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Herald-Leader/Chris Porter

Garrison Keillor, creator of radio's "A Prairie Home Companion," took his mythical Lake Wobegon, Minn., to Louisville last weekend.

'Companion' at home in Louisville

By Jim Warren

LEXINGTON — As Garrison Keillor might put it, Hello, love ... This story is dedicated to all of you die-hard fans of "A Prairie Home Companion" who were not playing golf or getting the wagon or something and missed both of the show's live performances at the Kentucky Center for the Performing Arts here Friday and Saturday nights.

Actually, it seemed like just about all of the show's Kentucky fans were here, with a few from Indiana thrown in. The art center's 2,000-seat auditorium was sold out, both on Friday night, when the performance was just for those on hand, and on Saturday night, when it was broadcast nationwide over American Public Radio.

Maybe we should take a break here to explain the show to those deprived souls who've never heard it. Its essence, it is a throwback to the '50s or the '60s, before TV appeared, when live radio really was a "home companion" to folks who lived far from town. It offers a wide range of music — you might hear bluesgrass, jazz or "the songs of Roy George as Handel might have performed them" — mixed with a few skits, jokes and bogus commercials for items like Frodo-milk Biscuits "with that whole-wheat goodness that gives dry persons the strength to get up and do what needs to be done."

The high point of each performance is when host Keillor settles down to describe the previous week's events in his mythical hometown of Lake Wobegon, Minn., where, as he puts it, all the women are strong, all the men are good-looking and all the children are above-average. Some weeks, his mono-

logues tickle the funnybone; often they touch the heart.

The best way to understand the show is to hear it. In Lexington, you can catch it at 6 p.m. Saturdays on WBBV-FM.

But for those regular listeners who couldn't make it to Louisville — and have never seen the show in person — we'll try to answer some questions.

For example, does Keillor, the show's host, creator and guiding light, really walk on water as many avid fans fervently believe?

No, but he just might show up, as he did for a press conference Friday morning, courteous, tireless, sockless and wearing slippers.

For Friday night's show, however, he returned to the trademark white suit in which he is often pictured, somewhat rumpled, with red tie, red socks and soft shoes. His pants, by the way, are a mile too short.

Keillor might be described as a strange-looking man. He has a broad, flat face and large eyes with bushy and very mobile eyebrows under a pile of thick black hair. With long arms and a somewhat clumsy gait, he reminds one of a country boy, just lately off the farm.

Despite the unimpressive demeanor he projects over the air, Keillor is constantly in motion. While he's onstage, his feet are constantly tapping. If music is being played, the tap may become a stomp, the attitude achieved on each stomp being directly proportional to the speed of the tune.

His hands also remain in motion, thrust into his pockets one second, patting his thigh in time to the music the next. The rest of the time he is making frowning gestures to the audience or to the Butch Thompson Trio, which provides most of the music for the show.



He apparently has a prodigious memory, or the ability to dream up funny things as an instant's notice. He used no notes during the weekend's performances. On Friday night, instead of his usual monologue, Keillor simply plopped down on a stool and answered questions from the audience for 20 minutes — keeping everyone laughing throughout.

Asked about his religious upbringing, Keillor described growing up in the "Church of the Sacred Brothers," which had no clergy and in which members would sit in a circle and wait for the Holy Spirit to tell them what to do. "It took longer that way," he said.

He talked of the Old Testament, in which "when God smote you, he smote you so that you stayed smitten."

Asked about the best overnight accommodations in Lake Wobegon, he advised anyone visiting the town to stay with relatives. If you don't have relatives, he said, there's always Art's Bait and Night O' Rest Tourist Cabins.

Now, is the show really as folksy and relaxed in person as it sounds over the radio?

Yes, sort of. The atmosphere on stage, Friday night at least, was as low-key as a lady's old maid. During those moments when he was backstage, however, Keillor pined, sweated, gulped, trembled and seemed as nervous as a cat as he charted the progress of the show.

What this points up, of course, is that the engaging atmosphere projected over the air is no accident and is the result of careful planning, much rehearsal and precise timing.

Planned or not, however, the friendliness comes through.

(Turn to LIVE, D6)



Keillor gestures to Chef Atkins and the Butch Thompson Trio of "Prairie Home," the countrified "Saturday Night Live" of radio.

back, as a weight lifter would pick up

Live 'Companion' at home in Louisville

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Keillor opened both shows here with a rendition of "Eight More Miles to Louisville." On Saturday night, he produced a Louisville-based barber-shop quartet, the Harrington Brothers, to join the show's usual lineup of musicians.

And, in a move that seemed to touch many listeners, Keillor gave a tribute to Grady Nutt, the late minister and humorist from Louisville. He then brought out Darrell Adams, a deacon from Nutt's church, and joined him in singing a hymn to the performer's memory.

In the end, it just may be touches like these that explain why 2 million people cuddle up next to their radios each week to listen to a program with an offbeat mixture of music, skits, bogus commercials and reports from a fictional town in Minnesota where nothing much ever happens.