

THE MAKING OF AN ICON

In the few short months since she made history by becoming the first African-American First Lady, Michelle Obama has won friends and admirers around the world, writes **Sharon Krum**.

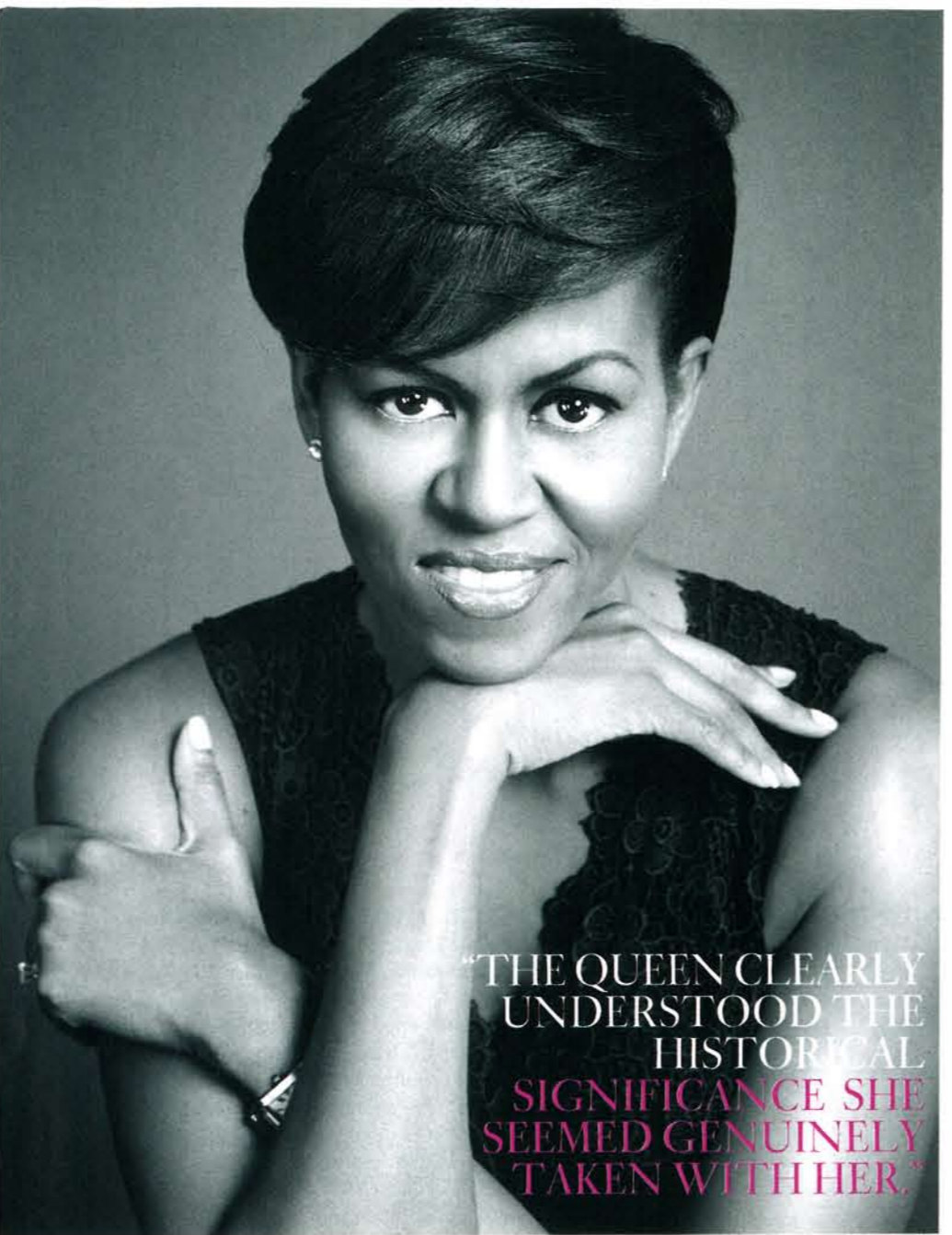
100 DAYS AS FIRST LADY

FOR THE TWO LITTLE girls who live in the White House, it was the phone call they had been waiting for. Their father was on the line from London and his news was as exciting as they had hoped. Yes, he had gone to Buckingham Palace to meet the queen. Yes, she was delightful. Yes, your mother curtsied.

On the phone, President Obama then told his daughters Malia, 10, and Sasha, eight, what else had transpired since he and their mother, Michelle, had flown out the day before on Air Force One to begin their first European tour. After meeting the queen privately, they went on to an elegant cocktail reception Her Majesty was hosting for world leaders in London for the G20 summit. The mood in the palace's picture gallery was upbeat. Champagne and wine was served, along with smoked quail eggs and foie gras. (The girls, who love macaroni and cheese, were probably unimpressed by the food.) Oh, then your mother made a little history.

