



Gays, celebs come Out for Equality

Star-studded unofficial ball honors Obama

By AMY CAVANAUGH | Jan 21, 2009

Hollywood descended on Washington this week for the inauguration of President Obama and after the frigid swearing-in and parade, all those people needed someplace to party.

In addition to the 10 official Inaugural Balls, dozens of unofficial balls dotted the city's nightlife scene Tuesday, including one crowded party for the gay set, Out for Equality.

Held at the Renaissance Mayflower Hotel, the party drew about 2,500 revelers, including gay actor Sir Ian McKellen, who briefly took to the stage.

"You are the cherry on top of my cake," he said. "It's been a wonderful day for me."

Also in attendance was actress Jamie Lee Curtis, members of the band Betty, who are well known for their appearances on "The L Word," and gay Episcopal Bishop Gene Robinson, who was pursued all evening by a camera crew.

Out for Equality was an unofficial ball, so Obama and the first lady were not in attendance. But Massachusetts Gov. Deval Patrick (D) was there, along with his wife Diane and daughter Katherine, who came out last summer as a lesbian. Patrick spoke for several minutes and urged the crowd to "make a claim on your government."

The ball also attracted the gay political set. U.S. Rep Jared Polis (D-Colo.), the newest openly gay member of Congress, was there, as was Michael Guest, a gay former U.S. ambassador to Romania. Bisexual Arizona State Del. Kyrsten Sinema and gay New York Assemblyman Daniel O'Donnell also joined the crowd.

Leaders of the nation's gay rights groups were on hand, including Joe Solmonese of the Human Rights Campaign, Neil Giuliano of the Gay & Lesbian Alliance Against Defamation, **Rea Carey of the National Gay and Lesbian Task Force**, Aubrey Sarvis of the Servicemembers Legal Defense Network, H. Alexander Robinson of the National Black Justice Coalition, Chuck Wolfe of the Gay & Lesbian Victory Fund and Jody Huckaby of PFLAG.

Hosting the ball was the irreverent Ross Matthews — "Ross the Intern" on "The Tonight Show With Jay Leno" — and there were performances by lesbian folk singer Catie Curtis, gay saxophonist Dave Koz and gay singer Rufus Wainwright.

Also performing was Grammy-winning singer Thelma Houston, gay favorite Cyndi Lauper and lesbian singer Melissa Etheridge. Potomac Fever, an ensemble from the Gay Men's Chorus of Washington, also took to the stage at one point.

Musically, the highlight was when Curtis, Wainwright, Houston and others joined a barefoot

Lauper on stage to perform a rendition of "Girls Just Want To Have Fun."

All the performers took a moment to wax political about the incoming administration, and Etheridge linked her coming out to one of Bill Clinton's inaugural balls.

"Sixteen years ago I came out at the Triangle Ball," she said. "I was so inspired, so proud to be lesbian, and I never regretted that. We've come a long way, and been through so much."

She added that the "best thing to do every day is let everyone else know who we are."

The official Inaugural Balls, which are notorious for their overpriced cash bars and scant hors d'oeuvres, could take a lesson from Out for Equality.

About half a dozen open bars meant that lines at this \$375-per-ticket event were only a few people deep, and the food was plentiful. Buffets were located in two different rooms, and dishes reflected both the new president's heritage (mini deep-dish pizzas alongside Hawaiian chicken skewers) and sophisticated fare (such as a constantly replenished tray of sashimi and sushi). One table with olives and crackers featured a White House made out of cheese — and its disappearance late in the evening raised questions about who had run off with it.

The dessert tables ranged from timely (red, white and blue cupcakes) to classic (chocolate covered strawberries). Passed hors d'oeuvres kept those in the main hallway sated, and included salmon canapés and phyllo-wrapped asparagus.

The space was festive. An illuminated rainbow ice sculpture greeted party-goers, and coordinated lighting and music efforts coalesced the party environment, despite it being broken into three rooms. The three areas off the hallway included a large performance venue, a smaller back room with a bar and broadcast of the stage, and another room with a buffet and bar. While the hallway and performance area were packed for hours, with movement nearly impossible, the smaller two rooms were always manageable and provided a respite area for those who wanted to sit down or have a conversation.

Attendees spoke highly of the event and the inauguration, which many also braved the cold to attend.

Angela Brown, of the San Francisco Bay area, who is on the board of directors for the National Center for Lesbian Rights, called the ball a "great event."

"I'm surprised at all the people I've run into here," she said. "People from California, people who used to live in California, people active in gay and lesbian rights."

Brown added that she "had to be" in Washington for the inauguration, and managed to score tickets at the last minute.

"As an African-American woman of 56, I didn't think I'd see it in my lifetime, so I had to be here," she said. "As of Friday, I didn't have tickets, but I still had to be here."

Randy Reade, a Washingtonian, described the ball as "better than I thought" it was going to be, in part because he "didn't realize how many good acts there would be."

Reade watched the inauguration from the Washington Monument, and said that the experience was "freezing cold, but exciting and the energy was amazing." He added that Warren's invocation was "OK, until he started with Christian creeds."

Scott Guenther, a Washingtonian who watched the inauguration from near the Lincoln Memorial, said that after "the last 8 years, Obama is a breath of fresh air," and added that he "wanted to do

a ball, and a gay-oriented one, and this fit the bill.”

Linda Holtzman, who came from Philadelphia for the inauguration and ball, said Obama’s swearing in “for the first time made me feel patriotic.”

She said that the best scene of the day was after the inauguration “when you saw Bush get on a helicopter and fly away. It was uplifting.”