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U Street: The Corridor Is Cool Again

By ALICIA AULT

SAUNTER down U Street in northwest Washington almost any night and you'll hear the pulsing beat of urban nightlife: the tinny pop of a snare drum, the caustic sneering of an indie rocker, the smooth melodies of a lounge singer, the plaintive picking of a folkie and the driving chunk-a-chunk of hip-hop.

The U Street Corridor, the center of Washington's African-American nightlife for much of the 20th century and the birthplace of Duke Ellington, is vibrant again and the newest and hottest place in town for getting out on weekends after dark. The transformation that began in the late 90's, after three decades of decline and neglect, continues to gather speed, with boarded-up buildings reopened and transformed into galleries, shops, cafes and clubs, and nightlife seekers migrating over from Georgetown and Adams Morgan for a slightly older, less raucous scene where the patrons have a bit more money to spend.

"Adams Morgan is not new anymore," said Melih Buyukbayrak, who sold his interest in a restaurant there last year and is a co-owner of the new Tabaq Bistro in the U Street Corridor. "U Street is new and hip."

On weekend nights and even during the week, throngs from the city and suburbs, along with hip city visitors, crowd the dozens of restaurants, bars and clubs of the corridor, a strip of U Street from 9th Street to 16th Street and blocks nearby.

"When I come to U Street, I'm coming more for a laid-back, jazz kind of thing," said Katarro Rountree, 24, a Georgetown University graduate student dressed preppily and drinking a Corona beer at Busboys and Poets, a bookstore, cafe and performance space that opened in September at 14th and V Streets. The cafe's high-ceilinged, loftlike space would be at home in San Francisco or Seattle, and it draws a multicultural stew of aging liberals, young antiestablishment types and college students. Although he likes hardcore partying in Georgetown, Mr. Rountree said, he prefers U Street for food, music and date nights.

In the heyday of jazz, artists like Dizzy Gillespie, Billie Holiday, Louis Armstrong, Ella Fitzgerald, Miles Davis and Shirley Horn, who was born in Washington, made regular stops on U Street. One club where they played, the Crystal Caverns, is now called the Bohemian Caverns and still books jazz acts. Another, the landmark Howard Theater, was closed in 1970 but later bought by the District of Columbia, which is soliciting redevelopment offers.

From the riots after the assassination of the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. in 1968 until the mid-1990's, many of

the three- and four-story brick buildings and glass storefronts along U Street were shuttered and derelict, with the exception of stalwarts like Ben's Chili Bowl, opened in 1958, where people still line up for half-smokes, chili fries and thick shakes. The construction of a Metro stop and the rise of real estate prices in Washington brought new interest in U Street, and in the last five years, condominium high-rises have sprung up and town houses have been renovated. Restaurants, shops and night life have followed.

The transformation has been so profound that Phil Coleman, 43, of Philadelphia, who used to live in Washington, thought in a recent visit that he had gotten out at the wrong Metro stop when he went to meet a friend on U Street. He was astounded, he said, by the crowd and the wealth of things to do.

One of those things is shopping. Need designer shoes? Try Wild Women Wear Red for Frye's spring sandal collection, or Carbon, where you can also pick up a \$155 Virgins, Saints & Angels belt with a Jesus-and-Mary diptych buckle. Style-conscious types looking for retro oversize 1970's sunglasses or double-knit pants (\$20) can bop into Meeps, which has been on U for 14 years.

A gallery scene is unfolding. NevinKelly holds down the western end of the corridor with the work of local and Polish artists. At the eastern end, Project 4 just held its first show, a war-themed photography exhibit that was shown earlier at the International Center of Photography in New York.

But it is at night that the U Street Corridor really comes alive.

Mary Beth Sullivan, 47, who lives in Arlington, Va., and was having dinner one busy Saturday night in December with friends at Creme, a popular new U Street restaurant, said that in 20 years of living in the Washington area, she hadn't set foot on U Street until a recent visit to see a concert at the Lincoln Theater. The district government bought and refurbished the old theater, reopening it in 1994 to show theater, comedy and dance.

