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Garrison Keillor performs his live radio show, "A Prairie Home Companion," in Atlanta in May. The raconteur comes to the Gallo Center on Wednesday.

Dispatches from Lake Wobegon

Garrison Keillor's homespun radio tales are both true and tall and, of course, above average

By Marijke Rowland
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For all the white-hang ways to communicate today, staring at tiny screens and talking with only our thumbs, it's still hard to beat the timeless appeal of a sonorous human voice.

For more than 40 years, one of the most comforting voices has belonged to radio host and humorist Garrison Keillor. As the man behind "A Prairie Home Companion," he regales his audience each week with all the news from Lake Wobegon, the fictitious small Minnesota town "where all the women are strong, all the men are good-looking, and all the children are above average."

The 73-year-old storyteller brings his tales – some tall and others personal – to the Gallo Center for the Arts on Wednesday.

When asked how his old-timey radio show, broadcast live each Saturday night for four decades now, has been able to thrive in a growing digital world with shrinking attention spans, Keillor deploys some of his signature Midwestern humor.

"I think the total number of listeners that Nielsen reports is about the same as the number of incarcerated felons and people in memory units of nursing homes," Keillor said in a recent phone interview with The Bee. "I don't know what it is, really. People seem to want to be talked to. And there are a lot of people around to shout at them, to try to sell them things. But not that many people who are telling them stories about ordinary life."

Stories about ordinary life have been Keillor's bread and butter since "A Prairie Home Companion" launched on Minnesota Public Radio in 1974. The live variety show melds music, comedy, skits and more in a folksy style that is both tongue-in-cheek and unabashedly nostalgic. The show reaches 4 million listeners on more than 600 public radio stations across the country, including, as Keillor notes, a large immigrant audience.

"We have a lot of Somali and Ethiopian listeners; people come to the Midwest as refugees," he said. "If I go into this Somali cafe in Minneapolis, all I do is my open mouth and they say, 'You're the one person in this country who I want to listen to to learn English.' See, I talk fairly slow. I have good diction. I don't throw out the names of current pop stars or go into politics. I don't get into pop culture. I don't make unique cultural references. I talk about raising children, I talk about animals, I talk about the seasons. I talk about getting old. These things are the same in Somalia, roughly, as they are here."

The show is recorded live each week, either at its home base of the Fitzgerald Theater in St. Paul, Minn., or from the road while on tour. That instant energy is another quality Keillor said has attracted listeners over the years.

"It gives it a kind of rough edge. People know right away because people's ears are attuned to editing polish and post-production," he said. "They can hear when something is canned. I think it's exciting in some subliminal way that 'this is happening now.' I think that is true whether it's our show, or a sporting event or the State of the Union event. I think people recognize this and they are fascinated by it."

Of course, the way a story is told helps, too. "A Prairie Home Companion" includes a stable of recurring characters such as pulp parody Guy Noir, private eye, and pretend sponsor Powdermilk Biscuits. But it's Keillor's weekly monologue, in which he recounts (and gently pokes fun at) the "News from Lake Wobegon," that the show's homey, humble roots shine through the most.

Luckily, Minnesotans knew how to take a joke.

"It's a very dry (humor). And it's not a comedy of complaint, which most comedy is. Most comedy is satiric in nature, and it is complaining. Like, 'You won't believe what happened to me today when I went down to the store,'" Keillor said. "That's not what I do. That's the comedy of younger people. People in their teens and 20s. That's not becoming to somebody my age.

"By the time you are 72, you really are supposed to have made your peace with the world and you travel through it with a certain grace and whatever elegance you can manage. My humor, I think, is more about the goodness of life – saying, it could be worse, it could be much worse. It's about savoring the small things, taking pleasure in small things.

"That's the wisdom of Lake Wobegon. It's not the center of the world, but you can see a lot of interesting things there."

Keillor's own humor, and gift for storytelling, can be traced through his family tree. He said he had a few relatives who loved sharing stories about their history and childhood.

