Hoffman, Letterman Among Kennedy Center Honorees

WASHINGTON (AP) — Years after playing a Washington newspaper reporter, Dustin Hoffman is returning to the nation's capital to share an honor with David Letterman — who appears surprised at how culturally important his Top 10 lists have been.

The actor and comedian are among seven people who will receive the 2012 Kennedy Center Honors, the performing arts center announced Wednesday. They join Chicago bluesman Buddy Guy, the surviving members of the rock band Led Zeppelin and ballerina Natalia Makarova.

The award is the nation's highest honor for those who have influenced American culture through the arts. It comes with a dinner with Secretary of State Hillary Rodham Clinton and a reception hosted by President Barack Obama. The honorees will be saluted by fellow artists Dec. 2 in a show to be broadcast Dec. 26 on CBS.

Hoffman, now 75, said in an interview that he was last in Washington for Obama's inauguration in

"It's maybe the coldest I've been since I was in Calgary, Canada, when it was 70 below for a film," Hoffman said. "Since I froze my (behind) off watching him be inaugurated, the least he could do is to shake my hand under the circumstances."

While being honored for his long career as an actor, Hoffman said he's most proud of his most recent work directing his first film. The film called "Quartet" stars Maggie Smith and follows aging opera singers and musicians who are reunited at a retirement home.

Hoffman said he may have found a new calling as director. "God willing, I'm happy to do

this from here on out," he said.

Kennedy Center Chairman David
Rubenstein called Hoffman "one of
the most versatile and iconoclastic
actors" of any generation. Hoffman
has played lead roles ranging from
"All the President's Men" and "Rain

Man" to "Tootsie."
Guy, 76, was a "titan of the blues" who has influenced countless electric guitar players over the past 50 years, Rubenstein said. Eric Clapton has called him the best guitar players alive, "without a doubt."

Guy, born into a family of share-croppers with no electricity or running water in Louisiana, said he's still pinching himself after hearing about the honor. He recalled that as a child, a guitar player would visit his family at Christmas. When all the other kids went to play with their toys, Guy wanted to strum that guitar

that guitar.
"I just felt like if I could learn to play guitar, like a sore thumb, I would stand out," said Guy, who visited the White House earlier this year and persuaded Obama to sing a few lines of "Sweet Home

Chicago" with Mick Jagger.

He pioneered the use of distortion and feedback with his electric guitar, a sound British musicians would embrace before mainstream American bands were ready to turn up the amplifiers. At the time, Guy said he didn't know what he was doing. He just wanted to turn up the sound so somebody could hear him when he was playing with BB

King, Muddy Waters and others.

"I'm hoping this will give the blues a lift," Guy said of the honor.

"That's what got me started. I just wanted to be something different."

Makarova's artistry has "ignited the stages of the world's greatest ballet companies," Rubenstein said. The 72-year-old dancer left her native Russia in 1970 and made her debut with the American Ballet Theatre in a production of "Giselle." She also performed in "Romeo and Juliet" at the Kennedy Center in 1971, days after it opened.

Makarova was the first exiled artist to return to the Soviet Union before its fall, dancing with the Kirov Ballet in 1989.

"What a remarkable twist of fate that I chose to leave my homeland and came to America to start a new life," she said. "I feel very privileged that through me Kennedy Center honors classical ballet."

The three surviving members of the Britain's Led Zeppelin — John Paul Jones, Jimmy Page and Robert Plant — are being honored for transforming the sound of rock and roll. They influenced many other bands with their innovative, blues-infused hits such as "Good Times Bad Times," "Immigrant Song," "Kashmir" and "Stairway to Heaven."

The band, which has been in-

The band, which has been inducted into the Rock and Roll Hall of Fame, issued a joint statement saying America was the first place to embrace their music.

to embrace their music.

"We owe a large debt to the vitality and variety of the music of the American people," they wrote.

In television, Letterman's unconventional wit and charm has made him "one of the most influential personalities," Rubenstein said.

Letterman said it was a wonderful honor for his family, his co-workers at CBS's "Late Night with David Letterman" and for himself. In 1993, Letterman helped honor one of his mentors, Johnny Carson, with the Kennedy Center prize, delivering one of his signature Top 10 lists about the longtime "Tonight Show" host

host.

"I believe recognition at this prestigious level confirms by belief that there has been a mix-up," he said in a written statement. "I am still grateful to be included."

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