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TRAVEL

Washington, D.C.'s eclectic music scene is remarkably cool

The city has often had an under-the-radar influence, operating at subterranean and subversive frequencies.

By **Mike Fisher Special to the Star**

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The Velvet Lounge on U Street is one of many music clubs in downtown Washington.
Mike Fisher /

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WASHINGTON, D. C.—"Put your hands in the air!"

It's a hoarse cry for participation, not a demand. DJ Kool, the lanky honorary member of Rare Essence, a go-go band that's burning up the stage during a convention gig in the city, is doing the call-and-response that characterizes go-go — a homegrown, D.C.-centric genre that mixes heavy percussion beats over funk, soul, R & B and hip-hop melodies.

"Hit me with the horns!"

ARTICLE CONTINUES BELOW

The crowd is kind of stiff for a go-go concert, mostly out-of-towners, me among them. We're at a special event in the Newseum, a modern, interactive news museum on Pennsylvania Ave., which connects the White House and the United States capital.

Even so, I am, indeed, hit by the horns. My feet are moving, bypassing my brain. Washington, D.C., has often had an under-the-radar influence on music, operating at subterranean and subversive frequencies.

The go-go band Rare Essence led by DJ Kool performed at The Newseum in Washington.

Mike Fisher

This is the city that arguably birthed hardcore punk music for the rest of the country while inspiring Foo Fighters leader Dave Grohl, who grew up in the nearby Virginia suburbs. He returns Oct. 12 with his band to open Washington's new state-of-the art auditorium, Anthem, in the burgeoning Southwest Waterfront district.

Over the next few days and nights, we explore the city, discovering music venues, visiting some must-see monuments and museums, and finding a few tasty, affordable food joints.

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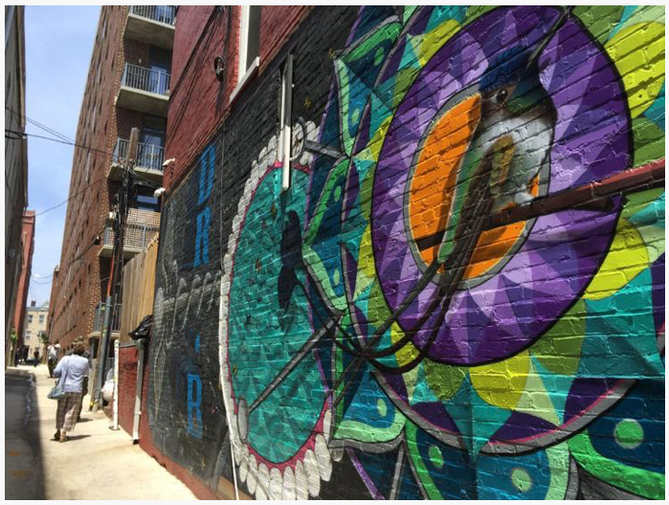
Washington was not what I expected. Who knew that this seemingly uptight town, the apparently polyester seat of the federal government, could be so undeniably, infectiously, remarkably cool?



What seems like an uptight town, the apparently polyester seat of the federal government, Washington is surprisingly remarkably cool.

Mike Fisher

I discovered what turned out to be my favourite club in the city by sitting next to a friendly Washingtonian in the downtown Absolute Noodle. The city is blessed with diverse eateries, from foodie fare to hole-in-the-wall cheap eats.

Over a bowl of creamy Tonkotsu Ramen and a crisp, Delaware-based Dogfish Head 90-Minute IPA India Pale Ale, I was told to check out the Adams Morgan district with its walkable nightlife scene for blues and jazz.

It cost less than $7 (U.S.) to take an Uber from the Marriott Marquis to the doorstep of Madam's Organ, where saxophone player Walter Tates Jr. led his extraordinary, four-piece soul and funk and reggae and jazz band One Nite Stand in a regular, weekly gig that has lasted 20 years and counting.

"We may be the longest running Monday night gig in the world," Tates Jr. said during a break outside the club, where he was hailed with a nod or a hello or a "Hey, Walter" from the constant stream of people passing by on the sidewalk or filing into the club.

The decor makes one's head swim, even as you enter and ease your way through the shoulder-to-shoulder dance floor to the bar on the left. There are several levels to the club. On the main floor, it's a taxidermy wonderland. There's a bison head and ducks. Boudoir paintings on the walls. A large wooden airplane hangs from the ceiling along with a bicycle.

