



Features

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## Unnatural Selection

**Beverly Sills got one. So did Aaron Copland, Risë Stevens, Bob Dylan, Bette Davis and a host of other great twentieth-century artists. This year, the nod goes to Andrew Lloyd Webber, Zubin Mehta, Dolly Parton, Smokey Robinson and Steven Spielberg. Just how do the Kennedy Center Honors get chosen? BARRY SINGER reports.**



1997's roster gathered Jessye Norman, Bob Dylan, Lauren Bacall, Edward Villella and Charlton Heston

**T**his year the letters were in the mail by mid-August.

"Dear Mr. Lloyd Webber," "Mr. Mehta," "Ms. Parton," "Mr. Robinson," "Mr. Spielberg," they began, respectively. "On behalf of the Kennedy Center Trustees and our national Artists

Committee, I am writing to invite you to receive the Kennedy Center Honors in recognition of your extraordinary contributions to the life of our country.... Sincerely,... Michael M. Kaiser, President, The John F. Kennedy Center for the Performing Arts."

Over the past twenty-eight years, nearly one hundred and fifty such letters have landed in the mailboxes of some of this country's most august performing artists, and a lot of old movie stars.

The letters turn up as invitations from on high. The gods have spoken, they suggest. Please join us on Mount Olympus.

And, in fact, the Kennedy Center Honors have become this country's most Olympian arts award, in no small part due to the fact that the Honors Gala is taped and broadcast over network television at Christmastime, attended by the President of the United States himself.

But who chooses these Olympians, one wonders, and precisely how were *they*, the choosers, chosen? The process may not be quite so secretive as the machinations of a closed-door Senate subcommittee - but it's close.

George Stevens, Jr., basically created the Kennedy Center Honors in 1978, with Nick Vanoff, and still very much runs things. A venerable producer of television specials and documentaries (as well as the son of a legendary golden-age Hollywood film director), Stevens is the keeper of the keys. No one knows more about the selection process than he does.

"We pull 'em out of a hat," he says, at first, when confronted. "That's the story."

Actually, according to the Kennedy Center, everything begins with recommendations from an artists committee - nearly 100 wildly disparate names, from Ackroyd, Dan and Blackwell, Harolyn through Stallone, Sylvester, to Zukerman, Pinchas.



1990's recipients included Jule Styne, Risë Stevens, Dizzy Gillespie, Katharine Hepburn and Billy Wilder

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"Every year I got a little solicitation card in the mail," reveals Jason Alexander (of *Seinfeld* fame), a former Artists Committee member. "I spent a good day or two working on it. I'm a little thin in the classical-music department, but I did always send in three or four serious suggestions. *And* I noticed - and I'm damn proud of this - that every year *someone* I wrote down on that card got an award. That's at least one out of five, so I batted ... well, twenty [percent]. Was I surprised to be asked at all? Yeah. I mean, what do I know? I like to think, though, that it had something to do with this disaster my wife and I endured the year I went down to perform for Stephen Sondheim, in 1993. There's a big dinner the night before the Gala at the State Department. That year, we were seated at a table with Adolph Green, his wife, Phyllis Newman, and Jean Kennedy Smith, as it turned out, the Kennedy sister, though we didn't know who she was at first.

"'What are you singing at the Gala?' Phyllis asked me. Now, I'd been on Broadway in a show of Sondheim's called *Merrily We Roll Along*, which had a helluva song in it called 'Bobby and Jackie and Jack,' this killer parody of the Kennedy White House. What a great thing for me to do at the Kennedy Center Honors, I'd first thought. But word had come down that it would be 'preferable' if I didn't. So, my wife, without thinking, answered Phyllis, 'Well, Jason was going to do this really great song from *Merrily* about the Kennedys, but some damn *Kennedy* had a problem with it, so he's not.' At which point, from across the table, we hear, in this marvelous dowager voice, Jean Kennedy Smith say, 'Yes. That would be me.'

