

Administration of Barack Obama, 2016

Remarks at the Kennedy Center Honors Reception

December 4, 2016

The President. Well, good evening, everybody.

Audience members. Good evening!

The President. On behalf of Michelle and myself, welcome to the White House. Over the past 8 years, this has always been one of our favorite nights. And this year, I was especially looking forward to seeing how Joe Walsh cleans up. *[Laughter]* Pretty good. *[Laughter]*

I want to begin by once again thanking everybody who makes this wonderful evening possible, including David Rubenstein, the Kennedy Center Trustees—I'm getting a big echo back there—and the Kennedy Center President, Deborah Rutter. Give them a big round of applause.

We have some outstanding Members of Congress here tonight. And we are honored also to have Vicki Kennedy and three of President Kennedy's grandchildren with us here: Rose, Tatiana, and Jack. *[Applause]* Hey!

So the arts have always been part of life at the White House because the arts are always central to American life. And that's why, over the past 8 years, Michelle and I have invited some of the best writers and musicians, actors, dancers to share their gifts with the American people, and to help tell the story of who we are, and to inspire what's best in all of us. Along the way, we've enjoyed some unbelievable performances. This is one of the perks of the job that I will miss. *[Laughter]*

Thanks to Michelle's efforts, we've brought the arts to more young people, from hosting workshops where they learn firsthand from accomplished artists, to bringing "Hamilton" to students who wouldn't normally get a ticket to Broadway. And on behalf of all of us, I want to say thanks to my wife for having done such a tremendous job. *[Applause]* Yay! And she's always looked really good doing it. *[Laughter]* She does. *[Laughter]*

This is part of how we've tried to honor the legacy of President and Mrs. Kennedy. They understood just how vital art is to our democracy: that we need song and cinema and paintings and performance to help us challenge our assumptions, to question the way things are, and maybe inspire us to think about how things might be. The arts help us celebrate our triumphs, but also holds up a mirror to our flaws. And all of that deepens our understanding of the human condition. It helps us to see ourselves in each other. It helps to bind us together as a people.

As President Kennedy once said, "In serving his vision of the truth, the artist best serves his nation." Tonight we honor five amazing artists who have dedicated their lives to telling their truth and helping us to see our own.

At 8 years old, Mavis Staples climbed onto a chair in church, leaned into the microphone, raised her eyes upwards, and belted out the gospel. When people heard that deep, old soul coming out of that little girl, they wept, which, understandably, concerned her. *[Laughter]* But her mother told her: "Mavis, they're happy. Your singing makes them cry happy tears."

It was those early appearances on the South Side of Chicago—South Side!—[*laughter*]—with Mavis, her siblings, their father, Roebuck "Pops" Staples, that launched the legendary Staple Singers. Theirs was gospel with just a touch of country, a twist of the blues, little bit of funk. There was a little bit of sin with the salvation. [*Laughter*] And driven by Pops's reverbed guitar, Mavis's powerhouse vocals, and the harmonies that only family can make, the Staple Singers broke new ground with songs like "Uncloudy Day." They had some truth to tell. Inspired by Dr. King, Pops would tell his kids, "If he can preach it, we can sing it." And so they wrote anthems like "Freedom Highway" and "When Will We Be Paid," which became the soundtrack of the civil rights movement.

As a solo artist, Mavis has done it all and worked with just about everybody, from Bob Dylan to Prince to Jeff Tweedy. On albums like "We'll Never Turn Back" and "One True Vine," she still is singing for justice and equality and influencing a new generation of musicians and fans. And each soulful note, even in heartbreak and even in despair, is grounded in faith and in hope and the belief that there are better days yet to come. "These aren't just songs I'm singing to be moving my lips," she says. "I mean this." And we mean it too. Six decades on, nobody makes us feel "The Weight" like Mavis Staples. Give her a big round of applause.

