

Remarks at PBS's "The History of Gospel: In Performance at the White House"

April 14, 2015

The President. Thank you so much. Everybody, have a seat.

[At this point, the President sang briefly as follows.]

The President. Well—[laughter].

[The President then made remarks as follows.]

The President. I hope everybody is in the spirit tonight. Bringing some church—[laughter]—to the White House.

Good evening, everybody.

Audience members. Good evening.

The President. Tonight we continue one of my favorite traditions here at the White House by celebrating the music that has helped to shape our Nation. And over the years, we've had the quintessential sounds of America fill this room, from jazz to Motown to blues to country. So it is fitting that tonight we honor the music that influenced all those genres, gospel.

I want to start by thanking tonight's amazing performers: Shirley Caesar, Darlene Love, Rhiannon Giddens, Rance Allen, Emmylou Harris, Rodney Crowell, Tamela Mann, Lyle Lovett, and the Morgan State University Choir. And I also want to thank tonight's emcee, Robin Roberts, who we love.

Now, I've got to say, you're having a pretty good night when T Bone Burnett and the Queen of Soul herself, Aretha Franklin, show up at your house to jam. So we've got royalty here tonight. It's a state visit tonight. [Laughter]

We don't know everything about the origins of gospel, but we do know that this music is rooted in the spirituals sung by the slaves, which W.E.B. Du Bois called "the most beautiful expression of human experience born this side of the seas."

Even though they were often forbidden to read or write or even speak freely, slaves were permitted to sing. Songs were where their

dreams took flight, where they expressed faith and love, as well as pain and fear and unimaginable loss. Songs were also how they conveyed information: the locations of safe houses for runaway slaves or directions for a path towards freedom, buried in the coded language of divine lyrics. They sang songs of liberation, if not for their bodies in this world, then for their souls in the next.

And over time, those spirituals blended with hymns and sacred songs to become the music of the Black church. In the decades after the Civil War, as free men and women streamed north in record numbers searching for a new life, they brought those tunes with them.

But the gospel music we know today really started in the 1930s, when jazz musician Thomas A. Dorsey combined the sounds of the church he grew up in with the jazz and blues that he loved. By the 1960s, gospel music had become central to the civil rights movement, not just through the political activism of legends like Mahalia Jackson and the Staple Singers, but through the songs themselves, from hymns like "Take My Hand, Precious Lord," a favorite of Dr. King's, to the anthem of the movement, "We Shall Overcome."

Gospel music has evolved over time, but its heart stays true. It still has an unmatched power to strike the deepest chord in all of us, touching people of all faiths and of no faith. As Mahalia Jackson herself once said, "Blues are the song of despair, but gospel songs are the songs of hope." Hope that we might rise above our failures and disappointments. Hope that we might receive His redemption. Hope that, in lifting our voices together, we too might one day reach the Promised Land.

So tonight we will hear from musicians who helped to shape this singular American art form and musicians who are taking gospel to great new heights.

And to get us started, I'd like to introduce an extraordinary singer, a woman who reaches millions with her music and preaches to her

flock from her North Carolina pulpit every Sunday. Please give it up for Reverend, Doctor, Pastor Shirley Caesar.

NOTE: The President spoke at 7:42 p.m. in the East Room at the White House. In his re-

marks, he referred to Shirley A. Caesar-Williams, pastor, Mt. Calvary Word of Faith Church in Raleigh, NC; Robin Roberts, anchor, ABC News's "Good Morning America" program; and musicians Mavis and Yvonne Staples.

Remarks Prior to a Meeting With President Ellen Johnson Sirleaf of Liberia, President Ernest Bai Koroma of Sierra Leone, and President Alpha Condé of Guinea

April 15, 2015

Well, I want to welcome Presidents Sirleaf, Koroma, and Condé. The United States has a long partnership with Liberia and Sierra Leone and Guinea, partnerships that proved to be critical in the fight against Ebola. We're here to assess progress today and to look ahead.

We begin by noting the incredible losses that took place in all three countries. More than 10,000 people have died from Ebola: men, women, and children. On behalf of the American people, we want to express our deepest condolences to the families and recognize how challenging this has been for all the countries involved.

Under extraordinary circumstances, the people of these three countries have shown great courage and resolve, treating and taking care of each other, especially children and orphans. The United States has been proud to lead an international effort to work with these three countries in a global response.

Last week, there were fewer than 40 new cases, so we've seen major progress. In Liberia right now, there are zero cases. In Sierra Leone and Guinea combined, there were fewer than 40 new cases last week, and that's around the lowest number in a year. Now we're focused on a shared goal, and that is getting to zero. We can't be complacent. This virus is unpredictable.

We have to be vigilant, and the international community has to remain fully engaged in a partnership with these three countries until

there are no cases of Ebola in these countries. Health systems also have to be rebuilt to meet daily needs: vaccines for measles, delivering babies safely, treating HIV/AIDS and malaria. And with our Global Health Security Agenda, we intend to do more to prevent future epidemics.

So the Ebola epidemic has been also an economic crisis. That's part of the reason why these three Presidents are here. They're going to be meeting with a number of the multilateral institutions—the IMF and World Bank—here in Washington. There's the challenge of restoring markets and agricultural growth, promoting investment and development. So I'm going to be looking forward to hearing from them, how the United States can stand shoulder to shoulder with them to work hard to take this crisis and turn it into an opportunity to rebuild even stronger than before: to strengthen administrative systems, public health systems; to continue the work that they've done in rooting out corruption, reinforcing democratic institutions—all of which will be the foundation stones for long-term progress and prosperity.

So, Madam President, Mr. Presidents, we are very grateful for the hard work that you've done. We're proud to partner with you, and we intend to see this through until the job is done.

All right? Thank you, everybody.

NOTE: The President spoke at 10:45 a.m. in the Cabinet Room at the White House.