Kurt Elling Live at the White House

Kurt Elling and Laurence Hobgood had the great honor of performing at the White House State Dinner for Indian Prime Minister Manmohan Singh and his wife, Gursharan Kaur. The gala dinner was held Tuesday evening, November 24, 2009.

The President and the First Lady invited 338 guests for dinner in a beautiful, heated tent on the South Lawn. Tables for ten were adorned with deep purple flowers, plum and fuchsia hydrangea, garden roses, and sweet peas, honoring the famous Indian Peacock.

The White House previewed the menu, china, and entertainment. The official guest list doesn’t include the “party crashers.” Photos are here and also here.

The evening’s stellar entertainment featured Kurt Elling with Laurence Hobgood and the National Symphony Orchestra conducted by award-winning composer Marvin Hamlisch, Oscar and Grammy winner Jennifer Hudson, Academy Award-winning Indian musician and composer A.R. Rahman, best known in the U.S. for the score of the hit film Slumdog Millionaire, and The President’s Own United States Marine Band.

There are no podcasts or recordings of this magical evening’s entertainment. But you can get a taste of Kurt’s bravo performance of “Nature Boy” from last year’s concert with the Sydney Symphony Orchestra at the famed Sydney Opera House in Australia.

Same arrangement, different orchestra, same song, different stage — and always cool and swingin’. Savor every moment and listen here.
Kurt’s White House Story

Laurence and I did have quite a time of it at the White House just before Thanksgiving. No, we didn’t spot the party crashers . . . but we did talk to Rep. John Conyers for some time before the gig. He remembered me (maybe) from past events and from his ongoing love for jazz. We also spoke with WH spokesman Robert Gibbs, who seemed very genuine, relaxed and self-effacing. There were a number of important huddles we did not try to break into – one featuring John Kerry, Colin Powell and Richard Lugar, another featuring David Axelrod and several cabinet-level secretaries. I did say hi to Valerie Jarrett on behalf of my father-in-law, who knows her from Chicago.

Hillary Clinton was in the receiving line along with the VP, the Prime Minister of India and, of course, BHO and MO. They were in an adjoining room with “The President’s Own” Marine Band doing the official welcoming. That was not to be part of our experience as performers, however. Laurence and I had some red wine and enjoyed ourselves.

Then we waited in our “ready room” – The Map Room of the WH – with our handlers, one from the State Department and two from the WH staff, and also our management team from NYC. Our handlers were there to make sure we could get from points “a” to “b” without being accosted for IDs at every portal.

Marvin Hamlisch conducted the National Symphony, and Laurence and I came on about halfway through for “Nature Boy.” It seemed to go off without a hitch. We actually had in the rhythm section the great Clayton Cameron playing drums and Rickey Minor, whom I knew a bit from Recording Academy work. One quick number (stretched out a bit, I admit) and I was done. Laurence stayed on to play three charts with Jennifer Hudson: “The Very Thought Of You,” “What a Difference a Day Makes” and Leonard Bernstein’s “Somewhere.” He played great, of course.

We all stayed in place after coming on for final bows according to a security directive. BHO and Prime Minister Singh both came on stage to thank all and sundry. I must say I didn’t mind being introduced by the President over the mic with the words, “And of course, we had to have my homeboy and homegirl, Kurt Elling and Jennifer Hudson, come and sing for us – so let’s thank them.”

Our photo op was arranged for after the guests were leaving. So Laurence and I waited in a narrow WH hallway as many guests were exiting. That was when people like Katie Couric and Michael Bloomberg saw us and came over to thank us personally and spend some time visiting. Bloomberg seemed particularly impressed, as did director M. Night Shalyman, who was pretty effusive. He was disappointed that he just missed our gig in Philly, where he lives. Finally, Laurence and I were escorted behind a partition where we had our photos taken with the first couple. They were very welcoming and informal, clearly remembering me from our past meetings and joking about the house, Chicago days, and asking after my family.
Anyway, I feel good about our little contribution to the evening, even though I didn’t really get to sit down and eat with the guests as I had expected. Laurence was great to have along, as always, and we picked up another important experience together.

KE

Laurence’s White House Memories

So, KE gave you his report on our recent D.C. experience; it tells you most of what you need to know. But comparing notes at LaGuardia on our way to St. Louis there was one recollection I had which prompted him to nudge me toward giving my own small recounting of our experience.

The tidbit in question is that, interesting or not, I do recall seeing the much-publicized “crashers” at the cocktail reception in the East Room. Her red dress and very blond hair might have been enough to draw the eye by themselves, but, in retrospect, I think I noticed them because there weren’t many people in that room who you wouldn’t recognize (KE and myself also being two of the few who’d answer that description); very few couples where you didn’t recognize at least one of the two.

It was natural to be attuned to this anomalous aspect simply because being there at all was quite surreal: I have no problem stating that this was probably the ultimate “power room” on the whole planet at that particular time. As such it definitely felt similar to being on a film set. So, not surprisingly, we kind of just walked around and took it all in, not speaking to too many people, but the “people-watching” factor was, as you might imagine, quite high.

