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Remarks by the President at 2013 Kennedy Center Honors Reception

East Room

5:20 P.M. EST

THE PRESIDENT: Well, good evening, everyone. On behalf of Michelle and myself, welcome to the White House. This is truly one of our favorite nights of the year, and not just because of everyone who visits the White House -- this group also usually wins "best dressed" award. (Laughter.) All of you look spectacular. I am a little disappointed that Carlos Santana wore one of his more conservative shirts this evening. (Laughter.) Back in the day, you could see those things from space. (Laughter.)

I want to start by thanking everyone who dedicates themselves to making the Kennedy Center such a wonderful place for the American people to experience the arts -- David Rubenstein, the Kennedy Center trustees, and of course, Michael Kaiser, who will conclude 13 years of tremendous service as the president of the Kennedy Center next year. (Applause.) So on behalf of Michelle and myself, we want to all thank Michael so much for the extraordinary work that he has done.

As always, this celebration wouldn't be what it is without the enthusiasm of the co-chair of the President's Committee on the Arts and Humanities, George Stevens. George. (Applause.) And his son, Michael. And together, for years they've put on this event to honor the artists whose brilliance has touched our lives.

President Kennedy once said of such creative genius that, "The highest duty of the writer, the composer, the artist is to remain true to himself and to let the chips fall where they may." Now, that's easy to say when -- as they do for these artists -- the chips usually fall in your favor, whether at Woodstock or the Oscars or elite venues all over the world.

But the fact is that the diverse group of extraordinary individuals we honor today haven't just proven themselves to be the best of the best. Despite all their success, all their fame, they've remained true to themselves -- and inspired the rest of us to do the same.

Growing up in Harlem, Martina Arroyo's parents told her she could be and do anything. That was until she said that she wanted to be an opera singer. (Laughter.) Her father -- perhaps not fully appreciating the versatility required of an opera singer -- said he didn't want his daughter to be like a can-can girl. (Laughter.) In her neighborhood back then, opera was not the obvious career path. And there weren't a lot of opera singers who looked like her that she could look up to.

But Martina had a dream she couldn't shake, so she auditioned relentlessly and jumped at any role she could get. Along the way, she earned money by teaching and working as a social worker in New York City. And when she got a call from the Metropolitan Opera asking her to fill in the lead for "Aida," she was sure it was just a friend pulling her leg. It wasn't until they called back that she realized the request was real, and she just about fell over in shock. But in that breakout role she won fans around the world, beloved for her tremendous voice and unparalleled grace.

Martina has sung the great roles: Mozart's Donna Anna, Puccini's Madame Butterfly, Verdi's Lady Macbeth, and, of course, Aida. She's played the world's stages, from Cincinnati to Paris to Israel. She's broken through barriers, broadening our notion of what magnificent artists look like and where they come from.

And along the way, she's helped people of all ages, all over the world, discover the art form that she loves so deeply. For a lot of folks, it was Martina Arroyo who helped them see and hear and love the beauty and power of opera. And with her charitable foundation, she is nurturing the next generation of performers -- smart, talented, driven, and joyous, just like her. For moving us with the power of her voice and empowering others to share theirs too, we honor Martina Arroyo. (Applause.)

Herbie Hancock played his first concerto with the Chicago Symphony Orchestra when he was 11 years old. Two years later, he heard a classmate play jazz piano at a variety show and thought, "That's my instrument, and he can do that? Why can't I?" It turned out he could. (Laughter.)



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By 23, Herbie was playing with Miles Davis in New York and on his way to becoming a jazz legend. And he didn't stop there. In the seventies, he put his electrical engineering studies to work and helped create electronic music. In the eighties, his hit "Rockit" became an anthem for a fledgling new genre called hip-hop. At one recent show, he played alongside an iMac and five iPads. (Laughter.) And a few years ago, he became the first jazz artist in 43 years to win a Grammy for best album.

But what makes Herbie so special isn't just how he approaches music; it's how he approaches life. He tours the world as a UNESCO Goodwill Ambassador. He's done so many benefit concerts that Joni Mitchell once gave him a watch inscribed with the words: "He played real good for free." (Laughter.) And we know this because he's played here for free a lot. (Laughter and applause.) We work Herbie, I'm telling you. (Laughter.)

But we just love the man. Michelle and I love this man, not just because he's from Chicago. Not just because he and I had the same hairdo in the 1970s. (Laughter.) Not just because he's got that spooky Dorian Gray doesn't-get-older thing going on. (Laughter.) It is his spirit, it is his energy -- which is relentless and challenging, and he's always pushing boundaries. Herbie once said of his outlook, "We're going to see some unbelievable changes. And I would rather be on the side of pushing for that than waiting for somebody else to do it."

Well, Herbie, we are glad that you didn't wait for somebody else to do what you've done, because nobody else could. For always pushing us forward, we honor Herbie Hancock. (Applause.) When a 22-year-old Carlos Santana took the stage at Woodstock, few people outside his hometown of San Francisco knew who he was. And the feeling was mutual. Carlos was in such a -- shall we say -- altered state of mind that he remembers almost nothing about the other performers. (Laughter and applause.) He thought the neck of his guitar was an electric snake. (Laughter.)