"I guess it made a nice negative impression," muses Alexander. "All I know is next year I got my first card in the mail. Or ..." he pauses, with perfectly insecure hesitation - "does everybody who performs on the show just get asked automatically?"

Sort of, George Stevens concedes. "Often times it is people who performed the previous year that we ask."

A glance down the artists-committee list confirms this - Angela Bassett, Glenn Close, Renée Fleming, Audra McDonald, Mary-Louise Parker, Kevin Spacey. An awful lot of recent Gala broadcast alumni are current artists committee members.

How do all of their, no doubt, various recommendations impact the final selection? What weight does the Kennedy Center actually give to them?

"Every year, nearly 100 committee members submit about 200 different names," replies Stevens. "Honestly, we're usually pretty familiar with them all - though there have been occasions when someone who wouldn't have occurred to us turns up. I'm thinking particularly of Marion Williams, the great gospel singer, who was chosen in 1993. But no," Stevens allows, "this is not an election. There are no votes. The chairman of the Kennedy Center (Stephen A. Schwarzman), the president (Michael M. Kaiser) and I sit down, we discuss, and we come up with somewhere between ten and fourteen names. That list then goes to the executive committee."

James Johnson was chairman of the Kennedy Center for eight years, from 1996 through 2004. "There is this formal process, but there's also a companion informal process," he acknowledges. "If questions came up, I didn't say, 'Let's have an up or down vote, let's caucus, let's lobby each other.' In most cases we knew *who* we wanted to honor, and we'd just keep working back and forth trying to decide *when*."

This being Washington, one assumes, notwithstanding this disclaimer, that a load of behind-the-scenes lobbying goes on. Johnson - who served as Vice President Walter Mondale's executive assistant and ran Mondale's failed 1984 Presidential campaign before becoming chief executive officer at Fannie Mae - just laughs.

"Campaigns do develop. One year we got three or four hundred letters on behalf of ... well, I won't mention who. Another year, twenty people called me almost at once about someone else. Neither of those candidates got chosen. Typically, I think the biggest campaigns came for people we were not likely to choose."

What about sitting Presidents? Has the Kennedy Center ever been lobbied by the White House? "No," Johnson replies, "no President ever told us, 'I'd like to see so-and-so get it.'"

Still, as George Stevens confirms, "Presidents have favorites too. I know for a fact Ronald Reagan was tremendously pleased that Frank Sinatra and Jimmy Stewart got in on his watch."

But was this purely random? Was it a coincidence that Ray Charles and Aretha Franklin, for example, received their honors while Bill Clinton was in office?

"Yes," Stevens insists. "It was."

The Kennedy Center Executive Committee is a quintessential assemblage of Washington insiders. Recent members have included Alma Johnson Powell, the wife of Colin Powell, and Kenneth Duberstein, former chief of staff to Ronald Reagan. Washington socialite/philanthropists such as Buffy Cafritz and Alma Gildenhorn have long been a common denominator, as have former Senate majority leaders such as Tom Daschle and Trent Lott. David F. Girard-diCarlo, a Philadelphia lawyer and major campaign contributor to George W. Bush, is one longstanding member, as is Anne Sewell Johnson, the wife of Clay Johnson, a Bush crony who attended both Andover and Yale with the President and was one of his DKE fraternity brothers. Then there is Robert B. Barnett, the Board of Trustees' Senior Counsel, a D.C. lawyer perhaps best known as an authors' representative, whose client list has included Bill Clinton, Hillary Rodham Clinton, Bob Woodward, Katharine Graham, George Will, Art Buchwald, William Bennett, Lynne Cheney, several former U.S. Secretaries of State, numerous U.S. Senators, Queen Noor and Benazir Bhutto, to name just a few. In addition, he is a leading rep for television news correspondents and producers, from Sam Donaldson, Judy Woodruff, Jeff Greenfield and Christiane Amanpour to Brit Hume and David Gergen.

Barnett is considered something of an expert on making the transition to the private sector. "I was Bill Clinton's first appointee to this committee," he happily announces.

