

GREAT SALT LAKE WOBEGON



Radio bard Garrison Keillor will bring his keen observations to Salt Lake City for a live broadcast of "A Prairie Home Companion" Saturday.

Garrison Keillor and the Choir Live From Abravanel Hall!

By Brandon Griggs
THE SALT LAKE TRIBUNE

The voice is unmistakable. Deep, soothing, slightly hoarse and utterly familiar, it resonates through the phone lines clear as a Minnesota night in January.

"I've come through [Salt Lake City] a lot of times," the voice is saying. "I came through with my stepchildren in '86. They are Danish, and at the time they were teen-agers. I took them to a water park. It thrilled them out of their minds. They had never been to any such thing, where water flowed down slides and you went through these big plastic pipes and you got water up your nose. They were not all that interested in Temple Square. But they loved the water-slide park. To them, that was America."

Garrison Keillor — radio bard, raconteur, modern-day Mark Twain and keen observer of small-town American life — is calling from the Land of Lake Wobegon, the fictional Minnesota hamlet (pop. 942) made famous by his radio monologues.

Interviewing Keillor by telephone is not unlike listening to his radio program. He answers questions, sure, but mostly he tells stories: softly and unhurriedly, his words chosen with care as they are each Saturday evening when "A Prairie Home Companion" is heard in living rooms across the country.

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Keillor And the Choir In Salt Lake

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Keillor returns to Salt Lake City Saturday, and this time he is bringing "A Prairie Home Companion" for a live nationwide broadcast from Abravanel Hall. While Keillor has performed in Salt Lake City before, Saturday's program will mark his first live broadcast from Utah. Tickets to the event sold out within 36 hours last month.

The variety show will include comedy sketches, music by Guy's All-Star Shoe Band and Keillor's signature monologue, "The News from Lake Wobegon." His featured musical guest will be the 320-member Mormon Tabernacle Choir, which Keillor believes will be the largest group ever to perform on the program.

"I told the staff that I wanted to sing with the Tabernacle Choir and somehow they set this up," he says. "The Tabernacle Choir is as big as some of our early audiences were."

Bigger, actually. In the first months after its July 1974 debut on Minnesota Public Radio, the show drew as few as a dozen people. The roof of the old World Theater in St. Paul leaked when it rained, bats occasionally swooped through the hall during shows and Keillor banged out the weekly script on an old Underwood typewriter. Performers took tickets, swept aisles and raced to a bathroom in the theater's balcony during shows because there was no toilet backstage.

Audiences slowly grew, and "A Prairie Home Companion" began broadcasting nationally in 1980. By 1985, it had become a phenomenon. *Lake Wobegon Days*, Keillor's novel published that year, sold 3.5 million copies, landing Keillor on the cover of *Time*. But as his listenership increased, Keillor's enthusiasm for the show was waning. Weary of being a public figure, Keillor closed the show in 1987 to move to Denmark, the homeland of his new wife, Ulla Skaerved.

Brief Exile: His self-imposed exile lasted a year. By 1989, he was back in the States, transplanted to New York, where he revived the show under the forgettable title "The American Radio Company." He would later call his decision to end the show "the dumbest thing I ever did in my life."

In 1993, Keillor returned to Minnesota, changed the show's name back to "A Prairie Home Companion" and began broadcasting again from St. Paul. He also bought a farm in rural Wisconsin, just across the Minnesota state line about 20 minutes from the Twin Cities. Last year, he was voted into the Radio Hall of Fame at the Museum of Broadcast Communications, which called him "contemporary radio's most inventive humorist."

"A Prairie Home Companion,"

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GARRISON KEILLOR
of "A Prairie Home Companion"

Sold Out

Tickets for Garrison Keillor and "A Prairie Home Companion" at Abravanel Hall Saturday are sold out. But those without tickets can still listen in on KUER-FM (90.1) from 5 to 7 p.m.

which celebrated its 20th anniversary last year, now is heard by nearly 2 million listeners on 325 radio stations nationwide. This season, Keillor broadcast 18 shows from St. Paul and 16 from places like Amherst, Mass., Baton Rouge, La., and San Diego with such diverse musical guests as Bobby McFerrin, Buckwheat Zydeco and Nancy Griffith.

Each week, 10,000 Utahns tune in to the show, making it the third-most-popular program on Salt Lake City public radio station KUER behind "Morning Edition" and "Car Talk."

"What he talks about resonates with just about everyone. You don't have to be from the Midwest," says KUER manager John Greene. "There are elements he mentions that everyone can plug pieces of their own childhood into. His wit and his observations are so sharp — that's what keeps it from being cornball."

"People are wrong when they just call him a humorist or a storyteller. He is our country's foremost theologian," says Tom Goldsmith, minister at First Unitarian Church in Salt Lake City and a longtime listener.

"I'm not trying to be cute because I'm a minister. He has a sense of the essence of humanity — how people hurt and how they get put back together again. There is an element of grace in all his stories. He just strikes a very universal human chord. And he's got a voice every minister would give his eyeteeth for."

