

Obama and family sweep pop culture

They've captivated a society that celebrates distractions

BY JULIE HINDS • FREE PRESS POP CULTURE WRITER • NOVEMBER 15, 2008

America has to wait until Jan. 20 for President-elect Barack Obama to officially tackle his new job.

But one aspect of the change he campaigned for is already happening. To borrow from a James Brown classic, pop has got a brand new prez.

The soon-to-be Obama White House is having a big impact on the waves of popular culture washing over television, print and the Web.

With the economy looking bleaker every day, the only market that seems upbeat and thriving is the one in up-close-and-personal news about the next commander-in-chief and his stylish young family.

What kind of puppy will Malia and Sasha Obama get? Will or won't the girls be paying a visit to "Hannah Montana"? Which designer is making Michelle Obama's Inaugural gown? Who is on the guest list for the Inaugural parties?

Move over, Brad Pitt. The latest cover of Us Weekly has a picture of Obama hugging his daughters next to the headline: "I Think I'm a Pretty Cool Dad."

Make way for sitcom significance, too. Conversation has swirled around "the Huxtable effect," a theory that the family portrayed in the 1980s hit "The Cosby Show" helped pave the way for an Obama presidency.

A flurry of new books on the Obama campaign is coming soon. Hip-hop artists are putting out songs to mark Obama's win. Blogs are popping up about Michelle Obama's [clothing](#) and public image.

Where will this surge of interest in a history-making administration land? Here are some of the cultural hotspots to watch.

- **Will politics become the place to be?** It happened before, when John F. Kennedy's New Frontier made government feel like a glamorous calling. Don't

expect young people to give up "The Hills" for C-Span, but do look for them to be drawn to policy and process issues with fresh interest.

"I think this is the first politician who's made being a nerd cool," says Michel Martin, host of National Public Radio's "Tell Me More," heard weekdays in Detroit on WDET-FM (101.9).

Martin marvels at the level of interest sparked by the presidential campaign, which culminated in a record-setting 70 million-plus viewers watching the election returns. The race for the Oval Office became the hottest show of the fall TV season -- the only new drama, in fact, besides "The Mentalist" to really catch the public's eye.

"You have people calling up and saying, 'Hey, where are you watching the debate?' as if it were 'American Idol,' " Martin says.

• **How will celebrities play into the mix?** The Obama campaign was the place to be for the entertainment industry's hottest stars and mega-movers like Oprah Winfrey. Now the question is whether Hollywood and Washington will become entwined in ways that are positive or distracting.

"One predictor of pop culture influence will be to see how they handle the Inaugural entertainment," says Alan Schroeder, who teaches journalism at Northeastern University in Boston and is the author of "Celebrity-in-Chief: How Show Business Took Over the White House," a chronicle of how past presidents interacted with performers. "I'm thinking of Bill Clinton, who brought in every celebrity under the sun."

Indeed, Clinton was criticized while in office for behaving like an awestruck fan around actors and singers. Schroeder, however, doesn't sense the same need for reflected glory in Obama's behavior.

"Although there were entertainers campaigning, he was pretty judicious in his use of that. You didn't see him day after day next to big-name celebrities," says Schroeder. "He doesn't seem to have that need to schmooze with the stars like Clinton."

• **How deeply will the Obamas influence style?** The sky could be the limit, given the focus that's already on the first couple, who, more than the Clintons or the Bushes, are earning comparisons to the poised, trend-setting partnership of John and Jackie Kennedy.

"It's safe to say they're two of the most influential people in the world and will continue to be, so everything from what they're wearing to where they're **eating**, where they're hanging out, what they're listening to music-wise, who their friends are... it's all going to be dissected," says Lola Ogunnaike, who covers pop culture for CNN's "American Morning."

People noticed when Barack Obama used his BlackBerry or made a shoulder-brushing gesture during a speech, a reference to the Jay-Z song "Dirt Off My Shoulder." Whether it's through high-tech gadgets or hip-hop tracks, he seems plugged into modern life in a way not always characteristic of presidents.

But Michelle Obama could get even more attention for being a fashion icon, someone whose choices -- like the \$148 White House/Black Market dress she wore on "The View" -- can start a run on particular items of clothing.

Her clothes are all anyone can talk about, says Ogunnaike. "Anytime I go out for drinks or dinner, it inevitably ends up a real part of the dinner conversation."

• **Can comedy keep finding the funny?** There's been some hand-wringing by comedians over how to find humor in an Obama presidency, partly because of fears of veering into racially insensitive territory, but also because Obama's confident, self-aware demeanor doesn't offer the usual targets for parody.

