

Administration of Joseph R. Biden, Jr., 2024

Remarks at the Kennedy Center Honors Reception

December 8, 2024

Hello, hello, hello. Welcome to your house. I know that guy.

Please have a seat. Thank you so much.

Well, welcome to the White House. Good evening to all of you, and I'm delighted to have you here.

And thank you, Kennedy Center President Deborah Rutter. Deborah, where are—where's Deborah? Stand up. Let everybody know who you are.

To the Board Chairman, one of the most generous people—men I've ever known on everything that's in need—a friend of mine, David Rubenstein. David, stand up.

When I was getting set up in the President's suite upstairs where we sleep, I—my brother was saying, "Look, you want to be able to see from your desk—you want to be able to see the Rubenstein." I said, "I beg your pardon?" He said, "The Washington Memorial." [*Laughter*] This guy rebuilt the sucker. [*Laughter*] I'm serious. God love you. You're the best, David. You are.

And thanks to all of you, especially this year's Kennedy Center honorees.

Folks, for Jill and me—and Jill is not here. She'll be—make it over to the event tonight. But Jill has been dealing with women's—equality for women's health research, and she just got back from Abu Dhabi and all through Africa and ended up—although, she did go spend a little time in Sicily, because—[*laughter*]—just a—just a day or so to meet her great-great-grandmothers—parents.

She made fun of me going back on the Irish, you know? [*Laughter*] Pat—but I tell you what, I don't screw around when she's—gets her Irish—when she gets her Italian up, I don't mess with her. [*Laughter*]

But anyway, you'll all see her tonight. She's very much—she's up changing. She just—her plane landed, I don't know, about an hour and a half ago, 2 hours ago.

For Jill and me and for Kamala and Doug, this is one of the favorite events at the White House, and I mean that sincerely. And I did it when I was Vice President. Did it when I was a Senator, as I could.

All around us, we see the power of art and imagination—

[*At this point, the President cleared his throat.*]

Excuse me for my voice—to capture the spirit of this holiday season, to capture faith. You know, it's—which is the substance of things hoped for and the evidence of things not seen. Folks, we see the power of the arts everywhere—everywhere.

A few days ago, I returned from a trip to Angola in southwestern Africa. Historians believe people of Angola account for a significant number of all enslaved people shipped to the United States. I'm the first President to ever visit there. Today, millions of African Americans have Angolan ancestry.

I spoke at their National Slavery Museum, where, over 100 [400; White House correction] years ago, enslaved Angolans were baptized into a faith that was foreign to them. Their names were changed against their will. They—you know, they—and they were condemned to a slave

ship, bound for what was referred to as the Middle Passage. I saw the artifacts, the shackles, the whips that tortured their bodies.

I also saw something else. I saw folk instruments Angolans used to share their strength and hope and persevere, instruments like those we have—that they would take all the way across the Atlantic to help them lay the foundation for Black folk music in America. It's really remarkable how much music has played a role in everything.

Throughout our Nation's history, artists in America have used their talents to inspire and empower, to overcome, to challenge power freely and without fear, and to be a link in memory between the past and the future—it matters—to be the spark to make history and to ensure history is never erased. We have too many people trying to erase history instead of write history. That power of art is everywhere.

And, in America, our freedom of expression sets us apart. Other nations were founded on ethnicity, religion, geography. We're the only nation in the world—major nation—founded on an idea—an idea, literally—an idea. That idea was, we're all created equal and deserve to be treated equally throughout our lives.

We've never fully lived up to that idea, but we've never walked away from it either. In America, artists have made sure we never will. And that's what we celebrate tonight.

Raised in Queens, New York, the grandson of Italian immigrants, Francis Ford Coppola was once a 9-year-old boy homebound with polio. But with a tape recorder and a camera by his side, his imagination took seed.

Over six decades, he would write, direct, and produce over 70 films, both sweeping epics and deeply personal stories, taking big swings to explore who we are as a nation and who we are as human beings: "Patton," "The Godfather," "Apocalypse Now," "Dracula." Five Oscars. Fourteen nominations.

Mentoring fellow filmmakers and partnering with his good friend George Lucas to pioneer innovations in filmmaking. Fostering talent before they were stars, like previous Kennedy Center honorees who are here tonight. Robert De Niro. Robert, stand up. I'm a big fan, man. I want everybody to see you. If I get in trouble, I'm coming to you, pal. *[Laughter]*

Well, Francis, I'm looking for work in February, so—*[laughter]*—maybe you've got something for me and a Biden-De Niro combination here. *[Laughter]* I can't sing. I can't act. I can't dance to a damn thing, but I can help you. *[Laughter]*

Above all, Francis is about family. He's joined us tonight by his children and grandchildren, who are making their own mark on American cinema.

For a storied career of independent vision, I say congratulations, Francis, and thank you—thank you, thank you, thank you—for all you've done, pal.

