

Remarks at the Kennedy Center Honors Reception

December 3, 2023

Hello, hello, hello! Good evening, everyone. Please have a seat.

Jill and I are honored—truly honored—to host you at one of our favorite events.

A special thanks, by the way, to David Rubenstein. David, you're Chairman of the Board of the Kennedy Center. But you're a great friend, but you always step up and support the arts and the history of the Nation. You're always there. I call him the "Washington Monument." Remember when I got—[inaudible]? He rebuilt it. [Laughter] Anyway.

And to you, Deborah Rutter, the—where's Deborah? Deborah. Madam President, I should say—President of the Kennedy Center. Thank you for all you do.

And to all of you and supporters of the arts and the family and friends of this year's honorees. And my sister. [Laughter]

It's wonderful—it's wonderful—it's a wonderful tradition at the White House to recognize the President and Mrs. Kennedy's love of the arts and the culture in America, love that endures 60 years after his death, tragically. The anniversary was marked last month.

The anniversary just came as we said goodbye to someone who I admired greatly, the First Lady Rosalynn Carter, who was also a champion of the performing arts.

It's simple as it is profound. The performing arts are more than just sound and scene. They reflect who we are as Americans and as human beings.

That's especially true for more than 200 Kennedy Center honorees over the past 46 years who have helped shape how we see ourselves, how we see each other, and how we see our world. Honors not just based on the length of the career or the scope of work or the height of fame, but because of their unique place in the conscience and the very soul of our dynamic and diverse nation. You're an incredible group. You really are. This year's class continues that legacy.

In New York City, you can walk a few blocks, and you can circle the Earth in just a few blocks. Eight million people of every background in most—in the most alive city, probably, in America. And that's just one guy who makes everyone stop and laugh, Billy Crystal. [Laughter]

Now, Billy grew up sweeping the floor of his family's music shop on 42d Street, and he became America's most celebrated comedians, actor, and writer on screen and on stage. And he played every form—in everyone's form.

The miracle man—[laughter]—and the princess—for "The Princess Bride." Oh, I tell you. [Laughter] The one that really fascinated me was the therapist for a mobster. And city slicker, which I told him I just looked at again today. A guy who met Sally.

Nine-time Oscars, most—second only to Bob Hope and previous Kennedy Center Honorees. And six Emmy Awards. Tony winner. Best selling author.

And by—what I admire most about him is his heart—his heart—that reminds us to love and care for one another—raising awareness and funds to end cancer, fighting homelessness, help a city rebuild after 9/11 and Superstorm Sandy, and so much more.

Maybe the most helpful of all, helping people find the light of laughter and purpose from the kindness and the darkness that occurs as a consequence of loss and pain.

Billy's award-winning Broadway show is about 700 Sundays he had with his dad before his dad passed away when Billy was only 15 years old. It captured the love they shared at the time and the time they had together and the love of his mother, his brother, his uncle, and other pieces of his soul gone too soon.

By sharing that love so openly, Billy has helped countless people hold onto to the loves of their own lives. That's Billy Crystal, the American showman with a heart of gold, Billy.

And he promised me he's not going to primary me. *[Laughter]* Because he could win.

The holiday season has arrived, and we hear our favorite holiday songs. Tonight—tonight—we celebrate someone who brings joy to the world with her extraordinary voice: Renée Fleming, one of greatest opera sopranos of all time.

Descriptions of her voice verge on the mystical. Characterized as "pure gold," "jewels floating like butterflies." With her heavenly voice, Renée has risen from humble roots in Upstate New York to the heights of the opera world and well, well beyond, performing more than 50 of the greatest soprano roles on the world's most prestigious world stages.

She sings in six languages. Over 2 million records sold. Five Grammys.

And takes opera outside the grand halls of the world. The first opera singer to perform at a Super Bowl. *[Laughter]* Her voice was heard in the "Lord of the Rings" movies. And she sang on "The Late Show With David Letterman" and with the cast of "Sesame Street," both fellow Kennedy Honorees.

More personally, her rendition of "Danny Boy" at the funeral of my friend, John McCain, moved us deeply.

On a cold January day in 2009, she performed as Barack and I were first inaugurated. I'll never forget it.

And on another cold day in January 2021, before another Inauguration, she performed a—in a private mass for Jill and me and Kamala and Doug and our families. We sat in awed silence, listening to her rendition of "America the Beautiful." I felt like a choir of angels singing.

That's Renée Fleming. Renée, thank you.

As a child in Australia and England, Barry Gibb—finally made it to the United States, thanks God—*[laughter]*. And he and his brothers set their sights on one thing: to make it big. To make it big.

Kids being kids, they made guitars out of cheese boxes, lip-synced their favorite songs, and performed on street corners. Not even 10 years old when he first performed on stage together, they discovered early on the natural gift—the natural gift—of singing in three-part harmony.

It was the start of what was to become one of the longest running, top-selling musical acts in history: the Bee Gees. And I'm a fan. *[Laughter]*

From their soulful hits in the sixties—and I was a mere child, but—*[laughter]*—to fueling the explosion of disco in the 1970s, the Bee Gees defied genres and left an enduring mark upon pop music.

Over the course of four decades, their trademark falsettos and prolific songwriting have sold over 220 million albums and created 100—excuse me—created 1,000 songs, including songs for another superstar's performance.

The Bee Gees earned nine number-one hits. Nearly 30 Top 40 Hits. Five Grammy's, nine nominations.

