

Music is a smash hit at inaugural bash

By J. D. Considine
Pop Music Critic

WASHINGTON — "We're so happy to be here." Little Feat front man Craig Fuller told the crowd crammed into Reunion Hall yesterday afternoon. "Ain't it great to have a president who likes rock 'n' roll?"

He got no argument from the crowd. From a musical standpoint, this first part of the Clinton inaugural celebration was a stunning success, from the exuberant tent shows that made up America's Reunion on the Mall to the star-studded An American Reunion extravaganza at the Lincoln Memorial.

At times, it seemed more like a pop festival than a political event. Just look at the Live Aid-quality talent that turned out for the Lincoln Memorial concert: Aretha Franklin, Tony Bennett, Bob Dylan, Diana Ross, Luther Vandross, Michael Bolton, Kathleen Battle, L. L. Cool J and even Michael Jackson.

Although, to be fair, Live Aid didn't have the Marine Corps Band.

Nor was the music simply rock 'n' roll — not even if you stretch the definition far enough to include R&B, rap, gospel and country. Aaron Cop-

land's "A Lincoln Portrait" — which featured narration from Jack Nicholson, Oprah Winfrey, Edward James Olmos and James Earl Jones — was just as bright a highlight of the big show as was the obligatory rendition of "We Are the World."

In fact, one of the afternoon's great pleasures was simply being able to wander from tent to tent, soaking up an array of exciting and exotic sounds. For instance, as Michelle Shocked warbled the Steve Goodman song "Penny Evans" in one tent, another had salsa group Seis del Solar bringing its set to a close in a blaze of percussion. Drummer Elvin Jones kept the Coltrane legacy alive with his seven-piece Jazz Machine, while Los Comperos de Nati Cano played mariachi classics with their pal, Linda Ronstadt.

It was as vivid a picture of American musical diversity as could be imagined. Taj Mahal played Southern blues. Tish Hinojosa played Texas conjunto music. Booker T. and the MG's (Steve Cropper and Duck Dunn, with Anton Fig filling in for the late Al Jackson) played Memphis soul.

And it all fit the occasion perfectly.

There was hardly even a sense of celebrity overkill at the Lincoln Memorial. Sure, arranging "The Battle Hymn of the Republic" so one verse was done to a country beat, one salsa-style and one as a gospel shout-out smacked of show-biz overkill. True, the Melissa Etheridge and Jon Secada verse of "Stand By Me" was enough to make you wish they'd let Luther Vandross handle the whole thing himself. And yes, Bob Dylan did sing "The Chimes of Freedom" in a voice that sounded alarmingly like Popeye's.

But it was great when, as L. L. Cool J urged the crowd to "Throw your hands in the air/ And wave 'em like you just don't care," to see the first family waving their hands along with everybody else. It was indescribably beautiful to hear Kathleen Battle apply the operatic power of her voice to "We Shall Overcome," particularly with saxophonist Kenny G providing tasteful, blues-based counterpoint.

And if the sight of Bill Clinton leaping from his seat to grasp the hand of Aretha Franklin at the end of "Respect" wasn't enough to convince you that this administration has soul, odds are that nothing will.