

BRANDEL FRANCE de BRAVO

A Tale of Two Rivers

*Washington has always been a tale of two rivers,
what you could call the white river and the black river.*

—Jim Dougherty, Sierra Club

1

MANY WHO HAVE WRITTEN ABOUT Washington, D.C.—not as the nation’s capital but as a city and permanent home, my home—have used Dickens’ *A Tale of Two Cities* as a starting point. Whether side-by-side or nestled one inside the other, there are two Washingtons: a black one, the country’s first city with an African-American majority, and a white one, made up mostly of transplants.

I was born here, and I’m white. In the future, many more people will be able to say the same due to gentrification and the resulting black flight. It used to be that when acquaintances asked me where I was from, they assumed “Washington, D.C.” was short-hand for one of the Maryland or Virginia suburbs. And the ones who knew something about the geography, knew about Bethesda, Chevy Chase, Falls Church and McLean, would ask: *But where did you really grow up?*

2

LIKE A LOT OF CITIES, Washington, D.C. has two rivers, but they are far from equal in stature. The Potomac River, which separates the city from Virginia and George Washington’s riverfront home, Mount Vernon, is the one Robert E. Lee crossed to invade the north. Four hundred and five miles long, it is the “nation’s river” and like the Mississippi, it is an “American heritage river.”

But it is the less distinguished, long neglected Anacostia River—only 8.7 miles long—that has come to symbolize Washington, D.C.’s racial divide: the population east of

it is over 90% African-American. While “east of the river” has become synonymous for some with “high crime” or “under-served,” people of varying means reside there. The area includes historic Anacostia where Frederick Douglas lived, the Barry Farm public housing complex (built on the site of the city’s first free black settlement), and upper-middle class neighborhoods like Hillcrest, which has been home to at least two mayors.

3

SQUAT BESIDE A RIVER, PEER down, and you can see rocks, silt, green-phantasm-waving, and fish oh-ing, or you can see your reflection. Sometimes when the light and your frame of mind are right, you can see both: you assembling and disassembling with each breeze or insect landing, and beneath that, the inverted firmament. A wet polyphony of present and past, or perhaps present and future.

This is a tale of two rivers, my two rivers. More than that, it is the tale of two Washingtonians who were born and died only a few months apart: one black and one white; one who sang and one who couldn’t; one famous; one not; one native-born and the other adopted.

4

THE MAJORITY OF WASHINGTON, D.C., residents are “adopted.” In 2010, nearly 63% were born elsewhere, a higher proportion than in any state, except Nevada and Florida.

In “Two Cities in One,” Latoya Peterson, owner and editor of Racialicious.com, explains that there is “Washington,” and then there is “D.C.” “The folks who watch (or are guests on) “Meet the Press” call it “Washington,” but those born to parents from here call it “D.C.” Both cities are a state of mind, and inhabitants of either may or may not live within the physical city’s limits. Citizens of “Washington” often reside in northern Virginia or Montgomery County, Maryland “for the good public schools,” but increasingly they can be found—particularly if childless—in any one of the city’s quadrants, including parts of the city that only 2 decades ago were the exclusive domain of D.C.’s citizens, meaning predominantly black neighborhoods.

Today, “D.C.” is as likely to exist outside the four quadrants as in them—maybe more so in Maryland’s Prince George’s County. Even though Prince George’s is the wealthiest county in the U.S. with a majority black population, it has also become one of the default destinations for African-Americans who can no longer afford to live in Washington, D.C.

5

IF YOU’VE LIVED ALL YOUR life west of the Anacostia River, when you cross it you may be surprised by the hilltop views afforded of official Washington. “Acropolis” literally means city on a point or “city on the extremity.” The area east of the Anacostia River is an acropolis dotted with the ruins of failed solutions, such as St. Elizabeths, the first federally run psychiatric hospital, once known as the Government Hospital for the Insane; the Benning Road Power Plant; and the Kenilworth Landfill with its open incineration. These sites have all been closed or repurposed, but the Anacostia sediments have not forgotten: concentrations of lead, cadmium, zinc, PCBs, and other contaminants continue to be much higher than in the sediments of the Potomac.

