

Music in Metropolitan Washington: Thriving Traditions

by Phyllis M. May-Machunda

Washington, the capital city, has long been known for its official culture and public celebrations such as presidential inaugurations, Independence Day pageantry, military band concerts, state funerals, and embassy receptions. Yet it possesses another reality, one sometimes hidden beneath the official veneer. Washington, the residential city, burgeons with cultures transplanted from beyond urban, state, and national boundaries as well as with hybrid traditions newly rooted in an urban environment. Over the next several years the Office of Folklife Programs will explore the fascinating, vital, and variegated pool of cultures that enliven the Washington metropolitan area.

Metropolitan Washington, with over two million residents, is currently the home of more than 850,000 Blacks, nearly 100,000 Hispanics, an almost equal number of Asians, and thousands of other peoples from around the world. Unique forces have shaped the cultural development of the distinct yet interdependent residential communities located on the banks of the Potomac and Anacostia Rivers. Evolving as a center designed to meet the needs of national politics and government, the city neither developed a culture based on a manufacturing economy nor drew a large European immigrant population as did New York and Baltimore. Instead, it merged its southern agrarian culture with northern business interests and developed a strong workforce geared to service and government. The traditions arising out of this mix were strongly enriched by a continual influx of people from the South and, more recently, immigrants from Central America, the Caribbean, and Southeast Asia. For thousands who have moved to the area, the city has been the focal point of ardent dreams, abundant hopes, and magnificent intentions. People, viewing the city as the pinnacle of American possibilities, have flocked to Washington throughout its 200-year history, in search of refuge, a better life and greater opportunities for freedom, education, power, respect, employment, and financial security. While some have come with abundant wealth, others have brought little more than themselves, their values, and their traditions to sustain themselves in their transition to a new situation.

Music is among the most vital of these intangible traditional resources that help to support these Washingtonians. To understand the traditional musics of Washington, we may first look at the variety of communities that create and carry on these traditions. Urban dwellers characteristically belong to multiple communities such as those based on occupational, religious, residential, social/recreational, familial, and ethnic affiliations. A member of a community may or may not share membership with the people who participate in the

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The combined gospel choirs of Mt. Bethel Baptist Church, 1st and Rhode Island Ave., N.W., perform at an Easter morning service. Photo by Daphne Shuttleworth

various areas of his or her daily life. For example, some Korean-Americans in Washington may live, work, and socialize together, but many middle-class Black Americans in Washington typically do not. The people with whom Blacks work may not be the same people who live in their neighborhoods or with whom they socialize on a regular basis. Each community has developed particular institutions and networks of support facilitating social interaction and exchange of information. Some of these communities are defined by common geographical boundaries, as in a neighborhood, and traditions may emerge out of that experience. Other communities may share or be perceived to share common characteristics such as age, ethnicity, occupation, social interests, or even family relationship. The sharing of values, perspectives, and experiences creates a basis for the existence and growth of tradition. Music provides a channel for the expression of community-based values through melodies, rhythms, and words.

In large cities such as Washington, traditional communities find economical and efficient ways to disseminate information about their activities. Washington has dozens of ethnic and neighborhood newspapers, bilingual and special interest radio and television programs, church bulletins, flyers, and multi-colored posters announcing upcoming community events not mentioned by mainstream media. Churches, neighborhood schools, restaurants, community centers, and local festivals are a few of the institutions that support traditional performance. Such community institutions not only disseminate information about the traditions but also may offer a place to construct, rehearse, transmit, and present it as well.

