

Untitled

Obamas celebrate, at last, on way to White House
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WASHINGTON (AP) - President Barack Obama and his wife Michelle capped their historic day with a speedy tour through 10 inaugural balls before retiring, at last, for their first night in the White House.

The Etta James classic "At Last" was the Obamas' song of the evening, crooned by Beyonce at the Neighborhood Ball, the first of 10 inaugural celebrations they attended into the early hours of Wednesday.

The president wore white tie, while Michelle shimmered in a white, one-shouldered, floor-length gown. It was embellished from top to bottom with white floral details and made by 26-year-old New York designer Jason Wu.

"First of all, how good looking is my wife?" Obama asked the crowd of celebrities and supporters.

The president pulled his wife close for a slow, dignified two-step to the song that marked the end of a long day of formal inaugural events and the two-year campaign that put them in the White House.

Obama cut loose in a faster groove a few minutes later, as Shakira, Mary J. Blige, Faith Hill and Mariah Carey sang along with Stevie Wonder to his "Signed, Sealed, Delivered." The song was played at nearly all of Obama's rallies throughout the campaign.

"You could tell that's a black president from the way he was moving," comedian Jamie Foxx joked following the dance.

At most of the balls that followed, the Obamas spent little more than the length of the song greeting supporters and whirling for the crowd. But the two seemed to share intimate moments nonetheless, smiling and laughing as Michelle pulled her dress out of the way.

Director Ron Howard said he sympathized with the long day Obama was having.

"I feel bad for him," Howard said in an interview with The Associated Press at the Western Ball. "He's had a long day and now he has to do seven dances. This has got to be the grueling part for the first family."

Obama and Vice President Joe Biden each saluted the nation's military men and women at the Commander in Chief Ball via satellite. Biden said he wasn't looking forward to his moment on the dance floor - a familiar refrain throughout the night.

"The thing that frightens me the most (is) I'm going to have to stand in that circle and dance in a minute." At that, he laughed and did a quick sign of the cross.

The Obamas were more enthusiastic, splitting up to dance with Marine Sgt. Elidio Guillen of Madera, Calif. - who was shorter than dance partner Michelle - and Army Sgt. Margaret H. Herrera of San Antonio, Texas, who cried in the president's arms.

Despite the formal attire and celebrity entertainment, the balls weren't overly fancy affairs. Lines were long to get in, and the food was heavy on vegetables with dip and cheese cubes.

In a sign, perhaps, of the tough economic times, guests who already paid anywhere from \$75 for a ticket to thousands more for a package deal had to buy their own drinks served in small plastic cups. Beer went for \$6, cocktails for \$9 and champagne for \$12.

People were standing in line outside Union Station to get into the Eastern States Ball an hour and a half after it started. Because of very limited seating at the Western ball, a number of attendees in long gowns and fancy dress plopped cross-legged on the floor.

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“This is what happens in a down economy. No chairs, no highboys - it's the floor and plastic cups,” commented ballgoer Brig Lawson, 38, of Las Vegas.

At the Obama Home States ball, the dance floor was dominated by two little girls who skipped and twirled in matching red dresses while the grown-ups stood still, crowded around the stage waiting for Obama to appear.

Singer Sheryl Crow was greeted by a cheering crowd later for her appropriate hit, “A Change Would Do You Good.” When hip-hop star Wyclef Jean asked the men at the Mid-Atlantic Ball to pull off their tuxedo jackets and swing them in the air to show their support for Barack Obama, thousands did.

At the Youth Ball, Kid Rock belted out songs as well-dressed 20-somethings mingled about. One of them walked up to a bartender, gave him a high five and said, “Barack Obama is president!”

The Obamas, following Kid Rock and Kanye West, got the real rock-star reception and launched into something of an awkward dance, laughing as they swayed. When they were done, the president grabbed a mic and said, “That's what's called old school.”

At the Midwestern Ball, he joked that it was time to “dance with the one who brung me, who does everything that I do except backwards and in heels.”

And though the mood was celebratory, the reality that the country remains at war hung over the festivities at the Commander in Chief ball and a separate Heroes Red White & Blue Ball.

“Please know that you are in our thoughts and prayers today, every day, forever,” Obama told troops at the Commander in Chief ball. “Tonight, we celebrate. Tomorrow, the work begins. ... Together, I am confident we will write the next great chapter in America's story.”

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