

How Chris Thile, Who Remade ‘A Prairie Home Companion,’ Spends His Sundays

The mandolin player recently moved his radio show to New York.



Cristina Baussan for The New York Times

By Emily Sernaker

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For a while, Chris Thile spent his weekends between two cities. After hosting “Live from Here” (formerly “A Prairie Home Companion”) in St. Paul, Minn., on Saturday nights, he would fly home to Brooklyn early the next morning. “Sundays were sacred,” he said. “But they didn’t start until I got home from J.F.K. or LaGuardia.”

Last fall, all that changed when Mr. Thile, a renowned bluegrass musician, moved his variety show to New York City. “There’s all the talent that’s already here,” he said. “That Edward Norton will come by and read from a novel he just made a movie out of, or that Jonathan Biss basically walked on and gave us some incredible Schumann,” he continued. “That kind of thing can happen all the time.”

Now on the weekends, Mr. Thile, 38, only has to travel between Manhattan, where his show takes place every week at Town Hall, and Brooklyn, where he lives with his wife, Claire Coffee, 39, an actor, and their son, Calvin, 4.

FOCUS HANGOVER When we wake up on Sunday, Claire calls it my focus hangover. It’s not an alcohol thing — it’s from the Saturday show. She is so patient with me as I remember how to be a human being.

The biggest thing is coffee. It’s a two-tier process. At home there’s the “putting your own oxygen mask on before you help the person sitting next to you” coffee we make with a little AeroPress. We’ll make Calvin a little hot cocoa and then we usually head off to a coffee shop after that.

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THE HOOD People who are happy with their neighborhoods in New York always say the same thing: “It’s such a *neighborhood!*” And that’s how we feel about Carroll Gardens. We see all the same people who have been there a long time and

are very friendly and welcoming to us. We feel like we're continuing their way of life as opposed to interrupting it. And, in addition to coffee I'm a massive wine geek, so being in a neighborhood that's predominantly Italian is fun for me.

DEMOLITION Right now we're in Windsor Terrace as we wait out our renovation in Carroll Gardens. The place we bought is lovely on the outside and a total disaster on the inside. So, it's structurally sound but everything else that could be wrong is wrong. It's taking a long time. That's a part of our Sunday: getting pictures of the demolition of the inside of our brownstone and imagining things we'll do once we get back in there.

IN THE MOMENT We get out into the city and just stay there. Just walking around, doing stuff, trying to be outside as much as weather will permit. Calvin is a constant reminder that I'm not always as present as I want to be. His go-to state of being is present. So I'm really grateful of that part of being his parent. Just a reminder of how I feel things were going down before smartphones. Honestly that's what Sundays are about for Claire and me: it's an exercise in being present.

BROOKLYN BRIDGE PARK Depending on what the second coffee location was, we then ask: what large outdoor space are we the closest to? At Brooklyn Bridge Park, Calvin and I watch the ships go in and out. Some of the old packet-looking ships he thinks are pirate ships, which I think is great and I'm not going to disabuse him of that.

JANE'S CAROUSEL When you wrap around Brooklyn Bridge Park you see Jane's Carousel. We wait in line with a bunch of people and I feel like a tourist — but in a good way. I do that thing when I'm in other cities, when I think, "I could live here" or "I wish lived here," and then realize *I do*, which is so great. And you're on the carousel looking off where the East River meets the Atlantic Ocean, looking up at the Brooklyn Bridge.

If you're ever in one of those modes where you're questioning the validity or necessity of the struggle that New York engages us all in, just ride up and down on one of those carousel horses.

AN AWFULLY GOOD THING A cocktail and an oyster is an awfully good thing after a park, especially one close to water. Last night we went to Henry Public, which had this unbelievable trio, this violin player, guitar player and someone playing a washtub bass. I think they were called the MilkMan & Sons, it was epic. Henry Public is already sort of a trip back to the late 1800s, or early 1900s. We had two dozen oysters and cocktails. Calvin gets a mocktail that looks like whatever we're having. Then we think about dinner or sometimes that is dinner.

BACK TO WORK Claire and I plot the week ahead and update each other on what we need to get done. Then I go back to work. The more you look at great art of any kind, you'll see that there's this thread running through all of it. What that is — the evaluation and exploration of that — is the work of the show.

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