The executive committee, Barnett insists, is not just a rubber-stamp outfit where the Honors are concerned. "There have been a few times when we rejected a name. With reasons given."

What sort of reasons?

Barnett has to think about that for a moment. "Criminal records," he finally answers. "The biggest problem has been a few folks over the years with criminal records."

Barnett reduces the executive committee's work to a simple formula. "Basically, this is what goes into our final decision," he says: "Number One, a distinguished body of lifetime work. Number Two, a diversity of artistic disciplines, meaning we never wind up with four ballet dancers. And Number Three, what will make a good show for the audience in the Kennedy Center and the audience watching on television. Though that's kind of secondary."

But how secondary, one wonders. Larry Gelbart, the humorist, playwright and screenwriter, was on the artists committee for more than ten years. "More and more the choices have to do with television," he says, "and less and less with the arts. It's also become politicized. Mostly the people making the decisions now are from Wall Street, or lobbyists."





1979's Henry Fonda, Martha Graham, Tennessee Williams, Ella Fitzgerald and Aaron Copland

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James Johnson denies Gelbart's second assertion. "Individual politics have never entered into the decision-making, to my knowledge," he maintains, "though in Washington one never wants to categorically state that one knows all of the antecedents for anything somebody chooses to do."

As for how much influence television wields, Johnson will only say, "The Kennedy Center has a lot of equity in this brand. That means there is a dimension of entertainment, a dimension of audience size, that is important. That's no reason, though, to overreach, serving up honorees who are simply popular but not deserving. On the other hand, the Kennedy Center is not looking to just celebrate the obscure."

But this inverts the question. The issue is not over-celebrating obscurity: the issue is celebrity. In its initial years of existence, beginning in 1978, the Kennedy Center honored an exquisite array of artists: Marian Anderson, Fred Astaire, George Balanchine, Richard Rodgers, Arthur Rubinstein, Aaron Copland, Ella Fitzgerald, Henry Fonda, Martha Graham, Tennessee Williams, Leonard Bernstein, James Cagney, Agnes deMille, Lynn Fontanne, Leontyne Price, Count Basie, Helen Hayes, Jerome Robbins, Rudolf Serkin....

Over the past decade-plus, however, there seems to have been at least one honoree every year - such as Johnny Carson or Sean Connery or Charlton Heston or Elizabeth Taylor - who was chosen because even Americans with no interest at all in the performing arts know him or her and just might tune in to watch.

Of course, no one really wants to gang up on the Kennedy Center Honors. As artists-committee member Kathleen Turner dreamily observes, "There's just something really wonderful about our taking the time to honor these people. Plus, it's a really classy occasion. How many awards shows

can you say that about?"

Still, has no one ever turned the Kennedy Center down (beyond Stephen Sondheim, who - according to legend - initially refused to be honored so long as a Republican administration was in office, then accepted in 1993, with Clinton in and Reagan out)?

"Vladimir Horowitz," answers George Stevens, "who informed us that his award's presentation could only happen at four o'clock on a Sunday afternoon, and for him alone. Oh, and Irving Berlin, who said he simply was too old to appear."

What about Paul McCartney, in 2002, who opted out after his name already had been announced, because of a "scheduling conflict?"

"His daughter was getting married the weekend of the awards presentation," explains Stevens hastily. "He was truly distressed to find himself in that position, because he accepted, at first. We fully intended to give him his Honors award the following year."

But that didn't happen.

"No comment."

So, the Kennedy Center does reserve space in advance, on occasion?

"Certain people have such busy schedules that we have booked them for their award over a year in advance, yes."

Is there anyone Stevens feels the Kennedy Center has overlooked?

"There are people I wish we'd gotten to - Jackie Gleason, John Huston. Time just ran out."

What about some still-among-the-living oversights? What about Woody Allen and Burt Bacharach, Julius Rudel or even Mickey Rooney?

Stevens sighs. "Everybody has their own ideas about the Kennedy Center Honors." □

BARRY SINGER's *new book*, *Alive at the Village Vanguard*, was recently published by *Hal Leonard Books*.

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