Music is a central part of festive occasions and celebrations as well as an integral feature of everyday life. People mark what they feel is distinctive and valuable through the use of music, frequently accompanied by dance and ritual. For instance, various Asian communities of Washington have maintained some of the seasonal ceremonies of their homelands, such as Lao or Chinese New Year's

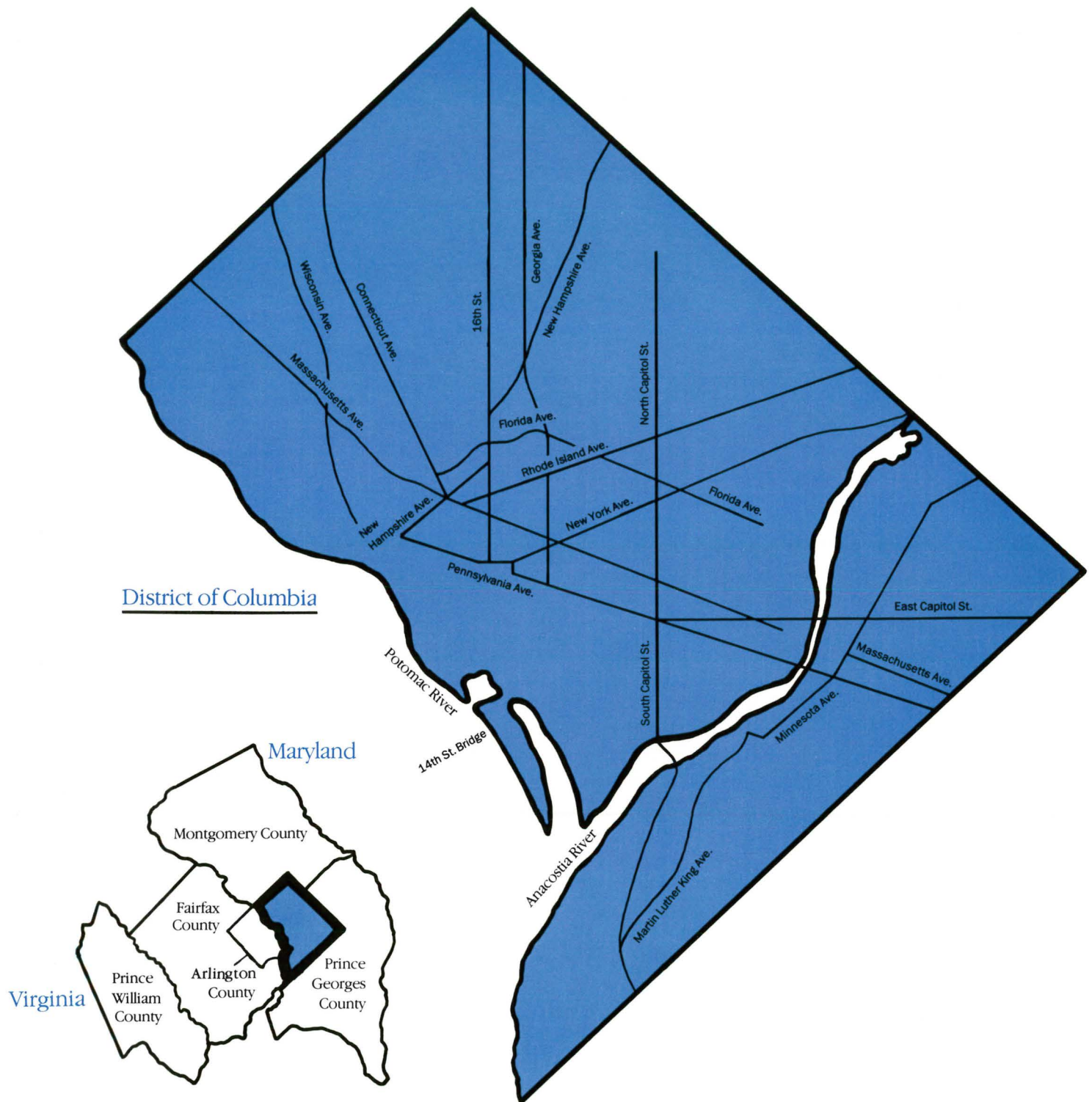


Hispanic, African and Afro-American children play handclapping games on the playground of Ross Elementary School, 17th and R Sts., N.W.
Photo courtesy of Olivia Cadaval

celebrations which occur on various dates throughout the calendrical year. These elaborate and colorful ceremonial events incorporate music, costumes, parades, food, and dance and draw community members from the entire eastern seaboard.

