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HARMONICA

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WANTED:

Eisenhower's Golden Harmonica

by HERBERT QUELLE

RECENTLY REVISITED THE LATE MANFRED WEWERS' PIECE ON THE HARMONICA IN POLITICS (HARMONICA HAPPENINGS, VOL. 45, No. 3, SUMMER 2011). IN REFERENCE TO PRESIDENT DWIGHT D. EISENHOWER, WEWERS WROTE:

Republican Dwight D. Eisenhower (1890-1969) was "an avid harmonica fan and no mean performer on that instrument. The Toronto Star reported that in his courting days, Ike wooed Mamie with the mouth organ" (1.14.1961: 26). In 1959 Richard Bain, formerly with Borrah Minnevitich's Harmonica Rascals, played his harmonica at President Eisenhower's forty-second wedding anniversary (TS 9.2.1960: 19). Eisenhower's White House days (1953-1961) followed a long and active military career. Soldiers of all ranks, throughout the years and many wars, have been known to play the harmonica.

After the Lincoln Library and Museum had destroyed the myth of President Lincoln being a harmonica player in their official correspondence with me (see "Monika's Blues" <https://amzn.eu/d/68wTcFy>), I began to look for the substance in other claims concerning U.S. presidents, with Ike being high on my list. To the benefit of our favorite instrument, we may all wish that as many as possible of those claims were true. But our higher interest should be to distinguish fact from fake. It is obvious that at least some harmonica-playing presidents are rather a reflection of Hohner's marketing strategy than of reality.

So, did President Eisenhower play the harmonica? I honestly don't know but believe there is a likelihood. Interestingly, there is also no knowledge of it at the Eisenhower Presidential Library, Museum, and Boyhood Home. In fact, when I approached them with this question in 2019 the reply was "We would love to know more about President



ADDRESS OFFICIAL CORRESPONDENCE TO
THE SECRETARY OF STATE
WASHINGTON 25, D. C.

DEPARTMENT OF STATE
WASHINGTON

May 19, 1953

MEMORANDUM FOR MR. STEPHENS:

I am sending under separate cover a Hohner harmonica, made of gold, which has been received by the Department, through the American Consul General at Stuttgart, Germany, from Dr. Reinhold Maier, President of the Bundesrat of the German Federal Republic and concurrently Minister-President of Baden-Wuerttemberg.

This harmonica is a gift to the President from Dr. Maier, who is described as a "key official insofar as certain matters vital to American foreign policy are concerned".

In the circumstances, it is recommended that the President accept this gift. Although the Consul General has suggested a personal acknowledgment from the President, I shall be guided by your suggestions as to the nature of a reply which should be made to Dr. Maier, whose letter of March 26 in regard to this question is enclosed.

John F. Simmons
John F. Simmons
Chief of Protocol

Enclosures:
Letter.
Gift.

XOF8

Staatsministerium
Ministerpräsident

Stuttgart, den 26 March 1953
Richard-Wagner-Strasse 15
Fernsprechnr. 91540, 91548/49

My dear Mr. President,

On learning that the harmonica is the dear companion of your leisure hours, the senior chief of the world-famous harmonica factory of Matth. Hohner has expressed the wish to present you with an instrument specially made for you and being the only one manufactured in pure gold.

The firm of Matth. Hohner representing a highly important undertaking in the land of Baden-Wuerttemberg, an enterprise whose products enjoy an excellent reputation all over the world owing to their quality, I am pleased to meet this wish and beg to hand you, Mr. President, the golden harmonica of Matth. Hohner.

I am, my dear Mr. President,
Very sincerely yours,

Reinhold Maier

The President
The White House
Washington 25, DC

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MAY 10 1953

May 19, 1953

Dear Dr. Maier:

Through the courtesy of the American Consul General at Stuttgart, I have received the fine Hohner harmonica which you so kindly sent to me. Thank you very much for this wonderful instrument.

Please convey my deepest appreciation, also, to the senior chief of the Matth. Hohner factory for his thoughtfulness and generosity in having this harmonica specially made in gold for me.

With my gratitude and best wishes,

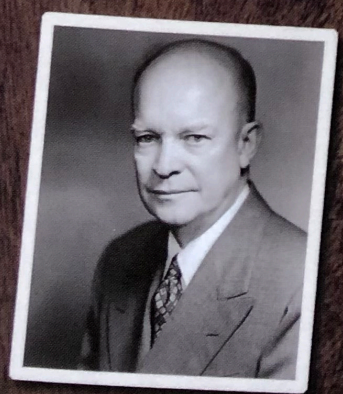
Sincerely,

Dr. Reinhold Maier *
President of the Bundesrat of the
German Federal Republic
Richard-Wagner-Strasse 15
Stuttgart, Germany

via State Dept.

