

# *Mood Swings Big Band*

*plays*



You may have heard that **MoodSwings** played a wedding in August 2007 in Kennebunkport. The bride was a White House staffer; the groom was a scion of the Ellis branch of the Bush family.

We impressed Laura Bush. She told the White House social director to hire us to play for the Congressional Ball. This is the White House's annual Christmas party, which was held yesterday, Monday, December 8, 2008. Here's the story.

The 25 of us were instructed to enter the E street gate to the White House at 1:00PM. You heard right: 1:00PM arrival for an 8PM performance. I left the house at 11:30AM, to rendezvous at the Pikesville Hilton parking lot. This was a staging area for several of our official band vehi-

cles. It was windy and freezing as we loaded Tahoe and an Avalanche SUV's with five passengers each and a full load of equipment. Other vehicles staged from other departure points around the Baltimore metro area.

The ride down I95, I495, and 16<sup>th</sup> Street in the Tahoe was uneventful. Here I am in the back seat. Our driver was



Figure 1: Riding to the White House

one of our trombones. Passengers were two of our female vocalists, our male vocalist, and I.

Much of the conversation was about the dresses the five female vocalists would wear. I'm glad I don't have to deal with couture. I learned the \$600 dollar dresses were had for only \$250, good news, I'm sure! I trust they'll see a bit more usage than the average bride's maid dress, but

still. The dresses were carefully piled on top of the instruments and men's tuxes in the back. We were all dressed in business casual, having been warned that no denim of any kind would be allowed in the White House.

We hit the gate at 1:02PM, only to be told that they weren't ready to admit us yet and that we should join another band vehicle behind a DC metro police cruiser on the west side of 15<sup>th</sup> Street. This picture is from the Tahoe, looking



Figure 2: Waiting on Fifteenth Street

south on 15<sup>th</sup> Street, with the White House to our right. Just beyond **Mike's** Taurus, you can see the white guard shack. **Kip's** orange Avalanche is across the intersection on the other side of the traffic cone.

Thus began the cycle, familiar to us from the Kennebunkport gig, of accommodating the Secret Service, the White House Police, the local constabulary, and a host of twenty-something junior staffers. Each group seems to

have the idea that if they inconvenience us enough, we'll go become some other group's responsibility.

We were admitted to the sacred precincts at 1:48PM, after certain filming had been completed. (We couldn't have Laura Bush's film tour of the Christmas decorations inconvenienced by a bunch of case-schlepping musicians, even if they were denim-free.)

The next step was to get through the second line of defense, the internal check point. The simple matter of finding a parking place on the grounds, carrying our gear to the gate, and lining up for entry took us into the dreaded 2:30–3:00PM shift change window. The outgoing White House policeman manning the bulletproof entry booth was not pleased. I added to his inconvenience by the effrontery of not being on his admission list!

“You're not cleared through; you'll have to contact your contractor on that phone behind you; next,” he explained. It turns out I impressed some of my band mates when, in response to the White House operator's request to spell the last name of “my contractor,” I said, “Last name Horst: hotel, oscar, romeo, sierra, tango.”

For some reason I was on the no-fly list, or not on the can-enter list. While I and others were trying to contact somebody already inside, the rest of us were spreading instrument cases, drum cases, Nike bags of music, Adidas bags of lunch, Under Armour bags of who-knows-what, some thirty feet along the sidewalk. The lone police officer, realizing there was no way he was going to get out

of there at 3PM, expressed his lack of appreciation.

“Nobody told us to expect you; your contractor really screwed up!” he said, along with some eye rolling and head shaking. He said this just as the social secretary, coming to vouch for me, came up behind him.

“Look,” she said, “I’ve been working my ass off on this since 6:00AM, and I don’t need that kind of shit from you!”

The officer was a bit surprised, but we rather got the idea that he knew she was a short-timer, soon to be swept away on the patronage tide. It was an interesting dynamic. He wasn’t overtly disrespectful, but he wasn’t the least bit apologetic.

