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On U Street, Mood Indigo

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When I arrived in the District in 1999, the vibrancy of U Street made an impression on me.

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Duke Ellington was on U, and because I was an 18-year-old jazz aficionado fresh from Nashville, his presence made me feel at home. G. Byron Peck's mural of the great musician at the corner of 13th Street NW spoke volumes about Duke's effect on the Washington jazz and cultural scene. It also said to me that Washington valued its past and the contributions of its African American artists.

Duke's familiar face helped me through my first years at Howard University and gave me a sense of permanence through my many transitions. His face was there when I emerged from the Metro or crawled down U Street on the No. 90 bus. Duke's sad eyes watched over my friends and me as we made our 2:30 a.m. walks back to the dorm.

But one day my painted guardian disappeared. In his place was a construction site. Washington was expanding the Metro, and new (and expensive) housing was being built all around the neighborhood. Most significant, a luxury high-rise was going up across the street from where my mural had been. It was to be named "the Ellington." The nerve of some developers, I thought.

With Duke discarded to make room for a larger Metro stop, a sandwich shop and a Starbucks, it seemed that gentrification was wiping away U Street's character. I mourned the death of my Duke and my street.

But somewhere amid the pounding of jackhammers, the drying of concrete and the procession of construction workers, I began to undergo a little reconstruction of my own. It had been more than five years since I was a

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Howard freshman with twisted hair and a penchant for throwing my fist in the air for the cause of the week. As the years passed, and the hole between 13th and 14th streets NW filled in, I felt a strange anticipation begin to brew inside me.

When the "Starbucks coffee coming soon" sign was placed in the window of the signature green, black and white storefront, I could picture myself enjoying a Sunday morning there with my Apple PowerBook, a croissant and a double-tall extra-foam latte. Maybe the neighborhood was changing, but as a product of capitalism, I was finding ways to rationalize the changes.

The sidewalks suddenly seemed cleaner and the streets safer. Businesses were popping up where they had been afraid to pop up before. Dilapidated houses were getting makeovers, and the results were beautiful. I even booked an appointment to view the Ellington, where the cheapest apartments were going for almost \$2,000 a month. As I toured the building, with its mirrored elevators and state-of-the-art exercise facilities, I wondered if even Ellington could have afforded the rent. Maybe it was for the best that he wasn't around anymore to see how his community had been transformed.

Then, one day in spring, as I was walking down U, I looked up, and there he was. With the construction complete, Duke Ellington was back on his corner, gazing out with those soulful eyes. I almost couldn't look.

In the years Duke had been away, I had betrayed him with my double-tall extra-foam Starbucks latte. I had betrayed him with my hope of moving into a high-priced apartment. I had betrayed him by watching silently as the elderly and other lower-income residents of the neighborhood had been displaced.

When I think of the U Street corridor, I like to imagine it as it was when I first came to the District. Even though it was rundown, maybe even down-and-out in some people's eyes, for me it was hallowed ground. If Peck were around to create a new Ellington mural, he might paint a tear in the corner of Duke's eye.

If I quiet my mind, I still can feel the history on these blocks. If I close my eyes, I can see the community that supported black businesses, black children and black art. And if I listen long and hard, I can hear a jazz band. But when I open my eyes and look around, I see the face of a man who once embodied all these things, and these sad eyes that will never see them on U Street again.

-- **Amanda Sevier Miller**

amandawriter@mac.com

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