

Finding America's heart in the nation's head, Washington, DC, is no easy task. If one can crest Capitol Hill, crammed with hardboiled politicians, flagrant flesh-pressers, and haughty up-and-comers, the district's true delight comes into view: the ethnic mix of the world's foremost global village.



Walking down the steps of the temple-like Lincoln Memorial on a muggy July day in DC, I find Newt Gingrich. The former Speaker of the House and poster boy for conservative Republicans is standing in front of the reflecting pool with the mighty Washington Monument obelisk in the background. He is sweating like a stuck pig under the sun and hot lights of a movie crew, which is filming the gray-haired grandstander read the same lackluster words over and over again from a large cue card.

"Winning the future! Defending God! Reconnecting with America!" As he underscores each line with a firm nod, the sweat rains down off his brow. The makeup artist covers her face with her hands. There's not enough powder in the world....

A heavyset black woman in orthopedic shoes and oversized sunglasses saunters by the gaggle of onlookers. "Asshole!" she shouts in Gingrich's general direction. He doesn't blink. Neither does his wife, who stands diligently by his side with a strained smile stretched across her face.

The director calls cut. "That was a perfect take, people, but we had some... audio difficulties." The black woman chortles, shakes her head, and moves along.

Father Abraham, the deified patriarch of American equality, looks down on us from his marble throne and beams with a knowing smile.

WASHINGTON, DC is home to the US federal government, the Smithsonian Institute and hundreds of other big-league national and international organizations. Why the founding fathers selected this small swatch of marshland, just over 60 square kilometers (160 square miles) in size, as the seat of the nation's government is incomprehensible to me. But as a compromise between the "barbaric" South and the "freewheeling" North in 1790, Washington was carved out of what US President Thomas Jefferson fondly dubbed "that Indian swamp in the wilderness." Like most things Washingtonian, conflict is the city's birthright.

Even today, Washington is saddled with a tug-o-war between federal and civic rights (DC has no voting delegate in either chamber of congress—their license plate reads "Taxation without Representation"), between Northern practicality and Southern gentility, and most palpably between the elite rich in the city's core and to the west, and the neighborhoods of destitute poor in the east. This incessant strife between the haves and the have-nots is glaringly obvious, from the bougainvillea-lined streets of Georgetown to the Salvadorian machete gangs of Columbia Heights. But it's these disparate and sometimes warring tribes that give the district its character as the dynamo of the Eastern seaboard.

Soul Searching

BY JONAS MOODY
PHOTOS BY PÁLL STEFÁNSSON





SHARON JONES, a small, thick black woman with piercing eyes and lungs like a bullhorn, paces onto the stage with all the pomp and circumstance of a foreign dignitary. The Dap Kings, her band clad in smart pinstripe suits, begins to churn out a beguiling groove. She radiates heat and frenetic soul and funk at the cozy Black Cat nightclub on 14th Street in the city's U Street corridor.

"Bush, we tired of yo' lies!" she launches her words out like a Baptist preacher and is answered with cheers.

"You got our people being killed ev'y day! I'm gon' get the Dap Kings together and we gon' ride up to the White House. I'm gon' knock on the do'..." She vehemently thrusts her fist in the air in a black power salute while a snare drum punctuates her knocks.

"Ev'y American in the US of A is gon' say we ain't gon' pay *no mo' taxes!*" The crowd explodes with shouts and applause. Ms. Jones is preaching to the choir.

It seems every man, woman, and child inside the Capital Beltway has something to say when it comes to politics, and deep in the funk and jazz lounges, clubs, rock shows and hip-hop concerts on U Street is no exception.

U STREET IN NORTHWEST WASHINGTON is a cultural cocktail popular among trendsetters and adventurous bar hoppers, although its roots are firmly planted in its heritage as the black Broadway of the 1920s and 30s. Jazz legends Duke Ellington and Pearl Bailey were locals, and regulars included Ella Fitzgerald, Louis Armstrong and Billie

Holiday at venues like Bohemian Caverns, which still features jazz shows. After the 1950s the area sunk into disrepair, hitting a low point in 1968 when the corridor became ground zero for rioting that broke out after Martin Luther King, Jr. was assassinated.

Today U Street remains a vibrant area of town attracting first and foremost DC's fervent music fans of all manners and colors, from punks and hipsters to jazz enthusiasts and hip-hoppers. After shows the crowds migrate in droves to Ben's Chili Bowl, which proudly proclaims itself the only ground sacred enough to remain unscathed during the riots. Since 1958 the Bowl has served up southern delights like chilidadogs and half-smoke sausages. Inside there is a sense of shared hunger and shared space among the disparate tribes sitting on red vinyl stools in a row, all eager for their dogs and cheese fries.

But after the show, I can't stomach the south so close to bedtime, so my fellow show-goer asks, "Could you handle a cupcake?"

"Any time of day," I reply.