Formed in the San Francisco Bay at an inflection point in history, the Grateful Dead have long since transcended 1960 counterculture. Technical virtuosos fiercely dedicated to their craft, they fused decades and dozens of musical styles to create a willowy new American sound: experimental, innovative, and brave.

Their lyrics tell the story of dreamers and rebels. Their iconic jams are just a performance—they're not just that, but they're an ongoing conversation with generations of devoted fans. Hundreds and hundreds of songs. Recorded 59 of top 40 albums—59. Twenty-three hundred concerts, from Woodstock to Egypt's Great Pyramids. One of the most popular bands ever to be watched live in concert.

Look, and there's still a lot of Deadheads around. *[Laughter]*

[*The President pointed to himself.*]

No two performances even the same, but their spirit and joy is enduring.

Tonight we honor Bobby, Bill, and Mickey. Guys, raise your hand.

And we remember those lost songs along the way, like Ron; Phil, whose grandson Grahame is here tonight; and, of course, Jerry Garcia, whose daughter Trixie is here. Trixie, where are you? Stand up, Trixie.

Ladies and gentlemen, the Grateful Dead.

My youngest granddaughter said, "Pop, what's the Dead?" I said, "I beg your pardon?"

[*The President imitated a young child's speech as follows.*]

"What's the Gwateful Dead, Pop?" [*Laughter*]

Anyway, joining them here tonight is another California native, Bonnie Raitt: born and raised in Burbank, the daughter of a famed Broadway singer, accomplished piano player with two musical—[*applause*—]two musical brothers. Eight-year-old Bonnie got her first guitar as a Christmas gift. The rest is history. Thank you, Santa. Thank you, Santa. [*Laughter*]

Over the last 50 years—she's only 50 now—13 Grammy awards, 31 nominations. More Grammy performances than any woman in American history.

An inductee to the Rock and Roll Hall of Fame, her music defies genre and blends music of folk, country, rock, and pop.

You know, with infectious beats and soulful lyrics, her sound carries through the highs and the lows of life: time—time and trust, heartbreak and hope, love and loss. That's Bonnie helping us find healing and light and purpose within and beyond music. One of the alltime greats that inspires fans and follows [fellow; White House correction] musicians alike.

And I tell you, Bonnie, you've had an—from—an incredible impact. So, Bonnie, thank you for all you've done, not just your music, kid.

When Bonnie picked up that guitar at 8 years old in California, there was a young boy more than 2,000 miles away in Cuba. Born to a mechanic and a homemaker, raised in a home with a dirt floor, Arturo Sandoval was 10 years old when he picked up the trumpet, under a communist regime that controlled everything from where people could travel to where—what they could read. His musical talent was undeniable and uncontrollable.

While jazz was thriving in the United States, he spent 3 months in jail—3 months in jail for listening to American legends on the radio. At great risk to he and his family, they fled Cuba for America to live in the land of the free and share his own jazz sounds for the entire world.

Thirty-three albums, 10 Grammys, and an Emmy and the Medal of Freedom—Arturo's story is the American story: a nation of immigrants, a nation of dreamers, a nation of freedom.

Congratulations, Arturo. God love you. [*Applause*] I mean it.

Few places in America captured the essence of freedom more than the Apollo Theater. You know, you walk through those doors of 125th Street in Harlem, New York—you walk into American history. You literally walk into American history.

Opened in the thirties as a refuge for Black patrons and performers in a segregated America. Over the next 90 years, it became the birthplace of Black expression, home for the hopeful, school for stars in music, dance, comedy, acting, and so much more, including former Kennedy Center honorees Ella Fitzgerald, James Brown, Gladys Knight, Stevie Wonder. The list goes on.

You know, when there were few places to go, there was "Showtime at the Apollo"—"Showtime at the Apollo." A big stage, a boisterous crowd, a beacon of what's possible, shaping a fearless future of equality and inclusion in the Nation, you know, one where Black excellence is celebrated, not denied. Reminding us all that Black history is American history, for God's sake. Black culture is American culture.

For the first time, the Kennedy Center is bestowing this honor to an institution and not an— an individual. For—thank you, Apollo Theater. Thank you, thank you, thank you. [*Applause*] Thank you.

Let me close with this. It's been the honor of my life to serve as your President. And for the final time, Jill and I are honored to represent the Presidency, to recognize and respect the power of the arts to literally redeem the soul of the Nation, because that's what you've done so many times: redeem the soul of the Nation.

So congratulations on our—to—on our honorees, to your families. I look forward to tonight's show.

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

NOTE: The President spoke at 5:03 p.m. in the East Room at the White House. In his remarks, he referred to Vice President Kamala D. Harris and her husband Douglas C. Emhoff; actor Robert De Niro; Bobby Weir, guitarist and singer, and Bill Kreutzmann and Mickey Hart, drummers, Grateful Dead; Grahame Lesh, son of Grateful Dead bassist Phil Lesh; David John Raitt, brother of musician Bonnie Raitt; and musicians Gladys Knight and Stevie Wonder. He also referred to his brother James. The transcript was released by the Office of the Press Secretary on December 9.

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