It's curious if President Obama did tell the girls about what their mother did that night. As the party was winding down, Michelle found herself standing next to the queen, who reportedly had enjoyed meeting the First Lady earlier. They began discussing their difference in height, when, spontaneously, the queen placed her arm around Michelle's back, who then warmly wrapped her arm around the monarch, a royal no-no.

"No one — including the ladies-in-waiting standing nearby — could believe their eyes." >>>



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said an astonished eyewitness later. (The former Australian Prime Minister Paul Keating touched the queen during a royal visit in 1992, the British tabloids dubbed him The Lizard of Oz.)

It was billed as the hug heard around the world, the moment when five decades of royal protocol flew out those heavily curtained palace windows. Yet what was extraordinary was that it took a black woman who grew up in a humble one-bedroom apartment in Chicago to do it.

"Now we've met, will you please keep in touch?" the queen reportedly said. This is what people mean when they talk about the magnetism of Michelle Obama.

"This is a queen who is never informal," says Letitia Baldrige, Jackie Kennedy's social secretary, now 83, and still the person who understands diplomatic etiquette like no other. "Michelle is the first African-

American First Lady. The queen clearly understood the historic significance. She seemed genuinely taken with her. It was a gracious moment."

Yet not the only one. She was only 10 weeks into the job of First Lady, but Michelle's first European tour would turn out to be an album's worth of snapshots of unexpectedly electric or graceful moments, all packaged in beautiful clothes.

For instance, Michelle choking up as she told young girls at a London school that "nothing in my life's path would have predicted that I'd be standing here as the first African-American First Lady of the United States of America. You, too, can realise your dream ..."

Then there was Michelle and Prime Minister Kevin Rudd's wife, Therese Rein, having tea in London, striking up a genuine rapport. (Ms Rein came with

Smugglepott and Cuddlepie and Bindi Irwin DVDs for the Obama girls.) And Michelle greeting French First Lady Carla Bruni-Sarkozy in Strasbourg, France, with an enthusiastic "Bonjour!", then a double kiss, all in front of delighted crowds.

Everywhere Michelle went in Europe, the reaction was the same — hugs, cheering, applause. For an American First Lady? By the time she was back in the White House supervising Malia and Sasha's homework, the verdict was in: she was "Michelle the Conqueror", "Michelle Ma Belle" and the oh-so-fashionable half of "Obamamania".

"It was a smashing success, like when JFK brought Jackie to Europe," says Carol Felsenthal, a contributing editor at *Chicago* magazine. "The world fell for her."

"I was surprised by her reception in Europe," says Cynthia Gordy, of *Esence* magazine. "A regular African-American woman from Chicago being hailed as a style icon, a superstar, an inspiration."

Cynthia rattles off all the praise that's been heaped on Michelle in such a short time — recently on the cover of *Vogue*, named one of *People* magazine's "World's Most Beautiful" and *Time* magazine's 100 Most Influential Women.

"Even Oprah doesn't have the same level of interest in what she's wearing and doing and saying," says Cynthia.

Talk is growing louder that Michelle may outshine Jackie Kennedy as the most loved, most influential First Lady of modern times. Letitia Baldrige says she understands why it's tempting to compare the First Ladies. Both young when they arrived at the White House — Jackie was 31, Michelle, 45 — and caring for small children, they were stylish dressers, attractive and popular. "Both loved their husbands very much and both had very attractive husbands," she says, laughing.

Yet, she cautions, Michelle is not simply of a different generation to Jackie, but the product of a different America. Jacqueline Bouvier Kennedy Onassis was born into New York high society, educated at private schools, rode horses and married into the illustrious Kennedy clan. Michelle Robinson Obama is the daughter of an African-American city pump operator and a stay-at-home mother, who worked her way through the prestigious Princeton and Harvard universities to eventually become a lawyer, public service program director and a hospital vice-president.

"That requires a different kind of adrenaline. Jackie's adrenaline was equally strong, but her direction was cultural," explains Letitia. "Jackie was interested in >>>



Barack and Michelle Obama met Queen Elizabeth at Buckingham Palace in April. Right: At a second meeting later, Michelle's friendly touch, a breach of royal protocol, made headlines around the world.



"THE JOY MICHELLE BRINGS TO HER ROLES AS FIRST MOTHER AND FIRST LADY IS WHAT MAKES HER SO INTOXICATING."

changing the cultural landscape, so we would not be considered as hicks. She brought in great artists, great paintings to the White House. She did a lot for American fashion [as has Michelle, with women copying her looks].

"Michelle has her own admirable agenda — supporting military families, women's rights, public service — but the two women have different perspectives on what they want the job to be."

Adds Cynthia Gordy, "You do see Jackie in Michelle, in the shift dress and pearls, and now in the intense fascination with her by Americans and the world. But Jackie was more of a seen-and-not-heard First Lady, lovely and graceful. Michelle's taking the role a step further — she's speaking up about her causes, her passions.

"What's compelling is her personal journey. She didn't come from a privileged background, she transformed her own destiny. People find that inspirational."

