

Music in Metropolitan Washington

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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 has another reality, one sometimes hidden behind official functions. Washington, the residential city, burgeons with cultures transplanted from beyond urban, state, and national boundaries as well as hybrid traditions newly rooted in an urban environment.

Metropolitan Washington, with over four million residents, is currently home to more than one million African Americans, 250,000 Hispanic Americans, nearly 250,000 Asian/Pacific Americans, and thousands of other peoples from around the world. Unique forces have shaped the cultural development of the distinct yet inter-

dependent 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 developed a strong workforce geared to service and government. The metropolitan area has been enriched by a continual influx of people from the South and, more recently, immigrants from Central America, the Caribbean, Southeast Asia and the Horn of Africa. For thousands who have moved to the area, the city has been a focal point of ardent dreams, expanding hopes, and magnificent intentions. Viewing the city as an environment of distinctly American possibilities, people 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

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The D.C. Harmonizers sing at a Gospel program in Washington. The Harmonizers, founded in 1952, are one of nearly 80 gospel quartets active in the D.C. area. *Photo courtesy D.C. Commission on the Arts*

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 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 African Americans in Washington typically do not. The people with whom African Americans 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 geographical boundaries, such as a neighborhood, and traditions may emerge out of that experience. Other communities may lack geographic definition but share common characteristics such as age, ethnicity, occupation, social interests, or even family relationship. The sharing of values, perspectives, and experience creates a basis for the existence and growth of tradition. Music provides a channel for the expression of community-based values.

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 celebrations. These elaborate and colorful ceremonial events incorporate music, costumes, parades, food, and dance and draw community members from the entire eastern seaboard.

Washington has long been a center of gospel music. 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 African American gospel music. African American churches have served as a primary conduit for the transmission of 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 of 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 African American 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 and accompanied by coordinated movement. Less complex in their multi-layered structures but

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THE MUSIC PERFORMANCE TRUST FUNDS

Each year since the 1970s, the Music Performance Trust Funds (MPTF) have generously supported musicians performing at the Festival of American Folklife.

The MPTF was founded in 1948. At that time new technology had made long-playing phonograph recordings possible. But sound recordings initially caused performers to lose employment and income, since people could listen to these recordings over and over again without payment to the musicians. Negotiations between the recording industry and the musicians' union established a pool of funds to compensate performers. The recording industry contributes money to MPTF from the sales of LP, cassette, and CD albums.

MPTF support of free, live, public performances like those at the Festival has many important benefits. The exposure that relatively little-

known musicians receive at these performances improves the chances that they will be offered recording contracts. When musicians already have recordings on the market, the performances stimulate increased sales. The events also help raise the level of understanding for a wider range of music and build greater audience appreciation for live performance.

To date, the MPTF has spent more than \$340 million on its projects. MPTF has enabled the Smithsonian to research and present rich talent at the Festival every year for two decades. It has been crucial in our ability to offer many relatively unknown musicians "equal time" with established career musicians. Many of today's well-known artists in fact had their first introduction to the commercial world when they played together with professional musicians on MPTF-funded projects.

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 female activities such as cheering, double dutch (a form of jump roping 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 groups. One example is in the Adams Morgan and 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 American, the Caribbean, and Africa. The Hispanic population in this part of the city consists predominately of 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.

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.



Suggested Listening

Adams, Tom. *Right Hand Man*. Rounder 0282.

Ganga: *Live from Berlin*. International Management.

Jackson, John. *Don't Let Your Deal Go Down*. Arhoolie 378.

The Johnson Mountain Boys. *Blue Diamond*. Rounder 0293.

Kouyate, Djimo. *West African Kora Music*. Music of the World T101.

Mulvihill, Brendan and Donna Long. *The Morning Dew*. Green Linnet 1128.

Oboade. *Kpanlogo Party*. Lyricord 7251.

Hasan Mohammed, originally from Ethiopia, performs at the Twins Restaurant in Washington. *Photo by Balsha Gebretsadik, courtesy D.C. Commission on the Arts*

Li Tian Xiong is a jinghu player with the Han Sheng Chinese Opera Institute. The troupe was founded in 1977 by David Lee to promote Peking Opera in the Washington area. *Photo by Wei-Ye Jia, courtesy D.C. Commission on the Arts.*