But it did get me my “backstage pass,” a laminated card on a ball-chain that said, “Worker; Escort Required.” I noticed two things about it. First, it had an RFID chip embedded in it, suitable for operating the turnstile. Second, it was utterly plain and non-descript, nothing but the words, nothing that would make it pilfer-worthy for souvenir purposes. Sure, you could maybe swipe it and tell your pals it was a White House backstage pass, but there was nothing about it to confirm such a claim.

And for all that, security was a joke! Of course, I triggered the metal detector, but the guard keenly perceived that this could be because I was carrying forty pounds of baritone sax on my back. There was no wanding as there had been at Kennebunkport. I could have smuggled in a pisto, and nobody would have been the wiser. I’d just have to carry it in my pocket, not an instrument case!



In at last! We entered the east portico, passing a giant, seasonal, nutcracker soldier. There were other guards, seated and standing, at various internal points, but the backstage pass worked its magic. The entrance was at the basement level, so we had to climb a flight of twenty marble stairs to get to the East Room. The band stand was set up between the two Christmas trees in this earlier picture



Figure 3: White House East Room

of the East Room.

We found most of the set-up already done, by a Durango full of band members who arrived slightly early and were admitted before the filming had begun. We set up our instruments, went down the marble steps again, and then down another flight of twenty to a sub-basement room. Those of us with theater experience would have called it a green room. But there's already a "Green Room,"

on the first floor, so the staff called it the “containment area.” That sent us a message about how we were regarded.



Figure 4: Stair to the Containment Area

At the foot of the stairs was a small room with a table and ice chest filled with soft drinks and water. We piled our cases under the stairs and checked out the rest of the space. This picture was taken from where the table

stood. We spent most of the afternoon down here.

The hall with table and drinks opened (from the left as you look up the stairs) onto a large (say 20'x20') room with a full-width dressing table and mirror on the far wall and pictures on the left and right walls of various celebrities who were contained here. I recognized Kenny Chesney, Yo-yo Ma, Al Green, and Brian Setzer. There were four other pictures of totally unfamiliar folks. Somehow I expect that MoodSwings won't be joining them, but, well, we hadn't performed yet, so who knows?

In the right wall, between Al Green and Kenny Chesney, there was a door leading to a huge bathroom, with five stalls on the left and sinks on the right. No urinals; no auto-flush valves.

We got the cases stowed and went up for a quick, 45-minute rehearsal and sound check. The room is small, so we had mikes only for the vocalists, not our usual ear-bleed amplification system.

After the rehearsal, from about 3:45–4:15PM, we had a tour of public areas of the White House. Yeah, it's an old place, with stylized, formal decor, but there's a boatload of *je ne sais quoi* too! This inscription under the mantel in the state dining room was added by Franklin Roosevelt. That renovation was ordered by Truman. These magnolia trees were planted by Thomas Jefferson. This tea urn was a gift to John Adams. That is original Duncan Phyfe furniture. I was impressed! Of course there are a few modern touches. For example, if you ever take such a tour, be sure



to tap the windows. Talk about thermo-pane! They're all inch-thick Lexan, or some such bullet-resistant substance.

Back to the containment area, to be kept from underfoot as various Movers and Shakers (or perhaps only wannabes) went about their Important Business. Then we got a tour of the Oval Office area. This is afforded, we were told, only to those who know somebody. In our case, that would be Justine Sterling, our liaison with the social office. We were also told that our particular tour dispensed with the velvet rope that keeps the *hoi polloi* at a suitable distance.

We weren't allowed to enter the Oval Office, but we were allowed to walk up to the door, stick our heads in, and gawk. I'm tempted to say that it looked just like it did in that X-Men movie, where mutants were flitting around, but I found myself taking it rather too seriously for that.

