

Keillor wryly beams 'Prairie Home' from Tucson

By DANIEL BUCKLEY
Citizen Music Critic

"Only a few Minnesotans can be trusted to come to Tucson this time of year," Garrison Keillor told his Tucson audience before the live broadcast started. "We are those Minnesotans."

Dressed in a tux with a red bow tie, the tall, slow-talking host of "A Prairie Home Companion" worked the packed University of Arizona Centennial Hall crowd Saturday before being beamed live via satellite to two million public radio listeners across the country. As he welcomed those from Phoenix in their ranks who had come "to give the audience a tone and raise its standards a little bit," the hometown crowd boomed and

laughed.

He knew he'd found Tucson's buttons.

At 4 p.m. sharp, a red "On Air" indicator doubling as a street sign came on. Next to it, lights bloomed on a stage set of a narrow, twostory, Midwest-style wooden house with the lights on in the front room. Keillor launched into a carefree song about going down to Tucson, clued in his radio listeners about his historic and warm surroundings, and described for them the musicians on stage with him "in black suits with silver ornaments running up and down their trousers" International Mariachi America.

The first of three Tucson acts, the mariachis won big applause

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straight off with the clipped, vibrant rhythms of "El Son de la Negra" and the plaintive "Cucurrucucu Paloma".

Asked about the latter song, lead singer and group leader Gilbert Velez told Keillor it was the cooing of a dove - a love song. "It wasn't simply about birds and ornithology?" Keillor asked. Velez answered that it was about a homesick dove. "Gilbert, it sounds better in Spanish than in English," Keillor replied dryly.

Relaxed and off-the-cuff in his interview style, Keillor got big laughs as well with Tohono O'odham waila (chicken scratch)

band Southern Scratch. Before he group boogied through the cumbia "Mi Cafetal," the host asked band leader Ron Joaquin what functions they typically played for besides dances and weddings. "Divorces," Joaquin instinctively replied.

Tucson western music veterans Dean Armstrong and the Arizona Dance Hands sang a classic written right here by Sons of the Pioneers founding member Bob Nolan "Tumbling Tumbleweeds." And as they bounced through "Minnie the Mermaid," the group's fiddler, Old Time Fiddler's Hall of Fame award-winner Edsel Smith, cracked up the live audience by using his bow to reel in imaginary fish.

The two-hour show was filled

with music that represented the unique history, culture and character of Tucson, it was packed tightly as well with hilarious and artful sketches, monologues and stories of imaginary life, both here and and in his frosty Minnesota home.

And this helpful advice about snake safety "When you use a toilet, always look for ripples in the water."

We will, Garrison.

If you missed the fun, catch "Arizona Illustrated" on KUAT-TV (Channel 6) on Thanksgiving at 6:30 and 11:30 p.m. for a behind-the-scenes look at "A Prairie Home Companion's" desert encounter.