

The George Washington University

Summary and Review of Final Project:

The Rebirth of Jazz Amid Gentrification in Washington DC

An Analysis of Twins Jazz's Survival on 14th and U Street

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Introduction to Ethnomusicology

Professor Lornell

This final fieldwork project looks at how gentrification effects jazz clubs, and specifically analyzing Twins Jazz on U and 14th Street. I thought looking at this area, which after all was once called “Black Broadway,” would be perfect to examine how the movement of an entirely new audience to a local club could effect the club’s revenue, message, audience, performers etc. Twins Jazz was perfect to study, because they had moved about 15 years ago from Colorado Avenue to U Street. These areas are both in the District, but would have different demographics surrounding them and thus some variables were controlled (city, owners, type of club) while others had changed overtime (audience, location, the flocking of younger, white people into the city). I had also been to the club before, and so I had a basic familiarity that became an advantage when writing the paper. I remembered attending a GW Jazz concert at the club and sitting at the bar to watch my friend on the piano. An older, African American man sat next to me, and he said to the bartender “Isn’t this a jazz club? It doesn’t look like one.” I overheard the bartender say, “It’s a college band, that’s why.” This interaction struck me and peaked my interest in how gentrification of the District was affecting one of the jazz hubs of America.

U Street began to gentrify right around the time of Twins Jazz move to the area. While jazz clubs once lined the streets, now they are fairly difficult to find, with the exception of Blues Alley and Twins Jazz. Blues Alley may have experienced the same questions and problems Twins Jazz did, and a follow up fieldwork study would be interesting to find any parallels or differences between the two clubs. Furthermore, tracking down the owners of a club that moved from U Street to another area would be interesting. With Twins Jazz, who used gentrification in their favor by bringing in these younger audiences (college students, young professionals etc.) finding different view points on why this notion is harmful or helpful to jazz would be a good follow up.

Many of the resources I found had very different ideas on this and I felt ill equipped to have an opinion on it without asking older jazz musicians specifically. With more time and resources, I would have taken a stronger stance on this issue. Going into the project, I would have assumed that keeping jazz clubs open amid gentrification is an important issue because this would allow for the preservation and continuous of an art that is profoundly encompassing of black identity and struggle in America, but after reading online, I became aware that jazz in gentrified areas may be “damaged” or not authentic. This topic was outside the scope of my research paper, but definitely peaked my interest and widened my view on the issue. Quite honestly, it’s a topic that is very complex and rooted under many different psychological, social, and cultural layers.

I had never interviewed someone for a fieldwork project before this paper, and I was happy I had the opportunity to do so. My hypothesis going into the paper was that gentrification of the U Street area was hurting all jazz clubs, but clearly this was not the case. If I had done solely online research and did not go to the location itself and speak to the owner, Kelley Tesfaye, I would have written my paper on the horrors of gentrification to jazz. However, Twins Jazz may be a special case; their strategy of catering to younger audiences by having connections at multiple local college campuses (UMD, George Washington, UDC, Georgetown, and Howard) has undoubtedly helped the club keep their doors open. While the rent is nearly a dozen times higher on U Street, the cover charge of \$10 a person can help pay a decent amount of their expenses by just hosting one university show.

The topic of jazz and gentrification is large and thus the topics and factors considered are numerous. While my paper focused on how a club caters to a younger audience when it was specifically created for an older one, I would like to focus on other topics in the future. While

Kelley said she did not have anything to add about the topic of gender in her club, gender would be a huge issue to look in jazz in the District. An entirely female owned club is interesting enough to cover in a paper, but the fact that both Kelley and Maze are Ethiopian immigrants who built their name from the ground up is even more intriguing. I attempted to address the immigrant experience in the District, but again, I think more interviews and maybe sitting down with Kelley and Maze together would produce an inspiring piece on the universality but same time locality of jazz.

I was lucky to interview someone so passionate about her club. While I was doing the interview, the bartender, Wendy, suggested I talk to several GW Professors (Thad Wilson, Peter Fraize). With several weeks left in the semester, I was unsuccessful in establishing contact with either of them for an interview, but further research projects should contain interviews by either of the professors. The bartender also said she had worked for the twins for nearly 20 years, if that gave any indication of the women's character. It would have been a much more challenging project if Kelley was unwilling to help, but of course, she was selfless and encompassed everything jazz was about. I felt honored to complete this project about such an amazing woman.