Our tour guide, a staffer-friend of the Kennebunkport bride and groom, gave a very moving speech. Sure, some of it was a description of the ephemera that will turn over with each administration, but much of his speech was built around the **Resolute Desk**. This desk, constructed of timber from a British vessel and donated by Queen Victoria, has been in continuous use since Rutherford B. Hayes. We learned how various presidents added to it: Roosevelt, the front panel to conceal his leg braces; Truman, an eagle; Reagan, a two-inch lift. The guide described how the president spent his day at that desk. You got the feeling



Figure 5: The Resolute Desk

that this really was a sacred precinct. Ok, cynics, crack wise if you like, but then try it yourself.

Back to the containment area for dinner at six. Not the usual cold cuts we get at the Marriott. The dinner was from the buffet set up in the state dining room, but I don't think it was complete. We got huge trays of lamb chops, sliced ham, rolls, and hors d'oeuvres cheese chunks. Not exactly a balanced diet, but there was plenty of it. I was just finishing as my 6:30PM class, covered by colleague **John McFadden**, started back in Timonium.

After dinner, we slipped into something less comfortable. First, the guys changed into tuxes with red vests, and then the girls took over the head to slip into their \$200–600, glorified prom dresses. Of course, they had been primping with brushes and curling irons at the dressing table for an hour already. The dress theme was “gem tones.” One was in turquoise, another sapphire, another

ruby, etc. As it worked out, we guys were seated in folding chairs around the periphery of the 20'x20' dressing room. The only gap in the chairs was the entrance to the bathroom. That means that, as each of the women came out, we'd hoot and clap, offering comments like a gymnastics judging section. Since they are performers, they took full advantage of the opportunity to flounce and pose.

At 7:30PM, it was photo-op time. Our escort escorted us from the containment area to one of the diplomatic reception rooms. Those are one floor up from our sub-basement green room, but one floor down from the main floor of the White house. Professional-grade photo equipment was already in place. The photographers efficiently arranged us in front of a fireplace (the White house is full of fire places) with a slot left for "the boss" and the first lady.

When all was ready The Boss came in.

OK, Bush has taken his share of knocks in the press. But he does extremely well at putting you at ease and making you feel welcome. It's an understatement to say that he's a world-class schmoozer. That doesn't do him justice. One of the band's Bush-haters said later, "Damn, if I'd have stayed there much longer, I'd have turned Republican; Suzanne (his wife) would kick me out!"

After three quick photo shots, the pose dissolved. The president and first lady gave us all unhurried face time and handshakes. Our escort assured us that she had seen them make the 400<sup>th</sup> person in a reception line feel as

welcome as the first, and I can believe that.

Now it's show time!

Back up to the East Room. Our six-inch-high bandstand was against the east wall of the East Room centered between the Gilbert Stuart portraits of George Washington on stage left and Martha Washington on stage right. This is where the press corps sits for large press conferences, with the president's podium across the dance floor from the bandstand, backing up against the entrance to the East Room from the "Cross Hall," the hall that joins the East Room to the state dining room on the other side.

In front of us, on either side of the Cross Hall entrance, were two open bars, fifteen-foot-wide tables covered with red table-cloths, already attended by a few drink-seeking buffet-skippers. Actually they were the smart ones, because there were mini-buffets and a few tables set at the extreme north and south ends of the room. There was a large dance floor left open between us and the open bars. The entire room has a teak-looking parquet floor, so there was no need for the temporary dance floors you see at your usual wedding reception.

We started on time, with **Mike Mullis**, our yarmulke-wearing pianist (here in a zoot suit), out from behind the keyboard, singing *Jingle Bell Rock* from the center of the bandstand. I should note that he had switched his seasonal purple Ravens yarmulke for a more formal black velvet one. We went on from there with our "dinner set," which basically means more Sinatra tunes and no disco.



Figure 6: Mike Mullis

This was followed by a dance set, which means it can get raucous. We played continuously, with no breaks. The musical part of the evening just zoomed by. I couldn't believe that we had to cut several tunes on the [set list](#), because we were out of time.

