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Contemporary Christian singer Amy Grant, center, reacts as she is recognized by President Joe Biden during the Kennedy Center honorees reception at the White House in Washington, Dec. 4. The 2022 Kennedy Center Honorees include from left, George Clooney, Amy Grant, Bono, Gladys Knight, and The Edge. (AP/Manuel Balce Ceneta)

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December 6, 2022

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The Kennedy Center Honors, on its 45th occasion, recognized singer and songwriter Amy Grant, marking the first time the top cultural distinction was given to a contemporary Christian musician.

"There are stories of tenacity, stories of faith, stories of unfettered creativity and stories of endurance," said actress and 2002 honoree Chita Rivera at the Dec. 4 event that highlighted the "queen of Christian pop" along with actor George Clooney, singer Gladys Knight, Pulitzer Prize-winning composer Tania León and the rock band U2.

"Tonight, we broaden that spectrum to include for the first time ever a contemporary Christian music artist, Amy Grant," she said. "In her amazing 40-plus years, Amy has logged success after success without ever compromising her faith or her individuality."

In a brief red-carpet interview just before the black-tie event, Grant said she hoped to live up to the honor in representing the genre.

"Well, I'm a little bit of a rascal; I hope I do them proud," she said, laughing.



President Joe Biden, right, and first lady Jill Biden are recognized at the 45th Kennedy Center Honors, Dec. 4 in Washington. (Photo by Tracey Salazar)

Her arrival at the Kennedy Center came less than five months after a [bike accident](#) and hospital stay — neither of which the musician can remember — that forced her to postpone some concert dates.

Grant, who described herself as "doing well," said she appreciated being back on tour and at the Kennedy Center, even if it felt a little overwhelming after her extended time of rest.

"I felt like I was feeling really confident on my two-mile-an-hour treadmill and then I merged onto Interstate traffic," she said. "Just did my first show last week. And this has been such a beautiful way to reengage."

Grant, 61, has six Grammys and more than 20 Dove Awards from the Gospel Music Association. The Gospel Music Hall of Fame honoree signed her first record deal at age 17.

She became the first contemporary Christian musician to have a No. 1 hit on the pop charts with "Next Time I Fall," a 1986 duet with Peter Cetera of the band Chicago. Five years later, her fame spread with "Baby, Baby," a hit from her 1991 platinum album "Heart in Motion."

Gospel Music Association president and executive director Jackie Patillo, who described Grant as "a Christian music sweetheart," said it's a "big deal" that the Kennedy Center has taken this step to honor an artist who crossed over to mainstream pop and served as an ambassador of the Christian music subgenre.

"I think that Amy Grant lives a very holistic life in that her faith is just a part of everything that she does, and so whether her music is being acknowledged or played on pop radio or CCM (stations), she's, still, consistently Amy Grant," said Patillo.

"The way God has used her has stretched the industry and the church."

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Grant, who, like other [honorees](#), sat in an Opera House balcony not far from President Biden, Vice President Harris and their spouses, drank in the praise without having to take the stage to speak or perform.

In the audience of more than 1,900 were actresses Anna Deavere Smith and Julia Roberts, politicians Sen. Mitt Romney, R-Utah, and Rep. Joyce Beatty, D-Ohio, and Dallas megachurch pastor T.D. Jakes and Grant's first record producer Brown Bannister.

Kennedy Center Board Chair David Rubenstein acknowledged the significance of the recognition of contemporary Christian music.

"We felt that it was long overdue," he told Religion New Service. "There was only one person who could really fulfill that requirement, and that was Amy."

Gospel artist CeCe Winans echoed Rubenstein's comment when she appeared with her brother BeBe on the red carpet shortly before the event began but started with an exuberant "Woo!"

"We're so excited," she said. "It's been a long time coming. But she's a perfect person to open up that door. And so we're excited about that."

Added her brother: "Amen."

Later on stage, the Winans duo joined to fete Grant in a medley featuring her songs, "Sing Your Praise to the Lord" and "El Shaddai," as CCM artist Michael W. Smith played the piano and the Howard Gospel Choir added their voices.

When the show opened with the national anthem, singer Tricia Yearwood joined the choir, directed by Kirk Franklin, for an upbeat version of the patriotic tune. The background included a moonlit sky, the Washington Monument, Lincoln Memorial, U.S. Capitol and a waving American flag.

Prior to the event, Smith said he was thrilled to see his longtime friend honored for her role in music, including the subgenre she helped him enter.

"I wouldn't be standing here talking to you if it hadn't been for Amy," he told RNS as he appeared at the event before continuing their joint Christmas tour this week. "I was her opening act in 1982."



Members of the Howard Gospel Choir at the 45th Kennedy Center Honors on Dec. 4 in Washington. (RNS photo/Adelle M. Banks)

Others in and beyond the music industry spoke of Grant's influence on and off the stage.

Sheryl Crow, who sang Grant's "Baby, Baby" in her honor, spoke of how Grant had inspired her as a musician, mother and friend.

"Amy Grant's music had a profound effect on me as a young college student," said Crow. "Her music was a staple with her deeply soulful voice and her uplifting message of hope and faith," said Crow. "Amy also taught me that it was possible to be funny, irreverent and Christian all at the same time."

The segment of the program honoring Grant included video clips of her four children speaking of times when they accompanied her on tour when they were young, inspired a song — [she wrote "Baby, Baby" about daughter Millie](#) — or appeared on "The Tonight Show with Jay Leno," as was the case with daughter Sarah when she was a baby.

A glitch with a guitar caused an awkward pause as country musicians The Highwomen prepared to sing "Somewhere Down the Road" for Grant and the audience.

"We love you Amy," someone shouted before the program moved ahead after a "technical difficulties" announcement.

Veteran broadcaster Katie Couric, a close friend of Grant's, added to the chorus of accolades, speaking about lessons Grant had heeded.

"Amy, you once shared the four words your sweet mom said to you, words you've never forgotten: Sing something that matters," Couric said. "Well, you've done it and you're still doing it."

A two-hour presentation of the Kennedy Center Honors, which lasted more than three hours, will air on CBS at 8 p.m. EST/PST on Dec. 28.