The slow-moving Anacostia, frequently described as turbid, is less able to flush out pollutants, which accumulate like grievances. Turbid: thick or opaque as if with roiled sediment (suspended foreign particles); deficient in clarity or purity.

Rated one of the most polluted waterways in the nation, the Anacostia River is a tributary of the Potomac. Even though “the forgotten river” feeds the “nation’s river,” their fates—like two people the same age living in the same city—are not as intertwined as you might think.

Ruth and Chuck were born June 22nd and August 22nd, 1936. They died at age 75, first Ruth, who was white, and then Chuck, who was black. She died at home, and he in a high tech medical center. She had lung cancer; he’d been hospitalized for pneumonia, an infection which causes the air sacs and the space between the thin tissues encasing the lungs to fill with fluid.

A river can be a lung.

BUDDHIST MONK AND PEACE ACTIVIST Thich Nhat Hanh writes: “We have to meditate on being the river so that we can experience within ourselves the fears and hopes of the river.”

I am looking for stillness in a current of facts. My mantra, if I have one, is the telling.

CHUCK BROWN, “THE GODFATHER OF Go-Go,” D.C.’s *sui generis* funk, grew up near the source of the Anacostia, in Prince George’s County, but he wasn’t born there. Lila Louise Brown gave birth to Chuck in Gaston, North Carolina in 1936. Eight months later, when Chuck’s father died of pneumonia, she moved to Charlotte with her baby to find a job. She worked as a live-in maid until she met Chuck’s stepfather, and the family moved to Richmond, Virginia. There Chuck’s stepfather worked at saw mills, in construction, and at the Lucky Strike cigarette factory.

They lived in shacks on several different Virginia farms. “I used to love to watch the trains go by. I would stand in the field waving and a man on the red caboose would throw me a bag of food every day—potatoes, chicken, biscuits.” Chuck learned to sing by going to church with his mother, who not only sang but played harmonica, accordion, and a little piano. He started singing gospel with her when he was only three years old—sometimes for money, sometimes for food.

Oh, that little boy going to be someone someday.

In 1944, Chuck’s family headed even further north, leaving the south for good like millions of other African-Americans in what came to be known as the 2nd Great Migration. The family settled in Fairmount Heights, Maryland, just over the D.C. line, 8 miles from the Potomac River.

WHAT YOU MIGHT SEE ON the Potomac River: sailboats, rowboats, canoes, sculls, sweeps, kayaks, paddleboards, and power boats with blondes diving from them, cases of beer on board. What you might see in the Anacostia River: folding chairs, barbeque grills,

tires, Styrofoam cups, plastic bags, and human feces. Notice the prepositions: “on” and “in.”

Ruth Murray was born in Northwest D.C., eight miles from the Anacostia River, and lived there nearly her whole life. Her parents had moved to the capital in the 1920s because her father, a flight instructor and aviation pioneer, had been hired by Boeing, and like every defense contractor, Boeing needed a man in Washington.

Ruth and Chuck were five years-old when Pearl Harbor was bombed. According to Brown, “Mama made me get up under the bed. It was thousands of miles away and I looked out to the window, looking for the bombs.” A few months later, Ruth’s Japanese housekeeper Gladys was sent to a “War Relocation Camp.” Ruth wept for days, and throughout her life she decried the injustice of the internment. She never spoke in as impassioned a way about the civil rights of colored people. If Gladys’ abrupt removal was a hole in Ruth’s skirt, segregation was the lining. No one saw it unless it came undone.

Even though her father had lost “everything” in the stock market crash, Ruth grew up with nursemaids, cooks, oriental carpets, crystal, and a grand piano. She began weekly lessons when she was seven years-old and was instructed to play for company. Chuck started teaching himself to play at seven, the same age he smoked his first cigarette. By thirteen, Ruth and Chuck had both quit playing.

