



Garrison Keillor

## A return to the radio of yesteryear

By IRV LETOFSKY  
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ANAHEIM, Calif. — Garrison Keillor is the stuff of guru. He looks right-bearded and spectacled at 6 feet 4. But he possesses a manner shy and wary and projects a thick Minn-uh-so'-duh accent that reeks of early evenings on the back porch with the mosquitoes in full attack and the Twins losing to Baltimore on the radio.

His peculiar sect is bound together by a weekly two-hour devotion in the form of a radio series, "A Prairie Home Companion." It is done Saturdays in St. Paul by Minnesota Public Radio and shipped live by satellite to stations throughout the land from 6 to 8 p.m. EDT.

The program challenges analogy, although James Thurber doing Arthur Godfrey would be close. It is essentially an old-time variety show with music and funny things, suggesting that Keillor has grabbed onto an idea whose time has come and gone and come again.

At the heart of the charm are recitations by Keillor on the life and times of Lake Wobegon (as in Wobegone), a middle Minnesota town of 500 that "time has forgotten and the decades cannot improve,

where," Keillor continues. "All the women are strong, the men good looking and all the children are above average."

Keillor (as in dealer) has populated his town with a complete citizenry that is much too real, if you've ever been in middle Minnesota — Mayor Bunsen, Pastor Engquist, peace officers Gary and LeRoy, poet laureate Margaret Haskins Durber.

Plus the businesses that sponsor the show — Ralph's Pretty Good Grocery, Bob's Bank, Jack's Toast House, Bertha at Bertha's Kilty Boutique encourages cat ranching: "Start out with a couple of males and 10-12 females and someday you might have a little spread of your own, two-three acres and maybe

several hundred head of cat."

The Fearmonger Shop sells items for primal fears, including safety toilet seats — "Up to 36 inches above the water, out of reach of snakes, even those that stand on each other's shoulders."

(The show's real-life sponsors, besides the Minnesota public network, are Cargill Inc., and the National Endowment for the Arts.)

The 7-year-old show recently won a Peabody Award, assumed to be the class achievement in broadcasting, and its popularity is bounding ahead with its now year-old syndication plus loving coverage (Wall Street Journal, Rolling Stone, etc.) by a media that are captivated by the Keillor wit and wisdom.

According to an interview during a

recent visit to a public radio conference in Anaheim, Keillor, 39, believes that it's all due to the lively dynamics of live radio.

"Odd thing about a live radio show," he said, "it seems to be important to people that they are listening to something that their friends or their family are listening to a long ways away."

"It's magical and it has great potential. I wish that I were in it for the money so I could take advantage of it."

The musical segments expand the concept of eclectic. The traditional entertainments include regular Butch Thompson (he does the Jelly Roll Morton piano repertory) and frequent guest Leo Kottke (he and his 12-string guitar have their own cult-dom). Plus occasional yodelers and gospel singers and stars of dulcimers, mandolins, washub basses, carpenter's saws and various mouth instruments like the cheek and the tongue. One man did "The William Tell Overture" on his teeth.

Keillor plays the autoharp, with sincerity if not technical triumph. He sings, although on occasions, the music has left him and his range trailing far behind.

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# Radio

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But, in fact, it's part of his philosophy, "The host is supposed to sing. Because the host is supposed to put himself on the line. That is what you have to do to do a live radio show. You can't hang back and be the cool guy. You're supposed to put yourself in jeopardy."

Gary Keillor (he took "Garrison" because it made him sound like "someone not to be trifled with") comes out of small-town Minnesota, the son of members of the Plymouth Brethren, a stern fundamentalist sect that frowned on dancing and movies and were even not all that happy when Gary had a poem published in the high school literary magazine.

A high school teacher turned him on to Thurber, E. B. White and John Updike, et al., and gave Keillor the dream of being glamorous and sophisticated and living the high old life in New York.

Keillor ended up in radio, having perfected his "educational radio" voice at the University of Minnesota. But that authoritative persona (and having to guess at the pronunciations of classical composers) began to bore him.

On the St. Paul public station, between news and cuts of bluegrass, he came up with a sponsor, Jack's Auto Repair in Lake Wobegon ("All tracks lead to Jack's").

Because he didn't know much about cars, he launched Jack into retail sales — air fresheners, novelty items, carloads of out-of-fashion clothes. Then Jack began his correspondence School of Thought.

After a visit to the Grand Ole Opry in Nashville, Tenn., Keillor came up with the idea of "A Prairie Home Companion."

"The appeal, I think, is the live radio from a stage, with an audience from a particular place. It's magical, that when you play on our radio show — and I tell this to the musicians over the years — you are not in competition with recordings. You are not in competition with Barry Manilow. You have the benefit of the fact that you are doing it at the same time your audience is listening. So they are with you in a way that cannot be true for other shows."

This may be the reason that the audience doesn't care — and in fact enjoys it — when Keillor starts a song in a key too high for his modest voice, then has to catch up.

Nevertheless, the real beauty is Keillor's reflections on Lake Wobegon and its folks: One pre-Easter week premise was that the strength of Lake Wobegon was that its people believe in the existence of sin.

He went on, "They don't believe that everything



Host Garrison Keillor reads a letter from a listener during a live radio broadcast of 'A Prairie Home Companion.'

that goes wrong is the result in a failure of communications or a misunderstanding or a lack of B-1 vitamins. People sometimes spend a great deal of time trying to understand problems — only to come up with new and different problems . . . whereas in Lake Wobegon they save a lot of time by simply calling it sin and forgiving it and to hell with it."

Many people tuning in have missed the satirical premise.

"I get a few letters every week from people who want to know where Lake Wobegon is and some of them want to come up and visit and some of them want to buy the products," Keillor said.

"People are not angry when you tell them."

How do you tell them?

"Gently. I've talked with people long distance who want to find out about it and they did not seem angry that it was a fiction. It seemed to interest them as much as the possibility that it was real."

More than radio, Keillor's passion seems to be in his writing. Even on his two-day stop in Anaheim, he had two articles-in-progress in his briefcase. Besides his frequent contributions to New Yorker magazine (Athenaeum Press will publish a collection of his pieces at the end of the year), he's also writing for Atlantic.

But he won't live the high old life in New York. He is well-tied to Minnesota and Lake Wobegon. Despite his local role as Saturday's hero, he continues his "Morning Home Companion" show on Minnesota Public Radio. He can't play the star: "That's very important in Minnesota. If you are appearing to become successful, a big deal, you still have to dig your potatoes."