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DC's go-go sound becomes anti-gentrification battle cry

By ASHRAF KHALIL May 30, 2019



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WASHINGTON

(AP) — It's the

soundtrack of
"Chocolate City,"
the nonfederal

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black America.

Go-go music, a distinctive D.C.-specific offshoot of funk, has endured for decades through cultural shifts, fluctuations in popularity and law enforcement purges.

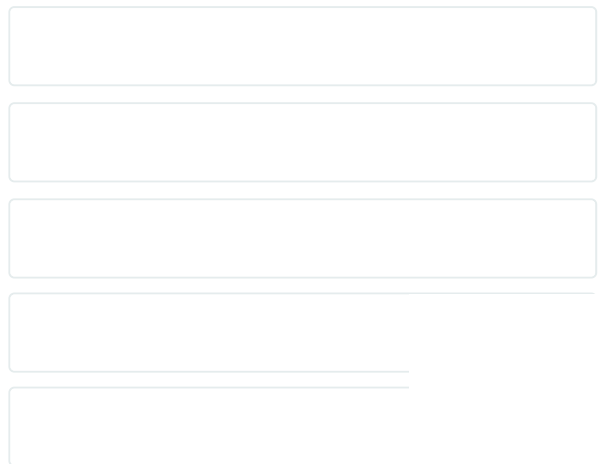
Now go-go has taken on a new mantle: battle hymn for the fight against a gentrification wave that's reshaping the city.

"It's a very deep cultural thing," said Justin "Yaddiya" Johnson, an activist and organizer of several go-go-themed protest

concerts. "When you think about go-go, you should

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by Taboola





our culture.”

Many longtime Washingtonians fear that culture is being steadily eroded as the city becomes whiter and richer. A recent controversy over an innocuous noise complaint placed go-go at the center of a perfect storm of gentrification symbolism.

The owner of a popular mobile phone store in the historically black Shaw neighborhood was told to [turn off the go-go](#) that he had been playing through sidewalk speakers for more than 20 years. He claims the complaint came



apartment building
erected on the
next block.



The reaction was
fierce. Seemingly
overnight, a
protest movement
and [petition drive](#)
sprung up and
[members of the
D.C. Council](#)
started weighing
in. Within days,
[the decision was
reversed.](#)

The mini-
controversy was
over almost before
it started. But it
obviously touched
a nerve.

“I think that was
messed up. Go-go
IS D.C. Go-Go is
our history,” said

community
activist Tiffany
Richardson. one of

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night this month
for an outdoor
concert/protest
featuring go-go
mainstays
Backyard Band.
“They’re not going
to stop go-go.”

The concert,
mischievously
named
“Moechella,” was
organized by
Johnson. And
since it was a
protest, he didn’t
need to secure a
permit, so police
obligingly blocked
off several city
blocks. The
location —the
corner of 14th and
U streets — was
no accident. That
intersection was
once one of the
hearts of black
D.C.; now it’s

within two blocks
of a Trader Joe’s
and a lululemon.



to the animated, go-go music seems indistinguishable from funk. What sets it apart are a specific conga-driven syncopation, known as the pocket beat, and a culture of call-and-response that turns the crowd into part of the show. Go-go bands feature multiple percussionists and often multiple vocalists— with one usually designated as “lead talker.”

“It’s the drumming it’s the rhythm pattern. It’s the feel of the rhythm,” said Liza Figueroa Kravinsky, founder of the band Go-Go Symphony. “In go-go, the fans know who the conga



[Brown](#) is generally considered the [godfather](#) of the sound, starting in the early 1970s. And bands like Rare Essence and Trouble Funk have all flirted with mainstream success, but there has never been a full-scale breakout star. Probably the most famous go-go song is “[Da Butt](#)” by Experience Unlimited, which was showcased in the Spike Lee film “School Daze.”

While the music retains a local fanbase, musicians and devotees say the scene is still recovering from the effects of the crack epidemic, which ravaged Washington and turned go-go



Eventually police began shutting down famous clubs like the Ibex in 1990s and forcing the shows out of the city.

Anwan “Big G” Glover, lead talker of Backyard Band, still recalls the time with bitterness.

Authorities blamed the music for drawing violence when he says go-go was simply the ambient soundtrack of a [city in crisis](#) .

“Those rave parties in the suburbs with these rich kids — if anything happened there, they could just cover it up. That was the difference,” he said.



live performances.
Glover and others
say there's a
missing generation
of fans who
weren't exposed to
live go-go in their
youth.

“The reason a lot
of kids don't know
about go-go is that
it's been erased,”
said Angela Byrd,
founder of “Made
in the DMV”
incubator for local
artists and
activists. She was
speaking at a
recent conference
organized under
the banner of
[#DontMuteDC](#). “I
feel like go-go was
pushed out, but
it's coming back.”

This official
mistrust has

continued. As
recently as 2010
the alternative



Police Department's bi-weekly internal "go-go report" tracking all the shows in the area.

Glover says the attitudes of the police have eased a bit in recent years and Backyard Band and others now play regular shows around the district. But there's still a shortage of the all-ages shows that used to be the main gateway for young new fans.

That age gap was evident during one of Backyard Band's recent shows at a bowling alley in Chinatown. The concert drew a healthy crowd of about 150 people

— many of whom were obvious hardcores who



seemed to be at least 35 years old.

Now the renewed attention comes at a time when go-go may organically be approaching one of its periodic flirtations with [mainstream popularity](#).


Glover has gained personal fame for a memorable recurring role as [Slim Charles](#) on the popular TV show “[The Wire](#).” Artists as diverse as [Snoop Dog](#) and [Dave Grohl](#) from Foo Fighters have paid public tribute to the genre. Rare Essence and Backyard Band have both [performed at the South by Southwest](#) music festival and Backvard Band



[of Adele's "Hello."](#)

Wale, the most famous Washington rapper, pays regular homage to go-go and [recorded a song](#) with TCB, purveyors of a neo-go-go sound called bounce-beat.

But local musicians still feel authorities have kept the culture at arms-length. They want to see the District government embrace go-go the way Chicago has done with blues and New Orleans with jazz. They want a [go-go museum](#), a hall of fame and go-go landmark-themed tours.

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go-go during
election season.

“They love us at
campaign rally
time,” he laughed.

“They know that’s
the only way to
bring people out.”

This story has
been corrected to
reflect that Justin
“Yaddiya” Johnson
is an activist and
organizer of
several go-go
themed protest
concerts, but is
not creator of the
#Don’tMuteDC
campaign.

Flow

BANG

KOK ...



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or...**

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LCR
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**Archa
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