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Crank & Groove!

SEPTEMBER 11TH, 2013 BY AMY SAIDMAN NEWS AND INFORMATION

Guest post by Jess Solomon

For the past two weeks I've been having those "How did I get here?!" moments. I imagine it's the gut reaction most builders of things have when speakeasy gogo4x6they reflect on a nearly finished work.

We are a few days out from opening night of *Crank & Groove: A Go-Go Love Story* and instead of looking down from the perch of the director's chair I find myself sitting in circles with the cast; rather an ensemble of brilliant Go-Go practitioners, griots and lovers of the music and culture. My teachers. From the very beginning, this production has been rooted in collaboration, improvisation and a little scrappiness.

When I talk about *Crank & Groove* as a SpeakeasyDC production, the origin story matters. The makings of my collaboration with SpeakeasyDC started four years ago. I was a super green, gutsy theater maker desperate to find examples of great cultural producers in the city. After an Arts Administrators meeting at the DC Commission for Arts and Humanities, I ended up at The Heights for dinner and drinks with some of the attendees. At this long community table full of who's who in the DC Arts scene I was sandwiched between Amy Saidman and musician Christylez Bacon (who coincidentally, is a part of the amazing *Crank & Groove* ensemble). The whole time I

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STORYCAST



Katy Barrett: Most Improved Released April 8, 2013

kept thinking, “Geeze, I need to know this funny, loud woman!”

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I believe Amy thought my naiveté was charming and that I had good ideas. A few coffees’ later we were fast friends, colleagues and I eventually told stories with SpeakeasyDC, most recently at the SpeakeasyShorts Challenge last fall. As producers do, Amy and I always find moments between camaraderie to talk shop, swap ideas and explore ways to grow our audiences and build capacity.

After my last performance with SpeakeasyDC, I had to reflect on what it meant to tell my “true tales” as sometimes the only or one of few Storytellers of color in the cast.... in “Chocolate City”. Let me be clear, my reflection was less about race, and more about how the lack of diversity on stage (and many stages in DC) is the call for a large conversation about audience engagement, active recruitment and stories that reflect richer cultural experiences. I love the SpeakeasyDC community. And I know there are so many more stories that should be on that stage. With some hesitation, I shared this with Amy over tapas. She agreed.

So here we are, two wild women, full of ideas, breaking bread together. We began thinking out loud about ways to intervene on SpeakeasyDC. “*We should do something with artists...*” “*What’s unique to DC?*” We landed on stories connected to Hip-Hop and Go-Go. I immediately put out the bat signal and spoke with Charles Stephenson, Go-Go historian, Co-author of [The Beat: Go-Go Music From Washington, D.C.](#), former chair of the DC Commission of the Arts and Humanities, and what I call my fairy God-Father. He gave me a priceless education, expressed excitement about the project and encouraged us to truly focus on Go-Go as the vehicle for the stories. That was a major turning point for this show. With newfound clarity it was easy to connect how Go-Go, an art form indigenous to DC, would make space for new stories, new audiences and hopefully more capacity for SpeakeasyDC as a cultural institution to produce unique shows like this.

We are a few days out from opening night of *Crank & Groove: A Go-Go Love Story* and I am so, so, so honored to work alongside Kato Hammond, Natalie Hopkinson, Nina Mercer, Christylez Bacon, DJ Zombie, DJ Mothershiester, Black Picasso, Be’la Dona Band and photos by Thomas Sayers Ellis– stand-alone artists in their own right. And I know there are so many others that could be on stage with them. At Sunday’s tech rehearsal, Kato (who I consider one of Go-Go’s architects) said that his

was one of many Go-Go stories. I believe that, and I am grateful that we get to hear his.

“Go-Go is more than music; it’s a complex expression of cultural values masquerading in the guise of party music in our nations capital... go-go musicians call upon their everyday experiences to create this music... go-go “represents” for D.C. on many artistic and creative levels.”
– Charles Stephenson & Kip Lornell, *The Beat: Go-Go Music From Washington, D.C.*

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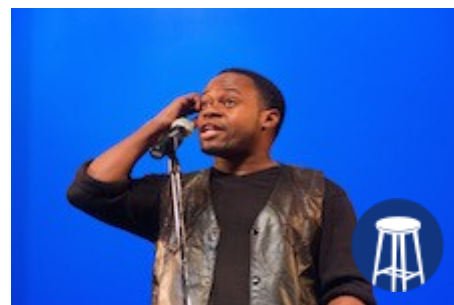
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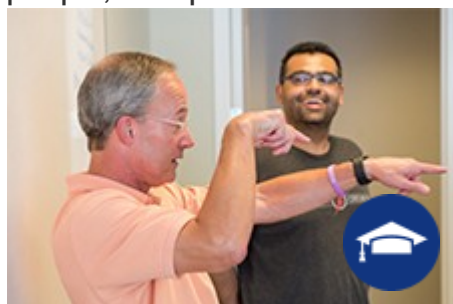
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