

Awards Celebrate Go-Go's Funk

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Two groups of rival teenagers shot icy glares at each other, furrowing eyebrows and clenching fists to square off for a fight. One girl lost her cool as she rolled her neck and swung her braids wildly. The go-go band CCB stormed the stage at Constitution Hall just in time to play its hit song "Stop the Violence."

The Peaceholics, a local anti-violence youth group, staged the mock fight as part of the 93.9 WKYS Go-Go Awards, the first such program since 1990 dedicated to recognizing the District's funk-based music style.

The Nov. 19 event, which drew a number of local celebrities and politicians, came at a challenging time for both the local radio and go-go music industries. The parent company of WKYS, Radio One, the nation's largest radio operator targeting African Americans, saw profits tumble 59 percent in the second quarter of this year, followed by a 30 percent drop in the third quarter, according to company and published reports. While show attendance remains strong, go-go music has faced its own setbacks with the recent closings of popular D.C. venues such as Kili's Cafe, Club U and Between Friends.

Go-go fans said they are hopeful the awards show will provide a much-needed boost to their music.

"It's about time people put a spotlight [on us]," said Tre, a singer for the band UCB.

Aisha Martin, 23, of Fort Washington was among the hundreds who got one of the coveted tickets, which were distributed only to fans who called the station or attended promotional events.

This "is a good start, but more can be done," such as increasing air time for go-go music, Martin said.

Just before showtime, stretch limos floated by the red carpet, which was used to greet go-go royalty, including Robert Reed of Trouble Funk and members of Lissen Da Grewp. Red carpet fashions ranged from fur coats and fedoras to button-up shirts and cuffed jeans. Outside, the aroma of barbecue smoke filled the air as fans grilled near the steps, and go-go artists, promoters and managers posed for the cameras.

Filmmaker Bruce Brown, council member Marion Barry and Mayor-elect Adrian M. Fenty were among the local newsmakers who showed up to support the event.

Inside Constitution Hall, aisles became dance floors when Junkyard Band took the stage. The event also featured performances by go-go bands Rare Essence and UCB and rappers Wale and Tabi Bonney. Bonney, nominated for Best D.C. Metro Breakout Artist, was flanked onstage by a small entourage, wearing white transparent helmets advertising his new album, "A Fly Guy's Theme." Bonney continued the self-promotion after the show by handing out copies of the magazine "Sexy DC," which featured him on the cover.

One of the highlights of the evening was the presentation of a lifetime achievement award to Chuck Brown, the godfather of go-go. Local groups Backyard Band and Rare Essence, crowd favorites, proved their years of achievement and popularity, each winning four awards. Other winners included UCB (Best Go-Go Song Current), Familiar Faces (Best Grown and Sexy Band), Wale (Best D.C. Metro Breakout Artist) and CCB (Best New Crank Go-Go Band).

Many go-go artists said they were hopeful the awards would help bring more respect to their community, which has been associated with youth violence in the city. But WKYS, which used an online voting system, made a few missteps in planning the event.

The Big Footz Award, named after a late member of Rare Essence (known as Footz) was initially misspelled on the station's online voting system. That offended go-go fans, some of whom say Footz was to go-go what Tupac

Shakur was to rap. Also, in the category of Best Venue, Club U was nominated, even though it closed in 2005 after a patron was fatally stabbed and the club's liquor license was revoked. Go-go fans called and e-mailed the station and posted complaints on go-go Web sites.

Kevin "Kato" Hammond, chief executive and publisher of "Take Me Out to the Go-Go" magazine and Web site, was a presenter at the awards. Several weeks ago, he dedicated one of his Internet radio shows on WTGO Go-Go Radio to addressing problems with the awards. After the show, Hammond and other members of the Go-Go Coalition, a group of go-go artists and managers whose mission is to promote the music and culture, met with WKYS to discuss improving the ballots. Hammond said the station should have included the go-go community earlier in the planning, but he applauded its effort.

"It'll bring the go-go community together," Hammond said. "It allows everybody to congregate and fellowship together. KYS understood there were flaws, but [they] plan to improve in future years."

Maurice "Mo" Shorter, chairman of the coalition, also attended the meeting with Radio One. Shorter said the go-go community needs to unite and host its own awards show.

"It's on the agenda, and it's going to happen," he said. "We have to do it ourselves."

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