At Creme, Ms. Sullivan's party was eating at the bar; at 8 p.m., there was a two-hour wait for the restaurant's upscale version of Southern dishes like shrimp and grits (\$16) or pork and beans (\$18). A relaxed crowd — young and old, black and white, straight and gay — basked in understated candlelight reflecting off blond wood and olive-tone walls. Ms. Sullivan had come on the recommendation of the bartender, whom she had known in his previous job at the upscale Marcel's in the nearby West End. What was U Street's allure for her and her friends? In part, Ms. Sullivan said, "We like the diverse crowd."

At Busboys and Poets, named for Langston Hughes, who began his career as a poet while working as a busboy at the Wardman Park Hotel in Washington, the varied crowds come for camaraderie, poetry readings and screenings of films like "Wal-Mart: The High Cost of Low Prices." Late one night last winter, a young couple lounged on a sofa and not far away, even though it was after 1 a.m., students pored over laptops at long, communal wooden tables. A middle-aged couple, the man in black tie, made their way to a spot in the sofa area near where a young woman in a halter top and her date, an Usher look-alike, were drinking Champagne.

A few doors down 14th Street at Jin on another winter night, a hip crowd of 20- to 40-somethings shimmied and sipped Kristal and Dom Perignon behind the frosted door of the "Asian-Caribbean Soul Lounge." Tiny white stools lined the bar, but most patrons chatted in the lounge area, where tables hugged by retro sofas can be reserved for \$250 or \$500.

At U-Turn on 11th Street, a spike-haired, tattooed Matt Aikens, 22, had joined the punk and goth crowd that comes regularly to listen to bands with names like Curbside Revenge and Pessimist Parade. He had come in from Alexandria, he explained, for the "community feel" of the club.

And at Polly's Cafe, at 1342 U, a neighborhood crowd ate vegetarian-leaning comfort food in a cozy public space mostly below street level with exposed brick walls and a working fireplace. Polly's has live music, usually acoustic indie, on Wednesday nights, the owner, Cici Mukhtar, said. She is adapting to the new U Street crowds by supplementing her beer on tap with small-batch bourbons and novelty liquors like the espresso-fueled Van Gogh vodka.

U Street hasn't yielded completely to the new and affluent. Visitors will be accosted for change on busy weekend nights, and they will walk past liquor stores with bulletproof cashier's windows and boarded-up, spray-painted storefronts. But with the old U Street steadily fading, the party scene is what takes the eye.

Well after the dinner hour on a Friday night in March, women in cocktail dresses and stilettos waited at the valet station at Tabaq; one stepped into a Volkswagen Touareg, another into a black BMW sedan. A block away, about a dozen men and women who seemed to be barely more than 18 years old, wearing club attire, laughed and teased each other just beyond the velvet rope at Bar Nun.

The night was far enough advanced for crowds to be thickening at Republic Gardens, a nightclub that survived lean times to enjoy the resurgence and can now command \$250, \$500, and \$1,000 minimums at some tables after 11 p.m. on Saturdays.

Jazz sounds drifted into the street from Bohemian Caverns, Twins Jazz and Duke's City. At DC9 and the Velvet Lounge, which are smoky, scruffy and loud, the music was indie and punk. Two of Washington's most successful spots, Black Cat and the 9:30 Club, drew fans who like a smorgasbord of music: reggae, pop, alt-country, gypsy, R & B, go-go, gospel, punk, folk, Latin.

Jon Dauphiné, 38, a lawyer eating with five friends at Creme on a Friday night in March, said he liked U Street enough to have moved close by three years ago from Georgetown, drawn by the diversity not only at night, but also in the feel of the area day to day. "This is the cutting edge," he said, "of what the city is and can be."

If You Go

The U Street Corridor is accessible from the U Street/Cardozo/African-American War Memorial stop on the green line of the Washington Metro system. It is easily navigated on foot.

Hotels within walking distance include **Hotel Helix**, a boutique property at 1430 Rhode Island Avenue, NW, 202-462-9001; doubles from \$140; and **Hotel Rouge**, 1315 16th Street NW; 202-232-8000; rates \$150 to \$200. The **Bed and Breakfast on U Street**, 877-893-3233, www.bedandbreakfastdc.com, in a home at 17th and U Street NW, has a queen room with a private bath for \$165 a night on April and May weekends.

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