

Life Life Life

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'Prairie Home Companion' is folksy fun on radio

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It's a 45-minute hour in showtime and the people are a study of contrast.

Odette, the folk singer, is dancing. Red Maddock, the drummer, is joking. Margaret Moon, the producer, is producing. And Garrison Kellor, the new American folk hero, is pacing.

He has become the world's best shot at a 1980s Will Rogers. He has a radio show, "A Prairie Home Companion," with a cult following; he has a book, "Happy To Be Here," that was an instant best-seller.

He is a man of considerable warmth and humor.

And he doesn't look the part. Kellor is a tall, stern-looking man of 42. He removed his beard a year ago. He says he's 6-3, which may be an understatement. He says he's painfully shy, which is clearly an understatement. And at this moment he's pacing backstage with two packs of cigarettes, one straight and one mentholated.

"There's double pressure," Moon said. "He's doing a live radio show and a live concert. We all get a little nervous."

In 20-ers when live variety shows have virtually vanished, Kellor creates one every Saturday. An in-studio audience expects big things from him; so do people listening to more than 300 stations nationwide. The two-hour program is broadcast locally on WKEG-FM (88.1 on the dial in Elmira, 88.3 east of Elmira) at 8

p.m. Saturdays.

It is a strange position for a guy who gets nervous talking to one person, much less mobs of them.

Kellor grew up in a small Minnesota suburb, in a starchy fundamentalist family. TV was late reaching his home and radio fueled his fantasies.

So he became a DJ, blessed with a baritone voice mellow enough to make Perry Como seem grating. And he led a double life.

In Minnesota, he was a public radio DJ, gentle and folksy. In big cities, he was known as the author of articles and humor pieces for the New Yorker and The Atlantic.

"These are two very different audiences," Moon said.

They began merging after he wrote an article on "Grand Ole Opry," then wanted to do a local equivalent. So "Prairie Home Companion" began on the Minnesota public radio station in St. Paul with a make-believe hometown (Lake Wobegon) and make-believe sponsors.

Audiences were charmed by the wit, the warmth and the music. In May of 1980, "Companion" was bounced off a satellite from the Minnesota station to other stations.

At first, 30 stations took "Companion"; now there are 300. And now, Moon grants, "the level of expectation is so high."

Instead of one part-time producer, "Companion" has a three-person production staff. In April, Kellor dropped his DJ duties.

On this particular night, the audience is packed; the backstage mood is varied. Odette is ebullient, clapping and talking and doing an impromptu reel. Maddock also is cheerful, because he's been through it all.

"I've been in show business for 41 years," he says with a grin. "Started when I was 2." That began with his dad's band and had gone on and on. Red Maddock can talk about jamming with the best, about being tipped 10th by John Dillinger and Babyface Nelson.

Throughout his hectic road life, he has stayed married — "44 years, four kids, 15 grandchildren" — and happy. Even cohab treatments for throat cancer didn't seem to slow him. New radio audiences love his rasp. "They always think I'm colored, because I sound so much like Nat King Cole."

As Maddock jokes, Kellor paces.

He has written parts of the show — commercials and song parodies — but, the monologs are only sketched out. They're still forming in his mind. "Radio is the medium in which you can imagine yourself as being young and flamboyant and good-looking," he said dryly. "And you lead people into believing this. Now comes the moment of truth."

He paces, letting people see the real Garrison Kellor. "A lot of people leave at this point. We offer a half-price refund."

Soon, the show begins with his gentle crooning. The formula is consistent. There's bluegrass from Stony Lonesome band, fiddle from Peter Ostroushko, low-key jazz from the Butch Thompson Trio. There's the guest star — in this case, Odette blasting out some powerful folk sounds.

And there are the coveted Kellorisms.

One moment, he's doing a pitch for Bertha's Kitty Recreation Center. "Just hanging a ball and string isn't enough. But a cat never tires of a good game of air hockey."

Later, assistant producer Margaret Ostroushko (Peter's wife) is filling in as sound engineer so Tom Keith can step onstage and play a dog. The pitch is for "Jack's Scraps, the only dogfood taken from the plates of flaky children." Somehow, all of this blends into a package that is intelligent and folksy.

The crowd loves it.



"A Prairie Home Companion" host Garrison Kellor (at microphone, left) sings...with Robin and Linda Williams during a live broadcast.