

Kennedy Center taps Joni Mitchell and Berry Gordy for awards

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The last Kennedy Center Honors aired on television less than two months ago, but on Wednesday, the institution announced a new batch of honorees, taking a step toward getting the program back on schedule after the upheaval of the pandemic.

The recipients include folk singer-songwriter Joni Mitchell; stage and screen performer Bette Midler; Berry Gordy, the founder of Motown; Lorne Michaels, the creator of "Saturday Night Live"; and opera singer Justino Diaz.

Because of the pandemic, the 2020 honors were delayed until this year and the celebration did not at all resemble the event from prior years, when artists, politicians and other prominent figures packed into the opera house. Instead, the ceremony was split over several days, and television producers stitched together a combination of recorded at-home tributes and in-person performances that aired in June.

This time, the ceremony, scheduled for Dec. 5, promises to look more like the Kennedy Center Honors of old, with the house at capacity and, if all goes well, President Biden in attendance. (President Donald Trump was a no-show at the three ceremonies held during his time in office.)

"It's going to be the party to end all parties because we haven't had one in so long," said Deborah Rutter, president of the John F. Kennedy Center for the Performing Arts.

The ceremony will air on CBS, but the date has not been set.

The honorees, selected on the recommendation of an advisory committee that includes Kennedy Center



New York Times file photo

Bette Midler as Dolly Gallagher in "Hello Dolly" in 2017. Midler, Joni Mitchell, Berry Gordy, Lorne Michaels and Justino Diaz will receive tributes at the Kennedy Center Honors ceremony.

officials and past award recipients, include two singer-songwriters, Mitchell and Midler, whose careers started to soar in the early 1970s, when they were in their 20s.

Fifty years ago, Mitchell, 77, released "Blue," her fourth album, which went on to have an enduring influence on singer-songwriters for decades to come. Mitchell, who helped shape an era of protest music with songs like "Big Yellow Taxi" and "Woodstock," said of the honor, "I wish my mother and father were alive to see this."

Midler's debut album, "The Divine Miss M," came out a year after "Blue," and helped propel her into a career that spread to Broadway, television and film. Midler, 75, put out more than a dozen studio albums, and her run as Dolly Levi in the Broadway revival of "Hello, Dolly!" earned her a Tony Award for best lead actress in a musical in 2017.

In Gordy, the founder of Motown Records, the Kennedy Center is honoring the figure behind an entire generation of musical talent. Gordy, now

91, once borrowed \$800 from his family to start the record company and then went on to discover and help ignite the careers of Diana Ross and the Supremes, Stevie Wonder, Smokey Robinson, Michael Jackson, Marvin Gaye and more.

After announcing his retirement two years ago, Gordy said in an interview, he spends much of his time playing golf, tennis and chess.

"Here we are 60 years later and Diana Ross and the Temptations are both coming out with new albums," he said. "Motown's legacy continues without me having to do anything."

This year is the 50th anniversary of the Kennedy Center's opening in 1971, more than a decade after President Dwight D. Eisenhower signed legislation creating a National Cultural Center. Shortly after the grand opening of the center, Diaz, then a 31-year-old opera singer, performed there as the male lead in Ginastera's "Beatriz Cenci." He played a villainous count and recalled handling two huge Mastiffs

onstage during his first entrance.

Now, at 81, Diaz, a bass-baritone who has performed for opera companies across the globe, will return to the opera house to see artists pay tribute to his career.

"Little old me?" he said in an interview. He noted that despite his fame in the opera world, he is not a household name.

Rutter said that although the last ceremony was limited by social distancing requirements, there are aspects of it that she wishes to maintain. In particular, she said, there was a sense of intimacy in that celebration that had not been there before.

At one point, she noted, as the artists mingled outside on a terrace, Rhiannon Giddens picked up her banjo, began playing, and Joan Baez started to dance.

"It was spontaneous," Rutter said. "The artists broke open their instruments and people started singing and dancing together."

(It is unclear whether the attendees this year will be required to wear masks, as they will be required to do for the Kennedy Center's fall programming.)

Michaels, 76, who created "SNL" in 1975, was also forced by the pandemic to drastically rethink his show. In the spring of 2020, "SNL" filmed sketches at its actors' homes, allowing the audience to connect with the cast members in a new way. Now that they have returned to a live audience, they are thinking of ways to apply what they learned in quarantine.

"Those shows had a strong homemade quality, which was part of their charm," he said. "Once we went back to the audience, we kept pushing the limit of what we could do."