But that did not stop Carlos and his band from whipping the crowd into a such frenzy with a mind-blowing mix of blues, and jazz, and R&B, and Latin music. They'd never heard anything like it. And almost overnight, Carlos Santana became a star.

It was a pretty steep climb for a young man who grew up in Mexico, playing the violin for tourists, charging fifty cents a song. But as a teenager, Carlos fell in love with the guitar. He developed a distinctive sound that has drawn admirers from Bob Dylan to Herbie Hancock. And he gave voice to a Latino community that had too often been invisible to too many Americans. "You can cuss or you can pray with the guitar," Carlos says. He found a way to do both. (Laughter.)

And today, with 10 Grammys under his belt, Carlos is considered one of the greatest guitarists of all time. And he's still attracting new fans. Back in 2000, his album "Supernatural" beat out Britney Spears and the Backstreet Boys to get to the Number 1 on the charts. Kids were listening to Carlos who hadn't even heard of Woodstock.

But despite all his success, Carlos says he still feels blessed to "be able to play a piece of wood with strings and touch people's hearts." So for blessing all of us with his music, we honor Carlos Santana. (Applause.)

Now, when you first become President, one of the questions that people ask you is, what's really going on in Area 51? (Laughter.) When I wanted to know, I'd call Shirley MacLaine. (Laughter.) I think I just became the first President to ever publicly mention Area 51. How's that, Shirley? (Laughter and applause.)

We love Shirley MacLaine. She's unconventional, and that makes her incomparable -- with nearly 60 years of reign as one of the most celebrated stars in movie history to prove it. "There are some performers that are indelible," said one fan about Shirley. "We fall early and we fall hard for them and we follow them for the rest of their lives." Now, that fan just happens to be a legend in her own right, who we honored here two years ago -- Meryl Streep. But Meryl is not the only one who fell hard.

Shirley has been drawing fans, including me, since -- well, not since she first lit up the big screen -- because in 1955 she was in Alfred Hitchcock's "The Trouble with Harry," but she's still spitting fire with the same old spunk, most recently playing the American grandma in "Downton Abbey," which Michelle I think got some early previews for. (Laughter.) Along the way, Shirley has racked up just about every Hollywood award that is out there. That's why her nickname, "Powerhouse," is so fitting. The truth is Shirley earned that nickname for hitting the most home runs on the boys' baseball team when she was a kid. But I'd say that it still works pretty well to describe her today.

And that's because Shirley MacLaine's career isn't defined by a list of film roles and musical performances. Through raucous comedies, and stirring dramas, and spirited musicals, Shirley has been fearless and she's been honest, and she's tackled complicated characters, and she's revealed a grittier, deeper truth in each one of those characters -- giving every audience the experience of cinema at its best. It's a motto she has lived by: "Don't be afraid to go out on a limb. That's where all the fruit is." For her risk-taking, for her theatrical brilliance, for her limitless capacity for wonder, we honor this American powerhouse -- Shirley MacLaine. (Applause.)

And finally, in a world full of brilliant musicians, there's only one Piano Man. The son of a Jewish father who left Germany for America to escape the Nazis, Billy Joel started piano lessons as a boy growing up on Long Island. His father was a classical pianist, so that was Billy's training too -- until the night he and millions of Americans watched The Beatles play the Ed Sullivan Show. Most people thought, "I want to hear more music like that." But Billy thought, "I want to make my own music like that." And from then on, it was all rock and roll to him.

With lyrics that speak of love and class and failure and success, angry young men and the joy of becoming a father, he's become one of the most successful musicians in history, selling more than 150 million records.

Above all, Billy Joel sings about America: About the workers living in Allentown after the factories closed down.

About soldiers home from the war, forever changed, bidding "Goodnight Saigon." Commercial fishermen struggling to make a living in the waters off of Long Island, sailing the Downeaster Alexa. The sights and sounds of that city like no other, which can put anyone in a "New York State of Mind." And of course, the rag-tag bunch of regulars at the bar where he started out, shouting at him again and again to "sing us a song."

Billy Joel probably would have been a songwriter no matter where he was born. But we are certainly lucky that he ended up here. And the hardworking folks he's met and the music that he's heard across our nation come through in every note and every lyric that he's written. For an artist whose songs are sung around the world, but which are thoroughly, wonderfully American, we honor Billy Joel. (Applause.)

So, Martina Arroyo, Herbie Hancock, Carlos Santana, Shirley MacLaine, Billy Joel -- each of our brilliant honorees has given us something unique and enriched us beyond measure, as individuals and as a nation. Together they bring us closer to President Kennedy's vision of the arts as a great humanizing and truth-telling experience.

Their triumphs have lifted our spirits and lifted our nation and left us a better and richer place. And for that we will always be grateful. So we thank you all.

God bless you, and please join me in saluting one more time our remarkable 2013 Kennedy Center Honorees. (Applause.)

END
5:36 P.M. EST

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