Al Pacino calls the theater his "flashlight." [*Laughter*] It's how he finds himself, where he sees truth. And since Al first hit Broadway in 1969, his singular talent has been the gold standard for acting. A great playwright once compared the way Al inhabits his characters to the way Louis Armstrong played jazz. One director said that while "some actors play characters, Al Pacino becomes them." And we've all seen it. In the span of 5 years—you think about it—he became Serpico, became Sonny Wortzik, twice became Michael Corleone for, let's face it, what's got to be the two best movies of all time—[*laughter*]—became Tony Montana on screen, then became the owner of a couple of Tonys on the stage. [*Laughter*] And he's always been this way.

At 13, Al committed so profoundly to a role in the school play that when his character was supposed to get sick on stage, Al actually got sick on stage. [*Laughter*] I'm not sure how audiences felt about that. [*Laughter*] But later, when he played Richard III and Jackie Kennedy visited him backstage, the actor playing this self-absorbed king didn't even stand up to greet actual American royalty, which he says he still regrets. [*Laughter*]

Through it all, Al has always cared more for his flashlight than the spotlight. He says he's still getting used to the idea of being an icon. But his gift, for all the inspiration and intensity that he brings to his roles, is that he lets us into what his characters are feeling. And for that, we are extraordinarily grateful. Al Pacino.

In the late sixties, James Taylor got the chance to audition in front of Paul McCartney and George Harrison. Now, Ringo, I don't know if you were there, but this is a true story. [*Laughter*] "I was as nervous as a Chihuahua on methamphetamines"—[*laughter*]—is what James Taylor says. Which is exactly the kind of metaphor that makes him such a brilliant songwriter. [*Laughter*]

But if James has a defining gift, it is empathy. It's why he's been such a great friend to Michelle and myself. We're so grateful to him and Kim for their friendship over the years. It's why everybody from Carole King to Garth Brooks to Taylor Swift collaborates with him. It's what makes him among the most prolific and admired musicians of our time. In fact, James recently went through all his songs and kept coming across the same stories: songs about fathers and traffic jams, love songs, recovery songs. I really love this phrase: "hymns for agnostics." [*Laughter*] He says that in making music: "There's the idea of comforting yourself.

There's also the idea of taking something that's untenable and internal and communicating it." And that's why it feels like James is singing only to you when he sings. It feels like he's singing about your life. The stories he tells and retells dwell on our most enduring and shared experiences. "Carolina on My Mind" is about where you grew up, even if you didn't grow up in Carolina. "Mean Old Man" is probably somebody you know. "Angels of Fenway"—well, actually, that's just about the Red Sox. So—[*laughter*—if you're a White Sox fan, you don't love that song, but it's okay.

James is the consummate truth-teller about a life that can leave us with more unresolved questions than satisfying answers, but holds so much beauty that you don't mind. And from his honesty about his own struggles with substance abuse to his decades of progressive activism, James Taylor has inspired people all over the world and helped America live up to our highest ideals. Thank you, James Taylor.

Without a preschool rivalry, we might not be honoring Martha Argerich. [*Laughter*] The story goes that when Martha was 2 years old, a little boy taunted her, saying, "I'll bet you can't play the piano!" [*Laughter*] So she sat down at the keys, remembered a piece her teacher had played, and played it flawlessly. By 8 years old, she had made her concert debut. By the time she was a teenager, she left her native Argentina to study in Vienna and won two major international competitions, launching one of the most storied and influential careers in classical music. That little boy lost his bet. [*Laughter*]

Martha combines unparalleled technical prowess with passion and glittering musicianship. From Bach to Schumann, she doesn't just play the piano, she possesses it. Martha can charge through a passage with astonishing power and speed and accuracy and, in the same performance, uncover the delicate beauty in each note. As a critic once wrote, "She is an unaffected interpreter whose native language is music."

But what truly sets her apart and has cemented her place as one of the greatest pianists in modern history is her dogged commitment to her craft. In an age of often superficial connections, where people too often seek fame and recognition, Martha has been guided by one passion, and that is fidelity to the music. She can only be herself. And that is the truest mark of an artist. And the result is timeless, transcendent music for which we thank Martha Argerich.

