



POP CULTURE

Notes During the Draining of Lake Wobegon

by Gary S. Vasilash

I am not a sports fan. In spite of the encouragement and coercion of family and friends, I have never taken to hitting, throwing, or running. Yet, my admission of athletic indifference is not a boast. It's only that it makes me acutely aware that Detroit, my home, is what's known as "a great sports town." It's not that its teams are all that hot. They tend not to be (though this year is an exception). But the fans support the teams, come hell or high water, and it usually is one of the two.

One day last September, I spent a lunch hour wandering through a bookstore in Birmingham, one of the city's upscale suburbs. As I passed an elevated desk, I realized the man standing behind it was Ernie Harwell, the voice of the Detroit Tigers. Harwell has been broadcasting Tiger games on WJR radio for as long as I can remember. His voice is to Detroit sports announcers what Chuck Yeager's is to airline pilots: something to be emulated. Harwell was, not unexpectedly, promoting a book.

But no one was lined up for an autograph.

I made eye contact and cudgeled my brains for sports trivia that would serve as some sort of bridge. Civility seemed to demand it. Nothing.

Some two weeks later I planned to spend another lunch hour at the same store. But it was, to all intents and purposes, inaccessible. A line of mostly women snaked out of the store and

along the front of the mall. There were well over 100 of them, clutching thick, hardcover books—the sense of excitement, enthusiasm, expectation, and camaraderie was like that of Springsteen fans. But these people could clearly be the parents of rock fans.

The person who had brought them all together, drawing numbers Ernie Harwell could only dream about, was Garrison Keillor, host of the now-ended "A Prairie Home Companion." Keillor had been doing the radio/stage show for 13 years. But earlier this year he decided to return to being "a shy person." Keillor's saga of small-town Midwestern life, appropriate music, and light humor made him a best-selling author and put him on the cover of *Time*. (Although Keillor talked about taking over CBS News, I have my doubts about the upper central Minnesotans who read New York news magazines.) Success seems not to have spoiled Keillor. He retired at the top of his game, though we're sure to be hearing more from him and about Lake Wobegon.

Although my enthusiasm for "A Prairie Home Companion" does not enable me to recite entire passages of the News from Lake Wobegon, like some people I know, whatever it is about Keillor that caused him to far outdraw a Detroit sports celebrity brought me to downtown St. Paul, for one of his final performances.

The magic of Keillor is actually quite simple—and all the more amazing because it is so elegantly pure. In a world of grotesquely perverse abnormalities presented as givens, Keillor is able to portray normalcy with all of its blemishes and bouquets. It's idealized but not innocent, decent but not dull. It plays in Peoria, though it may be incomprehensible in Park Avenue penthouses. Keillor's is a world that

never was, yet still exists, every day, in many communities throughout the country. It is something people can identify with and draw close without feeling queasy afterwards—a simple, but no small, feat.

Here are some notes about the May 16, 1987, presentation of "A Prairie Home Companion" in The World Theatre. Guests included the Everly Brothers (Phil and Don) and Taj Mahal.

Audience is dressed mainly in polyester, banlon, and mystery synthetics. A complement of organics, mostly T-shirts and jeans, makes up the rest.

A sign in the lobby warns the show is being taped for broadcast (the Disney Channel) and that the audience has given tacit permission for being cabled into homes. What's the reason? To warn off any Gary Harts who would take their newest inamorata to hear about Powder Milk Biscuits?

Offerings in the gift shop, in addition to sweatshirts for Raw Bits and baseball caps for the Whippets, include a book entitled *Scandinavian Humor*.

The World Theatre was completely renovated a couple years back. The walls are a milky beige with blue trim. The filigree work is appliquéed with gold. It is a million miles from Las Vegas. Yet its upper Midwestern elegance puts it some distance from Lake Wobegon. So, as a reminder of more fundamental things, the dirty brick wall at the rear of the stage.

How many nights did Keillor, *et al.*, play when the brick wall was the theater's most handsome feature, the seats oozed their stuffing, and only a few people were there, getting out of the cold?

A woman with an infant (nine months?) is told they will be asked to leave the auditorium if the child cries.

Keillor's microphone cover is red.

So are his suspenders, socks, and glass frames. There is no resemblance to, say, an Elton John.

Keillor's preshow warm-up includes comments that, per Economics 101, the value of the tickets is far greater than the price since they are in short supply. All remaining shows are sold out. Of course, the use value is higher than either. Keillor is not above adding light to his sweetness. He knows the audience will understand his reference to the college course: They, or their children, have endured it themselves.

