

# Composer and lyricist Stephen Schwartz on the “Trump-Kennedy” Center for the Performing Arts: “There’s no way I would set foot in it now”

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Artists continue to cancel scheduled appearances at the concert and performance venue in Washington D.C. now known as “The Donald J. Trump and The John F. Kennedy Memorial Center for the Performing Arts.” A Trump-appointed board of trustees voted last month, in apparent violation of the law, to add the president’s name to the center.

One of the most recent and prominent individuals to drop out of the Kennedy Center schedule is *Wicked* composer and lyricist Stephen Schwartz, a three-time Academy Award winner. According to *Newsday*, “Schwartz, who grew up in Roslyn Heights [on Long Island] and also created ‘Godspell’ and ‘Pippin,’ worked with Leonard Bernstein on ‘Mass,’ which was the first performance held at the Kennedy Center when it opened in 1971.”

Schwartz ... was scheduled to host the Washington National Opera Gala at the Kennedy Center on May 16, but he said he is bowing out. “It no longer represents the apolitical place for free artistic expression it was founded to be,” Schwartz said of the Kennedy Center in an email sent by his assistant. “There’s no way I would set foot in it now.”

Schwartz explained he had been invited by Washington National Opera Artistic Director Francesca Zambello to be part of the mid-May event. “But I’ve heard nothing about it since February 2025, so I have assumed it’s no longer happening,” he added. “I can’t imagine Francesca continuing under the current circumstances. If it is happening, of course I will not be part of it.”

Trump’s interim Kennedy Center President Richard Grenell dismissed Schwartz’s comments, insisting that “He

[Schwartz] was never signed and I’ve never had a single conversation on him since arriving.” However, as usual, Grenell, a former public relations consultant and Trump’s acting director of national intelligence (!) in 2020, shot himself in the foot. Various media outlets took note of the fact that the Washington National Opera had conspicuously advertised Schwartz’s presence, as “host” no less, at its upcoming gala. His name has since been removed.

The exodus of artists from the Kennedy Center began in February 2025, when Trump named himself chairman of the board of trustees and purged all the existing members and the former chairman, David Rubenstein.

Acting promptly, Lin-Manuel Miranda and the musical *Hamilton* canceled their planned 2026 run at the Kennedy Center. American musician Rhiannon Giddens explained her decision to change venues for her May 2025 show:

The Kennedy Center show was booked long before the current administration decided to take over this previously bipartisan institution, but I cannot in good conscience play at The Kennedy Center with the change in programming direction forced on the institution by this new board.

Actress and producer Issa Rae canceled her sold-out one-woman show at the Kennedy Center, commenting that

Unfortunately, due to what I believe to be an infringement on the values of an institution that has faithfully celebrated artists of all backgrounds through all mediums, I’ve decided to cancel my

appearance at this venue.

The Philadelphia-based band Low Cut Connie, featuring frontman, pianist and songwriter Adam Weiner, canceled a scheduled performance in 2025. Weiner issued a statement on social media, explaining that upon learning that the Center

is now chaired by President Trump himself and his regime, I decided I will not perform there.

Our little rock n roll act stands for diversity, inclusion, and truth-telling.

My extended Low Cut Connie community includes black, white, gay, straight, transgender, Jewish, Christian, Muslim, atheist, and immigrant individuals—all of whom are wonderful upstanding Americans.

Many of these folks will be directly negatively affected by this Administration's policies and messaging. ...

Maybe my career will suffer from this decision, but my soul will be the better for it.

Trump brought in a group of his cronies, and the result has been a collapse in sales and a general, predictable debacle. As we have noted, the gangster-Trump and “arts” in the same sentence constitute an oxymoron. The recent derisory Kennedy Center honors, paying tribute to Sylvester Stallone and KISS among others, demonstrated once again that culture and the Trump administration are at deadly odds with one another.

Since the renaming of the institution in particular one artist or group after another has bowed out.

- The Cookers, the jazz ensemble, canceled a New Year's Eve performance. Saxophone player Billy Harper explained in comments posted on social media he “would never even consider performing in a venue bearing a name (and being controlled by the kind of board) that represents overt racism and deliberate destruction of African American music and culture.”

- Chuck Redd canceled his annual Christmas jazz concert. Grenell has threatened to sue Redd for \$1 million.

- Doug Varone and Dancers canceled upcoming April performances, stating they could not ethically perform at the renamed venue.

- Kristy Lee, an Alabama folk singer, canceled a January show: “I won't lie to you, canceling shows hurts. This is how I keep the lights on. But losing my integrity would cost

me more than any paycheck.”

- Brooklyn-based musician Wayne Tucker on Wednesday told *Newsday* he and his band, The Bad Mothas, would not appear at the Kennedy Center as scheduled on January 22.

- Peter Wolf, former lead singer of the J. Geils Band, canceled an event to promote his memoir at the Kennedy Center in March 2025 but only recently spoke to the media about it. “When they changed the administration and fired a lot of good people, I just felt uncomfortable,” he told the *Boston Globe*. “It became a political issue. Appearing at the Kennedy Center became political, and I felt that was wrong. It was a very easy decision to make.”

Grenell blamed “a form of [Trump] derangement syndrome” for the wave of event cancellations in a post on X. “The artists who are now canceling shows were booked by the previous far left leadership,” he said, ludicrously asserting the center's former leadership was “more concerned about booking far left political activists rather than artists willing to perform for everyone regardless of their political beliefs.” In another post, Grenell claimed CNN and the *Washington Post* were “encouraging” artists to boycott the Kennedy Center.

The comments of the various artists are principled but of a politically limited character for the most part, expressing a disgust with Trump largely as an individual “nightmare.” They undoubtedly speak to much wider and angrier popular disaffection.

In fact, the administration's policies, although cruder than those of the Biden or Obama governments, reflect the objective needs of the crisis-ridden and besieged American ruling elite as a whole: that art and culture—and every aspect of public life—must be rigidly subordinated, Nazi-like, to the “national interests,” i.e., the aims and ambitions of the billionaire oligarchy.



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