

With a Little Night Music

By Donnie Radcliffe

President Nixon and Pearl Bailey, performing as an impromptu "Dick and Pearl Show," momentarily upstaged Watergate, the energy crisis, troubles in the Middle East and the economy Thursday night.

To the astonishment and subsequent delight of 180 dinner and after-dinner guests gathered in the White House East Room, Mr. Nixon sat in at the piano and Miss Bailey belted out the vocal accompaniment.

Their repertoire was a trio of oldies that began with "Home on the Range," went into "My Wild Irish Rose" and wound up with Mr. Nixon and the audience joining Pearl in singing "God Bless America."

The unexpected encore to a solo performance by Miss Bailey was one of the smash hits in the annals of White House theatrics.

"You don't play as well as I sing but I don't sing as well as you govern," Miss Bailey told the President when he joined her onstage at the end of her own spectacular concert. Before he knew it, he was being railroaded into playing the piano.

Clearly uncomfortable and caught by surprise, Mr. Nixon smiled nervously as he stood there in front of the Vice President, six Cabinet officers, 41 state governors and a number of other high administration officials. He and Mrs. Nixon had invited them to dinner as a climax to the Midwinter Governors' Conference.

"Anything you play, I know—however old," Miss Bailey continued persuasively.

"That's the surest bet I ever heard," cracked Mr. Nixon.

Miss Bailey assured him that everyone in the crowd knew how he played and the President shot back that if that were the case, "the place would be empty."

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Pearl Bailey: "Anything you play, I know—however old." President Nixon: "That's the surest bet I ever heard."

Photos by Bob Burchette—The Washington Post



"You don't play as well as I sing but I don't sing as well as you govern," Pearl Bailey told President Nixon Thursday night as he sat down to play the piano and she began to sing.

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Obviously trapped, Mr. Nixon walked to the piano, sat down, bumbled a few chords, then struck up something that turned out to be "Home on the Range."

A couple of bars into it, after struggling to find just the right presidential key, Miss Bailey interrupted, "Mr. President, I wanted to sing a song, I don't want to ride a horse."

And that's the way it went right on through a steadier "Wild Irish Rose," which brought tumultuous applause and cheers from the VIP black-tie clad audience.

Apparently gaining confidence, Mr. Nixon toughed it out for still a third number, "God Bless America."

"Now he's playing AND singing," chided Miss Bailey. "He's got more encores for what he don't know than what I did know."

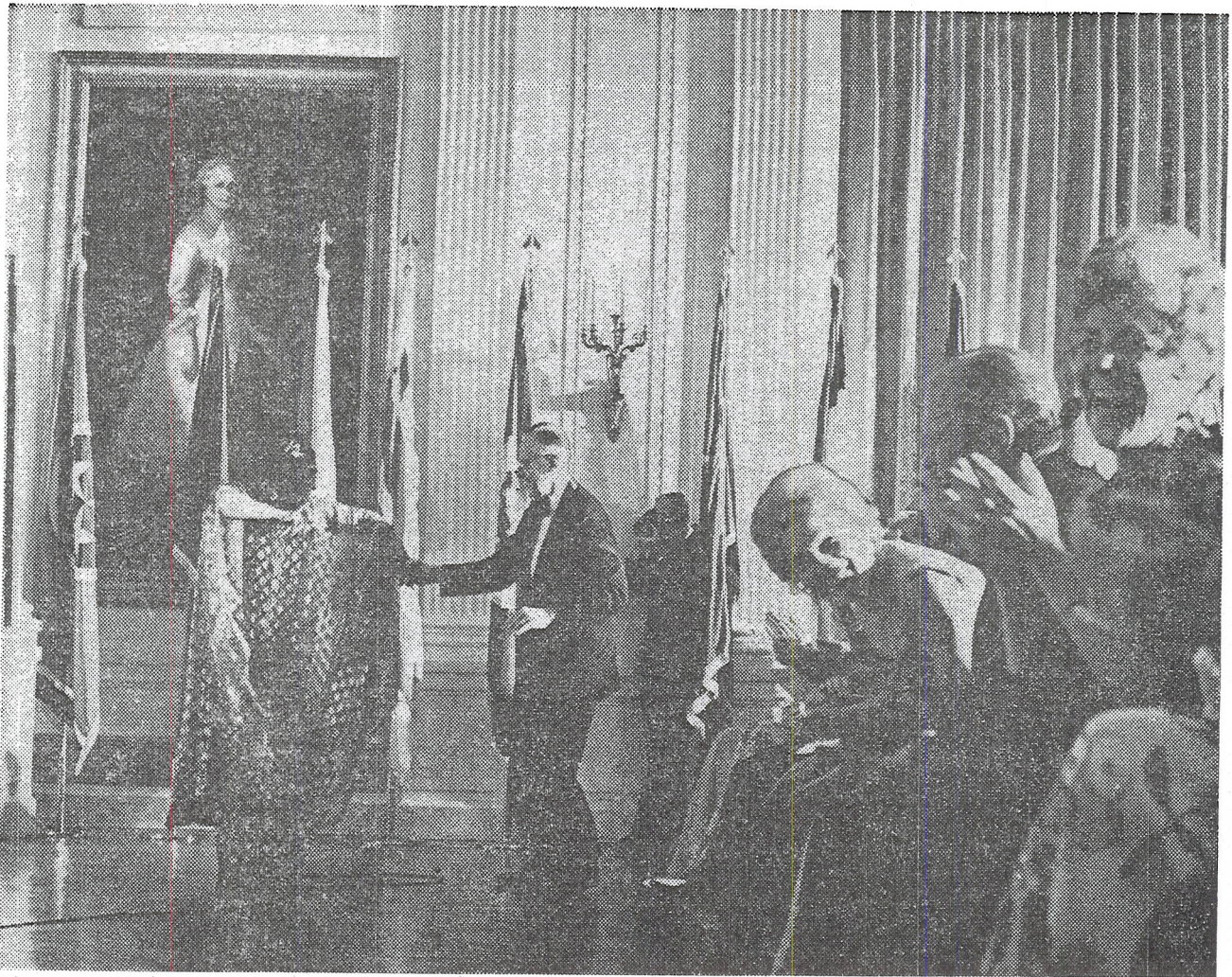
When more cheers and applause subsided, Mr. Nixon noted wryly that "the piano will never be the same and neither will I." He told Miss Bailey that he couldn't give her the White House piano, which she had jokingly expressed a desire for earlier, so he was instead giving her "the Pearl Bailey presidential seal."