At age eight, only a river between them, they listened to the Lone Ranger and ate dinners purchased with ration stamps in rooms of invisible light. Every Sunday they went to church: Ruth to St. Anne’s with her father, and Chuck and his mother to Mt. Zion Holiness Church. Ruth belonged to a club called the Secret Three: only she and her best friend, Boots, belonged—that was the secret. Chuck’s mother bought him a bugle at the Salvation Army, which he played each morning before breakfast to everyone on Jay Street’s dismay. Ruth became a Brownie; Chuck started shining shoes. He stationed himself in front of the Howard Theater, the Greyhound Bus Station, the Navy Yard, and in Foggy Bottom where he knelt at the feet of Louie Armstrong, Hank Williams, and Les Paul.

A RIVER CAN BECOME AN estuary, emptying into and receiving the sea. Some salt, maybe even a shark, finds its way to the capital. A river appears to flow one way when, in fact, it may be moving in two directions at once.

Eleven years before Ruth and Chuck were born, 25,000 Ku Klux Klan members paraded down Pennsylvania Avenue, past the White House. Three years later, the Klan marched in Washington, D.C. for the last time. There were only a few thousand of them in 1928, but for the first time they marched with their faces uncovered.

These are some of the places where Chuck Brown and Ruth Murray could have met as children:

- at the National Zoo
- in Rock Creek Park
- at Griffith Stadium
- at the National Museum of Natural History

These are some of the places where they could not have met:

- at school
- on a playground
- at the movies
- at the Glen Echo Amusement Park
- rolling Easter eggs on the White House lawn
- over ice cream sundaes at Hecht's Department Store
- watching *Oklahoma* at the National Theater in 1948, just before it closed for three years rather than integrate.

These are a few of the things that happened in 1954 when Ruth and Chuck were eighteen: she rode on the roof of a limousine around the tidal basin wearing a tiara and sash that said “Cherry Blossom Princess, Wyoming”; he, having lived on the streets since thirteen, robbed his first jewelry store in Washington, D.C.; and just as she was graduating from private high school, the Supreme Court ruled that “separate educational facilities are inherently unequal.”

HIGH SCHOOL YEARBOOK, 1954

Anyone who is around Ruth for more than five minutes becomes acutely aware of her artistic ability. Her incredibly tiny hands are never idle when there is doodling to be done. Another five minutes will reveal Ruth's passion for singing, off tune that is.

Outside of school, the incredibly tiny hands were never without a cigarette.

Dear Ruth,

I'm sure you'll look cute in Bermuda shorts on the Vassar campus. I know I'll be hearing about you and your escapades from half the boys at Harvard. I'm sure you'll know more kids at Harvard than I will. Your cartwheels and modern dance on your porch were wonderful—such form. Next you'll be adopting a Russian accent and trying out for the Ballet Russe.

Love Kent

Ruth,

You and I are no longer on speaking terms since you refused to illustrate my English book! I wonder how long you'll be able to stand it at a girls' school.

Dave

10

THE DAY THAT RUTH TOOK her final art history exam sophomore year of college, Chuck traded five cartons of cigarettes for a guitar. Six months later, Chuck had learned to play guitar and was performing in front of an audience. After graduating from Vassar, Ruth returned to D.C. to become an artist, although she wasn't exactly sure what that entailed. She married a man from North Carolina named Bill who left her before their baby was born. One of Ruth's few finished paintings is of her young daughter in shades of turmeric.

First, Chuck played with the Earls of Rhythm, then Los Latinos, then the Soul Searchers, until it was Chuck Brown and the Soul Searchers. And then, finally, it was just Chuck Brown.

Ruth dreamed of living in another country, even better, another century. Chuck dreamed of creating a sound for his town, a percussion-driven, call-and-response form of dance music that drew on Afro-Cuban polyrhythms, one song bleeding into another. “I just thought of it because, you know, you got night clubs, go-go clubs, go-go girls dancing in the club but there was no go-go music so I decided to call it go-go music simply because it didn’t stop, it just keep going and going and going . . .” Regardless of who he was playing with, Chuck was the guitarist and lead “talker,” exhorting people to get on that floor or stay on that floor, and giving shout outs.

“You’d call somebody’s name out, that make people feel good when you call their name.”

If go-go was playing on someone’s car radio or people were dancing to it in the park, Ruth couldn’t have told you anything about what she was hearing, except to say it was “loud.” She paid no attention to popular music, and if she hummed “Greensleeves” or “Dixie Land,” you wouldn’t recognize it because she couldn’t carry a tune. When everyone in high school was asked their favorite song, she replied: “When I’m not near the boy I love, I love the boy I’m near.”

