

*Administration of Barack Obama, 2014*

**Remarks at the Kennedy Center Honors Reception**  
*December 7, 2014*

*The President.* Well, good evening, everybody.

*Audience members.* Good evening.

*The President.* Welcome to the White House. Michelle and I love this event. Everybody looks so nice. [Laughter] This is one of our favorites. And as Lily used to say, that's the truth. [Laughter] Now, I—as a President, I cannot stick out my tongue. That might cause an international incident.

But I want to start the evening by thanking David Rubenstein and the Kennedy Center Trustees and the Kennedy Center's new President, Deborah Rutter. Where's Deborah? Yay! I want to thank George and Michael Stevens, who produce this event every year. Lately, they've won an Emmy for it just about every year as well. So we are very proud to have them here. In fact, Michelle and I call this the "Stevens season." [Laughter]

President Kennedy once wrote, "The life of the arts, far from being an interruption, a distraction, in the life of a nation, is very close to the center of a nation's purpose—and is a test of the quality of a nation's civilization."

I think Tom Hanks will agree that President Kennedy was probably envisioning "Joe Versus the Volcano" when he wrote that. [Laughter] Although, I have to say, "Big" was on last night. And that—you know, so things balance out. [Laughter] But it's clear that the group on stage with me tonight understands what President Kennedy understood: that our art is a reflection of us not just as people, but as a nation. It binds us together. Songs and dance and film express our triumphs and our faults, our strengths, our tenderness in ways that sometimes words simply cannot do. And so we honor those who have dedicated their lives to this endeavor: those who have tapped into something previously unspoken or unsung or unexpressed; those who have shown us not simply who they are, but who we all are; those who are able to tap into those things we have in common and not just those things that push us apart.

Now, I'm going to start with somebody who I know all of you think about whenever I sing, and that's Reverend Al Green. [Laughter] I've been keeping his traditions alive. [Laughter]

*Audience member.* Do it again. Do it again.

*The President.* No, I'm not going to do it again. I'm not going to do it. [Laughter] No. No. That was, like, a one-time thing. My voice didn't crack. It was a fluke. I can sing a little, but I cannot sing like Al Green. Nobody can sing like Al Green. [Applause] Nobody can sing like Al Green. That soul, that light falsetto. His music can bring people together. In fact, he says he can hardly go anywhere without a fan coming up to him, pulling out a picture of one of their kids, and telling him which one of his songs helped that child enter the world. [Laughter] I embarrassed the Reverend. Look at him, he's all, like, "Oh man." [Laughter]

Al was born in Forrest City, Arkansas, one of 10 kids packed into a 2-bedroom house. In his early twenties, he signed with Hi Records and helped bring Memphis soul into the spotlight with songs like "Tired of Being Alone."

*Audience member.* Mm-hmm.

*The President.* Mm-hmm. "Let's Stay Together," "Take Me to the River."

*Audience members.* Mmm. [Laughter]

*The President.* They're thinking about all those songs and how it brought people together. [Laughter] In the 1970s, he became a pastor at his church in Memphis, and later, he started churning out a string of gospel hits that earned him eight Grammys. And as the years passed, he's woven together his gospel and soul careers, recently collaborating with the Roots, John Legend, and his Memphis neighbor, Justin Timberlake. [Laughter] And of course, he's still singing from the pulpit on Sunday. As he says, "The greatest thing that ever happened to me . . . the little boy from Arkansas, was that amidst all the doubts . . . I found peace." For the peace he found and the soul he has shared with all of us, tonight we honor the Reverend Al Green.

On the night of Patricia McBride's farewell performance at the New York City Ballet, the crowd showered her with 13,000 roses. Thankfully, they cut the thorns off first. [Laughter] And that is fitting, because when you hear about Patricia, you hear about somebody who is all rose and no thorn, legendary for her good cheer, her sweetness, her unabashed joyfulness. And that personality translated to the stage, where her humor and grace was matched only by her power and stamina and incredible athleticism. She's one of the most versatile dancers we've ever seen.

