

"It was the hub. That's where everyone went." ... "It was exciting. There was always a line." ... "It was the theater for Black music, not just jazz." The Howard Theatre – it was "the place to be," the creative depot for Black musicians in the heyday of Washington, D.C.'s U Street, N.W. On August 22, 1910, the Howard Theatre, located at 620 T Street, N.W., opened its ornate doors adding to the "Black Broadway" emerging on "You Street," now known as the U Street Corridor. From the 1920's through the 1960's, some of the finest Black entertainers in America showcased their talents at the Howard Theatre. During its early years, vaudeville acts, plays, and circuses drew crowds to the Howard Theatre. In the 1920's, U Street was roaring and the Howard's popularity grew as jazz greats - Billie Holiday, Sarah Vaughn, Count Basie, Ella Fitzgerald, Charlie Parker, and Duke Ellington - performed there. Its success staged the opening of other great venues to open in Black Communities: Harlem's Apollo Theater, Philadelphia's Uptown, Baltimore's Royal, and eventually Chicago's Regal. Yet, in spite of its success, the Great Depression forced the Howard Theatre to close in 1929. The stage was silent for two years before reopening under new management on September 29, 1931. Washington, D.C.'s own Duke Ellington was the headliner, and for one week, he performed to an audience of standing room only.

Generations of Jazz on the U Street Beat

Duke Ellington

The Duke

By 1931, Ellington had a strong following among Blacks. He was well-known and his popularity was rising. Born on April 29, 1899, to James Edward and Daisy Kennedy Ellington, Edward Kennedy Ellington was raised in a middle-class D.C. neighborhood. Ellington's parents worked diligently to share their love of music with their son and provide piano lessons for him. As a child, Ellington favored baseball over private lessons. However, his interest for music grew intensely as he spent more time listening to ragtime pianists at Frank's Billiards next door to the Howard Theatre. Ellington began taking piano lessons again; this time, he was serious about them. At 17, Ellington embarked on his professional career as a bandleader, composer, and pianist after turning down a scholarship to attend The Pratt Institute of Fine Art. Nicknamed "Duke" by a childhood friend for his stylish dress and elegant manners, Ellington formed his first group, *The Duke's Serenaders*, in 1917. While they were U Street regulars, it was the second band – *The Washingtonians* – that launched his national success. Ellington joined the group in 1923 and eventually became the bandleader. Under his direction, in 1927, they were offered and accepted a position as house band for the famous Cotton Club, an all-White nightclub, in Harlem, New York. *The Washingtonians* were featured on a weekly national radio broadcast giving them a wider audience. Their popularity skyrocketed. Duke Ellington and his orchestra enjoyed success throughout the U.S. Duke Ellington's career flourished for more than 50 years until his death on May 24, 1974. While he is known as a jazz artist, Ellington preferred not to be categorized. During his lifetime, he composed more than 2,000 pieces of music and won 11 Grammys. Ellington even received the keys to the city of Los Angeles. In 1966, on behalf of Lyndon B. Johnson, he was presented with the President's Gold Medal. And, in 1969, Richard Nixon awarded Ellington with the Presidential Medal of Freedom.

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Buck Hill

The Jazz Postman

Roger "Buck" Hill, born in 1927, has solidified his notoriety as a tenor saxophone jazz great with his newest CD *Relax*. The 79-year-old Washingtonian said, "I always envisioned myself playing the tenor saxophone. I always liked the saxophone. Right from the beginning." Hill's talents extend beyond the saxophone and include the clarinet, which he has also played professionally for nearly 60 years. Hill noted, "I learned the clarinet because it gave me a wider audience." Hill's musical career began at 15, performing regularly in U Street jazz clubs and as a member of the Howard Theatre's house band. The Howard exposed him to the Duke, Count Basie, Benny Carter, and numerous others. Hill was nicknamed the "Jazz Postman" because he worked for the U.S. Postal Service full-time for 40 years by day and played jazz six nights a week. He resisted touring nationally to raise his family, stay connected to D.C.'s music scene, and teach another generation to love jazz. Hill's successful musical career includes his European debut at the North Sea Jazz Festival (1981) in the Netherlands and the mayoral declaration of "Buck Hill Day" (1982) in Washington, D.C. Hill appeared on fellow native Washingtonian and jazz artist Shirley Horn's CD, *I Remember Miles*, a tribute to Miles Davis for which she won a Grammy for best jazz vocalist. He also performed in the Eisenhower Theater (2004) as part of a tribute to Horn, who was recognized by the National Endowment of the Arts (NEA) as a jazz master in 2005. Hill has also received two NEA grants, one for composition and one for performance. At nearly 80-years old, Hill continues to perform. "I love it," he said about jazz. "You can't quit it once you start."