Some of Chuck’s hits: “We the People”; “Blow Your Whistle”; “Bustin Loose”; “Day-O”; “Run Joe”; “It don’t mean a thing if it ain’t got that go-go swing”; “I want some money”; “Wind me Up.”

Some of Ruth’s men: Judson; Bill; Alec; John.

Chuck Brown’s sound caught on with D.C. area bands and became popular. Unlike hip hop or rap, which began in the south Bronx and then coursed through the country and around the world, go-go never really left the “DMV”—the District, Maryland, and Virginia. It made it into the national spotlight only a few times over the years: Spike Lee featured Experience Unlimited’s song, “Da Butt” in his 1988 movie, *School Daze*, and in 2010, Chuck Brown’s “Bustin’ Loose” was used in a TV commercial for Chips Ahoy cookies. In spite of these flings with fame, go-go remains resolutely local: not stagnant but opaque to those not from D.C.

Below is a list of jobs held by Chuck and Ruth. Categorize the status of each by writing a “P” for Potomac or an “A” for Anacostia next to it:

- Truck driver _____
- Cashier _____
- Sparring partner _____
- Cocktail waitress _____
- Brick layer _____
- Receptionist _____
- Flight attendant _____
- Newspaper seller _____
- Ice deliverer _____
- Administrative assistant _____
- Watermelon wagon vendor _____
- Coffee house owner _____

These are the awards and distinctions Chuck earned:

2005: Lifetime Heritage Fellowship Award from the National Endowment for the Arts (NEA).

2009: A section of 7th Street, N.W. between T Street and Florida Avenue is named “Chuck Brown Way.”

2011: He is nominated for a Grammy for Best R&B performance by a Duo or Group With Vocals for his collaboration with Jill Scott and Marcus Miller on the song “We Got This.”

2012: Ten thousand people line up to view Chuck's body, and flags are flown at half mast throughout the city in honor of the Godfather of Go-Go.

At Chuck's funeral, D.C Council Chair Kwame Brown says, "For all of the people who just moved to Washington, D.C., and have a problem with go-go music, get over it." "Get over it" is what former mayor Marion Barry told white voters when he was elected to political office again after serving time for smoking crack cocaine.

In 2001, Ruth received an award for Distinguished Service to Georgetown, the white neighborhood where she lived, adjacent to the Potomac River. Chair of an historic preservation committee, she was recognized for stopping change, for *not* allowing things to go-go.

11

RUTH AND CHUCK HAD SOMETHING in common: they both had a gap between their two front teeth. In dentistry, this is called diastema, Latin for interval, which can be:

the difference between two pitches
a pause or break
an intervening time or space

There was an interval—a year—when Ruth and Chuck's lives could have intersected, when two rivers might have met.

In 1959, Ruth and her husband Bill Walker opened Washington, D.C.'s first poetry and jazz coffee house—first at 912 New Hampshire Avenue and then at 945 K Street. Coffee 'n Confusion was a sensation, and its happenings and recurring legal battles were frequently reported on in *The Washington Post* and other local newspapers.

Event No. 1 was an early evening announcement that beat Washington poets would pit their lines against some beat New York poets. Washington won, man! The New Yorkers failed to show. Admission to the poetry reading contest was \$1 a head and there was standing room only for the press. The bearded Walker called the formalities to order against the background music of a set of jungle drums, and within minutes even they were silent.

Eventually, the out-of-town poets, including Leroi Jones—soon to be Amiri Baraka—and Allen Ginsberg, showed up. Ruth didn't like any of the poetry recited, muttered,

screamed, declaimed, incanted at Coffee ‘n Confusion, not even her husband’s: *Mrs. Walker prefers John Donne to the “beat” poets and she’s certain Proust had more on the ball than Kerouac.*

She went along with the coffeehouse, playing hostess in a black leotard, auburn hair down her back, because people like her, she reasoned, needed a place to gather and discuss art and literature the way she and her friends had done at college, in their pajamas. And she went along with it because Bill wanted it.

