

Administration of Barack Obama, 2013

Remarks at PBS's "Carole King: The Library of Congress Gershwin Prize for Popular Song In Performance at the White House"

May 22, 2013

Thank you. I have to say that as the podium came out, which meant that was my cue, my mother-in-law said, "Oh, shoot." [*Laughter*] True story! She was getting into the music. [*Laughter*] Welcome to the White House, everybody.

I want to start by thanking all the incredible artists who have joined us to pay tribute to the one and only Carole King. I also want to thank Dr. James Billington and all the folks at the Library of Congress not just for making this event possible, but for the outstanding work that they do every day to preserve the very best of our culture for generations to come.

Of course, as we gather tonight to present this award, our thoughts and prayers remain with the wonderful people of Oklahoma. They have suffered mightily this week. And while the road ahead will be long, their country will be with them every single step of the way. That's who we are, and that's how we treat our family and friends and our neighbors wherever they are in the country. So we're going to help them recover. We're going to help them rebuild for as long as it takes. And eventually, life will go on and new memories will be made. And new laughter will come. New songs will be sung.

And that's often why we turn to music, during trying times, for comfort and for inspiration, and sometimes, just for a good diversion. And George Gershwin, it was said, was a "man who lives in music," who "expresses everything, serious or not, sound or superficial, by means of music, because it is his native language." And I can't think of a better description of tonight's Gershwin Prize recipient, singer-songwriter Carole King.

By the age of 4, Carole was already mastering the piano. By 15, she had already conducted her first orchestra. By 17, she had already written her first number-one hit, which you've already heard, "Will You Love Me Tomorrow?" with Gerry Goffin. So at this point, all of you are feeling like underachievers. I understand. [*Laughter*] It was pretty clear by this time that this promising young musician from New York—who grew up not far from where George and Ira Gershwin were born—was destined for similar heights.

Whether it was Little Eva telling us to do the "Loco-Motion" or Aretha Franklin belting out the anthem of "A Natural Woman" or James Taylor reminding us that even here in Washington, "You've Got a Friend"—[*laughter*]—for an entire decade, behind so many of the songs that touched our hearts, behind so many of the lyrics that stirred our soul, there was Carole, ever joyful, ever uplifting.

And then, in 1971, came the biggest break of all, when she showed the world that she couldn't just write hit songs, she could sing them too. Her album "Tapestry" struck a chord with a whole new legion of fans, including me. It was the very first solo album by a female artist to reach diamond status, meaning it sold more than 10 million copies. It was the first album by a female artist to win all the top Grammy awards for record, song, and album of the year, along with the Grammy for best pop vocal performance. And as one of the best selling albums of all time, it cemented Carole's status as one of the most influential singer-songwriters that America has ever seen.

To date, Carole has written more than 400 compositions that had been recorded by over 1,000 artists, resulting in over 100 hits. She's done everything from doo-wop to pop. She's played with everyone from Bono to Babyface. She's been inducted into the Songwriters Hall of Fame and the Rock and Roll Hall of Fame. And tonight she's still reaching new heights, becoming the first female artist to win the Gershwin Prize for Popular Song.

As Carole tells it, the secret to her success is that "I try to get out of the way and let the process be guided by whatever is driving me." That's what makes her songs so personal and so powerful, so enduring. Like the Gershwins, it's not just that Carole lives the music, it's that music lives in her.

So tonight it is my great pleasure to present America's highest award for popular music to a living legend, Carole King.

NOTE: The President spoke at 8:32 p.m. in the East Room at the White House. In his remarks, he referred to his mother-in-law Marian Robinson; lyricist Gerry Goffin; and musicians Paul D. "Bono" Hewson and Kenneth B. "Babyface" Edmonds.

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