"He's a cool guy, he's such a great public speaker, he's clearly a smart guy, he's a good-looking guy, he's not dry, he's not boring," says Paul F. Tompkins, host of VH1's "Best Week Ever with Paul F. Tompkins," which airs on Friday nights. "It's a little harder. With McCain, as smart a man as he was, you could always make fun of the fact that he is old. Most of us in the comedy industry, we tend to get a little lazy sometimes, so it's easy to grab onto those handles."

Tompkins thinks comedians will need to get to know Obama as a president and policy-maker before they can hone their material. "There will be plenty of non-

p.c. joking that will be on its way before too long, which I don't think is a bad thing."

Schroeder agrees that, for now at least, Obama isn't good comic fodder, and that may shift the spotlight to the foibles of those around him. "That's why we have the Senate and the House and all those other outlets for comedy. We still have Joe Biden and Sarah Palin."

• **Will first family memorabilia become a cottage industry?** There's a strong demand for keepsakes to mark Obama's win, as swelling sales for commemorative magazines and newspapers demonstrated.

But all presidents and their families tend to generate some merchandise, whether it's to exalt or bash them. Jackie Kennedy and her two young children inspired a booming market in the early '60s.

"There was jewelry, there were cartoon books, there were coloring books for kids, there were Caroline dolls, even some mothers started having their little boys get haircuts like John-John. It was quite phenomenal," says Carl Sferrazza Anthony, a noted first family expert and a historian for the National First Ladies' Library in Canton, Ohio.

And, of course, there was "The First Family" album by Vaughn Meader, a smash-hit lampooning of the Kennedy family's wealth and political ambitions.

Anthony says an Obama administration could inspire a number of products and parodies once his actual policies begin to roll out.

For now, the most prevalent image is the Shepard Fairey portrait of Obama -- the pop-art look that has become an instant icon on countless walls and [T-shirts](#).

"This image is everywhere," Martin says. "The fact that street artists have adopted and appropriated this image already tells you this is a cultural piece."

• **Will his star power get in the way of his job?** With magazines clamoring for cover photos of the Obamas and Billy Ray Cyrus floating and then downplaying invitations for the first daughters to visit the "Hannah Montana"

set, the challenge for the first family will be to manage their fame in a responsible way.

"The problem for the Obamas will be to cut back on some of that and not overdo it," Schroeder says. Tompkins thinks the Obamas will avoid the usual Hollywood trap of excessive exposure and ego. "People will try to treat them like celebrities, but I don't think they're going to *act* like celebrities. That's what makes the big difference," Tompkins says.

The McCain ad attacking Obama for his celebrity only made the president-elect more aware of the issue, the VH1 host says. Although the ad became famous, Martin thinks it never really connected with younger voters. "That ad they ran dogging him, saying he's the biggest celebrity? Most of the kids I know were like, 'So? And that's a bad thing?' "

In many ways, Obama's star power is tied to the bonds he has with everyday people, says poet M.L. Liebler, an English professor at Wayne State University.

Liebler sees Obama as "a person who really knows, truly knows what's going on in the streets, in the culture overall.... He listens to the music we do, he gets the Internet, he understands Google and Facebook."

Says Liebler, "This is a president who really gets it."

Contact **JULIE HINDS** at 313-222-6427 or jhinds@freepress.com.



MARK LENNIHAN/Associated Press
This iconic image of President-elect Barack Obama was originally designed by Shepard Fairey.



KAREL NAVARRO/Associated Press
What kind of puppy will Sasha and Malia Obama get? Fans of the Peruvian Hairless Dog have suggested this breed to the Obama family, saying it's a perfect hypoallergenic choice for kids who are sensitive to dogs.



KEVORK DJANSEZIAN/Associated Press
What will Michelle Obama wear next? Her clothes, like this J.Crew ensemble she wore on "The Tonight Show" last month, are driving sales and spurring trends. Now the suspense is all about the Inaugural gown.



MARK HUMPHREY/Associated Press
What's up with "Hannah Montana" and the Obama daughters? Although Billy Ray Cyrus indicated this week that they might appear on the show, he later backtracked and said the whole idea had "snowballed" more than he

expected.

Wenner Media
Which magazine will the Obamas grace next? The latest Us Weekly takes a look at the close-knit First Family and how they're preparing for



the transition to White House life.



Dana Edelson

What's so funny about the new president? That's something performers like Fred Armisen, who plays Obama on "Saturday Night Live," are still trying to figure out as they search for comedic angles about the next commander-in-chief.



EVAN VUCCI/Associated Press
Caroline Kennedy, an Obama supporter, was 3 when her father, President John F. Kennedy, moved the family into the White House.