Coffee ‘n Confusion wasn’t at all as Ruth had imagined. The poets were “inebriated or high on something, and there was a lot of posturing and fighting,” and unlike at Vassar, the women were minor characters, as in the book of the same title by Kerouac’s ex, Joyce Johnson. When she wasn’t busy playing hostess, she was bailing Bill out of jail or appearing by his side in court.

But the coffeehouse was one of the few venues in 1950s Washington where whites—at least the kind who appreciated “jungle drums”—and blacks mingled. Mississippi John Hurt, Dizzie Gillespie, Miles Davis, and Fats Domino performed at Coffee ‘n Confusion or stopped in to hear one another play. Anyone as talented as Chuck Brown who heard about this scene would have wanted to check it out, maybe even get a gig there. After all, by 1959, Chuck had not only mastered the guitar but was entertaining large and very appreciative crowds.

Unfortunately, the crowds consisted of incarcerated men.

12

IN 1959, CHUCK WAS HALFWAY through his eight-year prison term. Back when Ruth was still a cheerleader in high school, Chuck had graduated from shooting craps and hustling pool to robbery, sometimes armed. One night in 1954, Ruth was loading trunks filled with her clothes for college into the car, and Chuck shot a man in self-defense. The wounded man later died, and Chuck’s aggravated assault sentence was commuted to murder. He was sentenced to a facility in Virginia operated by the D.C. Department of Corrections: the Lorton Reformatory.

In Lorton, Chuck paid a fellow prisoner, a man named Bunny, five cartons of cigarettes for a guitar Bunny had made in shop. Chuck plucked and strummed on his bunk until he knew the six strings better than his six-digit ID number, and soon he

was famous inside Lorton, where he returned regularly after his release to play for the inmates.

When Chuck walked out a free man in 1962: “I took that guitar with me and I used to play in peoples’ backyards, cooker house and things like that and people would invite me to their house . . . I wasn’t allowed to play in any places that sold alcoholic beverages.”

In 1962, Ruth was free, too: two years after Bill Walker had fled D.C., having signed over Coffee ‘n Confusion to a man with mafia connections, and two years after their daughter was born, Ruth’s divorce was finalized. And just as Chuck was getting out of Lorton, Bill Walker was entering Madrid’s Carabanchel prison, along with his pregnant girlfriend.

By the time Chuck died, he had recorded more than 20 albums and sold 1.5 million copies since his first hit record in 1971, “We the People.”

“There was a time when the only people who wanted to take my picture was the police. Now, the police want to take pictures with me . . .”

How you see the river depends on which side you live on. A river can be a border, telling us where we begin or end. The river we call the “Rio Grande,” the Mexicans call the “Rio Bravo.” One country calls the river big, and the other calls it tough, wild, brave.

13

IN SOME CULTURES A SPACE between the two front teeth means you will be wealthy, lucky, or if you are a woman, lustful. *I know I’ll be hearing about you and your escapades from half the boys at Harvard.*

Ruth and Chuck died—if not wealthy—with means. Were they lucky, too?

Ruth was inside the about to-be-opened Coffee ‘n Confusion, painting a mural, when a bullet punctured the plate-glass window, missing her head by inches.

Police said the shots came from the gun of Louis Engle, 37, of the 1000 block of K street N.W. who is licensed as a medium at that address . . . “I just don’t like beatniks,” police quoted Mr. Engle.

If Ruth was fortunate that the fortune-teller had poor aim, perhaps it was funnel-shaped luck that lifted Chuck from the streets, landing him behind bars. “But when I went to Lorton, that’s where I found myself.” He obtained a high school diploma, a guitar, and he got his gift for music back. *Oh, that little boy going to be someone someday.* Long before his death, he’d joined the ranks of Duke Ellington, Billy Eckstine, Roberta Flack, Marvin Gaye, and all the other Washingtonians who’ve made musical history.

When Chuck Brown was hospitalized with pneumonia, the entire city was on alert, including the mayor, the newspapers and radio stations. He died surrounded by friends, his wife, Jocelyn, and four of his children.