Keillor believes his years in Denmark and New York have sharpened his outlook on his native Minnesota and, of course, on Lake Wobegon.

"Those were expensive experiences for me, so I hope I got something out of them," says Keillor, who has separated from Skaerved. "One would not want to go through things unchanged. You have to go away in order to see your home and your people more clearly."

"I think the show is going back to what it used to be," he continues. "We just do the show week to week. We never sit down and plan it or discuss it. There is no long-range plan. For some reason, I think we're heading back and becoming more of a Midwestern show after our fling with doing the show in New York. But if you

asked me what I mean by Midwestern show, I couldn't honestly tell you."

Since returning "A Prairie Home Companion" to Minnesota, Keillor has sprinkled his comedy sketches with barbed references to Rush Limbaugh, Ross Perot and Newt Gingrich. But the self-professed liberal resists suggestions that the show is becoming more political.

"The political situation calls for satire because it's just so funny, that's all. It's simply that I think Rush is a stitch and I think Gingrich is funny and I think Perot is wonderfully funny, though he's disappeared for a while. I hope they are able to laugh at themselves. If they can't, it would be a great waste. I'm not especially angry at them. I'm too old to get angry at politicians."

Shy and awkward since his years as a gangly teen-ager in Anoka, Minn., Keillor seems uncomfortable talking about himself. "I don't have the luxury of standing back and looking at myself, and I'm not particularly introspective," he says. But onstage, where Keillor can close his eyes, drift off to another world and pull his listeners along with him, he has gradually grown at ease.

"It's a lot more fun [now]," he says. "You don't suffer the way you do when you're starting out. You're not nervous in the same way. I get excited, but I don't get this cold chill that I used to get. I was afraid sometimes of just being unable to do it, a kind of paralyzing fright that perhaps in the next two minutes, words will not be coming out of my mouth any longer, and the ones that will I'd rather they didn't."

Deadlines Remain: While Keillor's onstage demeanor has grown more relaxed over the years, his writing habits haven't changed. He now uses a word processor instead of a typewriter to tap out the show's script, but still finds himself racing on Saturday to complete his monologue.

"Writing for the show is like writing for a newspaper. It has an absolute deadline attached to it," he says. "It's like going down a slope. You start rather slowly around Wednesday, you pick up a little speed on Thursday and then Friday you start to go. The deadline is a kind of inspiration, I think, if you get over the panic. You're inspired by the knowledge that in 24 hours, people will be listening to you. I never get over that."

The soul of "A Prairie Home Companion" — and the creations for which Keillor will be most remembered — are his weekly yarns about the fictional residents of Lake Wobegon. In these, he deftly weaves nostalgia, humor, irony and a hint of regret without ever veering into sentimentality.

"All of them come from some small, observed detail," Keillor says when asked where he gets the ideas for his stories. "I don't think they're ever completely made up. Oftentimes the detail is very slight and it isn't really the heart of the story."

With this, Keillor explains how he was out for a drive near his Wisconsin home recently when he stopped to watch a group of schoolboys playing softball. As he observed them, the idea for a story came to him.

"You could see immediately upon looking at them which ones were the athletes and which ones were not. I thought as I looked at them, I am moved to pity the ones that are awkward, but it can't be all that easy to be the best player, either. You start out feeling compassion for the awkward, but then you have to feel compassion for the gifted. They have the burden of envy."

At this point, Keillor launches into a tale about a legendary high-school baseball player who gave up a chance to try out for a pro team in order to stay in Lake Wobegon with the girl he loved. As the years went on, the man grew increasingly resentful, and he died a lonely, bitter alcoholic. Hundreds of townspeople turned out for his funeral.

"Perhaps our hero had fallen because we — the people who were inferior to him — had wished for this in our hearts," Keillor says. "And so the people who were at the funeral were looking to forgive themselves." Keillor goes on to say how the minister at the funeral described the greatest play the man had made: a diving catch in the outfield, followed by a perfect throw to nail a runner at home plate.

"The minister said in his sermon how this brief beautiful play, performed by someone you know well — your classmate, your friend, your neighbor — enlarges the world for everybody and makes great things possible for you."

At 52, Keillor seems to have settled into contentment, ensconced once again in his beloved Minnesota and secure in the affection of a new generation of devoted listeners. In his spare time, he writes fiction and essays. He goes out to hear live music. And he travels to New York occasionally to see plays. For a respected author, he doesn't read much literature, because, as he says, "I admire it too much. If I read things I admire an awful lot, it makes me feel inept and awkward as a writer."

What Keillor doesn't know or won't say is how much longer he plans to host the program he once said he was tired of.

"I hope I have many years [left]," he says. "I hope to go into my dotage, and have a nice long period of senility after that. I think even in senility there's some kind of twilight of pleasure and intelligence. I think maybe in senility certain kinds of humor that we haven't appreciated in our adult years will come back to us — booger jokes will once again make us laugh the way they did when we were 7."

And Garrison Keillor laughs.