

CITY

Kato Hammond, Go-Go's De Facto Historian, Remembers His Roots—and Go-Go's, Too

ALONA WARTOFSKY — MAY 21, 2015 9 AM



In 1996, **Kevin “Kato” Hammond** discovered the Internet at his day job at the Newspaper Association of America, where he worked as a database operator. He tried searching Netscape for “go-go music.”

Nothing came up. He searched again, then again, and finally found one very brief mention in a British music guide.

That didn’t seem right to Hammond, an avid go-go fan and musician who had played with several go-go bands during the late ’80s and early ’90s. So he built his own AOL webpage and named it after one of his favorite **Rare Essence** songs, “Take Me Out to the Go-Go.” TMOTTGoGo.com was officially launched in March 1996. Next year, the website will mark its 20th anniversary.

Hammond is a veteran of go-go bands **Pure Elegance**, **Little Benny and the Masters**, and **Proper Utensils**; at the time of his site's launch, he was an established go-go insider. Getting access to the musicians was easy, and so was finding writers and collaborators willing to volunteer. To expand the TMOTTGoGo brand, Hammond began publishing a monthly print magazine in '98 and started an Internet radio station the following year.

"If we in the culture don't do it, it's not going to get done," he says. "That's the way it's always been for us in go-go."

Bandleader **Chuck Brown** developed go-go during the mid '70s, and during its first decade, the music flourished mostly under the radar of mainstream and even alternative media. During the late '80s, go-go struggled with a different kind of image problem: When the crack epidemic hit D.C., street violence soared and go-go shows became magnets for trouble. Local politicians and the media condemned "go-go violence," and venues were closed down. (More recently, go-go shows in Prince George's County have been shuttered by the controversial CB-18-2011 licensing law.)

"For the longest time, we would all hear the music in the streets and on the radio, but there were no articles or stories being done about go-go and no media specifically about us," says Rare Essence guitarist and manager **Andre "Whiteboy" Johnson**. "Unless it was something bad, the media wouldn't report on it. Kato saw the need for the stories of our community to be reported on, and that's what he did."

Hammond eventually converted the print magazine to a digital one, and the website's popular chats rooms have since shifted to conversations on the TMOTTGoGo [Facebook page](#). Still, his platform offers news, performance listings, feature stories, and access to local go-go hits that may not garner conventional radio airplay. In the process, he's advanced go-go's palpable sense of community.

Thomas Sayers Ellis, who has chronicled go-go culture in photography and poetry, displays a link to TMOTTGoGo on his own website. "Kato Hammond has been at the forefront of this very vital movement, both as an active observer and an active participant," Ellis writes in an email. "If there is such a thing as an organic, living archive, he is it. Kato has a damn good crystal ball and his fingers on all of the pulses of go-go."

Now Hammond, who turns 50 later this summer, has embarked on another DIY project. Last week, he released a self-published book, *Take Me Out to the Go-Go: The Autobiography of Kato Hammond*.



Far more engaging than readers might expect a self-published autobiography to be, *Take Me Out to the Go-Go* tells a narrative greater than Hammond's own. The book opens in 1976 in Seat Pleasant, where Hammond's father, a truck driver, moved the family from D.C. in the hopes of staying out of trouble. Like most kids in his neighborhood, Hammond was all about music, mainly the soul and funk hits on the radio. He played an acoustic box guitar until he was 11, old enough to convince his father to buy him an electric one. After that, Hammond spent untold hours in his bedroom playing along with **Parliament's** "Aqua Boogie." He also learned another huge hit that year, **Chuck Brown and the Soul Searchers'** "Bustin' Loose." Hammond didn't know it at the time, but "Bustin' Loose" would be go-go's first hit record.

