

*Administration of Barack Obama, 2015*

**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 MC, 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 remarks, 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.

*Categories:* Addresses and Remarks : PBS, "The History of Gospel: In Performance at the White House".

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*Names:* Allen, Rance; Burnett, T-Bone; Crowell, Rodney; Franklin, Aretha; Giddens, Rhiannon; Harris, Emmylou; Love, Darlene; Lovett, Lyle; Mann, Tamela; Roberts Robin; Shirley Caesar-Williams, A.; Staples, Mavis; Staples, Yvonne.

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