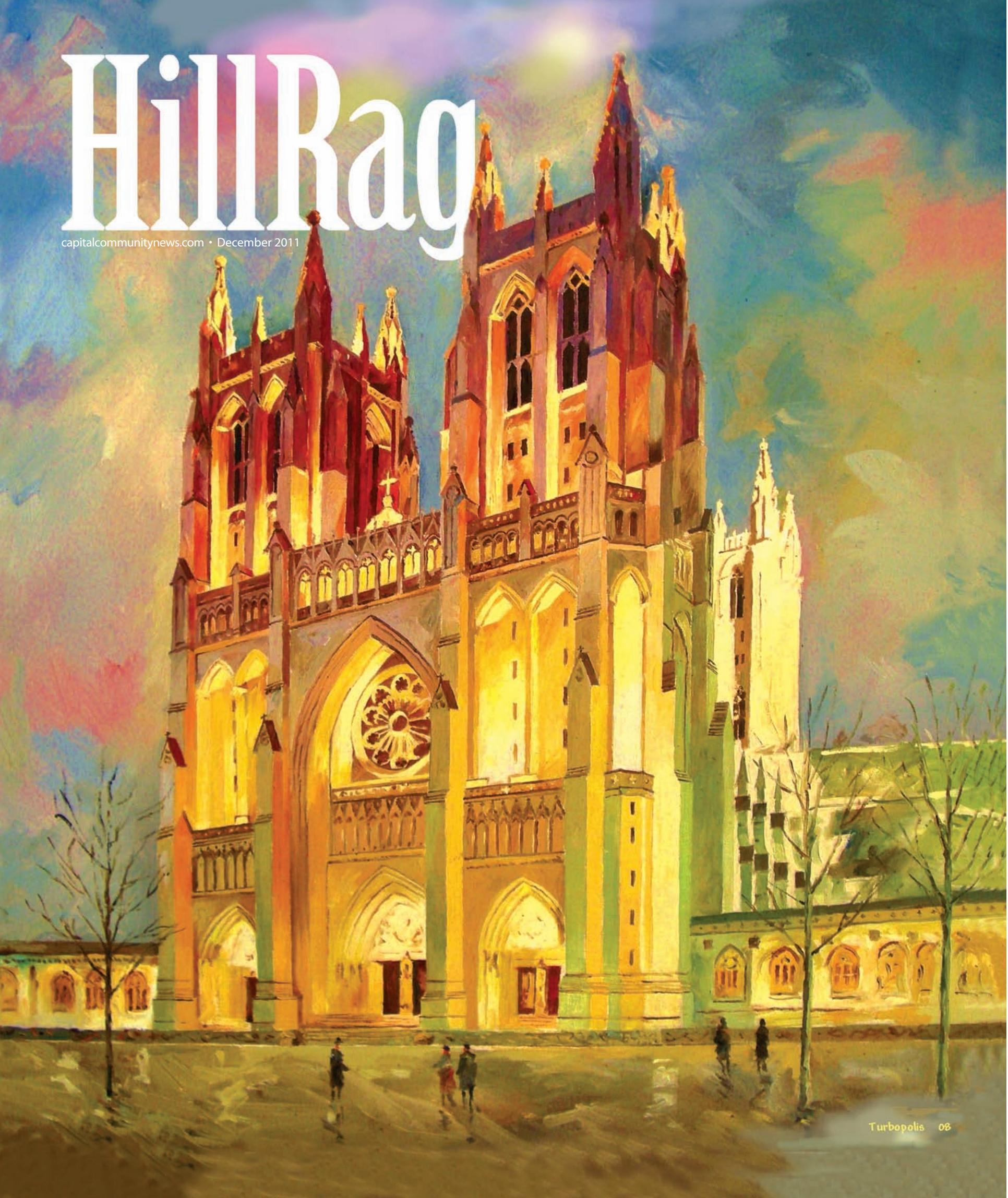


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Bluegrass at Sova

An Espresso and Wine Bar makes a Name with Music

ARTICLE BY STEVE MONROE | PHOTOS BY ANDREW LIGHTMAN

Outside the cars and trucks and buses are rushing past, an endless stream of machines and noise, with an occasional police or ambulance siren screeching near and then fading away, street lights spinning red, yellow, green in their own endless cycle and people walking past, a stream of pedestrian traffic matching the automotive traffic nearby.

But inside SOVA on H Street Northeast is another world, especially on Thursday nights when bluegrass bands take over and their harmonies of country and fields and small town loves lost and won, and then lost again, create their own dimension.

And it's bluegrass that has helped SOVA and owner Frank Hankins create an identity of its own on the revitalized H Street Northeast corridor, one starkly different from the other pubs on the strip.

Hankins is a Baltimore native who has lived in DC for over 20 years. He spent several years in financial services before deciding that he wanted to satisfy his entrepreneurial streak and start a coffee shop. Four years ago, he found the perfect place on redeveloping H Street NE and opened SOVA in a two-story building at 1359 H.