"Now, Pearl," he said, we all love you but if you don't leave we can't afford you any longer."

From start to finish the evening's entertainment had been a show of energy—one part human and the other electrical. Miss Bailey, whose wattage as a performer probably reached about 1,000, even ordered the President to turn up the East Room lights.

Midway into "Bill Bailey" she stopped short, walked off the stage to the President sitting in the front row and said she didn't want him to get rid of the hands manning the light switches but a little more brilliance would be helpful.

"We used to have two



By Bob Burchette—The Washington Post

With a portrait of Martha Washington looking on, Pearl Bailey and Agriculture Secretary Earl Butz do a "Hello Dolly" version of the twist that Thursday night brought down a top-level front row in the East Room, including, from left, Mrs. Nixon, Vice President Gerald Ford and Mrs. William B. Saxbe, wife of the Attorney General.

lights," Mr. Nixon replied, referring to three crystal chandeliers overhead, two of which were dark, "but because of the energy crisis we only have one now."

"Turn 'em all on, even if you have to put candles in 'em," ordered Miss Bailey. "The glow is on—I got the glow, I just want you to see the action."

The two darkened chandeliers came on immediately.

The gold chair, which had figured prominently in Miss Bailey's 1970 White House appearance for West German Chancellor Willy Brandt, came up again Thursday night, but this time not as a gift. On that earlier occasion, Mr. Nixon gave her a chair and designated her "Ambassador of Love." Thursday night he picked up the one he was sitting on and took it up to the stage to replace a stool she had been using.

"I just hinted about the

chair, I didn't think you'd give me another," she told Mr. Nixon, turning petulant. "It's a far cry. I was looking for the piano. You don't want this one back, do you? It matches the other."

The Bailey brand of electricity sent her flying at times down into the audience and at one point even found her pulling Agriculture Secretary Earl Butz out of his chair for a quick dance to her show-stopping number, "Hello Dolly."

At times, though, she was dead serious and recounted her 1972 heart attack and the religious faith she claimed helped bring her back from "passing on." she confronted Mr. Nixon to

At one dramatic moment, she confronted Mr. Nixon to tell him, "I don't know what adrenaline—the truth—got into you tonight but you look better than I've seen you in a long time. And you've got some lady sitting beside you," referring to First Lady Pat Nixon.

Later, the governors and their wives surrounded Miss Bailey, some of them even asking for autographs to take home to their children. California's Ronald Reagan called the whole evening "absolutely tops." Vice President Ford said he hadn't enjoyed an evening so much in years. "I laughed so much I cried."

But entertainment was one thing, some of the governors indicated, and Watergate quite another. Several said that while it had been a great evening, neither the President's serious remarks at dinner on American foreign policy, nor the hospitality, nor the stunning "Dick and Pearl Show" could influence their opinions on the Watergate scandal.

Attorney General William B. Saxbe said Mr. Nixon's wide-ranging talk on "Russia, China, the Mideast-Israeli situation was excellent."

The Vice President said the President had discussed the Middle East but gave no specifics on a solution to the oil crisis. Asked if Watergate had come up, either voluntarily from the President or probingly from the governors, Ford did not reply but merely shook his head.

William E. Simon, the Federal Energy Office administrator, ducked out of the

party before the entertainment began.

"I've got gas pains," he joked. "I'll save Pearl for my next world. If I don't go home now I won't be able to have briefs for the leadership meeting in the morning."

The subject of energy, however, proved too compelling and Simon had to be pulled out of the Red Room by his wife. "Let's go, this is embarrassing," she scolded him as White House aides tried to usher them into the Blue Room.

Retreating into the Great Hall instead, Simon was saying that "the back of the energy crisis is broken with the policy we've got. If we provide the leadership and provide the implementation."

Miss Bailey told reporters later that Mr. Nixon had not known she planned to add him to her East Room act. "If he had, he would have rehearsed."

She also said she would be packing her ambassadorial portfolio for a trip to an undisclosed destination, at the President's request. She described the country only as an untraveled one "with which relations are just opening up." Asked if it might be Egypt, she did not deny it. "I told the President when I came back he'll have oil running out of his ears."