Think about the image we have of Jackie's marriage to JFK, which was presented as idyllic (his adultery wasn't talked about at the time). With Michelle, you never get a scripted answer to

anything about her relationship with Barack. She tells it like it is, from admitting they weathered stresses when the children were small, to the hilarious exchanges that go on between them right now. For instance, Michelle recounted to *The New York Times* a conversation she had with her husband about her shopping sprees. "He's always asking, 'Is that new? I haven't seen that before.' It's like, 'Why don't you mind your own business? Solve world hunger. Get out of my closet!'"

Jackie was a contradiction, a devoted mother to Caroline and John Jr, elegant, beloved, yet slightly remote. We relate to Michelle, says editor Carol Felsenthal. She might be a Harvard graduate, but she shops at the mall as well as wearing high-end designers such as Jason Wu and Thakoon. She's a hugger. She calls her mother, Marian, her best friend, even bringing her to live at the White House.

Michelle may match Jackie in the glamour stakes, but this First Lady admits she loves TV, pop music and magazines, not fox-hunting. "I am Sasha and Malia's mom", is how Michelle describes herself. Caroline Kennedy had a pony, but when

the Obama girls settled in at the White House, they got a dog, Bo. "I want the kids to be treated like children, not little princesses," Michelle told *O* magazine. "I told everyone [the staff] that they should make their beds, they should clean their plates, they should act respectfully — and that if anyone on the staff sees differently, they should come to me."

There isn't a mother in the world who didn't enjoy hearing that. Or that after the girls strenuously campaigned for a dog, guess who ended up walking him? Michelle confessed she does. She is also at the soccer field on Saturdays, watching the girls' games and still organises slumber parties — except that now they're in the White House. "We had about seven girls over, screaming and yelling," Michelle was reported to have said.

"The joy Michelle brings to her roles as First Mother and First Lady is what makes her so intoxicating," wrote Oprah in *Time*.

So far, 2009 has seen America plunged into a devastating recession. Families are losing their homes, recalibrating their lives as fathers and mothers are laid off. When a country is in crisis, it looks to >>>



Michelle Obama is destined to be the new Jackie Kennedy (right) — the fashion icon and First Lady who will forever be known and loved as Jackie O.



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leaders to fix both its problems and its spirit. Not surprisingly, Michelle is focusing on the softer side of her role, the feel-good factor. She has been dropping in on government workers to thank them for their service, volunteering in soup kitchens and visiting military families.

None of this is for show, says Cynthia Gordy, yet Washington insiders say Michelle has been clever in crafting her image to focus on family, fashion, women's rights and healthy eating, even getting down in the dirt to plant an organic vegetable garden at her new home.

And it isn't just Jackie Kennedy to whom she has been compared. Tina Brown, author of a book on the late Diana, Princess of Wales, *The Diana Chronicles*, wrote that, in Michelle, she saw glimpses of the way Diana made people feel special. "When Michelle stooped down from her powerful height in those big, fat pearls to embrace each of the little girls at the Elizabeth Garrett Anderson School [in London], it was Di time all over again."

Others think she connects with us the way Oprah does, speaking to our emotional selves. Oprah may embrace more of the New Age and Michelle is

more conventionally religious, but one thing cannot be denied: they are probably the two most powerful women in America. From her perch on television, Oprah talks to millions of women about self-esteem and empowerment, and they listen. From her platform at the White House, Michelle's message is about balancing work and home, honouring women's achievements and inspiring Americans who have never got off the couch to volunteer. The effect of her new celebrity on women of colour around the world cannot be minimised, either. They have reported that seeing Michelle feted and respected boosts their sense of worth.

Nicest of all, Oprah and Michelle are true friends. "I first met Michelle almost five years ago, shortly after Senator Barack Obama's riveting 2004 DNC [Democratic National Convention] speech," Oprah wrote in *Time* magazine. "Long before there was serious talk of a campaign for the presidency, I remember going to the Obamas' house for dinner. I figured there would be takeout, since I knew that, like me, Michelle had worked all day. But there she was in the kitchen, calm and organised, preparing linguine with shrimp and vegetables."

Oprah went on to endorse and campaign for Barack Obama, upsetting fans who expected her to support Hillary Clinton's candidacy. "She put herself out there before it was popular to do so," says Cynthia Gordy.

In a *Time* magazine essay in 2008, Michelle wrote: "Oprah is a wonderful friend and an incredible force. Her friendship and support have meant so much to Barack and me." Oprah's response? "Her greatest influence is that she makes us want to be our own best selves — and maybe lift a few weights, too." Carol Felsenthal says she expects Michelle to start broadening her role, to become a little less Jackie, a little more Hillary. "She did work in community relations and the mayor's office in Chicago before all this, and policy and politics are important to her. She isn't going to let that side of her drop."

Nor it seems, her talent for a quip. Greeting guests at the White House recently, Michelle said, "Feel free, walk around, touch some stuff. Just don't break anything." Somehow, you can't picture Jackie saying that.

MICHELLE: SOUTH MANAGEMENT/REX USA; SHARON KRUM: AP PHOTO/DANIEL LABRIERE/REX USA

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