Let's be honest: We kicked White House ass (musically speaking, of course)! Imagine a crowd of anal-retentive, formally-clad, grey-haired, cosmetic-surgery-enhanced VIP's and spouses shaking their booties out on the dance



floor. It's true! They did!

To my left I saw Steny Hoyer getting down. To my right I saw **Richard Heyman**, dean of MoodSwings, direct the



Figure 7: Richard Heyman

mike to gravel-voiced Charles Rangel for a duet on *New York, New York*.

Ben Cardin was there but not very active. Dutch Ruppersberger, my congressman (who should lose that black hair dye), I saw only bellying up to the bar. But still! The social secretary assured us that, in eight years, she never

saw the dining room clear out so fast and the dance floor so full.

We did our usual show: as much form as musical substance. That included going out on the floor to wave our horns around for *In the Mood* and *Sing, Sing, Sing*. The crowd dealt well with **Jack Vaeth**, our leader, honking his



Figure 8: Jack Vaeth

tarnished brass, 1930's-vintage, Conn “transitional” tenor in their faces.

And **Kristin Lagana**, our twenty-something, white-girl



Figure 9: Kristin Lagana

version of Tina Turner, took a wireless mike and shamelessly hammed it up with the crowd on the dance floor, strutting like a peacock, dancing the twist with Nancy Pelosi.

I expected that the crowd would go out like a light on the dot of 11PM, just like the good Republicans did at Kennebunkport. But no! They actually called for an encore. This required permission from the Secret Service. Permission obtained, Jack called for *Shout*. This is performed by **Xavier Cole**, one of our trombones. We play it in a key that makes him strain to hit the high notes, but that adds to what we call “dramatic tension.” It also makes him



Figure 10: Xavier Cole

sweat a lot, which looks cool.

As we went through the “little bit softer now/little bit louder now” drill, I mused, while looking down the cleavages of all those crouching trophy wives, about what Thomas Jefferson might think of all this. I had to stop, lest my head explode.

After everybody shouted, we were herded back down to the containment area. We slipped back into our business casual while the premises were cleared. Justine, our liaison, came down and thanked us profusely both for our patience and our performance. She distributed our to-

ken gifts, presidential seal pins for the ladies and cufflinks for the men, as well as the booklet describing the White House Christmas decorations.

This was our only remuneration. The White House has no entertainment budget. All who perform there do so *gratis*. The White House does pay expenses though, but, since we're local, it was a day trip for us. We were really a bargain for the taxpayer.

Jack gave a nice little speech thanking Justine for her help and consideration during the day. We've played for some real Bridezillas, played gigs where nobody thought we might want something to eat, and been told not to come in the front door (yeah, [Belvedere](#), lookin' at you). Justine made sure our experience at the White House, despite the hurry-up-and-wait routine, was nothing like that.

When it was safe for us to be seen in public again, we took our cases up those two marble staircases, packed up, and headed out. And yes, you do have to return the backstage pass in order to get out.

There was some musing about the whole thing on the drive back. After all, how many groups get to play the White House anyway? And the night before, the president and first lady were with Barbra Streisand and the surviving members of the Who at the Kennedy Center. And then us, the next night, us! Two of the White House staffers said, "Good bye, I hope to have you at my wedding."



Holy shit, we just played the White House! What's left, except for maybe Buckingham Palace and the Vatican? My Dad, whose Duke Ellington records got me playing sax in the first place, would have been so proud. I wore his class ring (U.S. Naval Academy, 1940) in memory of him that night.

The down side is that it took from about 10:00AM, when I started to get ready, until 2:00AM, when I finally climbed into bed. It was draining. **Paul Tallon**, a colleague, covered my two classes the next day (the last class day of the semester), because I knew I wouldn't be able to handle it. I wanted to be sure to have some time to type all this out, while I could still remember the details.

So that's the story of my White House debut. Not bad, huh? Here's the official photo of us in a diplomatic reception room with the first couple.



Figure 11: White House Debut