

Kennedy Center to honor Buddy Guy, Led Zeppelin

BY LONNAE O'NEAL PARKER
WASHINGTON POST

WASHINGTON - Actor Dustin Hoffman, whose career has included some of the most memorable roles in film history, and bluesman George "Buddy" Guy, who began playing "before the guitar was electrified" and picked his way to worldwide legendary status, are among the seven artists to receive this year's Kennedy Center Honors.

The 35th anniversary honorees announced Wednesday also include comedian and late-night TV host David Letterman; ballerina Natalia Makarova; and keyboardist/bassist John Paul Jones, guitarist Jimmy Page and singer Robert Plant, all of the rock band Led Zeppelin.

"With their extraordinary talent, creativity and tenacity, the seven 2012 Kennedy Center Honorees have contributed significantly to the cultural life of our nation and the world," Kennedy Center Chairman David M. Rubenstein said.

The breadth of Hoffman's roles "has made him one of the most versatile and iconoclastic actors of this or any other generation. David Letterman is one of the most influential personalities in the history of television," Rubenstein said. Natalia Makarova, 71, who left her native Russia in 1970 and that year debuted in the title role of "Giselle" with the American Ballet Theatre, "has ignited the stages of the world's greatest ballet companies and continues to pass the torch to the next generation of dancers." The members of heavy-metal pioneer Led Zeppelin, who are all in their 60s, "transformed the sound of rock 'n' roll with their lyricism and innovative song structures."

And Guy, 74, a six-time Grammy winner, "has influenced virtually everyone who has picked up an electric guitar in the last half-century," Rubenstein said.

In a phone interview, Guy said of hearing he'd been named an honoree: "My daughter brought it to me, and I think she's joking, you know."

He added: "I like sucking things in, so this is exciting for me. I'm very emotional. I'm probably going to sit there and keep a handkerchief right there. I don't have a high school education, and it's a long way from pickin' cotton and pickin' a guitar."

Used to be, Guy said, that a bluesman hoped to play well enough so that a pretty girl liked him at the end of the night. "But even if she fell for you, you didn't make enough to get a room," he said, laughing.

"The guitar didn't take you places until the British guys got a hold of it. That's what opened the door for us," he added, crediting the Rolling Stones and Eric Clapton, among others, for bringing the music international attention and exposure. He doesn't want to call names, but he said that he hopes some of the old heads and the Brits might be onstage at the Honors.

Guy was reached on tour in New Brunswick, N.J., and if there is a theme for the Kennedy Center Honors this year, it perhaps is the notion of artists at work, plying their crafts at a point in their careers where they could rest on their laurels.

This extends to Kennedy Center Honors co-creator and American Film Institute founder George Stevens Jr., who is receiving an honorary Oscar on the same night as this year's State Department dinner for honorees, hosted by Secretary Hillary Rodham Clinton - a day before the Dec. 2 Kennedy Center Honors gala he and his son Michael are executive producing.

Stevens, 80, who calls the Oscar "a nice surprise," joked that he's talking with the "cloning division" of the National Institutes of Health to figure out how he's going to be in two extraordinarily important places at once.

Stevens said that after more than three decades since he began producing the show, expectations for the Kennedy Center Honors, which airs Dec. 26 as a prime-time special on CBS, continue to grow.

"It's daunting up until the time you get [the honorees], and then all sorts of opportunities open up, and it's our job to find inventive ways to recognize these people that will please the audience," he said. "That's the fun of doing it."

Reached by phone at the Toronto International Film Festival, where his directorial debut film, "Quartet," is gaining buzz, Hoffman said that he thought perhaps the honor might come around when he was 90 - not, say, for the body of work he has amassed, which includes best actor Academy Awards for "Kramer vs. Kramer" and "Rain Man," or for his roles in "The Graduate," "Death of a Salesman," "Midnight Cowboy," "Tootsie," "All the President's Men," "Marathon Man" and on.

Because Hoffman, 75, is driven, intense and famously contemplative about the human condition, talk of the Honors becomes an impassioned meditation on worthiness, aging and creative imperatives.

"You want me to be honest?" Hoffman asked. "Part of you is honored, and the other part of you feels like they are eulogizing you. You've gotta make sure that you remind yourself that it ain't over. They should call it a half-lifetime achievement award."

The benefit of being named an honoree is that you get to customize the meaning of the Honors, which for Hoffman is about embracing failure.

"I will never give up taking risks," he said. "If you're drawn to something and there's a risk of failure and you never let that stop you, I think you don't go wrong. You look back on your life and whether it's in your work, or not, it's the failures that most define you."

The other Hoffman takeaway? "Revenge." Honors beat obscurity and irrelevance, "but the aim is to keep going and keep growing. That's the only revenge you have on this thing called mortality. I'm talking to you honestly."

It's like saying to God, "Oh, that's what you've got in mind for me? It's a validation, hopefully, on what you're doing," he said.