

Can Keillor gain Will Rogers immortality?

By Dennis McDougal
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CLAREMONT, Calif. — The news from Lake Wobegon is that it is probably too early to tell whether the kleig lights and camera poses have spoiled Garrison Keillor.

Perhaps he will be doomed to go the way of Peter Frampton, Richard Brautigan and Silly Putty — national obsessions that were packaged and sold at premium prices for a time and, now, are to be found only in the bargain bins at the back of grocery stores.

To nobody's surprise, he was a hit at the Claremont Colleges, 35 miles east of Los Angeles, last weekend.

If Keillor's soft-core satire of Midwestern morality was not a big enough drawing card, then there was the added attraction of Willie Nelson and the stunning guitar work of Chet Atkins:

But it seemed clear from the beginning of Keillor's traveling version of "A Prairie Home Companion" public radio show that the 5,000 who paid \$17.50 a ticket did so to see the author of the best-selling "Lake Wobegon Days" and Nov. 4 cover boy of Time Magazine which billed him as a radio bard of heartland humor.

Hours before he took the stage in tux and white tennis shoes, Keillor met the press in jeans and black tennis shoes. His Shy Person persona worked for the adoring entertainment press, just as it does out on stage. When reporters sought to know whether success had changed the 43-year-old humorist after 11 years of weekly live broadcasts of "A Prairie Home Companion," Keillor went into his whimsical spiel about a Burbank, Calif., consulting company that took his \$85,000 retainer to "completely redo the concept of the show. These guys with chains around their necks, good skin tone, good chest hair . . . They said, 'Sweetheart, I'm going to tell you one word. That word's "Down

home'." Keillor said with as straight an expression his rubbery face could muster.

But when the questions became personal and pointed, the Shy and, perhaps, Angry Persona became real. Asked about a recent Minnesota flap over Keillor's relatively large public radio salary (\$171,000 for 1984) or his new romance with a former high

school sweetheart, Keillor turned stony.

"There are some questions that shouldn't be answered," he said.

He did not mind elaborating on his new love and how he met her at a 25th high school reunion. He even talked it up on stage.

And the shy Minnesotan himself is reportedly negotiating a screenplay with those very same good-skin-toned Burbank folk he takes such glee in lampooning.

But he would say nothing about the ex-producer of his show who had also been his roommate for several years.

When the line of questioning returned to the absurd, Keillor was back on safe ground.

"Is it true you're buying CBS?" one reporter-turned straight man wanted to know.

"I believe I can, yes. They're slow to acknowledge it on 57th Street," Keillor replied.

"What will you do when the book stops selling?"

"When the book is a dead item, we plan to use 250,000 unsold copies to insulate the World Theater in St. Paul (where his program is home based)."

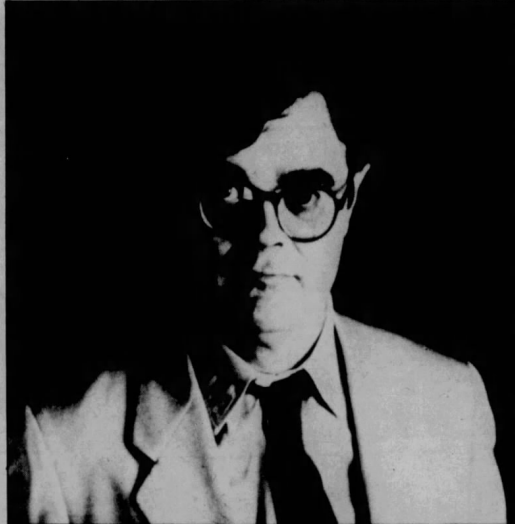
Has success spoiled Garrison Keillor? Too early to tell.

He still knits his brow and squishes his rosebud mouth into a wet, self-conscious wad when he's contemplating a tough question, but his delivery is glib, clever and disarming . . . anything but analysis retentive.

The one point that seems clear is that Garrison Keillor has finally moved from cult hero status to a brief turn in the national spotlight. Whether he can parlay homespun humor into Will Rogers immortality or may eventually shrink back into a genuine shyness is open to question — the kind he doesn't believe ought to be answered.

In the meantime, he is making the most of it.

With 925,000 copies already in print, "Lake Wobegon Days" (\$17.95) just went into its 13th printing. Lake Wobegon souvenir sweat shirts are now available for \$18.50 apiece from a 32-page mail-order catalog replete with "A Prairie Home Companion" products.



Has success spoiled Garrison Keillor, author and host of public radio's popular "A Prairie Home Companion"? One conclusion is that it's probably too early to tell.