Congress should recognize artist, activist Stevie Wonder

by Marc_H._Morial

Stevie Wonder is not only a legendary singer-songwriter, multi-instrumentalist and producer. He's also one of the most socially-conscious artists out there. Through his music and his activism, he has tried to improve the world in his own uplifting way. He's been described as the songwriter whose songs can make you smile even when you don't want to. He pens socially-conscious lyrics - not in bitterness or resignation - but in an accurate yet hopeful light.

Born Stevland Hardaway Judkins in Saginaw, Mich., in 1950, Wonder, who had his first hit single at the age of 13, overcame blindness since birth to become one of the most prolific and innovative artists in music history, releasing 35 U.S. albums with sales totaling more than $72 million. The child prodigy and musical innovator scored more than 30 Top 10 hits and 11 No. 1 pop singles and has won 22 Grammys, the most of any solo artist, as well as countless other accolades from the music industry, including Billboard's 2004 Century Award. He is also a member of the Rock and Roll Hall of Fame as well as the Songwriter's Hall of Fame.

One cold January day in the 1980s, as a young law student, I had the distinct pleasure of meeting him during a march urging the federal government and Congress to make Dr. Martin Luther King's birthday a national holiday. Wonder has been a huge supporter of creating MLK day and ardent activist in the civil rights arena and more. In 1999 during the Kennedy Center honors, President Bill Clinton observed that Stevie Wonder was helping compose the remaining passages of Dr. King's legacy.

That is why I recently called upon congressional leaders to honor him with a Congressional Gold Medal, the highest honor bestowed by the legislative branch. The congressional version of the Presidential Medal of Freedom, the award commends individuals who perform an outstanding deed or act of service in the security, prosperity and national interest of the United States.

Past recipients range from George Washington to John Wayne to Rosa Parks to Marian Anderson. Legislation bestowing the honor requires co-sponsorship by two-thirds of the U.S. House and Senate membership before it can be considered at the committee level.

The Continental Congress bestowed the first such medal upon Washington for his "wise and spirited conduct" in getting the Brits out of Boston even before issuing its Declaration of Independence three months later. Six more awards over the next 12 years went to Revolutionary War leaders. By the 20th century, Congress had expanded beyond recognizing military achievement to honoring excellence in the fields of arts, athletics, aviation, diplomacy, entertainment, medicine, politics, religion and science.

So far, 18 Americans from the arts and entertainment worlds have been recognized. George M. Cohan and Irving Berlin garnered medals for composing patriotic songs. Singer-songwriter Harry Chapin received a medal for raising awareness of hunger issues around the world and Frank Sinatra was recognized for "outstanding and enduring contributions through his entertainment career and humanitarian activities," according to a 2003 Congressional Research Service report.

Stevie Wonder has contributed a rich body of work to the world as a singer, songwriter, musician and producer. His songs have helped carry messages of love, humanity and social criticism for more than four decades. And then there's the music - its own unique universe. Wonder revolutionized the world of R&B in the early 1970s by incorporating electronic sounds into his work and composing challenging scores incorporating the most complex chords with abrupt melody changes. Like Marvin Gaye, Wonder was one of the first artists to break free of record label industry constraints and own the rights to his own music, paving the way for like-minded musicians wanting to wrest creative control of their careers. He has also inspired countless musicians to follow, including Mary K. Blige, George Michael and Prince, to name a few.

In addition to championing the Martin Luther King holiday, he fought apartheid and championed the 1985 USA for Africa (United Support of Artists for Africa) campaign to combat famine. The organization was behind the Live Aid shows of the 1980s and the recording of the hit single - "We are the World." In 2005, he

appeared alongside Harry Belafonte at a march supporting reauthorization of the Voting Rights Act of 1965 - the National Urban League's top legislative priority.

"That we have to have a march in 2005 - to demand that we have a bill that will guarantee the voting rights of all American citizens forever is ridiculous," he told marchers in 2005. "We have the right to pay taxes and we have the right to fight a war and die. Then obviously, we should have the right to vote. We must secure the right forever."

He has performed in concerts protesting nuclear weapons and advocating peace, and recorded songs urging racial and gender harmony, opposing drunken driving, supporting stronger gun control, among other themes.

It is Stevie Wonder's songwriting legacy that has inextricably connected him to the world from his earliest days as a Motown Records prodigy to a groundbreaking innovator, he has always believed in music as a transformational force. A Congressional Gold Medal would be a fitting tribute to this man's extraordinary career as an artist as well as an activist.

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