



'Prairie' show is hardly bush league

By Jim Dawson
Special to The Sun

St. Paul, Minn.—At 10 minutes to air time, Garrison Keillor stuffed out his cigarette and ambled onto the creaky old stage of the World Theater in downtown St. Paul.

"A Prairie Home Companion Show" was about to begin. For the past 20 minutes a trio of musicians had been warming up to the audience with a collection of ragtime and jazz tunes.

Now it was Mr. Keillor's turn. He wanted the mood to be just right, as if he and the audience were old friends gathered around a pot-bellied stove on a snowy Minnesota night.

"How many of you are trying to explain this show to the person sitting next to you who has come for the first time?" Mr. Keillor asked the audience in his soft, relaxed voice. He laughed with the crowd, then added, "Don't bother."

Insiders, the Minnesotans who have listened devoutly to Mr. Keillor and "A Prairie Home Companion Show" for seven years, know the frustrations of trying to describe this odd radio

show to out-of-state relatives and friends.

The show, which debuted on WBJC (91.5 FM in Baltimore) earlier this month, presents mythical characters from Mr. Keillor's imagination and real, although often obscure, musicians.

Mr. Keillor, 39, has long been a minor Minnesota cult figure and there is a certain smugness now that his show has become a nationwide hit, broadcast live on more than 150 public radio stations every Saturday at 5 p.m. Minnesota time, 6 p.m. in Baltimore.

(Kenneth Stein, station manager of WBJC, said "A Prairie Home Companion Show" has generated "a lot of favorable response in the three weeks it has been on the air here. "We're the only classical station in the market and we were afraid our listeners might object to what is basically a country music show with some sophisticated humor." Mr. Stein added that he had checked with other stations which carry "Prairie Home"—most of which also have classical music formats—and found the show had received the same favorable response in

other cities.)

The show proves there is more to this state than sub-zero temperatures, dairy farmers and Walter Mondale. It somehow reflects the wholesome, yet sophisticated, "quality of life" people around here tout so proudly.

Each week a growing national audience tunes in to hear both the music and Mr. Keillor's humorous tales from Lake Wobegon, an imaginary town somewhere in Minnesota. It's a place, he says, "where the women are strong, the men are good looking, and the children are above average."

Lake Wobegon is created each week out of Mr. Keillor's memories of his childhood in Anoka, Minn., but its appeal is universal. His tales satirically reflect the morals and values found in any small town.

Lake Wobegon is the home of Powdermilk Biscuits, the imaginary sponsor of the radio show. The biscuits are magical. They promote regularity ("Heavens, they're expeditious," Mr. Keillor said), and "give shy people the nerve to

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Host Garrison Keillor reads a letter from a listener on "A Prairie Home Companion" radio show.

Man tells anecdotes in St. Paul and the nation listens

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get up and do what has to be done." There's Bob's Bank, where the motto is, "Neither a borrower nor a lender be." There's Father Emil of Our Lady of Perpetual Responsibility Church. And there's Ralph of Ralph's Pretty Good Grocery. "If you can't find it at Ralph's," Mr. Keillor said, "you can probably get along without it."

The most popular place in town is the legendary Jack's Auto Repair, a garage that offers a wide range of services—from Jack's School of Thought, with a variety of self-improvement classes, to Jack's Toast House.

"All tracks lead to Jack's, where the bright flashing lights show you the way to complete satisfaction," Mr. Keillor said, ending another fictitious commercial for

Jack's. Mr. Keillor's low-key, mid-western humor has been appearing in the *New Yorker* magazine since 1969, and Mr. Keillor still sees himself as a writer, not a performer.

"The musicians on the show tonight," Mr. Keillor said as he stood backstage in his traditional light tan suit and hiking boots, "they go out and play nightclubs and bars with drunks and everything. I couldn't do that. I go on stage here, but I'm not really a performer."

He often writes his tales from Lake Wobegon the night before the show, then wings it on stage, rarely referring to his script. "The process of writing is a form of memorization," he said, "and it comes off better if you don't stand out there and read it. I made my monologue tonight better than it was on paper."

The show shifts moods almost minute by minute. A singer from the Minnesota Opera may be followed by a yodeler from North Dakota. An Irish folk singer might set the stage for a man playing wooden spoons.

The competition to get on the show is fierce, and Minnesota Public Radio is inundated by tapes and records from hopeful musicians. Mr. Keillor listens to many of the tapes, but it isn't pure musical ability he is after.

"I work for a variety of acts," he said, "but more and more I'm looking for a certain quality, an easiness in the approach to

music." Performers have to be able to "step up to the mike and be able to give their music to people at home," he said. "We've had some very good musicians on the show who just couldn't give themselves over to the radio."

"This is an odd radio show," he said, "and it isn't going to attract people who are devoted to one type of music. The sum of the show is greater than its parts. I couldn't do it without them," he said, nodding toward the musicians who were packing up their instruments, "and they couldn't do it without me."

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