We make for CakeLove, a late-night bakery for the U Street sweet tooth. Founded by a lawyer for the Department of Health, Warren Brown, who had had enough of both law and health, CakeLove is not only the ex-lawyer's business venture but also his contribution to society, dedicated to "bringing people better cake." Brown's love of all things baked shines through in his lively experimentations like lime buttercream frosting and my favorite, the Cynthia's Sin cake, with candied peanuts and chocolate mousse. No knob of butter nor drop of cream is spared. Though you'll not

find any collard greens or chitterlings here (you'll have to go down the street to Henry's for that) there is plenty of soul in this food.

After an evening of good music and good cake I feel that DC does have some moments of harmony among the boarded-up houses, bulletproof-glass storefronts, and politician heckling. But you can't help but be aware of the luxury condominiums and designer shoe stores encroaching on the corridor. Like any civic diamond in the rough, gentrification is inevitable as the tides of white flight have turned and yuppies from the suburbs flood the city anew. Unfortunately, mixing with the locals is not always on their agenda. While the physical proximity narrows, the social gulf widens.

"CAN YOU BELIEVE all that 'taxation without representation' whining? Those people who elected Marion Barry [the black mayor of DC arrested for smoking crack then reelected after being released from prison in the 90s] don't deserve to vote." These were the words recently spoken to Samantha Spinney, a 27-year-old schoolteacher, while at a party of the freshest batch of young, elite DC nobility in the mainly white, affluent neighborhood of Cleveland Park, among the ultimate bungalows and houses designed by I.M. Pei. Other utterances delivered during the highbrow merrymaking included, "They'll be washing my car" and a host of proclamations beginning with "When we run the country...". Spinney was horrified.

"I couldn't believe that people actually said these things," Spinney confides to me over



Above: Lincoln Memorial is visited by people from all over the globe.

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From left to right: Vietnam Memorial Wall, Lincoln Memorial, Washington Monument, and Hirshhorn Museum and Sculpture Garden.

Ethiopian food in the immigrant-cum-nightlife district Adams Morgan. While we sit in the window seat of Meskerem Restaurant watching the hodgepodge of passers-by including preppy college kids, day workers and aging punks, Spinney regales me with horror stories of her stint as a legislative assistant to a congressman.

“Working on Capitol Hill is basically wading through the egos of class presidents from every high school in America, all savagely clawing for their perch in the oval office,” Spinney says. After accidentally tumbling into a job in the cesspool of Washington politics, she was quick to drag herself out, rinse herself off, and redirect her good will where it’s needed: the DC public school system.

“The entire set surrounding the Hill—politicians, lobbyists, bureau journalists, preppy law students—is so detached from the real people who live in this city,” Spinney declares. She’s only too pleased to distance herself from the manic players jockeying for positions deeper inside and further atop the Washington machine.

HOWEVER, these rat-racers have their eyes far too focused on the prize to see the toiling masses of civil servants and other laborers who keep the city afloat. The lion’s share of upper-class contempt comes from the younger generation of DC

aristocracy. The Washington City Paper recently broke an invite-only social-networking website called LateNightShots.com, where the new crop of young and preppy Republicans delight one another with stories of their sexual escapades and binge drinking in Georgetown bars. They thrive on elitism, trashing everyone from the new money who drive BMWs to the “barbarous horde” that peoples the district’s streets.

Their nest is the Waspy bastion of Georgetown, which fought vehemently (and availed) to keep a metro stop from opening in their haven of affluence. The pristine streets of Georgetown are charming, lined with colonial houses and the picturesque C&O Canal running between M and K Streets. Unfortunately, Georgetown has become no more than an outdoor shopping mall. A telltale allegory for the entire neighborhood, the lovely façades of M Street and K Street lack any sort of character within. Save for a few hangers-on, almost all the historical storefronts have been converted into retail chains like Nike, Abercrombie & Fitch and Starbucks.

But a mere three miles away in Adams Morgan, where I sit with Samantha Spinney and a plateful of spicy food, the characters abound. In the block of 18th street between Columbia and Kalorama, the heart of Adams Morgan, you can

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Ethnic food in Adams Morgan.

find Japanese, Salvadorian, Chinese, West African, Peruvian, Ethiopian and Spanish restaurants, an Irish pub, a hookah bar, a Ghanaian bazaar and a Hispanic botánica for all your voodoo needs.

Just outside our window a line of suits has formed at a blues bar under the neon sign, “Sorry We’re Open”. Madam’s Organ in Adams Morgan has become a sultry staple of the nightlife in the area, drawing the likes of Tony Blair, the Bush girls and, tonight, an odd mix of embassy staffers and rockers. The mystery is solved when I learn who’s headlining: Hungarian Ambassador András Simonyi and his band, the Coalition of the Willing. Simonyi, having grown up behind the iron curtain listening to Radio Free Europe, has a soft spot for rock and is wont to wail on his electric guitar for anyone who will listen: Democrat, Republican or Stalinist.

