

A weekend of glittery receptions rivaling Hollywood culminated at the Kennedy Center Sunday with the 27th annual gala saluting the careers of six legendary performers: pop star John, 57; actor Warren Beatty, 67; soprano Dame Joan Sutherland, 78; composer John Williams, 72; and husband-wife acting team Ossie Davis, 86, and Ruby Dee, 80.

It's not every day one sees President Bush hobnob with Elton John. Or Secretary of State Colin Powell perform a rap song for Warren Beatty.

But when it comes to the Kennedy Center Honors, prim-and-proper Washington can be full of surprises.

President Bush and his wife, Laura, sat with the honorees while celebrities toasted and roasted the winners of the nation's highest achievement for the arts. Bush's defeated Democratic rival, Sen. John Kerry, and his wife, Teresa Heinz Kerry, also attended the event.

The irony of a conservative president toasting an openly gay, anti-war rock star (John) and a liberal actor with political aspirations (Beatty) was not lost on the presenters.

Robert Downey Jr. jokingly referred to the flamboyant John as "the other first lady."

Beatty's friend and neighbor Jack Nicholson said: "For years, Warren has dreamed of attending these awards. Unfortunately, not exactly as a Kennedy Center honoree but as the president of the United States."

Sunday's ceremony began with a bittersweet moment as Walter Cronkite, who hosted the honors for 22 years, formally passed the baton to Caroline Kennedy, who filled in last year when the legendary newsman was felled by laryngitis.

Red Blue States Aside

Written by Robert ID512

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Hip-hop's Sean "P. Diddy" Combs paid tribute to Davis and Dee, who will celebrate their 56th wedding anniversary this week.

"Ossie and Ruby proved that African-Americans can be not only great artists, but great Americans," rapper Combs said. "Ruby and Ossie, when I grow up, I want to be just like you."

Singer Marilyn Horne honored Sutherland for the "gift that you gave the world in your voice. Your soaring, beautiful, incredible voice."

Filmmaker Steven Spielberg, who collaborated with Williams on films including E.T. and Jaws, said the composer was "the greatest thing that has ever happened to my career." Williams "is as American as apple pie and President Bush's mom."

John was honored with musical tributes by Billy Joel, Kid Rock, Fantasia, Heather Headley and Downey, who performed John's song Levon, reports USA Today.

A two-hour broadcast of the honors will air Dec. 21 at 8 p.m. ET/PT on CBS.