At one point I watched an animated discussion, friendly but focused, between Robert Gates and Eric Holder, and I couldn’t help but say to myself, “That’s the Attorney General and
Another little aspect I enjoyed was that, during our time in the Map Room, which was where we were being “kept” whenever we weren’t supposed to be someplace else, we caught frequent glimpses of the various Secret Service guys whose rotational duty included spending a few minutes standing outside that particular door. The WH event staffers who were responsible for our movements would come and go because they had to leave the Map Room to get the information about when and where to conduct us. So this door was opening and closing regularly and it seemed like each time there’d be a different guy guarding the door.

What was funny about it was that, since they mostly stood with their backs to the door, the visual impression—to the casual observer, had there been any of those—was that they were “guarding” whoever was in that room, i.e. us. Of course the truth was the opposite: they were there to make sure that we didn’t leave that room unless properly escorted at the correct times.

The performance itself was supposed to last only 37 minutes; I didn’t time it but it sure wasn’t much longer than that. After the President and Prime Minister Singh finished their remarks everyone had to wait for them to leave the “tent.” (That was a “tent” like a “Maybach” is a “ride.”) The performers were all “herded” back into the immediate backstage area and held there for about 20 minutes. I want to say that it was sometime during that period that someone said something indicating for the first time (to me anyway) what was going to happen next.

It’s worth mentioning here that I’d definitely adopted a mindset regarding this whole experience that could be described as “no expectations.” Not “low expectations,” mind you, just a healthy absence of any pre-defined hopes or wonderings. This was of course mostly because being there at all was a wonderful honor, arguably a proverbial “once-in-a-lifetime” experience. (Although we’re just optimistically greedy enough to hope that we might get to return at some point with our own group and render a slightly more thorough accounting of what we do best.)

But I didn’t want to get my hopes up too much, especially about the obvious potential “gold ring” experience of the evening which would of course be to meet the First Couple and—dare I say it?—actually have a photo snapped to document such an unlikely moment!

So when we heard that we were about to be let out of the cramped backstage area and one of our escorts looked at me, smiled and said, “OK, now you get to go meet HIM,” that was really the first solid inkling I had that this might happen. We walked back up to the White House and were taken in through a different door than we’d used previously but ended up in the same arched hallway we’d spent most of the evening traversing. We were led forward to where a series of screens were set up; there was at this point quite a cordon of both Marine Corps and Secret Service lining either side of the hallway. (I’m pretty sure the “crashers” wouldn’t have
made it too far into this situation.) Once beyond the screen, what can I say, really? There were Barack and Michelle, about 25 feet away, speaking with Jennifer Hudson and taking a picture.

I’m sure I don’t need to tell you that there’s really no preparing for such a moment. That said, I guess I did sort of assume that KE and I would walk up together. But just as we “began our approach” a young woman said to us, “Now, we want you to go up individually.” Which is what led to my personal high point of the evening: watching from what was now less than 20 feet of distance as my best friend walked up ahead of me, then seeing the President of the United States throw his arms out and say, “Kurt!”

And if that’s not enough, they then exchanged a “soul” handshake (as opposed to “business”) and a half-hug/shoulder bump, then Michelle let KE kiss her cheek; they chatted merrily for about 45 seconds, inquiring about family. Kurt complimented the First Lady’s earrings (I believe the President may have had a deadpan, comic response to the earring compliment but it’s up to KE to share that if he wants to) and then the three of them had their pic snapped.

Then I had my turn to walk up, shake hands with both and say something appropriate and turn toward the flash. It was very brief but no less exciting.

The denouement was also cooler than it might have been for one reason: our coats and other small things were still in the Map Room which in turn was exactly where the photo op event was continuing. We couldn’t get our stuff until everyone in the line (around 35 people maybe) had had their moment. So for about 15-20 more minutes we got to stand out in the main hallway while many of the VIPs filed past us on their way out. And this was AFTER they’d heard us play; important because before we played they would’ve had no idea who Kurt was, much less myself. But now many people came over and spoke to us, praising Kurt’s voice and seeming genuinely interested. The longest conversation was with Mayor Bloomberg who was especially personal—I have to say a really nice guy.

Eventually we collected our things and exited the building; we were among the last out, and by the time we stepped outside, under the familiar portico, I noticed that, to either left or right at the end of the overhang were now positioned fully armed SWAT/commando guys, each with the requisite M-16 half-slung and half-ready. Clearly we were meant to walk straight forward. One of our escort/chaperones, a very cool young speechwriter for Hillary who’d been good company throughout, emerged behind me and also noticed the increased security to either side. I couldn’t resist and, nodding to the right, said, “Yeah, I don’t think I’ll try to go that way.” He smiled tightly, chuckled and said, “Yeah, I’m not going over there either.”