

HAPPY BIRTHDAY, MR. PRESIDENT



Marilyn Monroe sings "Happy Birthday, Mr. President" to John F. Kennedy at a Democratic Party fundraiser at New York's Madison Square Garden on May 19, 1962.

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By Charles Apple | THE SPOKESMAN-REVIEW

Sixty years ago, actor and international sex symbol Marilyn Monroe presented a sultry tribute to President John F. Kennedy at a celebration of his upcoming 45th birthday held in New York's Madison Square Garden. A spellbound audience watched Monroe, in a skintight, flesh-colored dress, sing a breathy, seductive "Happy Birthday, Mr. President."

New York Evening Journal columnist Dorothy Kilgallen would write the performance was nothing less than "making love to the President in the direct view of forty million Americans."

'IN SUCH A SWEET, WHOLESOME WAY'

The famous Marilyn Monroe wasn't doing so well in May 1962. Along with Dean Martin and Phil Silvers, she was filming a movie with noted director George Cukor. That project was running way behind schedule and way over budget as the result of Monroe constantly missing days of filming.

Monroe had earned a reputation in Hollywood for her erratic ability to show up on time. In fact, she had spent much of 1961 recovering from a series of health issues, two surgeries and a two-week hospital stay for depression. As work began on "Something's Got to Give," Monroe began suffering from a severe sinus infection and hay fever that then led to bronchitis.

Before filming began, however, Monroe had been given permission — reportedly at the urging of U.S. Attorney General Robert F. Kennedy — to appear at a Democratic Party fundraising event at New York's Madison Square Garden in honor of Kennedy's brother, President John F. Kennedy — a man Monroe had known for many years and for years, with whom Monroe had conducted an on-again, off-again affair.

While Cukor fumed in Hollywood, Monroe flew to New York and rehearsed a version of the standard "Happy Birthday" song merged with "Thanks for the Memory" — all with lyrics celebrating Kennedy's performance in the White House.

At showtime, host and actor Peter Lawford — one of Hollywood's famed "Rat Pack" and the husband of Bobby and Jack's sister, Patricia Kennedy — lavishly introduced Monroe ... only for her not to appear. It was a joke, built upon her infamous reputation for lateness. A bit later, Lawford repeated the gag.

Near the end of the evening, Lawford introduced Monroe a third time — calling her "the late Marilyn Monroe." The crowd of 15,000 ate it up.

But then, Monroe removed her stole revealing her dress: More than 6,000 rhinestones over a skin-tight, flesh-covered gown, created by French designer Jean Louis at a cost



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Above: Monroe parties with Kennedy brother-in-law Steve Smith following her "Happy Birthday" act. The dress she wore would sell to Ripley's Believe it or Not Museum at auction in 2016 for \$4.8 million. Kim Kardashian dusted it off for this year's Met Gala on May 2.

of \$12,000. The dress looked like nothing but beads and skin.

Monroe walked up to the mic and, with her trademark breathy voice set on maximum sexy, began to sing: "Happy biiiiirthday to youuuuu ..."

"Everybody just went into a swoon," said Life magazine photographer Bill Ray.

With her song done and the crowd completely mesmerized, a giant birthday cake was rolled out onstage. The president himself walked out and gave the audience a naughty smirk.

"I can now retire from politics," Kennedy said, "after having had 'Happy Birthday' sung to me in such a sweet, wholesome way."

Back home in the White House, Kennedy's wife, Jacqueline, was reportedly furious when she read and heard about Monroe's performance. "The Attorney General is the troublemaker here," Jackie told her sister-in-law, Ethel Kennedy. "So it's Bobby I'm angry at, not Jack."

Monroe would fly back to Hollywood to resume work on the film. But after more delays attributed to her health, Cukor would fire her in June.

Two months later, Monroe would be dead from an overdose of sleeping medication. Whether that overdose was accidental or intentional on Monroe's part has never been determined.



ASSOCIATED PRESS

MARILYN'S TRAGIC FINAL TWO YEARS

- 1960
 - MARCH 8, 1960**
Wins a Golden Globe for Best Comedy Actress for her role in 1959's "Some Like it Hot."
 - JULY-NOVEMBER 1960**
Films John Huston's "The Misfits" with Clark Gable and Montgomery Clift in the Nevada desert.
 - JANUARY 1961**
Travels to Mexico to get a divorce from playwright Arthur Miller. They had split while she was filming "The Misfits."
 - FEB. 1, 1961**
"The Misfits" is released but does poorly at the box office. It will be Monroe's final movie appearance.
 - JUNE 29, 1961**
Deals with a series of health issues — surgery for endometriosis, spending four weeks hospitalized for depression and then has her gall bladder removed. She loses 25 pounds over the first half of 1961. Her ex-husband, former baseball star Joe DiMaggio, aids her recovery.
 - APRIL 1962**
Begins filming "Something's Got to Give" with Dean Martin and Phil Silvers and directed by George Cukor but suffers a series of sinus infections, delaying production.
 - MAY 19, 1962**
Sings "Happy Birthday, Mr. President" to Kennedy in New York's Carnegie Hall.
 - JUNE 7, 1962**
After health issues continue to delay filming, a frustrated Cukor fires Monroe from "Something's Got to Give."
 - AUG. 5, 1962**
Monroe is found dead in her home in Los Angeles, in bed with a bottle of sleeping medication nearby. She was 36.

Sources: "An Unfinished Life: John F. Kennedy" by Robert Dallek, "The Dark Side of Camelot" by Seymour M. Hersh, "Sex With Presidents" by Eleanor Herman, the New York Times, the Guardian, Town&Country magazine, Biography.com, HistoryOfYesterday.com, World History Project