

# Garrison Keillor: Happy to be 'Home'

By Lou Carlozo

Knight-Ridder Newspapers

Garrison Keillor, the creator and congenial host of "A Prairie Home Companion," was walking briskly on a zig-zag course through downtown Chicago.

Though his own life has taken some unexpected turns, Keillor's hugely popular radio program remains largely unchanged since his folksy baritone launched the show in 1974, in the process launching his own fame as a humorist and storyteller.

And since returning to "A Prairie Home Companion" four years ago, he said, his life has been back on track.

"I did the wrong thing, looking back," the Minnesota native said of a mini-retirement that took him to Denmark and New York. "It certainly turned out well, but now I'm in the position where I can give advice to people, and one piece of advice is, 'Don't make decisions when you're tired. Make them at the end of a three-week vacation.'"

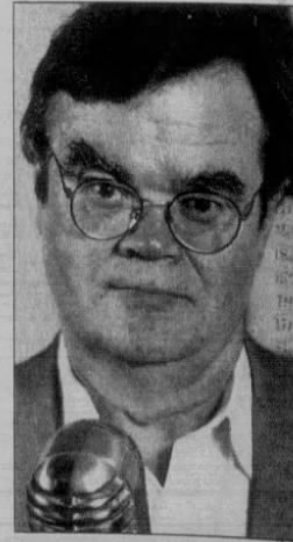
The show relies on a trademark arrangement of skits, music and sto-

ries that Keillor considers a time-tested mix.

"I think that changing the format at this point would be a confession of boredom or lack of imagination," he said. "Format is seldom a problem, as in football. It's not an issue of drawing up better plays, but of execution. I like the idea of working in a very clear form. You have your actors, musical guests, a certain number of commercials, longer dramatic set pieces."

For his stories, which are based in a fictional Minnesota town, Lake Wobegon, "I don't have any script in front of me," Keillor said. "I just hold a microphone in one hand and walk around. People can often tell I'm making it up because I have an intense look on my face, like a samurai."

To demonstrate, Keillor squinted his distinctive facial features into a ball. If not a samurai, he could have easily be mistaken for a Shar-Pei puppy whose bladder was about to burst.



Garrison Keillor of public radio's "Prairie Home Companion" says the show "feels like a lot of fun" since his return four years ago.

Please see KEILLOR, 3C

the edge than we would like to told her she was being molested. Barr cites as an example a people for these jobs."

# Keillor: Reflecting on the roads he's taken

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Should fans spot that look of concentration, they should not mistake it for the fatigue that made Keillor retire the show in 1987. He insists that this time around, "it feels like a lot of fun. I've gone through periods when it was a chore, but gradually I learned that the way to enjoy your work is to do it well."

The pace was much more frantic 10 years ago. "I was really bone tired," recalled Keillor, 55. "I had written a book, lost a producer of the radio show and was doing it myself, launched myself into a romance — and there's nothing more tiring than to throw yourself at the feet of a woman who's in Copenhagen. . . . And when you get that tired, it's easy to mistake it for depression or that you're weary of your work."

Back then, the personal and professional also intertwined in an uncomfortable way for Keillor, a man known for being private and shy. The producer who left was Margaret Moos, who had lived with Keillor and produced

his show from the beginning. The new love was an old high school friend from Denmark, Ulla Skaerved; the two met again at Keillor's high school reunion in the summer of 1985.

Keillor aired what he thought would be his last program in June 1987. "Once I was out of Minnesota and living in Denmark, I started to miss everything," he said. "Heck, I missed English. And my longing for the show did not dissipate."

Keillor returned to radio in 1989 with a New York-based show, "The American Radio Company," which moved to Minnesota in 1992 and reclaimed the "Prairie" name in 1993. He has been married for the last few years to Jenny Lind Nilsson, a musician with whom he co-wrote a novel for young adults, last year's "The Sandy Bottom Orchestra" (Hyperion). The couple split their time between western Wisconsin and New York.

Though millions of radio listeners know Keillor as an entertainer, they may be surprised to learn that he considers himself a

writer first and foremost.

His new novel, "Wobegon Boy" (Viking Press), marks another return of sorts — it is a spinoff from 1985's "Lake Wobegon Days." And while some earlier books garnered mixed reviews, the initial press for Keillor's latest has been largely enthusiastic.

In weaving the smart tale of John Tollefson, a Lake Wobegon expatriate weathering a midlife crisis, Keillor brandishes his wry wit. He even heaves a few salvos at National Public Radio in his searing sketch of a mythical guest commentator.

"Public radio is something of a sacred cow," Keillor said. "I happen to live with the sacred cow and I'm very fond of the cow. It's

been good to me and I hope I've been good to it. But I'm not saying anything in the book that people in public radio haven't been saying to themselves for years."

Keillor will perform to a sold-out crowd at Town Hall, West 43rd Street, on Dec. 6, 13, and 20, broadcasting NPR's "A Prairie Home Companion" live from the theater from 6 to 8 p.m.

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