

# The Brixton: It's new, happening and another example of African-American historical 'swagger-jacking'

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By Stephen A. Crockett Jr. August 3, 2012

Look. I get it. The Chocolate City has changed. It isn't what it used to be, and I don't know what's worse: the fact that D.C. was once so marred by murder that it was nicknamed Dodge City or that there is now a hipster bar on U St. that holds the same name. Point is, there is a certain cultural vulturalism, an African American historical "swagger-jacking," going on on U Street. It's an inappropriate tradition of sorts that has rent increasing, black folks moving further out — sometimes by choice, sometimes not — while a faux black ethos remains.

In a six-block stretch, we have Brixton, Busboys and Poets, Eatonville, Patty Boom Boom, Blackbyrd and Marvin. All are based on some facet of black history, some memory of blackness that feels artificially done and palatable. Does it matter that the owners aren't black? Maybe. Does it matter that these places slid in around the time that black folks slid out? Maybe. Indeed, some might argue that these hip spots are actually preserving black culture, not stealing it.

But as a native of a then Chocolate City, I can remember when a Horace & Dickie's fish sandwich always felt like a warm hug, because they were cheap, and we were broke. It felt like the owner knew we were struggling, so he lowered the prices for us. It felt like home.

Their presence makes me feel the same way I felt when my homeboy's dad, who lived on the corner of 5th and L St. N.E., used to rant about how there needed to be a four way stop sign at the intersection. Oh, how he would wax about how someone was going to get hit by a car and how the city didn't care about the black folks that lived there. The city turned over and the first thing that showed up on the corner of 5th and L was a four way stop sign.

I guess this is to say I am grateful for the stop signs but sad that it took us leaving to have it happen. That it didn't feel important to build until we were gone. That it isn't FUBU (For Us By Us). I know now that I can hit up any of these places and hear the music of my past and walk outside and see a city that I don't know.

*[For another perspective on the changing city, read [Sheryll Cashin's essay on cultural dexterity in D.C.](#)]*

Here's a news flash to those who don't know: This place was a place well before you. You didn't discover us. We aren't Indians. You didn't make Ben's; we did. This city was pig intestines after so many left, and we made it into chitterlings. And these places, these fancy places with "authentic" food, aren't homes. They're just rentals.

The bigger question is: Is it possible for a once-black city to experience gentrification while opening businesses that exploit black culture? Yes. Culture is weird in the way that air is weird: You need it, you breathe it, but you don't own air.

You can connect through culture, embrace culture, dance culture, but in the end, you can't be the culture police. Maybe I want to sit at the doors of D.C.'s black culture and check IDs, making sure you deserve to appreciate what Marvin Gaye and Donald Byrd meant to a city that really didn't have much to be proud of when these cats came up.

Maybe there should be a quiz at Brixton about the neighborhood's cultural significance. Maybe there should be a box set sold behind the bar at Marvin. Or maybe these places should just be called something else (Patty Moo-Moo or Farvin for starters, as I believe those are all free.) But there is a certain territorial connection that comes with culture that just has to be expected. The District isn't a city or a state, and it was at one point Chocolate City.

It was always a place that was special, with people that made laws during the day and the people that broke them at night. It was Ben's Chili Bowl way before it had a bank line. In order to get food, you had to jockey for position. You had to shout.

You had to let your voice be heard, because it was never just about the chili; it was about the experience — and it wasn't manufactured or recreated. It was organic. If the Ben's at Nationals Park made folks yell to get their orders in, it would feel just as false as these places.

The most conflicting part about these places — Brixton and Blackbyrd, Patty Boom-Boom and Busboys — is that they are extremely welcoming and well-run establishments. But there is something inherently inauthentic about homemade sweet tea out of a mason jar.

It feels like a rip-off. It feels like watching N.W.A. perform at the Kennedy Center. It feels like something is missing. It just doesn't feel like home.

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