

*Remarks for the
Governor's Awards for Excellence in the Arts
February 28, 2003*

- Recognize Tim Hedgepeth, Beth Clay, Bill Dunlap
 - Recognize corporate sponsors for their support of the arts in Mississippi
 - Recognize past winners as well / thank them for their continued contributions

Arts and Mississippi – the two words mesh well with each other. I never cease to be amazed at the breadth and the depth of talent in this state. Regardless of the medium – music, dance, visual arts, or the written word – the world knows of someone from Mississippi who is setting the standard.

We have a responsibility to encourage and support those talented individuals who share their creativity, their vision, their method and their message through their art.

A recent article in The New York Times described how states across the nation, struggling with the economic impact of the national recession and growing budget shortfalls, are cutting their support of the arts to the bone – and, in some cases, entirely.

The state arts agency in Arizona is facing complete elimination. The same situation is facing arts agencies in New Jersey and Missouri. In California, funding for the arts was cut by 41 percent; in Massachusetts, by 62 percent.

In Mississippi, our funding of the arts is an investment in education; it's an investment in economic development; it's an investment in historical preservation; and, it's an investment in our future.

The Mississippi Arts Commission supports an extensive network of artists and arts organizations around the state. This support must remain strong if Mississippi is to continue setting the standard for others to follow.

This support must remain strong, so we can continue to meet here each year and honor the magnificent work of Mississippi's artists and arts organizations.

This support must remain strong if we are to keep our culture, our promise and our potential alive and vibrant.

It is always a pleasure to be a part of these awards, and I am excited about being here today. Yesterday, we held a press conference proclaiming 2003 as the “Year of the Blues” in Mississippi.

Eddie Cotton did a great job of reminding everybody there – and I want to remind everybody here today – that there would be no Chicago blues, there would be no Memphis blues, if W.C. Handy hadn’t kicked it all off with the Delta blues – and if people like Little Milton hadn’t kept it going.

People around the world study, play and listen to the blues – a truly American art form; a truly Mississippi art form.

Beverly Sills once said, “art is the signature of civilizations.” Today, we honor those whose signature is boldly written on their particular mediums – and we thank them for the excitement, the joy, the laughter and the leadership they share with us all.

Thank you.