

# Features

## Go-go music, live on display?

DANIELLE CRALLE | TUESDAY, NOVEMBER 19, 2013



Contrary to popular belief, go-go music, a mash-up of funk, R&B and hip hop, isn't dead. In fact it's very much alive. But much like the District that birthed it, the music is going through an evolution of sorts, and in the middle of the change, growing pains are inevitable.

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Legendary clubs that once hosted go-go bands have closed, and in an effort to preserve the culture there's been an uptick in exhibits and performances that focus on the history of go-go.

The reality is that communities within the District are changing, and a go-go song that once held great significance may not mean as much to a new resident who doesn't understand the history of the music, says Jess Solomon, director of [Crank & Groove: A Go-Go Love Story](#), a performance with storytellers, musicians and dancers all bringing go-go to life. The show premiered at the Atlas Performing Arts Center in September.

Although D.C. is changing, the music and the message seems to have stayed the same.

The best way to describe go-go is a loud, bumping, percussion-driven mix of funk, hip hop and R&B. It is a genre of music that's best understood live and has connected many D.C. residents. Within the D.C. metro, area fans remain loyal and proud of the music and its cultural impact.

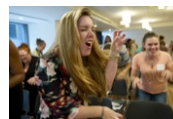
"It seems pretty clear to me that there's been an uptick in people interested in

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preserving, understanding and documenting the tangible and non-tangible elements related to go-go,” says Christopher “Kip” Lornell, ethnomusicologist and author of [The Beat: Go-Go Music From Washington D.C.](#)

Case in point: in late February, the Corcoran Gallery of Art featured “Pump Me Up”, an exhibit dedicated to the subculture of D.C. during the 1980's, a time when people were flocking to suburbia in droves. The exhibit featured Chuck “the godfather of go-go” Brown's red leather jacket, Rare Essence bandmember Little Benny's trumpet, and tons of vintage posters advertising go-go shows, says Roger Gastman, curator of the exhibit.

Understanding the history of the music helps those on the outside to realize that this isn't just music, it's culture, says Kato Hammond, one of the storytellers at Crank & Groove, former lead guitarist for Little Benny and the Masters and publisher of the go-go centric site [TMOTTGoGo.com](#).

Preserving the culture is important because D.C. is different now, he says. “It ain't Chocolate City anymore.”

### **"Getting people who don't understand to understand"**

Despite the importance of its history, go-go is music that is, at its core, meant to be consumed live.

Understanding the history is great, but if you haven't come out to a show there's going to be a disconnect, says Eric “EB” Britt, keyboardist for The Backyard Band, one of the more popular go-go bands in the District.

“I think that's one of the problems that we have with go-go, getting people who don't understand to understand,” he says.

*“I wanted to see stories of things that were indigenous and culturally specific to D.C.”*

From the band's verbal interaction with the crowd, to the audience's role in determining what gets played and for how long, it's all a live experience, Hammond says.

Sentiments like those are the reason that Solomon decided to make her “Crank and Groove” show part oral history lesson, and part

live go-go.

“I wanted to see stories of things that were indigenous and culturally specific to D.C.,” Solomon says. It was important to give the music some context, but “I didn't want this to feel like it was on display,” she says.

Go-go has to be experienced live, but just like anything that's cultural, there needs to be a record of it, says Natalie Hopkinson, author of [Go-Go Live: the Musical Life and Death of a Chocolate City](#), and one of the storytellers featured in Crank & Groove.

“The history doesn't diminish the reality that it's a live culture,” Hopkinson says.

### **Clubs, kids and communities contribute to change**

Still, the live culture has been evolving for more than a few decades. For many it's proof that the music, much like the culture, has been affected by legislation and gentrification.

Increasingly, it's become harder and harder to find live go-go in D.C., Lornell says. As clubs in the District close, there are fewer and fewer venues, he says.

The music is pushed into surrounding communities, such as Prince George's County.

There have been several incidents where communities and local Advisory Neighborhood Commissions would only support nightclubs obtaining liquor licenses under the condition that go-go music was banned, due to violence at other go-go events in the area, Hopkinson says.

In addition, as real estate prices rise in the District, and it becomes more and more expensive to run a nightclub, it becomes less lucrative to support the music, Lornell says.

Regardless, the importance of go-go in the District remains.

"Just like jazz in New Orleans," Hopkinson says, "this is something we own."

*Listen to a Backyard Band song below.*



[This Is For My Block](#) from [Backyard DC](#) on Myspace.



Read more articles by Danielle Cralle.

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