

Nixon an Opry opener

Associated Press

NASHVILLE — President Nixon carried his campaign to overcome Watergate onto the stage of the Grand Ole Opry where he plunked out "God Bless America" on the piano last night.

Nixon flew to Nashville where he welcomed his wife, Pat, home from a six-day Latin American tour, then he went with her to the first performance in the Grand Ole Opry's new \$15 million hall.

To the delight of 4400 country-music fans, Nixon escorted the First Lady onto the stage and played "Happy Birthday" as the audience sang to mark Mrs. Nixon's 62nd birthday.

Then the President played his wife's favorite song, "Wild Irish Rose."

Veteran country music star Roy Acuff hailed Nixon as "a real trooper as well as one of our finest Presidents . . . You're a great man."

The President, "on behalf of all the American people,"

thanked country music and country musicians for a style of entertainment that "radiates the love of this nation — patriotism."

He said the peace of the world for generations to come may depend "on our character, our belief in ourselves, our love of country . . . our willingness to love our flag, to stand up for our flag."

As he strode onto the stage, Nixon produced a yo-yo given to him by Acuff, who uses the toy as a trademark. He tried it without great success and returned it to Acuff before sitting at the piano.

After his comments, Nixon got an impromptu lesson from Acuff, who twirled the yellow yo-yo, then attached its string to the President's finger and told him to try. The President's first attempt was unsuccessful, to the amusement of the audience.

He then volunteered to "stay here and try to learn to use the yo-yo and you go up and be President."

Then, assuring Acuff that he was an honorary member of the musicians' union, Nixon returned to the piano and brought the crowd to its feet by playing "God Bless America," which he had played a week ago at a White House dinner for the nation's governors.

After that song, he and Mrs. Nixon left for Washington.

Earlier, at Nashville airport when he greeted Mrs. Nixon, who flew in from Miami, Nixon had told 6000 cheering well-wishers: "Here in the state of Tennessee there is that strong character, that patriotism, which will see to it that America is not only strong militarily but that we will be the world leader, which it is our destiny to be, because without our leadership there cannot be peace."

Also present at the dedication of the jammed 4400-seat hall at Opryland, U.S.A., were Alabama Gov. George Wallace and a galaxy of singing stars, including Johnny Cash and Loretta Lynn.