

The pianist zipped through "Sleigh Ride" in the sumptuous casino lounge, his breezy rendition sailing by gamblers who'd sipped too many whiskey-and-eggnogs.

The

jaunty melody competed with beeping and blinging slot machines named Zeus and Stinkin' Rich. One patron nodded off next to a still-smoldering cigarette. Another tried to accompany the piano, tipsily, with a harmonica.

But on this mid-December night, David Osborne endured the quirks of the Bellagio casino's Baccarat Bar with smiling cheer. He knew that on Monday, he was scheduled to play the [White House](#). Again.

The casino pianist, somewhat improbably, is also a presidential pianist. Osborne has helmed White House holiday events during three administrations, briefly glimpsing commanders in chief unscripted and unvarnished.

One president and his wife wanted [John Lennon](#) tunes interspersed with Christmas favorites. Another burst into song himself. A vice president even tried to lure the pianist into a policy debate.

For lounge players such as Osborne, the White House is pretty much the ultimate gig. But like a lot of lounge scenes, the patter matters almost as much as the playing. And as in all show business venues, getting there depends a lot on who you know.

Osborne's entree into such a rarified world came through a mix of salesmanship and serendipity — and the help of a U.S. senator and a former president.

Written by Administrator

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The pianist, 52, grew up in the small Oklahoma city of Miami (locals pronounce it "My-AM-uh"), infatuated with the rich tones of the piano at his Baptist church. "It sounded like a full orchestra," he said. While his older sister took piano lessons — his parents could only afford instruction for one of them — he pounded away by ear.

Eventually, he studied formally, played his way through graduate school and landed at a Marriott in Orlando, Fla. Over the years, he played events there for Presidents [George H.W. Bush](#) and [Ronald Reagan](#), whose wife, Nancy, favored melodies by [George Gershwin](#).

In the mid-1980s, Osborne heard that former [President Jimmy Carter](#) was scheduled to sign books at a nearby mall. The pianist had cast his first presidential ballot for Carter, whom he admired for his humanitarian efforts and plain-spoken manner. "I wanted to maybe play for him," he recalled.

Osborne drove to the mall with his recording of Baptist hymns and a note saying he hoped to play for Carter's Sunday school class at Maranatha Baptist Church in Plains, Ga.

Carter's security team took the recording from Osborne. The pianist was deflated. A short time later, however, he got a call from Maranatha Baptist.

He wore a maroon tie and gray jacket and swallowed his jitters for the six-hour drive to Plains. His hands stopped shaking long enough to muscle through "Amazing Grace."

He must have pulled it off. The 39th president has repeatedly invited him back to Georgia for church services and birthdays. (Osborne hung onto the menu from Carter's 84th: arugula salad, seared scallops, a choice of chicken or sea bass.)

Something of a friendship formed. In his e-mail, the pianist has a folder marked "Jimmy." On his

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[iPhone](#) , there's video of Carter tooling around on a scooter. This year, Carter told [the Washington Post](#)

he wanted Osborne to play at his funeral. (His press secretary said Carter was unavailable to comment for this story.)

By 1999, when Carter turned 75, Osborne had moved to Las Vegas, where he charmed tourists at Caesars Palace on a Steinway that [Frank Sinatra](#) once played. He helped dream up Carter's elaborate birthday gala that year, bringing some of the Caesars pizzazz to Georgia, including a Cleopatra lookalike and a handful of centurions.

Afterward, Carter sent a handwritten note, which Osborne displays in a living room packed with three pianos and music memorabilia: "You were the key & originator of the birthday gala — one of the most memorable events of my life. ... Thank you again for sharing your talent, and your friendship, with us."

At the Carter birthday bash, the pianist had another stroke of luck: wowing Georgia Sen. [Max Cleland](#) by playing into the wee hours. "He seems to get more out of the piano than the piano has to give," Cleland said in an interview.

Osborne told Cleland about his long-held dream to play at the White House. Thanks to Cleland's prodding, he got an invite to a 1999 Clinton administration holiday event.

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