Patricia became the principal dancer at the New York City Ballet when she was just 18 years old, the youngest to ever hold that role, and she kept at it for 28 years, longer than anybody else in history. By the time she was finished, some of our greatest choreographers had written dozens of pieces just for her, which is not bad for a shy young girl who grew up in the shadow of World War II, putting glue on the toes of her dance shoes to make them last longer.

She's the daughter of a single mom who worked as a bank secretary in a day when most mothers didn't work outside the home, who pinched pennies from that job and paid the 75 cents for each dance lesson. Today, Patricia hasn't forgotten where she came from. She and her husband Jean-Pierre are in charge of the critically acclaimed Charlotte Ballet, which offers a program that gives dance scholarships to young people in need. So for sharing her spirit and her smile in so many ways, tonight we honor Patricia McBride.

In "Nine to Five," Lily Tomlin plays an undervalued employee whose chauvinist boss steals her ideas and screams at her to get coffee. [Laughter] Finally, she and two coworkers get so fed up, they kidnap him. They get to work changing the office. Working moms get treated better. Productivity rises. The top brass are thrilled. It's basically a live-action version of the working family policies I've been promoting for years. [Laughter] It's the—we've sent DVDs to all the Members of Congress to try to get them on the program. [Laughter]

That role has Lily written all over it. It's edgy, a little dark, but fundamentally optimistic. She's created countless characters, from Ernestine, the telephone operator, to Lucille the Rubber Freak, to Edith Ann, the 5½-year-old philosopher—all of them kind of oddballs, like Lily—[laughter]—all portrayed with incredible warmth and affection, like Lily. She pushed boundaries as well. On her 1973 variety show, "Lily," she and Richard Pryor performed a skit called "Juke and Opal," about two Black folks hanging out in a diner. [Laughter] One reviewer called it "the most profound meditation on race and class that I have ever seen on a major network," which says something both about Lily and the major networks. [Laughter] That was ad-libbed, by the way.

[At this point, actor Lily Tomlin whispered something to the President.]

*The President.* [Laughter] In her one-woman show, "The Search of Signs of Intelligent Life in the Universe," written by her brilliant partner, Jane Wagner—[applause]—yay, Jane—Lily played a dozen characters, transforming instantly into men and women, young, old, crazy, and sane.

And this versatility has led to a flood of awards: Emmys, Tonys, a Grammy, Oscar nomination. She's just inches away from an EGOT. [Laughter] And now she's a Kennedy Center honoree. When asked what she hoped her tribute tonight would look like, she said, "What I'd like to see is a big stream of gay drag artists come out as Ernestine." [Laughter] I haven't talked to George Stevens. I don't know whether this has been arranged. [Laughter] Although, I'd like to see it too. I think that would be fun. [Laughter] But I can promise that your contributions to American stage and screen will live on. For her genius, her compassion, for just being funny, we honor tonight Lily Tomlin.

About 40 years ago, a young singer-songwriter named Gordon Sumner was known to wear a yellow-and-black, striped sweater. Ever since, he's been known by one name: Sting. Now, not everybody can pull off a name like Sting, but this guy can. His wife Trudie calls him Sting. Apparently, his kids call him Sting. [Laughter] "POTUS" is a pretty good nickname—[laughter]—but let's face it, it's not as cool as "Sting." [Laughter] I kind of wish I was called "Sting." I'm stuck with "POTUS." The—[laughter].

