

*'Prairie Home Companion'*

# Lively Mixture Of Music And Mirth

By TOM JORY

NEW YORK (AP) — "Well, hello, everybody and welcome to 'A Prairie Home Companion' ... coming to you live from the World Theater in downtown St. Paul. ... Mr. Bill Staines is with us. Mr. Vern Sutton, Mr. Phillip Brunelle, Miss Stevie Beck, Queen of the Autoharp, and the Butch Thompson Trio."

The voice — Garrison's Keillor's — is soft and measured, with a clear emphasis in the introduction on "Home." And the show sounds a bit like one you might pick up off the Plains, late at night.

In fact, it's 5 in the evening in St. Paul, and the audience, a large one for radio by today's standards — more than 150 National Public Radio stations carry the show — is scattered across the country, as far away as Kodiak, Alaska, to the northwest, Miami to the southeast.

"... Presented every Saturday night at this time," Keillor is saying now, "by Minnesota Public Radio and by this public radio station, and brought to you by your friends in Lake Wobegon, Minnesota, and by those Powdermilk Biscuits ... ah, those biscuits, ahhh, they're tasty, and expeditious."

And for the next two hours, it's a live mixture of gentle humor and traditional music — folk, jazz, bluegrass, ethnic, old-time.

The sponsors — all from Lake Wobegon, where "all the men are good-looking, all the women are strong, and all the children are above average" — change each half-hour, from Powdermilk Biscuits, to Bertha's Kitty Boutique, to Bob's Bank, where you can "save at the sign of the sock."

"I had never performed on a stage before," says Keillor, as soft-spoken on the telephone as he is on the air, "and before the first broadcast, I expected a big crowd. We hired a 400-seat hall, and I guess about 12 people came. It was like walking into cold water.

"Discouraging? Well ... yeah. The next week, it might have been 15 — that was midsummer '74 — and I don't think we broke 200 'til the fall. By then, we'd moved into a smaller theater, and that helped. We had a better feeling about the show. The place was packed every Saturday night.

"I recall doing a Christmas show back then," Keillor says, "and I realized after we were on the air, I didn't have a pianist, and we had all these carols to do. I called for volunteers, and one — a woman — popped right up. That's remarkable when you think about it — we couldn't do that today, it would be too big a deal."

Keillor, 39, created "A Prairie Home Companion" in 1974 after a trip to Nashville for a magazine article on the Grand Ole Opry.

"Its liveness appealed to me then — it charged the show with excitement above and beyond the music, the old magic of radio as a connection to distant places," he recalls. "And after writing about the Opry, I felt appealed to again, and came home, and two months later we were in business."

"It's a live show," he says of "Prairie Home Companion," "and that may be the most important about it. And being live, it's a particularly human show. The people out on the stage are doing what they do in real time — at the same time the audience is listening to them. It's not an ideal situation somebody has put together in the studio."

The program was offered to a national audience for the first time in May 1980. Keillor's career in radio began in the mid-'60s while a student at the University of Minnesota.

"When I started the show," he says, "I had every word written out — that was defensiveness to a very high degree. I quickly got rid of that script." Keillor says he still writes out the monologue for his weekly visit to Lake Wobegon, "but only as a way of thinking. I leave it behind when I go on stage. Mainly, I want a beginning and an end to what I say."

Keillor continues to write outside the show — he's had two-dozen articles in the New Yorker since 1969, and a collection of his stories will be published by Atheneum after the first of the year in a book called "Happy to Be Here."

Keillor takes the show outdoors in the late spring and summer each year, and traveled to Wisconsin and Iowa in 1980 and Boston, Philadelphia and Washington this fall.

"A Prairie Home Companion" won a George Foster Peabody Award for excellence in broadcasting in 1980.

"Somebody told me about going home to Wisconsin the other day," Keillor says, "to his brother's home, who'd decided not to have television. He said his brother's three boys got down on the floor on their bellies and listened to the radio.

"That's what I did when I was a kid," he says, "and that's the kind of audience I have in mind for the show."