The Everly Brothers: Smoky harmonies speak of bourbon on the veranda, not wine coolers on the beach *à la* Jan and Dean, nor port in a bag in a subway, as consumed by Simon and Garfunkel.

Keillor taps a foot to keep time. Normally it's his right, but he's ambidextrous. Curiously, his feet are tuned to some internal rhythm that has nothing to do with the beat of the song.

Taj Mahal looks like Famous Amos of chocolate-chip cookie fame. He sings "Paradise" and "Everybody Is Somebody." What happened to the "Walking Blues"?

Where else would Phil and Don sing backup for Taj?

Analog watches are worn in Lake Wobegon. There's no on-the-hour—and off-the-hour—beeping.

Interest dwindles as a quartet from Milwaukee plays a medley of Norwegian favorites. It isn't their fault. Things pick up as a couple dressed in, presumably, authentic ethnic costumes come out and do a brisk polka. It must be a big hit for American Public Radio lovers. The entire session is mercifully brief. Yet the night wouldn't be complete without a banjo, accordion, and a few "yips"!

During the news, Keillor describes a

small town in the Midwest on a summer's night. "It's not hard to fall in love on such a night," he says.

How can those in NYC and LA understand the soothing smell of lilies and the reassuring sound of water sprinklers?

"This is a life that will hold us up. This is permanent. This is what we live for."

There's more reverence in the audience than is possible at a symphony or rock concert. Those who cough make every effort to stop. Silent asphyxiation would be preferable.

"Softly and tenderly, Jesus is calling all you sinners, come home," says one of the final songs. There is more honest religious feeling in the theater than is possible on any televised ministry, and probably a good deal more than in many churches. Every performer on the stage could be bad to the bone, yet, there is salvation in the music.

The counterpoint to Keillor's opening, "Hello, Love," is exquisite: the Everly Brothers doing "Bye, Bye, Love."

Gary Vasilash grew up listening to *The Beatles*, *Motown*, and the *Everly Brothers*.

ART

A Poetics of the Mundane

by David Kaufman

Alex Katz by Ann Beattie, New York: Harry N. Abrams; \$27.50.

A year or two before Ann Beattie's

breakthrough second novel, *Falling in Place*, a cartoon appeared in *The New Yorker* showing a crowd of people, dressed in evening gowns and suits, drinks in hand, milling around what looked like an outdoor cocktail party with nearly all of humanity in attendance. The caption read simply: "Woodstock: Tenth Reunion."

During the 70's, while everyone was wondering what had become of the 60's generation, they were always to be found in Ann Beattie's fiction. At the time, there was a popular opinion that the hippies and the revolutionaries merely went underground, biding their time while waiting to reemerge with their ideals intact. But Beattie knew better. In her *New Yorker* stories and in her first novel, *Chilly Scenes of Winter*, Beattie depicted the children of the 60's who had come of age only to realize how naive and adolescent they were. If they had lost something in the process of getting older, their relinquished ideals were replaced by an all-consuming vacancy, an ennui. For the most part, Beattie located them in the Northeast—in rural towns in Vermont or in the second-hand suburbs of used cities in Connecticut, outside New Haven or on the outskirts of Bridgeport.

By the time *Falling in Place* was published in 1980, Beattie had picked up the narrative device that struck many of her readers as vital—her omniscient voice, free of the judgmental baggage that usually reveals an author to her readers. The world of letters received Ann Beattie as the era's answer to Updike and to Cheever.

Falling in Place captured a breed of Americans who seemed to be everywhere and nowhere simultaneously. If her characters seemed to have an existence beyond her conception of them, it's because they did. They were overly familiar at least to everyone who, like Beattie, grew up in the 50's and the 60's. Indeed, for many members of Beattie's audience, they were a little too close for comfort.

Because of her repeated references in *Falling in Place* to rock singers, Beattie became the disc jockey of American letters. But more than this, she seemed to be a kind of TV monitor that one could turn on if one wanted to tune into the contemporary sensibility. Whether or not it was an aim of

BOOKS IN BRIEF—BACK IN PRINT

A Buried Land by Madison Jones, Sag Hill, NY: Second Chance Press; \$18.95. Madison Jones's allegory on progress first appeared to great acclaim in 1963. Set in the valley of the Tennessee River, the novel records the moral impact of the TVA on a young lawyer entranced by the vision of the New South. At some points the writer's purpose may be a little too visible, but the conclusion is as powerful as anything in Faulkner.

The Conservative Mind: From Burke to Eliot, Seventh Revised Edition, Chicago: Regnery Books; \$19.95. There is little that has not been said in praise of the book that made Russell Kirk the leading conservative intellectual figure in the U.S. This latest edition includes a new forward by Kirk.