But everybody knows that Sting is more than just a name. He is an all-around creative force. There's his singular voice on classics from the Police: "Roxanne," "Every Breath You Take," "Every Little Thing She Does Is Magic." There's his incredible solo career, the songwriting that shape-shifts between rock and jazz and reggae and rhythms drawn from all around the world. He's acted in films. He's topped the classical charts. He just opened a musical on Broadway. The guy once turned down a chance to be a Bond villain. Who does that? [Laughter] Sting, apparently. I mean, look at him. He's too cool, right? [Laughter]

Because just being a celebrity was never Sting's goal. This is a man who comes from humble roots. He's the son of a milkman and a hairdresser. When he was a child, he was so tall that his classmates called him Lurch. They've regret that now. [Laughter] That's payback right there. He's here. You, whoever you are, you're out there. So—[laughter]. Before he had any success as a singer, he had worked as a teacher, a construction worker, and in a tax office. And if a few things had gone differently, we could be living in a world with a really hip, cool tax clerk named Lurch. [Laughter] Instead, we've got Sting: artist, truth teller, a champion of human rights, a champion of our environment. And for all those reasons, and the fact that his music is spectacular and beautiful—for all those reasons, tonight we honor Sting.

One of four kids in his family in Concord, California, Tom Hanks once said his idea of a good time growing up was to take a bus to Sacramento. [Laughter] In the years since, Tom has flown a rocket to outer space, he's fallen in love with a mermaid, he's faced down Somali pirates, mooned the President of the United States. [Laughter] I'm glad he got that last one out of his system before this evening. [Laughter]

Tom's career began just like so many Hollywood legends: dressing in drag for a show called "Bosom Buddies"—[laughter]—kung-fu fighting the Fonz on "Happy Days." But he first won our hearts in comedy, with big hits like "Big" and "Splash." I did watch "Big" last night. It's—that's a great movie. I love that movie. [Laughter] Got kind of choked up at the end when—[laughter]. And as the years passed, he told us "there's no crying in baseball," "life is like a box of chocolates." He told "Houston, we have a problem." And as a cartoon cowboy, he showed us we can always keep our faith in a little boy.

But Tom isn't known simply for his characters, he's known for his character. For his tremendous support of our veterans, he's in the Army Ranger Hall of Fame. For his support of the space program, he has an asteroid named after him. Through Tom, we've seen our World War II heroes not simply in sepia tones somewhere in the distance, but as they truly were: gritty, emotional, flawed, human. Through Tom, we saw the courageous faces behind an AIDS epidemic often overshadowed by stigma and bigotry. Through Tom, again and again, we've seen our passion and our resolve and our love for each other. As his friend Steven Spielberg once said, "If Norman Rockwell were alive today, he would paint a portrait of Tom."

And people have said that Tom is Hollywood's everyman, that he's this generation's Jimmy Stewart or Gary Cooper. But he's just Tom Hanks. And that's enough. That's more than enough. And for that, we honor him tonight—Mr. Tom Hanks.

So, Reverend Al Green, Patricia McBride, Lily Tomlin, Sting, Tom Hanks—charm, soul, spirit, spunk—they've helped us better understand ourselves and each other. And, as President Kennedy expressed, they've helped us center our purpose as a nation, and together reflect the quality of our society. For that, we cannot thank them enough. We are so glad to be able to celebrate these extraordinary people. Thank you for everything that you've given to us over the years and for what you're going to give us in the future.

Congratulations. God bless you all. Please join me in saluting one last time our extraordinary Kennedy Center Honorees for this evening.

**NOTE:** The President spoke at 5:09 p.m. in the East Room at the White House. In his remarks, he referred to Michael Stevens, son of President's Committee on the Arts and Humanities Cochairman George C. Stevens, Jr.; Jean-Pierre Bonnefoux, president and artistic director, Charlotte Ballet; Hilton Als, staff writer, the New Yorker magazine; Jane Wagner, wife of actor Lily Tomlin; Trudie Styler, wife, and Joe, Fuschia, Brigitte M., Jake, Eliot P., and Giacomo L. Sumner, children of musician Gordon "Sting" Sumner; Jim, Larry, and Sandra Hanks, siblings of actor Thomas J. Hanks; and film director Steven A. Spielberg.

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