"I found this utterly compelling from the time I was a little kid to realize there had been a world before me. These people who are now old – they were in their 40s at the time – had once been children," he said. "This was a huge fact and I just never ever got over trying to imagine what my Aunt Eleanor, who was a great storyteller and who would take the time to do it, was like as a kid. She was sort of tomboyish, loved to hunt and use a gun and play sports. My Great-uncle Lou, who went back even farther, could tell stories about the 1890s and the early '70s. I grew up listening to them and looked forward to it. Radio and television could not compete with these people."

Not everyone in his family could sit and spin yarns the same way. "My father could not; he claimed he couldn't remember anything of growing up," he said. "My mother felt it was unseemly to tell stories. It suggested you thought you were important."

Still, Keillor has built his career around storytelling, both on the radio with "A Prairie Home Companion" and in his writing. He has published 26 books, including more stories from Lake Wobegon, autobiographies, essays, fiction and poetry. His latest, "The Keillor Reader," was released last year and takes readers through his early days in radio and gives them a behind-the-scenes glimpse at the making of the program.

His live shows, like the Gallo Center appearance, are a mix of memoir and made-up stories. Often, he allows audience members to sort out which is which on their own.

"It's fun to play with the difference between them and let people judge for themselves," he said. "I like to talk about my upbringing because I grew up with various disadvantages that I think turn out to be to one's advantage. I grew up in a very old-fashioned family, a very devout fundamentalist family with a severe, strict view of the world. One could – maybe most people would look on this as a disadvantage. I think it gives you gifts that you don't realize until later. So I think one of the themes of it, in fact a theme of the Lake Wobegon stories, is that the things we were given that we did not choose often turn out to be more to our benefit than things we freely chose."

At an age when many are comfortably retired, Keillor continues to be as prolific as ever. In addition to the show and his talks, he is working on a novel and a musical. He also recently finished the first draft of a new Lake Wobegon screenplay. The venture onto the silver screen would be his second. Though he freely admits his first foray – the 2006 ensemble film "A Prairie Home Companion" starring Lily Tomlin, Meryl Streep, Lindsay Lohan, Woody Harrelson and others – was "kind of a dogs breakfast."

He said the new film, which would be a story about Lake Wobegon instead of the production of the show, would be a "a big leap" forward from that first movie. But, he said, telling any story means realizing that not everyone wants to hear it, especially in today's modern world with so much vying for everyone's limited time.

"It really depends on them (the listeners) a good deal. Some people do not have the empathy to be good listeners. And that's OK. God bless them, I hope they don't go off and shoot someone," Keillor said. "But other people do.

"So you tiptoe into a story and you talk about the day you went out to see your 95-year-old mother who had been under hospice care for three months and once you realized it was coming to an end. You and your sisters were there. She looked so tired and you put her to bed and you promised each other that you'd sit up all night singing to her. You'd do it in shifts so that she would have company. You did this because your younger sister had read that hearing is the last sense to go when you're close to death. So there you are, in the room that used to be your bedroom and there your mother is and she is dying. You are putting morphine into a tube and trying to remember the words to hymns. And at same time you are recalling when you were sitting on the same bed and reading 'The Sun Also Rises,' which your parents didn't want you to read, and smoking cigarettes."

As he says this his voice dips into that familiar baritone, which reassures while it enthralls.

"The audience gets into this and the audience wants to know everything. What did she look like? She had her mouth fixed wide open. Her body gasping for breath, she was not ready to go yet. You sat there holding her hand. What did your hand feel like? The audience wants to know everything because they're there with you," he said. "Or they're wondering, 'When is this going to end?'

"It's either one or the other, and you tell a story knowing that. Knowing that there is no way to hold this entire audience in your hand. People listening at home, half of them are going to switch the radio off or walk away and go get a beer. That's OK. Your job is to talk to your listeners. And once you get them into it, don't let them go."

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AN EVENING WITH GARRISON KEILLOR
When: 7:30 p.m. Wednesday
Where: Rogers Theater, Gallo Center for the Arts, 1000 I St., Modesto
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