And while I know when you think of the Bee Gees, it's the infectious beat and the—that you hear in your own mind. But I think it's universal. It's simple. Simple human truths that their lyrics contain so often capture and grip our hearts.

Lyrics like "there's a certain kind of light that never shone on me" from those hopelessly in love. Or "I've [been; White House correction] kicked around since I was born" about the Bay Bridge [Ridge; White House correction] 19-year-old struck by a dead-end job who's trying to stay alive. The list goes on.

The brothers' bound [bond; White House correction] made it all seem effortless and almost magical. They described it as, quote, "we'll be walking down the street together, and we'll simultaneously begin to sing the same song in the same key." God love you, Billy [Barry; White House correction]. I tell you, that's incredible.

Proof—proof that all—of all they may have accomplished as Bee Gees, looked at the world like so many of us do: in a simple straight way. How have I affected by it?

Family is the beginning, the middle, and end. So, while honor goes to Barry and—we know he accepts it in harmony with Robin, Maurice, Andy, and the brothers Gibbs. You know, Barry, I think you made it big. No question.

Fifty years ago, August of '73, the Bronx. A new artform was born, inspired by spirituals sang as prayers of freedom, gospel music heard in churches, jazz played at speakeasies, funk music in nightclubs. Continuing the long tradition of Black performers using their art to break down barriers and to give voice to the promise of America for all Americans—for all Americans.

And over the past 50 years, hip-hop has become an unstoppable force in America, and around—and not just America, but around the world.

Before I [it; White House correction] traveled from the Bronx to change the culture forever—before they did, it caught the ear of a child from Newark, New Jersey. She'd grow up practicing with friends at school and then learning from legends in nightclubs.

It didn't take long for—[laughter]—Dana Owens to know—become known as "Queen Latifah." Queen Latifah.

A natural storyteller—a natural storyteller—she released her first album at age 19. In the studio, she rapped about everything from the pain of losing her brother to the abuse of power, to respect for Black women to—the respect that Black women deserve, and how infinite love is the only hope for unity.

Grammy winner. Two million albums sold. Two million albums sold.

She's also a skillful storyteller onscreen. The first woman in hip-hop to earn an Oscar nomination, which she did for her role in "Chicago."

And by the way, with other movies and—movies, she's earned a Golden Globe and a Primetime enemy—enemy. [Laughter] That's me. [Laughter] A Primetime Emmy. She's also the first hip-hop artist with a star on the Hollywood Walk of Fame. That's a full trophy case, if I say.

But as a point of privilege—personal privilege, I'd like to thank—there's a second place for an honorary degree she received in 2011 from Delaware State University, my HBCU. [Laughter] Kamala and I have an ongoing, running debate about whether it's Howard or Delaware State, the best HBCU in the Nation. [Laughter]

From serving as a mentor for young women of color to building housing in her hometown of Newark, she displays how storytelling and service go hand in hand.

Tonight Queen Latifah, you know, you become the first female hip-hop artist to receive a Kennedy Honor, lifting—and fitting because it's a tribute to the 50th anniversary of hip-hop. Providing—proving that anything is possible when we discover our own voice, write our own story, and share it with the world. And that's what you've done.

Scripture tells us God gives us each gifts. And thank the Lord God gave the gift to us of Dionne Warwick. *[Laughter]* A few nights ago, she performed at the lighting of the National Christmas Tree just outside the White House. As expected, she was incredible, just as she's been from the very beginning.

A 6-year-old—as a 6-year-old, she climbed to the top of a stack of books in the pulpit of her grandfather's church in New Jersey. She sang for the congregation, finding her gift and her calling that now spans seven decades: iconic melodies, verses, and albums, love songs and anthems. It includes "I Say a Little Prayer," "Do You Know the Way to San Jose." *[Laughter]*

Five Grammys, fourteen nominations. The Grammy Hall of Fame, R&B Music Hall of Fame. Over 100 million sold—100 million records sold and counting.

But what makes her truly exceptional, in my view, is how her friend and great humanitarian, the incomparable artist, the previous Kennedy Center Honoree, Stevie Wonder, described her. He said, quote, "You cannot separate the voice from the heart." "You cannot separate the voice from the heart."

For example, as the HIV/AIDS epidemic raged in the eighties, she asked fellow artists to create music to help save lives and break stigmas. That group included Stevie, Elton John, and Gladys Knight—also a previous house center—Kennedy Center Honorees.

That legend recorded—they're just incredible, what they've done. And what they did, they recorded "That's What Friends Are For." And they were surely a good bunch of friends. A song that reached the top of the charts and raised millions of dollars to fight that deadly epidemic.

Her voice and heart make us feel something deep within ourselves. That's Dianne *[Dionne; White House correction]* Warwick. Truly a gift to all of us, Dianne *[Dionne; White House correction]*.

And that's all been introduced by a guy who couldn't carry a tune in a wheelbarrow. *[Laughter]*

Ladies and gentlemen, congratulations to the 2023 Kennedy Center Honorees. Congratulations to your families and friends. And thank you all for supporting the performing arts that shape our conscience and the very soul of the Nation.

So God bless you all, and may God protect our troops. Thank you, thank you, thank you.

NOTE: The President spoke at 4:29 p.m. in the East Room at the White House. In his remarks, he referred to David M. Letterman, former host, CBS's "Late Show With David Letterman"; former President Barack Obama; and Douglas C. Emhoff, husband of Vice President Kamala D. Harris. He also referred to his sister Valerie Biden Owens.

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