



From Malcolm X to Gentrification The Beat Goes On

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By Daniel Ofman

In Northwest D.C. etched between Adams Morgan and Columbia Heights is Meridian Hill Park, but to locals and long-timers it will forever be known as Malcolm X Park.

If you enter from the North side of the park, on a sunny Sunday afternoon, you will see the lawn at the top of the park swarming with people. A pandemonium of picnics, Chipotle catering, Yoga groups, soccer balls, Frisbees, meditation, guitar playing, lawn chairs, books and barbeques, every activity in the book. You name it and someone is doing it.

At the center of it all as you walk down the park towards W Street, you'll hear a distant rumble. Many beats converging and forming a consistent rhythm. Ahead you see a statue of Joan of Arc, high up on a horse with her right arm raised in a solid attacking formation, but yet Joan is sword less. It is said that it may have been [stolen](#), and this isn't [the first time](#). The statue is heroic, but in its current state it's strangely anticlimactic.

In the area around the statue, the Malcolm X Park drum circle converges and plays together for hours every Sunday, if the weather is fair.

I think the main thing about this is, whether you go to San Francisco, whether you go to New York, every place has its parks, said Joe Kennedy Jr. who has been coming to the drum circle for over 20 years, Sunday is the day when people come out and come together and want to celebrate life, drums has become a way to do that.

But the drum circle didn't start just as a way to celebrate life and let off steam after a difficult week. People first formed the drum circle after the assassination of Malcolm X.

After Malcolm X was assassinated, people wanted to come out to the park, mostly to celebrate his name, Kennedy said.

That's what people did at first but it didn't stop in the months after the assassination, it became a local tradition. Every week a small group of people would come together and play beats that were familiar to them. They were African American, Native American, Puerto Rican, Colombian and Jamaican. But the beats which everyone latched onto were Afro-Cuban.

All the long time drummers tell a similar story. The group used to be smaller, and the quality of the drumming was better. It used to be in synch and true to its form, mostly Afro-Cuban. As we were walking Joe Kennedy told me, It was really a small group of folks, mostly playing the congas as theyre playing over there now.

He was pointing to group of drummers that had split off from the main group, you could tell that they were a tight knit group that had good chemistry together. They played what Joe told me was the original style at Malcolm X park. The men were old timers, a mix of Latin American and traditional African drumming. They sang in Spanish and the style was call and response. In contrast the main circle where Joe spends most of his time is larger mix of everything.

Now its kind of morphed, people whove drummed for a long time, people who have taken some drum lessons, some people say, Yo! Where can I get a drum?! and they show up.

Joe sees himself as a bit of a diplomat. Hes not in charge but hes also aware that some of the older folks arent happy about all the changes to the circle.

I think now more people are prone to participate, as opposed to before, said David Kane who has been drumming at Malcolm X park for more than 15 years. When reflecting on how the circle looked when he first started coming he said, you had more African-Americans actually drumming African Americans and Latinos actually drumming, now everybody is drumming, it doesnt really matter.

I look around and I see a dreadlocked barefoot white man rolling his own cigarette. I see a yoga group in the distance. I see people playing some sort of wooden block throwing game Ive never seen before, I later looked it up, it was a game called Kubb. Everyone was having a great time feeling comfortably engaged in their own activities.

There are actually rhythms that are being played, said Kane. You just have to know whats going on and fit in as opposed to just having your own idea and just slamming away on the drum.

As Kane was talking to me about the demographics within the circle, and the quality of drumming these days, he was referring to old timers and what is frowned upon from their point of view. To me it was clear that David at times was annoyed himself, that the drum circle today isnt what it used to be, and he had a point, it did sound like many of the drummers were amateurs and didnt really know what they were doing. On the other hand other long-timers didnt seem to mind.

If someone is holding the drum completely the wrong way I might say, why dont you tilt the drum in slightly a different way, said Kennedy. If you come to the park and you want to buy a drum Joe will tell you where to go. Once you get the drum Joe will tell you where you can get some drum lessons. Hes the drum circle diplomat.

Hey you should talk to Kevin, Joe said just as we were wrapping up our conversation, Kevin was literally the first white guy to be accepted.

Joe pointed to Kevin Lambert who was in the drum circle crowd the man looked like a pro. Within the drum circle he was the only one with a full drum set. He had sunglasses on and this hat that you would expect to see a drummer wear in an old jazz club. He had gloves and bandages to protect him from getting blisters. It would

take him about half an hour to put up his drum set because many of his friends would come up to him and say hello. Once he started drumming he was in the zone, focused and clearly having a good time. I spoke to him on one of his smoke breaks and asked him about being the first white guy in the circle, he said that Barnett Williams who used to be one of elders of the circle helped him out.

That was a bit dodgy at first, but Barnett smoothed it over completely, nobody argued with Barnett. Barnett said, this guy knows how to play, let him play, and dont give me any s**t about it.

After Kevin was accepted many more followed and today the drum circle is much larger and very inclusive across all races, ethnicities and nationalities. So I came in and then the floodgates opened and now its as integrated as the rest of the city, more integrated then the rest of the city, Lambert said. But with integration, and with time, gentrification is the number one issue that many longtime drummers talk about. These were once just apartments, and now they are million dollar condos, Lambert said. The poor are getting squeezed out of the neighborhoods around the park and so the makeup of the drum circle is changing rapidly.

Some of the older guys, you know, sometimes they do get a little frustrated but its 2017 Kennedy said, but to me its a celebration and I call it a neutral zone.

Kevin Lambert has now been coming to the park for more than 26 years. He also recognizes the changes and the issues with gentrification. He sees how that affects the drum circle, but to him certain aspects of the experience cant change because of the essence of what it is.

Its a safety valve for a lot of people who are frustrated during the week and want to get out of that blue collar or white collar cycle, this helps, Lambert said, some people regard this as church.