

Convicted of racketeering in 1991 See B21, Page D9

Keillor puts spotlight on local talent

• Radio host 'discovers' voice of Akron man during broadcast from Blossom Music Center

BY JIM QUINN
Beacon Journal staff writer

It had been a quiet week for Bob Cohen. The 44-year-old business consultant from Akron had expected to spend yesterday evening at Blossom Music Center. There was nothing to suggest that he'd be a star performer for a live audience of 8,000, plus another 2 million out in public radio land.

But that's the news from yesterday's live performance of *A Prairie Home Companion*, when host Garrison Keillor broadcast his two-hour show to more than 360 public radio stations. Keillor's global audience got to hear about the wondrous architecture of downtown Akron, a report on the past week's news from Lake Wobegon - and the bass singing voice



Associated Press file photo

Garrison Keillor, shown in 1989, performed at Blossom last night.

of Bob Cohen (who can expect a little more respect from the other members of the choir the next time he sings at Beth El Congregation).

Keillor launched his show in 1974, but this is only the second time his fans in Akron have had a chance to see as well as hear it. Back in 1990 Keillor broadcast from the Akron Civic Theatre.

There are plenty of advantages to seeing Keillor produce the show that (along with his eight books and other writings) have prompted critics to compare his humor to the work of Will Rogers and Mark Twain.

For one thing, you can see for yourself that the best-known part

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RADIO

• Keillor praises wonders of Akron before show

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of the show – the 20-minute monologue telling a story of the mythical town of Lake Wobegon – is delivered without a script or even notes. For another, you get to see the pre-show entertainment, which Keillor uses to warm up his audience before the 6 p.m. broadcast begins.

It was about 5:40 p.m. when Keillor walked on stage, wearing a black tuxedo with matching red bow tie and socks. The national audience didn't get to hear Keillor's baritone voice singing a re-written version of the old Motown hit *My Girl* with new lyrics praising the Goodyear Blimp, polymers and the attractiveness of Akron's downtown.

Maybe it's because Bob and Gloria Cohen were a little late getting to their seats that Keillor's attention fell to the large man. Keillor said Cleveland's Rock and Roll Hall of Fame had inspired him to perform some old rock 'n' roll tunes, and he needed a volunteer to sing a duet. He asked if Cohen could sing bass and put the microphone in front of him.

When Cohen started to sing, it sounded like a choir of bullfrogs. Big bullfrogs, with advanced degrees in choral performance. Even Keillor looked surprised, and during the live performance he invited Cohen onto the stage to perform a long version of The Rivingtons' novelty tune *Papa-Oom-Mow-Mow*.

During the intermission Cohen said it amazed him to be singing bass with one of America's most recognized baritones. "I couldn't believe I was up there," he said. Gloria Cohen, however, said it didn't surprise her. "Bob always seems to get unusual opportunities to do fun things," she said.


She was right, too, because at the close of the show Keillor invited Cohen onto the stage again, for another impromptu duet that took the broadcast up to its 8 p.m. finale.

Cohen got the loudest applause of the night, louder even than the response to the regular music

guests, singer Leon Redbone and pianist Diana Krall. He can prove it, too; the show will be rebroadcast Saturday on WKSU-FM 89.7, which sponsored yesterday's performance with WCPN-FM 90.3.

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