

## Aronoff ready to play star-studded Obama celebration

By Mike Leonard  
331-4368 | mleonard@heraldt.com  
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Kenny Aronoff has played so many pressure-filled and prestigious performances that few things intimidate or rattle him.

Last month's Kennedy Center Honors, where The Who, George Jones, Barbra Streisand, Morgan Freeman and Twyla Tharp were celebrated? Nice gig, but another day at the office, as it were, for the Bloomington-based musician.

Next Sunday might be a little different. The former John Mellencamp Band member knows that he'll be sitting behind the drum kit for a nationally televised concert on HBO called "We Are One: the Obama Inaugural Celebration at the Lincoln Memorial."

He knows President-elect Barack Obama and Vice President-elect Joe Biden will be there. He knows thousands will gather outside the massive and impressive Lincoln Memorial in Washington, D.C., for the concert. And he knows he'll be playing with, as the Presidential Inauguration Committee phrases it, "some of the biggest acts in the world of entertainment."

But Friday afternoon, driving on a Los Angeles freeway on his way to a recording session, he acknowledged by phone that he still didn't know exactly who he was going to be backing in the concert. At that point, he only had a list of songs to learn. "I'm learning 'Pride in the Name of Love' (a U2 song), so what does that tell you? We may be doing 'Pink Houses' (Mellencamp), so what does that tell you? We're doing a James Taylor song, so, like those other songs, you say to yourself, 'I can only imagine one person singing that.'"

"I'm learning Stevie Wonder's 'Higher Ground.' Who might sing that?" Aronoff asked. The only performer he actually knew he'd be backing was Bruce Springsteen, and that was only because Springsteen himself had already announced to the public he'd be playing the star-studded Obama celebration.

"It's insane!" Aronoff exclaimed. "It's going to be really, really intense because there is so much work to be done beforehand."

Even at that, Aronoff isn't intimidated.

"You dream to get a gig like this. If you're into that sort of thing. And I am," he said.

For Aronoff, learning the songs is merely the first step. He'll arrive in Washington on Wednesday and begin rehearsing with the backing band on Thursday. On Friday and Saturday, the 10-15 featured artists will rehearse with the band, and at that point, any number of musical changes and modifications might take place. Aronoff expects to be revising his musical charts deep into the night each night.

"One of the reasons this will be so heavy is that it's going to be on television, and on television, you are literally working with seconds. If you are not right on it with timing, and I mean right on it, you have ads that people are paying millions of dollars for, cued up and ready to go. So you have to bring every song in on time," Aronoff said.

To add to the pressure, musically, the drummer is the guy driving the bus. It will be up to Aronoff to start every song exactly on cue, keep a perfect tempo and end every song exactly on time. And there will be a producer, a stage director, a musical director and others operating under exactly the same, demanding scenario.

"It's unbelievably complicated," Aronoff said. Fortunately, the Obama team hired the legendary filmmaker and producer George Stevens Jr. to coordinate it all.

"He's the one who started the Kennedy Center Honors and he's the best there is," Aronoff said. "He has a team that is awesome. They can put anything together, they're such professionals."

Aronoff was chosen for that same reason — his professionalism and breadth of abilities.

"At times like this, I think back to my time going to school at IU, and the jazz guys were saying, 'Why are you playing classical, too?' The classical guys were saying, 'Why are you playing jazz?' And all of them were saying, 'Why are you playing rock and roll?' I've always liked all of it, you know, so I have to say, I stayed on that path, and it's paid off big time. Even within pop music, I can play rock or reggae or hip-hop. Whatever. So maybe there's a lesson in that; I don't know."

Aronoff said that he's been told that the final rehearsal sessions will be recorded in case extremely inclement weather hinders the live performance.

"Again, with television, you can't have any excuses," he said. "They have their time slot; they have their advertising; the show has to go on. So we could actually be playing on stage with our prerecorded rehearsal blasting through the loudspeakers. Nobody wants to play that way, but if it's 10 degrees and your hands are freezing, you have to have a backup plan."

"The main thing for me to do is my job. I'm like a running back in football. My job is to concentrate on getting the ball into the end zone. To do my job. At the end of the day, you look at the scoreboard."

The veteran drummer is confident he can handle the task handed to him. But he did acknowledge feeling a sense of awe at what the event means.

"It's the inaugural concert for President-elect Obama. It's history. It's a once-in-a-lifetime event. So, yeah, that is something you can't help but know it's not just another gig," he said. "I've played with all kinds of famous musicians and entertainers, and so I'm used to that. But the president of the United States? That's a little out of my league."

Tune in to show

The Obama Inaugural Celebration concert will take place at 2 p.m. next Sunday in Washington, D.C. The event will be broadcast on HBO from 7-8:30 p.m. that night. HBO will unblock its signal so that anyone with cable, telcos or satellite television will be able to view the show for free, whether they subscribe to HBO or not.