

MICHELLE OBAMA:  
AMERICA'S  
GOT TALENT

*From music to fashion, the first lady has the power to make careers. Here she shines the spotlight on the most promising young performers.*

By LAURA BROWN



*Photographs by JASON SCHMIDT*

Young talent finds its voice. Chelsea Harrison, Anitra McKinney, Roy Patten Jr., Jumohny Shardenea Walker, and Kenneth L. Washington Jr. of the Duke Ellington School of the Arts and Andrew W. Jenkins, Arthur A. McKeithen, Jasmine C. Parnell, Geoffrey Phillips, and Kayla Waters of the Howard University Choir. Mrs. Obama's clothing and accessories throughout, her own. From left: Dress, \$4,115, **Missoni**. 212-517-9339. Dress, \$168, **White House Black Market**. 877-948-2525. Dress, \$640, **Just Cavalli**. 212-888-4333. All other women's clothing, their own.

Fashion editor: **Mary Alice Stephenson**

*“When Paul McCartney was here singing ‘Michelle,’ I was like, I’m done; I can go home now.”*

—MICHELLE OBAMA

**M**ichelle Obama has often joked that she, President Obama, and their two daughters, Sasha and Malia, “live above the store.” But one could also compare the White House to a beehive where, upon Mrs. Obama’s encouragement, young creative talents are invited to cross-pollinate on the East Room stage. She loves to invite an audience of old-school Washingtonians (or “muckety-mucks”) to see a performance by jazz singer Esperanza Spalding or a cello recital by Alisa Weilerstein. This evening, she is hosting the first-ever White House Dance Series, so the White House Entrance Hall is a scene of controlled chaos. A young Billy Elliot is chirping, “I’m free!” in one corner, while the Bhangra Empire dance troupe does traditional poses in the other. A tour group shuffles by, mouths agape.

“This morning, I was thinking, Is that the radio?” Mrs. Obama says of the din. “Then I thought, Oh, that’s right, we have the music series going on downstairs.”

The first lady is sitting in the Red Room of the White House, a vibrant gem filled with gold-framed portraits, traditional landscapes, and historic furniture maintained by glove-wearing staff. (The Obamas have infused their private residence with contemporary art: Edward Ruscha, Glenn Ligon, Susan Rothenberg. “It tells, I think, a broader story of who we are,” she explains.) She is wearing a raspberry-colored L’Wren Scott sheath that fits her like an inaugural glove and a pair of bright-blue kitten heels. “Well,” she notes, “you got to get a color pop.”

It was the arts that popped for the young Michelle Robinson when she was growing up in Chicago. “I was fortunate to grow up in a family that appreciates music,” she observes. “My maternal grandfather, we called him South Side, was a big jazz-music collector. He would play jazz 24 hours a day. As my mother said, when she was growing up, ‘You learn to sleep through jazz.’ He had speakers in every room in his house—including the bathroom.” It was South Side who gave Michelle her first album, Stevie Wonder’s *Talking Book*.

At school, she performed herself once. “I remember very early on being the good fairy in *Hansel and Gretel* and having to sing a solo, which was humiliating.” In a fairy outfit? “Yes, it was a little tutu fairy costume, and I liked it because of the costume.” (Now, at least, Mrs. Obama’s best-dressed status has a basis in history.) “Oh, and my brother,” she says, laughing, “was Hansel.”

But Mrs. Obama still found her voice. “We accessed culture in Chicago, which is one of the premier cities in the country for the arts.” Visual art is also in her blood. “My father was an artist. He sculpted and painted and spent time at the Art Institute of Chicago,” she remembers. (Fraser Robinson III died of complications from multiple sclerosis in 1991.) “Before he got really sick and had to work and raise us, he probably, if he had his choice, would have been an artist.”

It is more than 20 years since Mrs. Obama’s father last painted,

19 months since Stevie Wonder gave a private concert at the White House, and five since Sir Paul McCartney thrilled her by serenading her with “Michelle.” But under Mrs. Obama’s watch, the White House is less an ivory tower than an open door. “We want to lift young people up,” she argues. “The country needs to be mindful that we have all these diamonds out there, and it would be a shame not to invest in those talents.”

It’s more than an investment; Mrs. Obama has the rare power to make careers. “It is powerful to see a Jason Yoder [a teenage percussionist], who is adorable. I first saw him in Pittsburgh at the first G-20 Summit that we hosted. Jason played this amazing duet with Yo-Yo Ma—breathtaking. To see all of the spouses of the world leaders just sitting in awe and tearing up over this display in a public school in America, it was pretty powerful.”

**N**ot to mention the diplomatic power of performance. “That’s the beauty of arts and culture, music and dance,” Mrs. Obama says. “It’s a universal voice. When I travel to other countries, usually the first thing the spouses do is introduce you to their cultures through music and dance. [French first lady] Carla Bruni-Sarkozy is a musician. We gave her a Gibson guitar. When I came to visit, she pulled it out and played the most beautiful song. We were sitting there with family, and we started singing.” When Mrs. Obama met the Russian first lady, Svetlana Medvedeva, last year, “She took me and my girls to see beautiful Russian folk dancing, and although we didn’t speak the same language, we instantly connected.” One of Mrs. Obama’s priorities is to create an exchange between Russian arts students and kids from the Duke Ellington School of the Arts. “Mrs. Medvedeva grasped the significance of what arts and music and song can mean to international relations.”

One of the privileges of being a presidential spouse is “almost everything is accessible. That’s the beauty of this position,” Mrs. Obama says. Next up, Motown, opera, classical music, “because I also think about this in terms of my children. I don’t want them to develop just one taste. I want them to feel the power in country as much as they feel it in Justin Bieber.” But there is power in the Bieber. “There is some power in the Bieber! But we don’t have Fever,” she chuckles. “But when Paul McCartney was here singing ‘Michelle,’ I was like, I’m done; I can go home now.”

Nobody says no to an invitation to the Obamas’ house. “Pretty much,” Mrs. Obama says, “pretty much.” She imagines what her young guests think when they enter the White House: “‘I can’t believe I’m here.’ And sometimes I think that. I *still* think that.” She pauses, listening to the buzz outside the door. “If you can walk into the White House and come up to the first lady and introduce yourself, if you can perform in front of the president of the United States in the East Room, there is nothing that you can’t do.” She smiles. “End of story.” ■

ARTISTS: HAIR AND MAKEUP: SANTI BONG; MONAE EVERETT; KENNISHA FORD; DANIELLE GIBBS; JOHANNIE JACQUETTE; MARY PRULINO; RODNEY PINION; KIN POON; MINDY ROBERTS; DEMI VALENTINE; FAYOLA VEZAGA; AND VERA WINFIELD FOR ANDRE CHEREK; THE SALON SPA, WASHINGTON, D.C.



First lady in red. Mrs. Obama with musicians Jason Yoder, Antonio Madrugá, Elijah Easton, Zach Brown, and Kush Abadey and glass artists Carmen Salazar and Caleb Siemon. On Salazar: Dress, \$168, Ann Taylor. [anntaylor.com](http://anntaylor.com).



Cross-cultural exchange. Clifton Brown and Constance Stamatou of the Alvin Ailey American Dance Theater; Moneesha Muneet Gill, Navjit Singh, Omer Mirza, Michelle Puneet Gill, and Jackie Thind of Bhangra Empire; and Nicole A. Turchi, Elizabeth Whalen, Namaad Jackson, Tricia Brown, and Eric Scott of Joy of Motion Dance Center. See Where to Buy for shopping details. Hair: Johnny Wright; makeup: Derrick Rutledge; on-location production: Larry McCrudden for the Custom Family.