall and peering through an open window he "could see the lower half of the performer on stage. In the case of Stonewall Jackson—he

was the shortest that night—you could see almost all of him."

"A Prairie Home Companion" is more eclectic than the Opry.

"Each program features a roster of musicians who perform traditional jazz tunes, bluegrass, western swing, light opera, ethnic and old time music on a collection of instruments including zithers, harpsicords, fiddles, dulcimers, banjos and mandolins," according to an MPR description of the show. Performers range from little knowns to artists from the Minnesota Opera Company like tenor Vern Sutton and Phillip Brunelle, classical pianist, arranger and the company's music director.

It is Keillor's well-humored imagination that ties together the show's separate performances. His mythical community of Lake Wobegon—left off the maps because surveyors found themselves there by mistake—and its people have become storytelling staples. So are PHC's equally mythical sponsors—Powdermilk Biscuits—"They're expeditious" claims a proverbially favorite "ad," Bob's Bank, Ralph's Pretty Good Grocery, Jack's Auto Repair.

"Jack's Auto Repair in Lake Wobegon has diversified and now includes Jack's Warm Car Service and Jack's School of Thought," *The Wall Street Journal* reported last January. "The latter offers a Head Stop program that teaches intellectuals how to enjoy such pedestrian pastimes as bowling."

Keillor developed Lake Wobegon during the 1960s for his morning radio show—which he still does for MPR, but began adding embellishments with debut of "A Prairie Home Companion."

At 38 he retains a childlike affection for Lake Wobegon and its people. Fact and whim marry as he talks of it.

"The characters, the people who populate Lake Wobegon, the ones I have got around to naming and talking about, in my mind are based loosely on people that I used to know and whom I grew up with for the most part," he says. "They are based on people I remember, though my memory is very inaccurate. And my relatives remind me of that—though they enjoy my versions of what happened—that they didn't really happen that way."

"But I grew up in a very fundamentalist sect called the Plymouth Brethren, who believed that our home is not here in this world. It's elsewhere and we are waiting to go to it. And as a result they were almost completely out of step with the culture."

"When I hear people talk about growing up in the 1950s and hear of the music, what they did for fun, that really wasn't my upbringing at all. When I went from home to school I really crossed a chasm."

Keillor attended the University of Minnesota.

"And my upbringing I think has much more in

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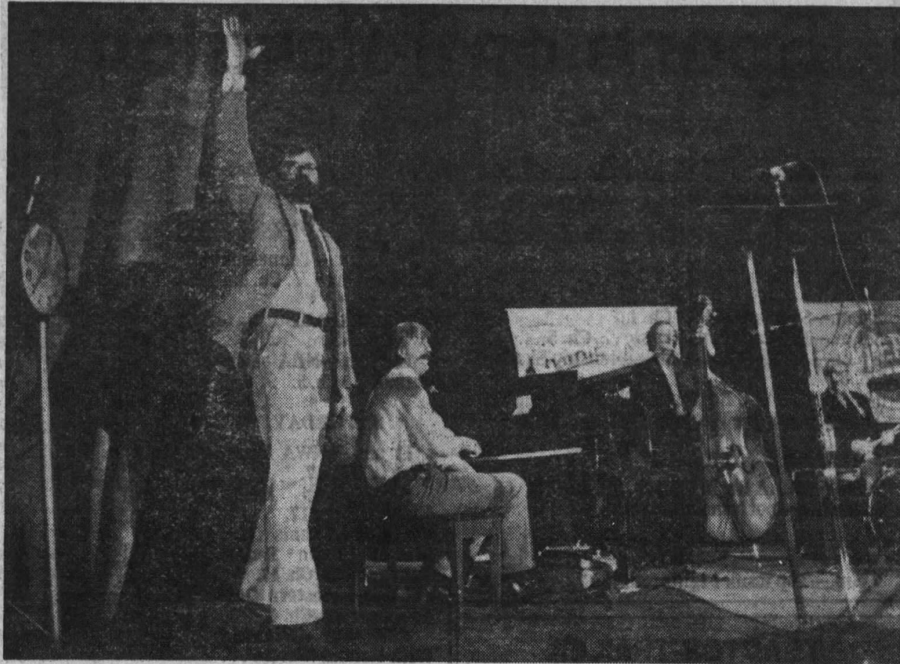
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Host and creator Garrison Keillor signals time cues to the sound crew to conclude a broadcast of "A Prairie Home Companion." The program will premiere in Nashville Saturday at 8 p.m. on WPLN. The show has been on Murfreesboro's WMOT-FM since Minnesota Public Radio began its syndication last May. The two-hour show is broadcast live from the 71-year-old World Theater in St. Paul, Minn.

common with the childhood of somebody who grew up in the early 1900s, you know, the turn of the century. I feel I have more in common with someone 80 or 90 years old. But their time is a time that is out of step, isolated, that walked off the edge a long time ago and kept going."

Keillor was dressed in his usual attire: hiking boots, white socks, T-shirt, sportshirt, wool herringbone sportcoat with too-short sleeves that ride like collars on the sweater sleeves that reach out beyond them. He looked out the window as he talked, letting go words slowly to be sure they had the proper mix of meaning and fancy. Listening to the man was much like listening to his radio show.

"I think that Garrison's humor is definitely the thing that gets the attention," explained Margaret Moos, who has produced "A Prairie Home Companion" since it began. "He has written in *The New Yorker* and has somewhat of a national

following... I think people are more interested in radio in the last five years than in the recent past when radio was so heavily formatted. I think there has been a slight resurgence in people turning to radio again, you know, they are dissatisfied with television and they're turning to radio again."

Here at St. Paul they also are packing the old World Theater, where "A Prairie Home Companion" is broadcast. The theater, built in 1910, was called the Shubert until 1933, when it changed from live shows to movies. It is in downtown St. Paul a short walk from MPR headquarters.

The World seats more than 600. A second balcony, enclosed and unused since 1933, is being refurbished to increase seating to about 1,000.

Like most happenings, the re-opening of the balcony loosened the rein on Keillor's imagination.

"A lot of ghosts up here," he drawled as he climbed into the long closed third tier. "I would imagine people never left after the last show."