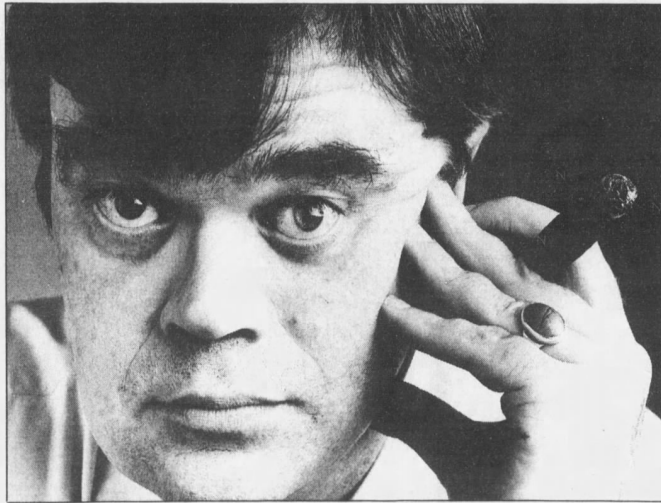


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## America's funnybone

Garrison Keillor brings down-home humor to Ryman Auditorium

By **BILL JONES**  
New York Times News Service

It's hard to imagine anything legal more soothing to the spirit than Garrison Keillor.

His bedside voice, his down-home manner, his humor, his tales of his fictional Lake Wobegon ... opiates for the ears.

For a couple of hours on his radio show, *A Prairie Home Companion*, Keillor pacifies our troubled past, appeases our uncertain future and reminds us of the simple beauty of the here and now.

The tall, 53-year-old Minnesotan with a boyish face and horn-rimmed glasses will bring his humorous observations to the Ryman Auditorium Saturday and Sunday. Keillor says he always tries to orient his shows to the region in which he's performing.

"People love to hear stories about themselves," he said. "They love to hear themselves talked about, so long as the storyteller is honorable and tells the truth, but not too much of it."

During his travels across the country, Keillor says, he's noticed a difference in audiences.

"People out East and people out West are a little quicker than people in the Midwest. A Midwestern audience is a little more cautious. They're not sure this is really such wonderful stuff on stage, not sure that guy is all that funny. So you don't want to be the first person to laugh at a joke, or the first person on your feet for a standing O. You want to keep a lid on it."

With an estimated listenership of 2 million, Keillor's *A Prairie Home Companion* is broadcast to 340 public-radio stations, including Nashville's WPLN. The two-hour variety show

### Getting there

Garrison Keillor brings his *Prairie Home Companion* to the Ryman Auditorium at 5 p.m. Saturday and 10:30 p.m. Sunday. Saturday's guests will include Chet Atkins and Mark O'Connor; Sunday's guests will include Atkins and Roy Blount Jr. Patron tickets (\$125) are still available for both performances. Call 862-5819. It includes the show and an invitation to a 7 p.m. Saturday reception with Keillor. A small number of single seats were still available at presstime for Sunday's show. Contact Ticketmaster at 737-4849.

Keillor's weekly *Prairie Home Companion* radio show is broadcast on WPLN-FM 90.3 Saturdays at 5-7 p.m. His radio show this week will be a live broadcast of Saturday's Ryman show.

is a potpourri of comedy sketches, local talent, music (folk, gospel, jazz, bluegrass, opera) and Keillor's signature monologue, *The News From Lake Wobegon*, "where all the women are strong, the men are good-looking and the children are above-average."

Every act on the show is infused with Keillor's wry wit, including the commercials for emporiums such as Bertha's Kitty Boutique or Guy's Shoes ("Try them on — they're no worse than any other shoes.")

Keillor puts his weekly show together with the kind of unpretentious efficiency you would expect from the humorist.

"I start writing the show on Thursday morning," he said. "Late on Friday, we get the actors together and the music director, and we run through the script. . . . We make a tape of them, and I sit and listen to it. It's my chance to hear this as radio. So I listen, and I figure out that they're not going to work, so I write something

else."

Keillor's appeal is his unprofessional style, which seems to mock the slick, no-risk kind of shows that inundate American TV and radio. Without cloying our arteries, he evokes a nostalgia for family and for a slower, simpler time.

The style comes naturally. Keillor isn't acting. He's really that laid-back.

"I'm just an extremely slow person. My metabolism must be like a hibernating wolverine."

Still, back in 1988, it got to be too much for him. After 13 years of emceeing *A Prairie Home Companion*, he signed off.

"I left because I was tired. Probably a summer off was all I needed. We were doing 48 shows a year back then."

Now he considers leaving the show "the dumbest thing I ever did in my life." He did a four-year stint with his New York-based program, *The American Radio Company*, then, in 1992, he returned to *Prairie*.

He's doing 33 shows a year, which he says "seems like a more reasonable season."

Over the years, Keillor has been compared to Mark Twain and Will Rogers. The Radio Hall of Fame, into which Keillor was inducted last year, described him as "contemporary radio's most inventive humorist."

The key to his success is his gift for spinning a good yarn. Good stories cannot be hurried, the master storyteller says. They should be experienced with a friend you've known a long time, so that he will be patient with you.

"I love stories that don't seem contrived, stories that perhaps the storyteller doesn't quite know what the point of it is, and is simply telling the best that he remembers of a sequence of events that strikes him as important, even if he isn't quite sure why." ■