Take a stroll in Washington's Shaw district and you'll find stunning murals in alleyways.

Mike Fisher

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The reliably feisty band was packed onto a small stage. Tates Jr. used a cowbell. It's the only club I've frequented where I could legitimately yell, "More cowbell!" Over three hours, the dance floor never lulled.

Later, I learned Madam's Organ is an institution of sorts in Washington. For full-on weird with a killer band, I recommend it, especially the Monday night gig.

Seeking a more elegant experience, we toured the stately John F. Kennedy Center for the Performing Arts, roaming in the aptly named Grand Foyer and walking beneath the eight-foot bronze bust of Kennedy, which is just steps from the fabled Opera House with its galaxy of house lights. Here's a tip: Friends of the Kennedy Center Tour Guides give free guided tours.

Matching grit with style, the 9:30 Club is perhaps the best known, most widely regarded nightclub and concert venue in Washington. Founded in 1980 and still going strong, it has hosted everyone from Root Boy Slim and the Sex Change Band to the Red Hot Chili Peppers and the Smashing Pumpkins, among many others. Food and drink here include beers by local brewer DC Brau and the 9:30 cupcakes for $5 (U.S.) made by Buzz Bakery.

The 9:30 Club in downtown Washington has long been a venue for alternative acts including Gogol Bordello, an American gypsy punk band (pictured here at the club).

John Shore for 9:30 Club

At Black Cat, a nightclub near the 9:30 Club, you can see bands coming through the city that are gaining traction, mostly Indy rock. Tip: Get your tickets early to the Kennedy Center or the 9:30 Club performances, as shows can swiftly sell out.

Two other historical music venues that I experienced are rooted in local culture.

The restored Howard Theatre in the Shaw neighbourhood hosts a gospel brunch (Maryland crab cakes, among other tasty items) featuring the Harlem Gospel Choir, one Sunday a month. The all-female group Be'la Dona performs a go-go music brunch about every two months — this is the one I fortunately attended, enjoying entrancing, soulful, danceable music.

The all-female go-go band Be'la Dona plays at The Howard Theatre to a full crowd during Sunday brunch.

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James Brown used to come and do five sold out shows in a row at the Howard Theatre, where The Supremes made their stage debut and The Isley Brothers were discovered.

The Lincoln Theatre in the city's U Street district, where we strolled past vibrant wall murals, was built in 1922. It served as a cultural draw in the city with Washington natives Duke Ellington and Pearl Bailey among the stars, though these days, you're likely to see acts such as jazz guitarist John McLaughlin and Brit punk/pop legend Paul Weller.

Everywhere, Washington wows. We walked the National Mall with its view of the obelisk Washington Monument and explored the nearby National Air and Space Museum, a Smithsonian Institution. It was the music, though, that really grabbed me. I'm a new go-go fan.

"I been to Toronto, or T-dot as a lot of kids call it, many times," said DJ Kool. "Drake come up to me in an airport, told me I was a legend. Who knows? Years ago, maybe he was a kid in the audience, hearing go-go, singing along."

DJ Kool wows the audience with go-go music at the Newseum, a fascinating news museum.

Courtesy of Washington.org

***Mike Fisher** was partially hosted by IPW, the U.S. Travel Association's annual international conference and trade show, which didn't review or approve this story.*

When you go:

Get there: A variety of carriers regularly offer direct flights from Toronto to Washington, D.C., that take about 90 minutes.

Stay: I stayed at the 1,175-room Washington Marriott Marquis (Marriott.com), a very comfortable downtown hotel popular with business people. It has an underground concourse to the DC Convention Center. It is otherwise centrally located near major music venues, museums and monuments.

Eat: So many great restaurants and bars. Named Restaurant City of the Year by Bon Appétit. Chinatown is less than a 10-minute walk from the Marriott Marquis. Legal Sea Foods (legalseafoods.com) had great shrimp wontons and sautéed mussels. Ted's Bulletin (tedsbulletin.com) is a kind of retro diner near both the 9:30 Club and Black Cat, with boozy milkshakes including the Millionaire Malt, livened with 18 Yr. Glenlivet.

Do your research: Washington.org

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