And finally, there have been some interesting said—things said about this next group, including being called "one of rock's most contentiously dysfunctional families." [*Laughter*] So yes, it was unlikely that they'd ever get back together and that they'd call their reunion tour "Hell Freezes Over." [*Laughter*] I love that. But here's the thing: When you listen to the Eagles, you hear the exact opposite story, and that is perfect harmony.

You hear it in the crisp, overpowering a capella chords of "Seven Bridges Road," dueling guitar solos in "Hotel California," complex, funky riffs opening "Life in the Fast Lane." It's the sound not just of a California band, but one of America's signature bands, a supergroup whose greatest hits sold more copies in the United States than any other record in the 20th century. And the 20th century had some pretty good music. [*Laughter*]

So, here tonight, we have three of the Eagles: Don Henley, the meticulous, introspective songwriter with an unmistakable voice that soars above his drum set; Timothy Schmit, the bass player and topline of many of those harmonies; and Joe Walsh, who's as rowdy with a guitar lick as I'm told he once was in a hotel room. [*Laughter*] Twice. [*Laughter*] This is the White House

though. [Laughter] And Michelle and I are about to leave. As I've said before, we want to get our security deposit back. So—[laughter].

But of course, the Eagles are also the one and only Glenn Frey. And we all wish Glenn was still here with us. We are deeply honored to be joined by his beautiful wife Cindy and their gorgeous children. Because the truth is that these awards aren't just about this reception or even the show we have this evening, which will be spectacular. The Kennedy Center Honors are about folks who spent their lives calling on us to think a little harder and feel a little deeper and express ourselves a little more bravely and maybe "take it easy" once in a while. And that is Glenn Frey, the driving force behind a band that owned a decade and did not stop there. We are all familiar with his legacy. And the music of the Eagles will always be woven into the fabric of our Nation.

So we are extraordinarily honored to be able to give thanks for the Eagles. And what's true for them is true for all of tonight's honorees: remarkable individuals who have created the soundtrack to our own lives: on road trips, in jukebox diners; folks who have mesmerized us on a Saturday night out at the movies or at a concert hall.

Mavis Staples, Al Pacino, James Taylor, Martha Argerich, The Eagles: Their legacies are measured not just in terms of works of art, but the lives they've touched, and creating a stronger and more beautiful America. They're artists who have served our Nation by serving their truth. And we're all better off for it.

So before we transport ourselves to what I'm sure will be a spectacular evening, please join me in saluting our extraordinary 2016 Kennedy Center Honorees.

NOTE: The President spoke at 5:28 p.m. in the East Room at the White House. In his remarks, he referred to musicians Victoria Reggie Kennedy, wife of former Sen. Edward M. Kennedy; Rose, Tatiana, and John B. Kennedy Schlossberg, grandchildren of former President John F. Kennedy; Yvonne, sister, and Pervis, brother, of Kennedy Center Honoree Mavis Staples; playwright David Mamet; musicians Paul McCartney and Ringo Starr; Alex Ross, contributing music critic, the New Yorker magazine; and Deacon, Otis, and Taylor M. Frey, children of late Eagles founding member Glenn Frey.

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Names: Argerich, Martha; Brooks, Garth; Dylan, Bob; Frey, Cindy; Frey, Deacon; Frey, Otis; Frey, Taylor M.; Henley, Don; Kennedy, Victoria Reggie; King, Carole; Mamet, David; McCartney, Paul; Obama, Michelle; Pacino, Alfredo "Al" J.; Pacino, Alfredo J.; Ross, Alex; Rubenstein, David M.; Rutter, Deborah F.; Schlossberg, John B. Kennedy; Schlossberg, Rose; Schlossberg, Tatiana; Schmit, Timothy B.; Staples, Mavis; Staples, Pervis; Staples, Yvonne; Starr, Ringo; Swift, Taylor; Taylor, Caroline Smedvig "Kim"; Taylor, James V.; Tweedy, Jeff; Walsh, Joe F.

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