

# A cult show from the Midwest

By David Black  
Rolling Stone

ST. PAUL, Minn. — "This is 'A Prairie Home Companion,' coming to you from the World Theater in St. Paul, Minnesota, and brought to you by Powdermilk Biscuits.

"Heavens, they're tasty and expeditious. They give a shy boy strength to do what has to be done. If you are a shy person and you eat a couple of biscuits, you will feel something rise within you. You will feel a surge of hope and delight and fortitude.

"Give me some of that biscuit fiddle music ..."

Every Saturday from 5 to 7 p.m. Central Daylight Time, "A Prairie Home Companion" is broadcast live to 130 radio stations across the country, reaching an audience of about 600,000 that is growing weekly.

The show is a mulligan stew of programming: old jazz, '20s and '30s pop tunes, gospel music, ballads, Balkan songs, fiddle, dulcimer and autoharp solos, yodeling and novelty tunes like "The Teddy Bears' Picnic."

Interspersed with the music are reports from the fictional town of Lake Wobegon, Minn. — home of the Church of Our Lady of Perpetual Responsibility, the Wally "Old Hardhands" Bunsen Memorial Field, the Chatterbox Cafe, the Sidetrack Tap (where you can get deep-fried fish lips), Bob's Bank (whose motto is "Neither a borrower nor a lender be") and the Fearmonger Shop.

The Fearmonger warns: "Most people think that deadly snakes don't like cold climates. And they're right, because when it's cold, deadly snakes head for warm places . . . homes, for example. In the home, the favorite resting place for deadly snakes — as all of us have known since childhood — is at the foot of the bed, under the covers. And here, public awareness is the solution. If every parent would simply whack the bed a few times with a baseball bat before putting their child to sleep, the danger of bed snakes could be completely eliminated."

The man responsible for this blend of Sherwood Anderson, Spike Jones and Thomas Pynchon is Garrison Keillor, a bearded Minnesotan with a forlorn look. Keillor, 39, invented Lake Wobegon in the late '60s when he was running a morning show on Minnesota Public Radio.

But the idea for "A Prairie Home Companion" came to Keillor in 1974, when he was in Nashville covering the Grand Ole Opry's last broadcast from the old Ryman Auditorium for the New Yorker.

The show is an electronic version of the turn-of-the-century practice of gathering around the parlor piano on a Saturday night.

It has developed a cult following and seems destined to break through to a mass audience — a dangerous kind of success for a low-key, intimate program.

On recent shows, the company of regulars, including Stevie Beck on autoharp and the Butch Thompson Trio, has been joined by such stars as Leo Kottke and Mose Allison.

The presence of these performers subtly shifts the show's center of gravity, since part of the appeal of "A Prairie Home Companion" is that the audience feels a kinship with the performers exactly because they are not big names.

Chances are the show will survive as long as it remains faithful to the spirit of Powdermilk Biscuits, which, Keillor said, "are made by Norwegian bachelor farmers, so you know they're not only good for you, they're pure, mostly."

After all, the problems faced by "A Prairie Home Companion" are the same ones facing Powdermilk Biscuits.

"Those of you who are somewhat removed from Minnesota occasionally write in to ask us about Powdermilk Biscuits," Keillor recently said on a show.

"Are they real?" you ask. Of course they're real. It's just that the Powdermilk Biscuit Co. has a distribution problem because it only has a '57 pickup truck, and Einer (the owner) refuses to go into debt, so he won't buy another truck until he sells more biscuits, which he can't do because he only has one truck, and since Einer refuses to stay away from home overnight, it pretty much eliminates the East and West coasts . . ."

But the spirit of "A Prairie Home Companion" doesn't have to range far to hit home.

In some hidden chamber of our heart, most of us, no matter where we live, are citizens of Lake Wobegon, where "all the women are strong, all the men good-looking and all the children above-average."

A story of two friends who didn't know they were supposed to be enemies.

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