



Rapper Common: Should he be disinvited from Obama poetry event?

Rapper Common is set to attend a 'Celebration of American Poetry' at the White House Wednesday, but Common has had harsh words for President George W. Bush in the past.



Rapper Common (r.) hosts and performs at Vanity Nightclub's first anniversary party at the Hard Rock Hotel in Las Vegas Jan. 20.

Newscom/file

By Peter Grier, Staff writer / May 11, 2011

Should President Obama have invited the rapper Common to perform at Wednesday's White House poetry event? Some people are upset that he's scheduled to appear. Common, that is, not Mr. Obama – it's OK for the nation's chief executive to go despite the fact someone may speak in (gasp!) iambic tetrameter.

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The event is titled "Celebration of American Poetry," and it's part of a White House series of cultural evenings loosely structured around music. The series has already included performances devoted to country, classical, and Motown.

Common – aka Lonnie Rashid Lynn Jr. – is a Chicago native who is kind of a rising thing in hip hop, but his lyrics aren't always of the "My little horse must think it queer/To stop without a farmhouse near" variety.

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In particular, his reference to the most recent GOP president has some Republicans riled.

"Burn a Bush cos' for peace he no push no button/Killing over oil and grease/no weapons of destruction" goes the Common work in question.

Possible GOP 2012 presidential candidates have weighed in condemning the Common choice. OK, one of them has, at least: Sarah Palin.

"Oh lovely, White House," the former Alaska governor tweeted earlier this week.

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Speaking as a former English major, we'll say this about the controversy: at least the critics care enough about poetry to consider it dangerous. That makes the whole art form seem more vital, somehow.

Plus, apparently Common is considered pretty mild in the hip hop world, though we're not an expert there. A large portion of his stuff is fairly uplifting and he's mainstream enough for The Gap to have used him in photos for its 2006 fall collection.

The Gap? Hmm. Maybe we part company with the White House poetry advance personnel at this point. What kind of artist does catalogue shoots? Did Robert Frost pose for Orvis while wearing a buffalo plaid vest and petting a spaniel? We think not. Though that would have looked cool, when you think about it.

Also, Common has an acting career that includes an appearance on the old UPN comedy "Girlfriends" and bit parts in the films "American Gangster," "Smokin' Aces," and "Terminator Salvation". Most recently he was in the film "Date Night" with Steve Carell and Tina Fey.

Where will the creeping trivialization of serious art end? With a White House retrospective of the best lines delivered by the Progressive Insurance girl? The AFLAC duck's spin paintings in the Lincoln Bedroom? Charlie Sheen's "Torpedo of Truth" tour, live from the West Wing?

Though we must admit, that last one has some Dadaesque potential.

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