While Adams Morgan offers up a walk on the prettier side of ethnic diversity, there is still a swarm of trouble rumbling in nearby Columbia Heights and Mt. Pleasant. Gangs, drugs, rampant crime and gun control are just the icing on this tumultuous cake, and no public figure seems prepared to take a bite. But some brave souls have taken up the hoi polloi’s cause and are striving to save DC’s soul. Samantha Spinney believes there is good in the people of the city and is willing to

stake her career on it as a public school teacher in the sorely neglected, overburdened DC school system.

Some of Spinney’s kids call her a racist when she suggests they play hangman to practice spelling. But one boy, who is especially misbehaved, speaks out against them, “Nah. She ain’t no racist. Miss Spinney, you looks like a fighter.” Samantha Spinney is in her corner, waiting for the bell.

WAKING UP EARLY before the tourists strike, I reach the National Mall before the morning haze has burned off. The only denizens at this hour are the monarch butterflies and joggers. And like a scene from a Mel Gibson movie, a swiftly moving pack of marines from the barracks at 8th and I Street suddenly burst out of the haze, stampede past me, and are gone before I even have time to salute. As the sun rises I reconnoiter the lawn, zigzagging from one Smithsonian to the next before opening hours to plan my attack later in the day.

By the time I’ve made it to the Potomac’s edge my clothes cling to me and I’ve finished two bottles of water. For a moment of shade I find my favorite monument, the Jefferson Memorial, tucked away on the far side of the Tidal Basin almost under the Rochambeau Memorial Bridge. There is something pleasant and balanced about

its roundness; the only-slightly-larger-than-human size of Thomas Jefferson's figure makes him somewhat more approachable. "We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal..." read the opening lines to Jefferson's Declaration of Independence etched in giant letters on the stone panel behind him.

A Japanese woman plops herself down next to me with a grunt. She cools herself with a folding fan and makes hooting noises. Through her thick accent I think she says to me, "It's hot!" which is reconfirmed when she mimes panting like a dog.

I nod. "It is, indeed."

And then she does something unexpected. She turns and begins to fan me with great furious flaps of her arms. At first I'm startled, but I accept her offering graciously and enjoy the breeze.

Father Thomas, the deified patriarch of American humanity, looks down on us from his marble pedestal and beams with a knowing smile. Q



Jefferson Memorial.

DOIN' THE DISTRICT

▶ **Best meal on the Mall:** Mitsitam Café (meaning 'Dig in!' in the Piscataway peoples' language) at the Museum of the Native American, which serves up indigenous food with a modern spin, like chicken tamals and quinoa tortes. nmai.si.edu

▶ **For the CIA agent in us all:** Operation Spy is an hour-long experience at the International Spy Museum that has you chasing down international terrorists and cracking safes. Bring your brain and your wallet. USD 14. +1 (866) 779-6873. spymuseum.org

▶ **Monumenting with the stars:** The Reflecting Pool between the Lincoln Memorial and the WWII Memorial is stunning after nightfall. You'll skip the heat, miss the crowds and catch only moonbeams.

▶ **Best dinner without a fork:** Meskerem Ethiopian in Adams Morgan. Cheap and tasty. Try *messob* for a taste of everything or, if adventurous, *gored gored* for a spicy, raw meat delicacy. 2434 18th St. NW. +1 (202) 462-4100.

▶ **B&B that won't break the bank:** Tabard Inn close to Dupont Circle. Tiny rooms carved out of two existing Victorians. Great location, friendly staff, dynamite breakfast if you get the scones. +1 (202) 785-1277. tabardinn.com

▶ **Good music for all kinds:** Jazz? Bohemian Caverns, bohemiancaverns.com. Blues? Madam's Organ in Adams

Morgan, madamsorgan.com. Indie, Funk, and Hip-Hop? 9:30 Club, 930.com, and The Black Cat, blackcatdc.com.

▶ **Post-show grub:** Ben's Chili Bowl, 1213 U Street, followed by CakeLove, 1506 U Street.

▶ **Drag racing, anyone?** The 17th Street High Heels Race between P and R Streets is a sight to behold with hundreds of drag queens making the mad dash in their stilettos. Early October. Ask around the gay district at Dupont Circle.

▶ **For a touch of Georgie:** From White House hand towels to emery boards for guests of the Lincoln Bedroom, visit America's Spirit inside Union Station.

▶ **Federal government's hidden gem:** I'm not talking about Condoleezza. The Library of Congress rivals any building in Europe or America in terms of sheer elegance and grandeur. Frequent and free guided tours. loc.gov

▶ **Respite from retail in Georgetown:** Duck into Martin's Tavern. Sit in the booth where JFK popped the question to Jackie O and try the steak salad. 1264 Wisconsin Ave. NW.

▶ **Rock about DC:** "The District Sleeps Alone Tonight" by The Postal Service and "W-A-S-H-I-N-G-T-O-N, Baby, DC!" by the Magnetic Fields.

▶ **For all else:** Pick up a copy of the Washington City Paper distributed around town for free and find out what's shaking when you're doin' the district.

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