XGF122 *Reinhold*

CROSS CARD FOR STAFF SECRETARY



Eisenhower's harmonica playing. Unfortunately, we cannot find anything about it in our holdings." Not knowing, does not mean he didn't. But would any information in Manfred Wewer's quote above be considered proof before a court of justice or sufficient as scientific evidence at least? Also read the follow-up information I got from the Eisenhower Library:

I finally found a small reference to his harmonica playing in a clipping from Collier's magazine. (Jan. 31, 1953).

"Mr. Truman and his pianos have gone. But there still will be music at 1600 Pennsylvania, Washington, D.C. Old 48 is told on fine authority that Ike is no fumblemouth with the harmonica. We are told, too, that his Oh Susannah caused many a SHAPE staff officer to break his arches stamping his feet."

"Old 48" must be the name of the writer.

Thank you for bringing this to our attention. It's not every day we learn something new about Ike!

Whereas doubts must remain about the harmonica playing prowess of President Eisenhower, it is a proven fact that the Hohner company presented him with an "instrument specially made for you and being the only one manufactured in pure gold." (letter of March 26, 1953, from Dr. Reinhold Maier, Minister-President of Baden-Württemberg, a function comparable to a U.S. Governor). It is further proven by a letter of May 19, 1953, from the Chief of Protocol of the Department of State that the harmonica was forwarded to the White House. The final proof is President Eisenhower's letter of acknowledgment, most remarkably signed also on May 19. He writes there:

Dear Dr. Maier:

Through the courtesy of the American Consul General at Stuttgart, I have received the fine Hohner harmonica that you so kindly sent to me. Thank you very much for this wonderful instrument.

Please convey my deepest appreciation, also, to the senior chief of the Matth. Hohner factory for his thoughtfulness and generosity in having this harmonica specially made in gold for me.

With my gratitude and best wishes,

Sincerely,



I came across the above information during research at the Hohner archives in 2019 for my second book, written and published in German, on the harmonica and its significance for American music. It is obvious that the gift was Hohner's initiative, appreciating for its implementation of the outstanding protocol function that the Minister-President of Baden-Württemberg, which is the seat of the company, held in that particular year at a federal level. Whether this sidetracked any ideas on President Eisenhower's inauguration pursued by the German Federal Government is irrelevant to the story and has not been researched.

Earlier in 2023, while working on the book's English translation ("Striking No False Note: Black Music Matters" <https://amzn.eu/d/fzlyMyE>), I made another attempt to locate that unique harmonica. After all, I thought, there was the foreign emoluments clause as a principle observed throughout the centuries by U.S. presidents. So, I submitted the following request via the formal submission process to NARA, the National Archives at College Park, MD:

On May 19, 1953, President Eisenhower signed a thank you letter to Dr. Reinhold Maier, President of the Bundesrat of the German Federal Republic. POTUS acknowledged receipt of a golden harmonica that the Matth. Hohner factory had gifted him with. Question: As the Eisenhower Library in Abilene, KS, does not hold the harmonica, is there a record of its whereabouts at your archive? Did POTUS purchase it for his private use?

NARA had no information and referred me back to the Eisenhower Presidential Library, Museum, and Boyhood Home. From there I finally got the following reply:

Thank you for contacting the Eisenhower Presidential Library. While I can confirm that the president wrote a thank you letter to Dr. Maier for the harmonica on 5/19/1953, our records don't make any reference to the final disposition of the harmonica. I'm sorry I can't be of more help to you, and please let me know if you have any further questions.

Hohner's gesture clearly did not translate into a marketing coup. At least, I could not find any picture of President Eisenhower with the Golden or any other harmonica in his hands or mouth. As he passed away in 1969, we can also no longer ask him to play "Oh Susannah" and then be his well-intentioned peer critics. The whereabouts of that gift from 70 years ago remain mysterious as well.

At best, this publication will initiate a successful search: Where is the secret collector who got hold of the golden harmonica? Where did it go missing? Any tip, also anonymous, leading to its recovery can be emailed to the author's website harpambassador.com, and will later reach the entire SPAH community. 🎵