He's filled it with his coffee – the well-known brand Intelligentsia is on sale here -- and sandwiches and other items on the first floor, with a large lounge room in the back and also a patio and picnic area outside. Upstairs is a full bar that specializes in fine wines, more lounge area – enjoy Wi-Fi if you like – and the music room.



Elise Smithmyer and Dan Buchner of the bluegrass band *By & By* backed by Claire Blaustein on fiddle sing at SOVA Espresso. Photo: Andrew Lightman

It's in this room where the bluegrass blooms on Thursday nights, giving SOVA a landmark status in this area, which some 60 or 70 years ago was considered the bluegrass capital. One Thursday last month the band *Stick Mob* entertained a mostly full space, with easy chairs and couches and paintings, and photographs on the wall, taken by community folks—Hankins is big on community.

...”And why did I leave a plow in the field ... and look for a job in the town,” sang *Stick Mob* guitarist Matt Haygood that night, to the strums of his guitar and Kathleen Mogelgaard's fiddle, with Suzanne Hunt joining in

on vocals on “The Old Home Place.”

Patrons bobbed their heads to the music, some sipping on a glass of wine or a bottle of beer or a cocktail, or just listening, a youngish crowd but with a couple of older types just enjoying the music, the up-tempo foot stompers or the lazy, lilting country love songs.

A bluegrass renaissance

SOVA is helping to spark a bluegrass renaissance with bands including *Second String Band*, *Family Hammer*, *Extension Agents*, *By and By* and others.

“I believe there is a renaissance,” Alex Large, a guitarist and vocalist in



A band plays at the 2011 Kingman Island Bluegrass Festival.

with Second String Band, said of bluegrass, a country and western style featuring string instruments and relatively high-pitched lead tenor vocals. Large grew up playing bluegrass in his hometown, Nashville, Tenn.

He came here to work for a congressman after graduating from the University of Tennessee, and said “I was certainly surprised [at the popularity of the music here]. When I moved up from Nashville I had written off getting to see or play bluegrass for a while.”

Large attended the first Kingman Island Bluegrass & Folk Festival last year, met festival organizer Daniel Conner, and ended up jamming at the event himself and later started playing at SOVA.

Conner, a staffer for D.C. councilman Tommy Wells, is from Alabama and has long been a bluegrass aficionado, having played a little himself. He said the idea for the Kingman Island festival came out of working for a group that wanted to promote the environmental aspects of the island and call attention to preserving it.

“D.C. used to be the bluegrass capital and then everything went to Nashville,” said Conner, who said bands played for free at last year’s inaugural event but this year he was able to pay them something. “I had to turn down 15 bands who wanted to play. It’s definitely enjoying a renaissance ... it’s amazing to see how many people have come out of the woodwork to play. Next year we may do a two-day festival.”



By & By plays to a packed house.

Hankins said his goal with SOVA was to “have a community place, where people could gather, and I wanted to focus on the arts and getting local artists, a place where people from all walks could meet their neighbors, have a cup of coffee, read a paper, socialize, get work done.”

He said the bluegrass came by chance.

“We did bluegrass because a regular customer, a professional musician, approached me one day and

said he liked the space and wondered if he could play a show here sometime,” said Hankins. “So he played and then he had a friend and they came back and played and then it just started getting popular.”

“And then there were people in the crowd who were musicians who would email me and ask if they could play and that’s what happened. We went from doing it every three or four months to once a month to every other week to doing it every single week.”

Another part of the renaissance is a monthly bluegrass jam, started recently by musician Wren

Elhai and others with the DC Bluegrass Union, at The Mansion on O Street Northwest the first Sunday of each month.

“Will the circle be unbroken ...”

Back at SOVA that Thursday night in October, the band played on, of love and heartache and kids and family, even sailing ships, and of being on the road, and leaving places and always, always looking back at what was once so special.

Meanwhile other SOVA patrons also enjoyed the evening in the wine bar next to the music room, at times an elbow-to-elbow crowd of folks talking,

drinking, enjoying the art and the vibe.

So Hankins has his community place, coffee and art and poetry and music, along with food and fine wines and whiskey too, with its signature in this town being the bluegrass.

“For me, coming from Baltimore City I had not heard it that much,” said Hankins. “But it’s some good, foot-stomping, upbeat music that gets to your soul a lot of time. I really enjoy it. And pretty much that’s how I wanted it ... have a space, where people could do different things. If someone wanted to do jazz or bluegrass



Frank Hankins, owner of SOVA Espresso.

or honky-tonk, whatever it was, if you could bring a crowd, that’s the bottom line for me.”

And that goes for the spiritual too.

“... Will the circle be unbroken?” crooned the band Stick Mob that night on the old favorite, to the guitar strumming and the fiddle’s plaintive melody “...by and by Lord, by and by ... there’s a better home awaiting ... in the sky Lord, in the sky ...”

SOVA - Espresso & Wine, 1359 H Street, NE, 202-397-3080, www.sovadc.com. Bluegrass performances are at 8 p.m. every Thursday (check website for name for the band). ★