Ruth died in a narrow, one-bedroom apartment, her last man by her side. Other than the hospice nurse and her daughter, she almost never had visitors. After *The Girl with the Dragon Tattoo*, *The Girl Who Played with Fire*, *The Girl Who Kicked the Hornet’s Nest*, when she could no longer read, she wrote sequels in her head until the morphine made even that impossible. This is how she chose to go: the water that is a human body evaporating into air, her four-poster a dry river bed.

Who is the national river? Who is the forgotten river? To this day there are arguments over which is the world’s longest river. Calculating this is difficult because it depends on pinpointing a beginning and end.

WHILE MIX TAPES OF GO-GO continue to be a local industry, it is music meant to be heard live. It is about “being there” and more specifically about being *here*: in D.C. and the surrounding areas of Maryland and Virginia. The crews, the streets, the neighborhoods, the names being called out don’t mean anything to people not from “around the way.” Because it is music by and mainly for black people, its popularity confined to a small section of the mid-Atlantic, go-go is more “Anacostia” than “Potomac.” And just as the Anacostia has been a repository for the city’s darkness—that which is cast off, toxic—go-go bore the blame for much of the violence here in the late 80s and early 90s. Even today, communities are wary of it: many African-American residents of the Langdon neighborhood where a park has been named after Chuck Brown have opposed the proposed amphitheater, fearing that performances there would be too disruptive or bring trouble.

But the sound Chuck Brown created for his town will live on, as the name go-go implies, evolving into “bounce beat” and whatever comes after that, and after that. “Most public high schools in the eastern part of D.C. and in neighboring Prince George’s County have go-go bands, just as most high schools in New Orleans have brass bands,” writes Natalie Hopkinson in her book, *Go-Go Live*.

From corrections to curriculum, from prison to tradition: Chuck Brown, American heritage river?

Like go-go, Coffee ‘n Confusion was a local phenomenon. What fame it had outside of Washington, D.C. was eclipsed by the bookstores, cafes, night clubs and churches of New York and San Francisco. When writing about the notorious but brief-lived Coffee ‘n Confusion, reporters often commented on Ruth’s striking appearance and her privilege: *The Vassar College graduate startled the usual crowd of policemen, defendants and hangers-on by strolling in wearing a green sweater ensemble, a plaid skirt to match—and no shoes.*

But in spite of her advantages, Ruth’s life was sometimes difficult and mostly unremarkable. She was a single mother when that bordered on scandalous for someone white and upper-middle-class, and when resources for working mothers were scarcer even than they are today. Half of every paycheck went to the black women—Howard University students, tired grandmothers—who showed up each morning to care for her daughter.

Ruth’s was a tributary life: hours streaming into jobs that demanded little creativity, days meandering as they fed a next life. She eventually found her artistic calling, a way to busy her fingers once they no longer held a cigarette. Five years into jewelry making, she was diagnosed with lung cancer.

The Anacostia won’t be fishable or swimmable until 2032, but the Anacostia Waterfront is now, says the D.C. government, “the fastest growing area of employment, entertainment, and residential growth.”

THEIR NAMES METRICALLY SIMILAR, EACH a spondee in two very different poems, Ruth France and Chuck Brown lived nearly all of their 75 years in the same city without ever meeting, two rivers without confluence. Two Washingtonians: one native-born, the other not; one black and one white; one who sang and one who couldn’t; one famous, the other not.

A man I never met whose music I loved, and my mother. This is a tale of the two rivers that ran through Chuck and Ruth, that run, like hope and fear, through me.

When I left Washington, D.C. for college at seventeen, I never thought I'd return. I equated staying with stagnation. It was what my mother had done. After twenty-two years away, I came back. Now, with no family left here, and my daughter about to leave for college, I ask myself: should I stay? To allow yourself to be *of* a place, to own it and let it own you, has its recompense: knowledge accumulates, relationships deepen, and changes—to your city, to you, your body and mind—are more easily observed. But to leave and start over in a new place is to be reborn: the challenge, and even stress of it, rejuvenating. While moving again and again prevents you from ever getting truly comfortable, it also lets you live a lie.

When Chuck Brown and Ruth France smiled, you noticed the gap. The space between their two front teeth was strangely alluring. You noticed the way an absence can separate and draw you in. Stare hard enough and you just might find stillness.