

Paper Mache for 8-22-25 by David Read

In case you missed it last week, the President decided that he should personally determine this year's Kennedy Center Honorees and that he would emcee the event, decisions which disregard decades of precedent and tradition. Regardless, if you have never watched the ceremony on television, I highly encourage you to do so when it airs in December this year. During the time I lived in Washington, DC, I was able to attend one of the award ceremonies held in the largest of the Kennedy Center theaters, the magnificent 2,300-seat Opera House, thanks to a Washington Post reporter friend who had tickets. It was in 2002, and the honorees were James Earl Jones, James Levine, Chita Rivera, Paul Simon and Elizabeth Taylor.

If you are unfamiliar with the Kennedy Center Honors program, it is an annual gala in Washington, D.C., recognizing individuals, groups, couples, or even television programs, for longtime contributions to American culture through the performing arts. The honorees are selected through a multi-step process that combines input from the arts community, past honorees, and the general public who submit nominations followed by an artistic advisory committee review, and then final approval by the Kennedy Center's Board of Trustees.

The Kennedy Center wanted a way to celebrate lifetime achievement, create a national tradition, complement the Kennedy legacy, and engage the public by broadcasting the gala each year on national television so the entire country could witness and celebrate. The first ceremony held in 1978 had Leonard Bernstein, Gene Kelly, and other luminaries introducing the first honorees. There wasn't a single "master of ceremonies;" segments were presented by peers of the honorees. Throughout the 1980s/1990s, there were rotating celebrity presenters instead of a central host. People like Henry Fonda, Liza Minnelli, Meryl Streep, Tom Hanks, Oprah Winfrey, and Morgan Freeman introduced tributes. Each honoree is celebrated by peers and protégés through performances, video segments, and personal introductions. The emcee's role is usually limited to opening the show, bridging segments, and closing the ceremony. The honorees reflect the Kennedy Center's tradition of honoring diverse contributions across music, theater, film, dance, and television, blending classical excellence with popular culture.

Other noteworthy past recipients by decade include from the 70s/80s, Fred Astaire, Gene Kelly, and Frank Sinatra. Honorees in the 90s included Dizzy Gillespie, Katharine Hepburn, Roy Acuff, Gregory Peck, Ginger Rogers, Johnny Carson, Stephen Sondheim, Aretha Franklin, and Pete Seeger. In the 2000s, honorees include Mikhail Baryshnikov, Chuck Berry, Plácido Domingo, Clint Eastwood, Julie Andrews, Quincy Jones, Jack Nicholson, Luciano Pavarotti, James Brown, Carol Burnett, Loretta Lynn, Warren Beatty, Ossie Davis and Ruby Dee, and Elton John.

The list goes on with many other well-known names including Tony Bennett, Tina Turner, Robert Redford, Dolly Parton, Andrew Lloyd Webber, Steven Spielberg, Paul McCartney, Merle Haggard, Led Zeppelin, Dustin Hoffman, Carole King, Cicely Tyson, Cher, Sesame Street founders, Linda Ronstadt, and Sally Field. More recently, 2020s honorees were Joni Mitchell, Bette Midler, Berry Gordy, U2, George Clooney, Gladys Knight, Renée Fleming, Queen Latifah, Dionne Warwick, Francis Ford Coppola, Grateful Dead, and Arturo Sandoval.

In 2025, under the politically assertive leadership of the President, his chosen honorees are: Michael Crawford, originator of the title role in "Phantom of the Opera," Gloria Gaynor whose signature anthem "I Will Survive" holds deep cultural significance, the rock band Kiss, Rocky himself Sylvester Stallone and my favorite this year, George Strait (Amarillo by Morning). Some nominees, including Tom Cruise, reportedly declined the honor. The Kennedy Center Honors remain one of the most prestigious recognitions in the performing arts, celebrating a richly diverse heritage—from celebrated legends to trailblazers. While most years proceed with bipartisan support and cultural reverence, 2025 introduces a sharply political inflection, underlining how even institutions revered for artistic excellence can become focal points in broader cultural debates.