



Big news from Lake Wobegon: *Companion* is back

By ELINOR J. BRECHER
Herald Staff Writer

It may have been a quiet week in Lake Wobegon, but in South Florida, Category Four-level anticipation has hit the long-hereft devotees of public radio's *A Prairie Home Companion*.

Tonight at 6, storyteller/humorist Garrison Keillor and *A Prairie Home Companion* return

to WLRN (91.3 FM), which last carried the show in 1987.

This week's show is a rerun of one that was broadcast last Thanksgiving from New York, featuring singer-songwriter Tom Paxton and the Heartbeats Rhythm Quartet. Live programs resume in October.

"I'm ecstatic!" crowed Miami lawyer and self-confessed sentimental Minnesota native Neil

WHERE TO HEAR IT

The weekly public radio show *A Prairie Home Companion* returns to South Florida tonight from 6 to 8 on WLRN (91.3 FM).

Robertson. "I've been miserable. . . . I had to go back to letting my wife schedule events before 8 on Saturday nights. I've managed to survive on CDs and tapes."

Humorist and Herald colum-

nist Dave Barry, who appeared twice on American Radio Company of the Air, the New York-based *PHC* successor that Keillor hosted in the early 1990s, also seemed thrilled.

"I'm a huge fan of *Prairie Home Companion*," he said.

"I've always felt that there were many, many startling similarities

PLEASE SEE KEILLOR, 34G

Keillor's back, and his fans are all ears

Companion tales resume tonight

KEILLOR, FROM 10

between Miami and Minnesota. For example, they both begin with 'M.'
Susan Wilson of South Miami, a retired Miami-Dade Community College professor, liked *PHC's* wry humor "and the funny little twists of Midwestern life," such as Keillor's gentle spoofing of Lake Wobegon's Catholic community — the congregational intrigues at Our Lady of Perpetual Responsibility Church — and the understated truth of the Ralph's Pretty Good Grocery slogan: "If you can't find it at Ralph's, you probably don't need it."
WLRN's program director, Joseph Cooper, said listeners have been imploring the station for years to air Keillor, but the programs were "way too expensive" to buy until recently. Now, *PHC* is the linchpin of a \$25,000 multiprogram package deal that Cooper hopes will increase the station's listener sponsorship.

Where has he been?

To paraphrase the show's theme song, *Hello Love*, Where in the world has Keillor been for so long?

The show debuted in July 1974 on Minnesota Public Radio and ran for 13 years. According to Arbitron, the rating service, it peaked in 1985 with five million listeners nationwide.

Two million listeners in 330 markets now tune in weekly, according to Janet de Acevedo, communications director for Public Radio International, the network that produces the show, including WSPF in Fort Myers, WQCS in Fort Pierce, WUFT in Gainesville, WJCT in Jacksonville, and WMFE in Orlando.

Keillor, now 53, offered an ever-changing musical menu — gospel, folk, bluegrass, barbershop, country, ethnic, blues — along with his own brand of irony-tinged Midwestern wit and wisdom.

"What I like about him is that he combines humor with a sentimentality that really touches the heart," said Neil Robertson, the Miami fan. "He feels like an anchor for me, in this era when we've become so transient. I relate to, 'This is where I came from and what I'm about.'"
Many familiar denizens of Keillor's famously fictitious Mist

County, Minn., "the little town that time forgot," return with him, along with new characters and sponsors.

The show's highlight was, and remains, Keillor's monologue: the weekly "news from Lake Wobegon." Keillor updates listeners on the latest about Buster the Show Dog, the Bunsen family, various Lutherans and Norwegian bachelor farmers, the hapless Lake Wobegon Whippets baseball team and other regulars.

New to South Florida listeners: *Guy Noir*, private eye; *Cafe Boucuf*, with Maurice, the maitre d'; the American Duct Tape Council; *Guy's Shoes*, "the cellular shoes, the shoes that help you keep in touch"; and *Beeboprecorpop Frozen Rhubarb Pie*.

Stalwarts that continue to "sponsor" the show include: *Powdermilk Biscuits* ("Heavens, they're tasty!"); *Bertha's Kitty Boutique* ("for persons who care about cats"); and the *Chatterbox Cafe* ("where Dorothy presides").

Land's End, the catalog retailer, is now the show's first — and only — real-life commercial sponsor.

Closed shop in '87

Keillor folded *PHC* in 1987. He said at the time he was exhausted, but he also was in a major snit over the perceived invasion of his privacy by the *Twin Cities'* newspapers, which published photos and stories about his house.

Good Evening, a Minnesota-based variety show hosted by public radio news anchor Noah Adams, attempted to fill the time slot, but survived only one year.

During *Prairie Home Companion's* final months, Keillor had charmed listeners with the story of a new romance with a woman named Ulla Skaerved. They became reacquainted in 1985, at the 25th reunion of his high school, where Skaerved had been a Danish foreign exchange student.

Keillor moved to New York and wrote for *The New Yorker* magazine. He has said he started missing the show after six months, which led to the first of three annual "farewell" performances.

After a stint in Denmark, Keillor returned to New York in 1989 — sans Skaerved — and, the following year, to the American Radio Co.

In 1993, he came full circle by moving back to Minnesota — a log cabin just over the Wisconsin border for himself, St. Paul's Fitzgerald Theater for the show. He reinstated the original title, telling a reporter that bowing out



BODY LANGUAGE: Garrison Keillor tells his tales of Lake Wobegon onstage in 1986 in Boston.

in '87 "was the dumbest thing I ever did in my life. I don't know why nobody told me at the time that this was the wrong thing to do, but people assumed I knew best. So I walked off the edge of the cliff, and it's taken me a long time to climb back up on the rocks."

He shares the cabin and a Manhattan apartment with musician Jenny Nilsson.

A low point in Miami

Keillor has written seven novels. He recently told *The St. Paul Pioneer Press* that the all-time low point on his press tour for one of them, *The Book of Guys*, took place with a radio interviewer in Miami.

"She was blond and beautiful in a sort of plastic way. . . . I don't hold it against anyone for not reading my book. They're busy. So I'm willing to do material from my book for her."

"And she's sitting there looking at me with a stone face.

Stone! None of this amuses her at all, and I'm giving her my best stuff. And then, when I'm done knocking myself out for this broad, she says, 'You're very well known for something, and I'm trying to think what it is. Could you name a few things and prod my memory?'"

"Yes. On the air! I thought this was so cruel! So I said, 'Well, I wrote a book called *Lake Wobegon Days* in 1985.'"

"Oh yes! I loved it!"

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