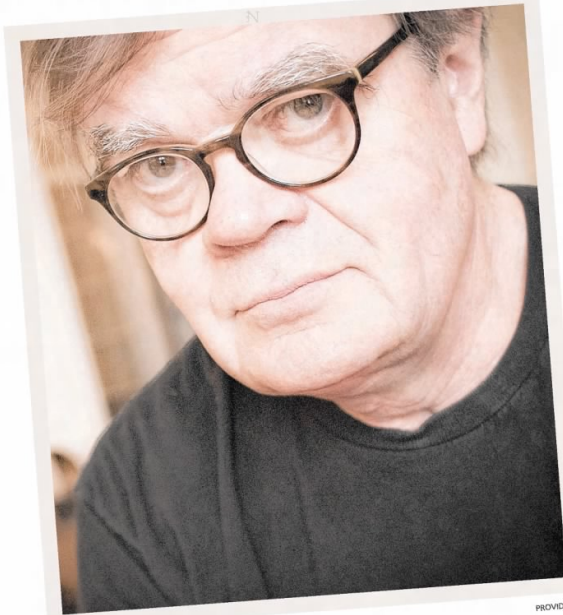


THURSDAY, NOVEMBER 14, 2013

A GANNETT COMPANY

'PRAIRIE HOME COMPANION' COMES TO MUNCIE



PROVIDED

# Garrison Keillor PAYS A VISIT

By John Carlson  
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If you are out Monday and see a guy who looks a lot like Garrison Keillor observing our fair city's high-lights, it just might be him.

The host of "A Prairie Home Companion," which comes to the stage of Emens Auditorium that night, will be preparing for his show, which often involves his observations on local points of interest.

"I just look around when I get there," the 71-year-old writer and humorist said.

Wednesday in an Indiana Public Radio studio at Ball State University, IPR general manager Marcus Jackman monitored the gizmos while we talked to the host of the

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'A PRAIRIE HOME  
COMPANION'

» WHERE: Emens Auditorium  
» WHEN: 7:30 p.m. Monday  
» COST: Tickets range from \$52 to \$72

ON THE AIR

» "A Prairie Home Companion" can be heard at 6 a.m. Saturday and noon Sundays on IPR, WBST 92.1 in Muncie.

## Keillor's show was, and is, worth the trip



JOHN  
CARLSON

It's about a million miles from here to Saint Paul, Minn. At least, it felt that far away back in the summer of 1983 or so, when my wife, Nancy, and I, along with our six-month-old baby, Katie, drove there in a cramped Chevy Chevette, seeking a per-

sonal audience with the man in the white suit who, for the previous couple of years, had brought such joy to our Saturday evenings. That man was Garrison Keillor, and his show was "A Prairie Home Companion," and the endless miles of heavy

traffic and road construction between here and there seemed a small price to pay to see him. Back then, as rabid fans of the show, we almost felt like cult members. While we were of a generation that had

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## Keillor

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legendary radio show, which Keillor noted isn't legendary at all.

"It's not a legend, it's an actual show," clarified the skilled writer, whose award-winning books and articles are numerous, his distinctive voice coming through the headphones like they come through your speakers on Saturday nights.

Asked whether there are certain regions of the country where "A Prairie Home Companion" goes over exceptionally well, Keillor surprised us by not saying the Midwest.

"I think the people on the coasts are particularly curious about the middle of the country," he said, describing how when he talks about us, they lean forward in their seats "as if I were describing a foreign country. ... It means you don't have to hold strictly to the truth."

Instead, he said, he can tell them the winds blow harder out here. Temperatures drop lower. Snow piles higher. Those are all substantial benefits when you are trying to tell an entertaining story.

That's just what he does each week, off course, in reporting the news from Lake Wobegone. Why are his tales of its townsfolk so popular? Why do they ring so true?

"My theory is that,

media has become so celebrity-centered ... what people miss is something I think you saw in the country back in the '30s, '40s and '50s, stories about ordinary people. 'A Prairie Home Companion' is about ordinary people," he said.

It's also about people who raise their children to be honorable and to find happiness in ordinary things, something he finds endears the show to new immigrants to this country, such as the Somalis who have moved in great numbers to his native Minnesota.

It's important to him, Keillor said, to be welcoming to new Americans.

Given his show's long-running success, he was asked, what is it about him that makes it all tick?

He thought about that for a moment or two.

"One asset that I have is, I'm such an unlikely person to do this," he said. "I'm a writer."

What he is *not*, he admitted, is a great singer or joke-teller.

"But I am ambitious for the show to be interesting and varied," he said, plus one more thing. "I'm kind of a compulsive re-writer."

That's a little hard to imagine, standing on stage as he does every show, sans notes, delivering his talks about the folks of Lake Wobegone, which can often leave you smiling, guffawing or swallowing a lump in your throat.

There's no trick to it,

he said.

"If you've been doing it this many years," Keillor said, "you ought to be able to think on your feet. ... It's a choice of between getting up there and talking and standing there silent."

That's not much of a choice, he hinted.

Of course, he gets a break from the spotlights when his many musical guests take the stage, usually acts from the very heights of traditional music, though he's more than willing to try others.

"I'd love to get Bette Midler on the show," he said. "I'd like to get Prince on, but I don't think he's likely to do it."

These days, he is also working on a play that is turning into a musical, and wants to do a movie about Lake Wobegone. He also loves poetry, which he promotes through his daily spot "The Writer's Almanac," which features poems with meter, rhyme and singable, memorable lyrics, traits he said he encountered as a kid in the Bible and its "elegant books of scripture," like the Song of Solomon.

Mostly, though, he wants to keep "A Prairie Home Companion" and his friends from Lake Wobegone, who might serve as examples for us all, going for a while yet.

"In the end," Keillor said, "they believe in cheerfulness as a virtue."

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## Carlson

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grown up craving more bombastic entertainment, his acoustic music guests, Powdermilk biscuit ads and, most of all, his quietly delivered wit in the reports of the news from Lake Wobegone, somehow captivated us, made us feel like converts, a part of something special.

When we finally entered the theater it proved to be a beautiful place, but a temporary replacement for its regular home, which was being renovated. That didn't matter, though.

We'd reached our Promised Land.

Of course, it probably helped that we were Lutherans, a group to which Keillor seemed especially attuned. And being a literary nut back then, I was also impressed that this tall, bespectacled, soft-spoken entertainer was also a great writer, one who

even back then had published a hardcover book made up of his works that had appeared in no less august a publication than The New Yorker.

Anyway, Nan and I loved the show, even though we each saw only half, taking turns sitting out in the lobby with Katie to quell a crew member's fears about crying babies at live-radio broadcasts.

Not long afterward, with Nan beginning her career as a telecommunications professor at Ball State University, we became further involved, working on "A Prairie Home Companion"-based fundraisers at WBST-FM, buying official merchandise and gathering at the radio for each broadcast.

And then, one dark day, Keillor pulled the plug on the show. For

those of us who so admired him, we knew he had to have a good reason for doing so, but for fans of the show across the country, we experienced something akin to grief.

What would we do without it?

Thankfully, in time, after living abroad and launching an aborted effort on another show, Keillor brought the original back. Now on Monday night, he is returning Lake Wobegone to Muncie, too, at Emens Auditorium, where he has played before.

For that brief evening of music, laughter and maybe even a wayward tear, the worries of our worlds will pass away. You've got to thank your lucky stars for a fellow who can do that.

John Carlson is a features writer for The Star Press.

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