

## Keillor may even sing in appearance here

By Adrian McCoy  
Post-Gazette Staff Writer

**G**arrison Keillor regales public radio audiences with his folksy monologues weekly on "A Prairie Home Companion" (heard locally on WQED-FM 89.3) at 6 p.m. Saturdays). So reading aloud from his novels is second nature to Keillor, who'll open the Drue Heinz Lecture Series on Monday.

Keillor will read "a few choice passages" from his latest novel, "Love Me." "If I get up the courage," he adds, "I'll sing a song."

"Love Me" is the story of a successful novelist who leaves his wife and heads for New York, only to have his second novel flop. Returning home, he ends up writing an advice column called "Ask Mr. Blue."

For more than three decades — something of an eternity in radio — Keillor has been spinning tales out of Lake Wobegon, the imaginary Minnesota town that has become very real for the show's fans. "Prairie Home Companion" is heard on more than 500 stations, with an audience of about 3.9 million.

Keillor signed on in 1969, hosting a morning show on Minnesota Public Radio called "A Prairie Home Companion." He was writing an article on the Grand Old Opry, which gave him the idea of incorporating live broadcasts, musical guests and commercials for imaginary products into the show. The first live show aired in 1971.

Keillor signed off in 1987, but after a two-year hiatus returned with "The American Radio Company," which was based at the Brooklyn Academy of Music. Like the protagonist of "Love Me," the show returned home to Minnesota in '92, and changed its

**LECTURE PREVIEW**

### Garrison Keillor

- **WHERE:** Drue Heinz Lecture Series in Carnegie Music Hall, Oakland.
- **WHEN:** 7:30 p.m. Monday.
- **TICKETS:** \$12-\$18, students \$8. 412-622-8866.

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Garrison Keillor will read from his novel, "Love Me," at the Drue Heinz Lecture Series.

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name back to "A Prairie Home Companion" a year later.

What has given "Prairie Home Companion" such staying power and appeal? "We have a perfect time slot," Keillor says. "Saturday at 6 p.m. Eastern is a mellow moment, and all up and down the East Coast people are opening their sauvignon blanc or sloshing a shaker of martinis and their hearts are young and free. That's when I sing 'Tishomingo Blues' and start saying funny things.

"By 8 p.m., they're at a dreadful dinner party or at the theater watching an awful play about childhood trauma or they're at a John Kerry fund-raiser at the Unitarian church, and they're thinking, 'What was that wonderful show on the radio that I only got to hear the first half-hour of?' That's the other reason for our longevity: Nobody ever hears the whole show."

Keillor has made a career out of making unique radio, and he has strong opinions on the current state of the medium. "Commercial radio is a dying horse, and that's why it's being conglomerated and automated. Nobody's having fun in commercial radio, and some day you'll have 10 people programming 5,000 stations.

"Public noncommercial radio has never been healthier, oddly enough, because public radio understands that homogeneity and automation are not what people tune in for: People want to hear distinctive individuals on the air who seem to be enjoying themselves ... the 'Car Talk' guys or Ira Glass or Terry Gross. You really need to stand out as 'Somebody.'"

He's an observer of the current

political scene. Keillor had a lot to say when his state elected a former professional wrestler as its governor. The thought of a movie actor and former body builder running for governor in California also gets him going. "California is always fun to watch and [Arnold] Schwarzenegger is the most preposterous candidate since Jesse (The Body) Ventura. Glad it's them and not us this time."

The Information Superhighway now runs through Lake Wobegon. The "Prairie Home Companion" Web site ([www.prairiehome.org](http://www.prairiehome.org)) gives listeners several ways to connect to the program and its host. Archived shows can be listened to either by segment or in their entirety. In "Post to the Host," Keillor answers questions on an array of topics, from personal advice — like his fictional character Mr. Blue — to recipes for potato salad. "Stories From Home" features listeners' stories about their hometowns. "The Chatterbox Cafe" is an online message board where postings range from things related to the shows to just about everything (politics is a hot topic). "From the Desk of Garrison Keillor" features many of Keillor's published magazine articles.

Keillor spent part of this summer on the road with The Rhubarb Tour, which took "Prairie Home Companion" live to 16 cities. He's at work on several projects at the moment, including "dabbling in screenplays and trying to fix up an opera and working on a novel about tomatoes and a book titled 'Why I Am a Democrat.'"

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