Ronnie Wells

Preservationist of Straight-Away Jazz

"Jazz picked me," said renowned jazz vocalist Ronnie Wells, who has performed nationally and internationally sharing the stage with other jazz musicians such as Billy Eckstine, Dr. Lonnie Liston Smith, Oscar Brown, Jr., Jimmy Witherspoon, and Dorothy Donegan. "I didn't have to think about it. When I first started listening to jazz and when I first started performing, it just pulled me in." Reminiscing, Wells added, "In the 50's and 60's, we would have listening sessions. Then, we would talk about it, discuss it, interpret it, and dissect it. We listened to what all of the instruments did. It was part of our life – our experience. It was a joy." Born and raised in Washington, D.C., Wells remembers the excitement of the U Street Corridor. Chuckling, she said that in the 40's, "On U Street, you could go from one club to another and not miss a beat." She added that the Howard "was our life – our breath." Straight-away jazz captured Wells' heart. Now, she works to keep it alive. "It's not often that you hear jazz music from the 20's, 30's, and 40's. You can go to hundreds of jazz festivals and never hear straight down the road jazz." In support of that era, Wells established the Fish Middleton Jazz Scholarship Fund (FMJF) nearly 20 years ago to perpetuate jazz and support emerging, young jazz artists. Musicians compete for scholarships at the annual East Coast Jazz Festival (ECJF) during Presidents' Weekend in February. In addition to providing a venue for jazz artists to perform, ECJF is a time when jazz is celebrated – a time when those who love jazz can listen and learn. Wells says, she too, continues as a "jazz student" "because I will never learn all that I have to."

Davey Yarborough

Performer, Composer, and Educator-the New Washingtonian

Not all accomplished performers have the ability to equally teach and mentor. Some outstanding musicians only perform. Davey Yarborough is equally amazing at teaching and mentoring. Since his early teens, Yarborough has had a passion for jazz. One of his earliest prized possessions is a gift from his aunt. "She gave me my own personal record," Yarborough laughs, "So, I wouldn't mess with hers." By the 60's, he was listening to live jazz on U Street. "I used to go to the Brown Jug... at 14th and U." There was always someone to encourage, advise, and support his dream as a musician. "The Creator always put me in the right places," he noted. "I'm a product of the community and should give back." That he has. At 52, Yarborough has been teaching at the Duke Ellington School of the Arts since 1984, where he founded the Jazz Studies Program. His investment in the community is illustrated in his positions as chair of the instrumental music department, director of the jazz orchestra, "The New Washingtonians," and saxophone instructor. Yarborough is also the president and artistic director of the Washington Jazz Institute, which he founded in 1998 with his wife, Esther Williams, to go beyond the classroom walls and continue training young musicians in jazz as rooted in D.C. As a performer, Yarborough is an acclaimed saxophonist and flautist. He has performed with famed Shirley Horn, Buck Hill, Ronnie Wells, Joe Williams, and Lena Horne to name a few. In fact, Duke Ellington's son, Mercer, asked Yarborough to join Ellington's famous band three times. There are few greater honors for musicians. "To me, it was the ultimate - being asked to join the Duke Ellington Band." However, Yarborough declined because of his dedication to his family and students. "I enjoy watching these young people take the music and run. I like to watch the culture grow. If not for school, some would not be exposed to it [jazz], then it would die." From the early 1900's through today, from Ellington to Yarborough, jazz continues to thrive in Washington, D.C. Its history still plays along the U Street Corridor. Memories of the Howard Theatre in its grandeur are housed in the minds of musicians who remember its significance in the community. Now, a younger generation is being taught to keep jazz alive.



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RONNIE WELLS PHOTO © EARL CALLAWAY

DAVEY YARBOROUGH PHOTO © EARL CALLAWAY

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