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# City-slickers flock to Lake Wobegon

By Michael Dougan  
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**W**HEN IT COMES TO Garrison Kellor and "Prairie Home Companion," there are two kinds of people — those who've never heard of them, and members of the cult.

Representatives of that second group, cunningly disguised as journalists, dropped by the Warfield Theater on Market Street yesterday afternoon to watch Kellor and crew rehearse for "Prairie Home Companion's" first-ever live-from-San-Francisco broadcast. The gathering was billed as a press conference, but had the feel of a love feast.

Obscure rural and suburban newspapers that have never carried a word about broadcasting in their history were represented because, some where on their staffs, was a "Prairie Home Companion" freak who offered to work a free month of Saturdays if their editors would only assign them to cover this group interview with Kellor.

It was also the first press conference this reporter has ever witnessed where practically nobody had any questions. Kellor just stared at the small crowd, and they happily stared back. It seemed enough to see this man, known to most people only as a disembodied voice.

Of course, not only representatives of the press are fixated on this remarkable, two-hour live radio variety program, which for 10 years has emanated from St. Paul, Minn., each Saturday afternoon. ("Prairie Home Companion" can be heard locally at 3 p.m. Saturdays on KALW, 91.7 FM, and — under the sponsorship of The Examiner — at 6 p.m. on KQED, 88.7 FM.)

When it was announced that 4,200 tickets would be available for a "Prairie Home Companion" dress rehearsal tonight and the live broadcast tomorrow, they sold out in three hours.

Cathy DeMott, a Minnesota-based publicist for Kellor's program, said the response was typical.

Though "Prairie Home Companion" rarely goes on the road, "we get requests from just about every city and municipality in the country to come," DeMott claimed. "Our last tour was to Vermont, and the same sort of thing happened as here. It was snowing when the tickets went on sale and a line started forming at 6 in the morning. They were sold out by 10."

What makes "Prairie Home Companion," an eclectic blend of musical presentations, satirical commercials for fictional sponsors and Kellor's "News From Lake Wobegon" monologues, so popular?

"I'm not sure that it is that popular," said Kellor, who apparently doesn't read his own press releases. "I don't really listen to the show, so I'm not a good judge of that."

As Kellor tells it, the magic is in the medium. "Radio is as powerful and appealing as it ever was. There aren't many live variety radio programs — almost none outside of the 'Grand Ole Opry' that I'm aware of. It still has a power in appealing to people's imaginations.

"I think the program's popularity has more to do with the medium of radio and of live broadcasting, rather than any formula that we might have — which we don't have."

Nor does Kellor attribute the show's appeal to its Midwestern origin. In fact, he said, "Prairie Home Companion" would probably be "better — more showy," if it was made somewhere else.

"There's something about my upbringing in Minnesota which is anti-show business," he explained. "It's hard to do a show if you're brought up to be opposed to what you're doing. But everybody's got to be from some place, and that's where I'm from. I stay there because whenever I go away from Minnesota, I have trouble cashing my checks."

With that, Kellor returned to his rehearsal, overseeing a musical number by the Butch Thompson Trio, his regular band, and San Francisco cable-car bellringing champion Carl Payne. Payne was having an easy time of it. "Play whatever you want to play," he told Thompson. "Any best you got, I can get with it."

In addition to Payne, Kellor's Saturday broadcast will be loaded with Bay Area talent. Joining the BT Trio will be reed-man Richard Hadlock, heard often on KQED radio, and trumpet player Jim Goodwin. Jean Redpath, a talented Scotswoman who's lived in San Francisco since 1961, will sing ballads. Bobby McFerrin, possibly the only a cappella singer of modern jazz in the world, will demonstrate his astonishing talent. And Berkeley folksinger Kate Wolf will join the line-up, accompanied by Nina Gerber on guitar, mandolin, harmonica and violin (though not, presumably, all at once).

KQED-FM will air tomorrow's "Prairie Home Companion" live at 3 p.m., as well as on tape in its usual 6 p.m. timeslot.



Garrison Kellor, top and immediate left, presided over yesterday's rehearsal for the first-ever live-from-S.F. broadcast of "Prairie Home Companion." The Butch Thompson Trio made the trip all the way from Lake Wobegon, too — Jim Goodwin and Thompson are above, violinist Peter Ostroushko at top

Examiner photos by Katy Raddatz