

## Radio host stays 'down home' with music, humor of our past

By RON WAYNE  
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Garrison Keillor preserves the past every Saturday night. A past when humanity and originality were our values.

The humor and music that is heard on his National Public Radio show do not reflect today's homogenized entertainment that depends on instant identification and gratification.

"A Prairie Home Companion" does not fit into our image-conscious world where fewer people know how to listen and to imagine. But there are still those who like to hear the voices from a seemingly distant land, broadcast live to the speakers a few feet away.

Keillor (pronounced Key-ler) spent Saturday nights close to his radio, learning about the magic of radio as a kid in Minnesota. Today, he hosts a radio show that is broadcast from St. Paul to about 70 stations across the country, including Pittsburgh's WQED-FM (89.3).

Talking to Keillor is a pleasant experience. By phone from Minnesota, he creates the same kind of informal conversation that is the keynote of "A Prairie Home Companion." The voice is unmistakably FM, the humor casual.

"I was recently talking to a Boston producer who thought we should put the show on television," Keillor said. "But the sound on TV is so awful, tinny."

As a fan of the "Grand Ole Opry," he much prefers the radio broadcasts to the telecasts. "There is always something missing," he said. "It's not a live telecast."

"Television has never represented country music very well," Keillor said. "But it does professional football wonderfully."

Keillor used to listen to the numerous country music shows that were broadcast when he was a kid. "My memory may be sort of romantic, but I remember getting a very close feeling of family with them," he said.

There is a definite down home feeling on "A Prairie Home Companion." Frequent listeners will come to know one source of his humor, a fictional town called Lake Wobegon.

The town boasts such shops as Bertha's Kitty Boutique where cats are their specialty ("no jackets for snakes"). In a dry voice, Keillor describes their products such as "Cat-a-lac," a low-fat milk substitute, or its provision for services at Eternal Lap Memorial Park "where you can be assured your cat won't lie beside a dog. What kind of rest would that be?"

Safety products can be purchased at the "Fearmonger's Shop." Elevated toilet seats that "lift you out of the range of sewer snakes." It offers T-shirts with your name in large letters to those who fear others will forget their



On the radio

Garrison Keillor, following years of work in radio, now brings back the old-time variety radio show every Saturday night on WQED-FM. The laid-back format includes his witty tales of folksy lore and a wide range of musical acts. He hosts the show that is taped live in Minnesota and broadcast to about 70 stations that belong to National Public Radio. He believes the tides will turn as more and more people begin to turn off the TV and remember they have ears.

name ("embarrassing with social acquaintances but disastrous with your family.")

Keillor's humor is of a folksy and witty sort, separating it from the kind of comedy that uses insults or stereotypes. "It's a form I'm not really comfortable with," Keillor said. "The performance of comedy does not have to be the reinforcement of ignorance."

His humor has its basis in stories that relatives like Uncle Lou and Aunt Ruth told him when he was young. They had no punch lines and often the stories were inconsequential, he says.

The stories would describe characters, their nuances and eccentricities. They were always done in a gentle spirit. "Even though the people would do unseemly things and sometimes end up with egg on their face, you would not think less of the person described," Keillor said.

Keillor listens as intently to the musicians he selects for the two-hour show as he did to his relatives. He cares little about the type of music or whether they are professional, but about their interest in reaching an audience.

"It's the attitude that people have," he said. "They're serious

but it doesn't deter them from trying to reach out and put it across."

The result is a range from Minnesota's bluegrass to the jazzy blues of Little Brother Montgomery on the piano. There is an occasional saw player, some fiddling and, of course, country and western. "If they have it, the kind of music doesn't matter," he says.

The show is staged in an old St. Paul theater during bad weather, and in the Sculpture Garden of the Minneapolis-St. Paul Museum of Science and the Arts during better weather. It usually attracts a family audience of all ages, totaling about 600.

He doesn't worry that his radio variety show needs to attract a lot of listeners. The advent of radio cable networks and satellite systems will continue to create a diversified market for the listener, he says.

"It will not be necessary for a show to have a huge audience and mass appeal," Keillor said. "I really think that's the way broadcast casting is going in general."

If you want to be in the vanguard, just turn on WQED-FM on Saturday at 10 p.m. and listen awhile.