Gospel heads the list of Black traditional musics for which Washington is known. As Pearl Williams-Jones points out in the article which follows, gospel music thrives in a variety of forms in this city, ranging from the harmonies of traditional quartet groups to the sounds of more contemporary soloists, ensembles, and choirs, some of which blend classical techniques with more traditional Black gospel music. Black churches have served as a primary conduit for the transmission of Black musical aesthetics, even for those who have studied music privately. Hundreds of churches support numerous choirs, smaller family groups, and other ensembles and soloists who provide their memberships with gospel music. They have offered sympathetic and nurturing performance environments for those who have directed their skills to the glorification of the Lord. Gospel music is central to a variety of community events in addition to regular services: for example, pastor, choir, and church anniversary celebrations, as well as funerals are filled with gospel music. Some churches regularly house rehearsals and sponsor concerts by community artists outside their own membership. These activities and frequent performances at other churches in and out of the city provide opportunities for mutual exchanges of ideas, news, and repertoire.

Some of the newest and most intense secular musical performances in Washington arise from Black youth. Go-go, a dance music tradition born in this city, is usually performed by small bands. Layered rhythmic patterns are blended with call and response, percussive instrumental riffs, and quotations from familiar melodies, frequently overlaid with rap (a patterned rhythmic speech) and accompanied by patterned coordinated movement. Less complex in their multi-layered structures but related in their uses of rhythmic



patterns, repetition, and call and response structures are several other forms that have dominated many of the expressive and competitive play energies of D.C.'s youth including such female activities as cheering, double-dutch (a form of jumprope incorporating multiple ropes), and collegiate performance genres such as stepping, a type of fraternal "cheer."

The urban environment offers special opportunities for cultural contact and exchange among a variety of communities and ethnic



The Khmer Traditional Music Ensemble includes a wide range of instruments, left to right: *khim* (hammer dulcimer), *skor* (hand drum), *takbe* (zither), *tro* (fiddle), *roneat* (xylophone), *sam-pbo* (double headed drum). Photo by Daphne Shuttleworth

Suggested reading

Green, Constance McLaughlin. *Washington: A History of the Capital, 1800-1950*. Princeton: Princeton University, 1962.

_____. *The Secret City: A History of Race Relations in the Nation's Capital*. Princeton: Princeton University, 1967.

Hutchinson, Louise Daniel. *The Anacostia Story, 1608-1930*. Washington, D.C.: Smithsonian Institution Press, 1977.

groups. One example is in the Adams-Morgan/Mt. Pleasant neighborhoods, long recognized as the center of cultural activity in the city for Hispanic and African people from the U.S., Central and South America, the Caribbean, and Africa. The Hispanic population in the city is predominantly refugees from Guatemala and El Salvador, with smaller numbers from Mexico, Puerto Rico, and Cuba. Some groups, such as Cubans, arrived in more than one wave of migration, each from a different social class and carrying a different set of cultural traditions. Many of these communities celebrate select traditions particular to their own cultures. However, in other cases, where fewer community members can pass on specific traditions, many residents of Adams-Morgan have been forced to focus on other traditions similar to their own. This sharing of traditions has resulted in a synthesis or pan-ethnic style, celebrating a multicultural heritage. In this urban milieu Hispanic, Caribbean, and African musicians constantly create new urban performance forms by drawing fragments from known repertoires and styles and transforming them into new expressions through the use of new harmonies, updated texts, and changes in tempo, rhythmic configurations, or performance style. These traditional musicians often learn to play in a variety of musical styles from outside their own cultures in order to satisfy the tastes of their diverse audiences. The events for which they perform are rarely attended solely by their own ethnic communities. The musicians are able to switch musical styles as easily as others switch dialects within a language to communicate to their chosen audiences while their audiences expand their musical tastes and support them appreciatively.

Music is ephemeral, yet enduring. It embodies the values and aesthetics of a culture through words and restructuring of sound. It is flexible enough to incorporate melodies or poetry hundreds of years old, yet able to address the most contemporary issues with relative ease. An integral part of living, traditional culture thrives in urban Washington, D.C. through music.