

# Good Times

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Our Night on the Town

## 'Prairie Home Companion' rolls out tour of 'Summer Love'

### Acoustic musician Sara Watkins featured

By MIKE CHAIKEN  
EDITIONS EDITOR

Singer, songwriter, fiddle player Sara Watkins is taking a detour this summer... a detour to love.

Watkins is part of the cast of "Prairie Home Companion's" Summer Love Tour, featuring host Garrison Keillor. The Summer Love Tour rolls into Ives Concert Park in Danbury on Wednesday, Aug. 18.

The tour of the popular radio program, which is broadcast locally on WNPR 90.5 FM, focuses on the theme of romantic love. Press materials say the show will be "jam-packed with tender duets and ballads, poetry (Poe, Shakespeare, Anonymous), and stories of passion and marriage — not to mention Mr. Keillor's intermission walk through the audience for the sing-along of 'Unchained Melody' and 'Can't Help Falling in Love with You.'" (The tour will not be a part of any radio broadcasts.)

Before launching a solo career, Sara had been a member of the acoustic trio Nickel Creek... joining that group when she was 8. (Nickel Creek is currently on hiatus.)

This won't be the first time Sara has been with the "Prairie Home Companion" family. She performed on the radio broadcast four or five times already. And the idea of performing duets is not a first for her other. She sang several on the show during her appearances.

"I'm a big fan," said Sara of "Prairie Home Companion."

"I love Garrison's singing," said Sara. "It's a brand name... It's consistency... is a big part of it's appeal," Sara said.

Sara's participation in the Summer Love Tour was set into motion when Keillor emailed her, asking whether she was interested. Sara said the idea of the show was to feature duets. But Keillor was still searching for a hook to hang the duets on.

That's when the idea of



TODD COOPER

Sara Watkins will be a featured musician as 'Prairie Home Companion' rolls into Danbury on Aug. 18.

romantic love came to him, said Sara.

"I've never been part of something so theme-oriented," said Sara. "It's so refreshing... I really enjoy stepping into something that's controlled and focused."

When you're in a band, Sara said themes tend to be generated over the years and often by the fans who want to hear their favorite songs in concert. This is something different, she said.

Asked what in particular appealed to her about the Summer Love Tour, Sara blurted out, "Everything... everything appealed to me."

"It's a totally different kind of show (from what I've usually done)," said Sara.

Prior to the launch of the Summer Love tour, Sara had been out on the road as a solo act with her band, and just a small crew. Prior to that when she was in Nickel Creek, which had a larger crew than her solo tour. But there was still a pretty small contingent on

the tour bus.

"Nothing compares to this (in terms of cast and crew size)," said Sara. For instance, "Prairie Home Companion" tours with sound effects man Fred Newman. "I never toured with a sound effects man," said Sara.

The song selection for her duets was decided by Keillor, said Sara. However, she did make some suggestions.

Sara said audiences should expect to recognize the songs that will be performed, especially because of Keillor's fondness for the American classics.

Although Sara is a musician, "Prairie Home Companion" also is about more than music. Regular bits include Guy Noir and Dusty and Lefty.

Sara doesn't know if she will be involved in any of the comedy as well as the music. But she would love to try.

"I really hope to be brought into the show," said Sara. She was modest about her skills as an actress, however. "I know

what I can do. I know I probably can't do it," said Sara. "But I'd love to try."

Sara said her favorite comedy bits on "Prairie Home Companion" are the food-oriented ones. "I have a special place in my heart for the food songs." She said she loves the ketchup commercials performed by Keillor. She also loves Keillor's musical variations on the "Powder Milk" theme.

Sara currently is touring behind her first solo album, "Sara Watkins." Sara makes it immediately clear the decision to go solo wasn't something she set out to do or something she did to Nickel Creek.

"All of us were so worn out," said Sara.

Sara said that after nearly two decades together, Nickel Creek's members felt the need to try different things on their own. Sara said this was especially important if they were to grow as artists and musicians.

While Nickel Creek was going full-steam ahead, Sara said solo projects

weren't going to get the attention they needed.

The break has helped them, said Sara of the members of Nickel Creek. "Each of us are better musicians... we're more well-rounded musicians... I feel I am much better."

For her first album, Sara worked with a rock and roll heavy hitter, former Led Zeppelin bassist John Paul Jones.

Asked if she was worried that Jones's participation in the record might overshadow her own work, Sara said that never was the case. For Jones, said Sara, the gig was about making the best possible Sara Watkins record.

"I would never say he was a fan of mine," said Sara of Jones. "But he made me feel that he was... I really need to feel that from a producer."

Sara said Jones also exhibited a great deal of respect for her music and he treated it with respect, she said.

Sara said Jones also made it clear he had high expectations from everyone

involved in the record. And that helped push everyone that much harder "to rise to the situation."

Once "Prairie Home Companion" wraps up its tour, Sara said she will open for singer Stephen Kellogg in a tour through the Midwest to the East Coast. She then will perform a few duet tours with her brother, fellow Nickel Creek member Sean. After that, she will be heading to the U.K. for a tour. Then she will take a couple of months to figure out the focus of her next album. She said she spent about 1 1/2 years touring behind "Sara Watkins," so the time is right to figure out "the next phase for me."

For the next few weeks, however, "Prairie Home Companion's" Summer Love Tour is her first priority.

"I'm looking forward to it," said Sara.

For more information, go to [www.prairiehome.org](http://www.prairiehome.org), or contact David O'Neill at [david@prairiehome.us](mailto:david@prairiehome.us)

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