During the late '70s, writes Hammond, just about every black neighborhood in the area had an “official” band that would provide both entertainment and role models. “Younger kids always had people to look up to, and they were people who you knew directly from your neighborhood,” he says. Even when family funds were tight, kids could usually get their hands on musical instruments and teach themselves how to play. As soon as they could, they formed bands. Hammond recalls seeing one neighborhood band playing outside an apartment building, their amplifiers plugged into an extension cord dangling from a third-floor window.

One Saturday night when he was 14, Hammond discovered Rare Essence. It was a 1979 show at Prince George's Community College, and the band's trademark “inner city” groove—driven by mesmerizing layers of percussion and indelible call-and-response chants—forever changed the way Hammond thought about music.

The years that followed became the golden era for D.C.'s homegrown funk, and go-go became the musical lingua franca of the city and the growing black population in the P.G. County suburbs. While Hammond and his friends were grooving to Rare Essence, **Experience Unlimited**, and **Trouble Funk**, his father was partying with an older crowd at Chuck Brown shows. “That was the era when it seemed like everybody was playing go-go,” Hammond says. “Funk bands were converting to the go-go style, and most of the bands that didn't play go-go essentially disappeared.”

As a teenager, Hammond attended the Duke Ellington School of the Arts along with several kids who played in local go-go acts like **Petworth Band**, **the Peacemakers**, and **Ayre Rayde**. (Another Duke Ellington student at that time was **Donnell Floyd**, who would soon join Hammond's favorite band, Rare Essence.) “They would refer to it as ‘jungle music,’ and refer to those who appreciated it as ‘block boys,’” he writes in the book. “Basically, it was just another way of calling us neighborhood ghetto kids.” That kind of derision didn't make much sense to Hammond. “Those kids saying that were coming from the same neighborhoods we were,” he says, “which makes that really ironic.”

Hammond also had a keen interest in theater and joined the Children's Urban Arts Ensemble, a local theater group. Eventually, he was kicked out of Duke—he'd spent too much time on go-go and theater, not enough on academics. In 1982, he transferred to Bowie High School, and soon after submitted a play to the Young Playwrights Festival, a national competition founded by **Stephen Sondheim**. Titled *Buddies*, the play was about three D.C. teens—go-go fans, of course—who face a crisis when one of them inadvertently robs a gas station. *Buddies* was one of 11 plays out of more than a thousand that were selected for readings in New York City. A group of talented young actors did those readings; the one who read the part of *Buddies*' villain was **Denzel Washington**.

The most compelling elements of Hammond's book are its vivid descriptions of the culture surrounding D.C.'s homegrown funk. Rare Essence used to play at the Howard Theatre every Friday night, but many kids didn't have \$5 for admission. “During the week, my mom would give me a dollar for lunch money,” Hammond writes. “Instead of using it to buy lunch, I would pocket it, sneak through the lunch line, and steal my lunch.” By the time Friday night rolled around, he had five singles to get him into the show.

Some of the best anecdotes come later, when the adult Hammond played guitar and contributed raps and other vocals for Little Benny and the Masters. The Little Benny years were the highlight of Hammond's stage career: The band performed free shows in front of Benny's house for neighborhood kids and appeared on a 1988 all-go-go lineup at the Capital Centre. When the formerly incarcerated **Marion Barry Jr.** won a seat on the D.C. Council, the group played his victory party.

Then there was **Andre Lonnell Smith**, better known as **Elmo**, a hugely popular conga player with Little Benny and the Masters and the inspiration for the band's local hit "Elmo Get Busy." Smith later served time at Lorton Reformatory, and when the band played at Lorton during the late '80s, the prison guards—who, like many inmates, were avid go-go fans—allowed him to perform with the band onstage.

What resounds throughout the book is the story of an indigenous musical culture that has survived drug-related violence, race and class prejudices, and the deaths of a number of its beloved local stars. In between the lines of Hammond's own story, one thing is clear: Go-go prevails due to the extraordinary dedication and perseverance of both the musicians and their fans.

"There's only one way to maintain a movement, and that's with some type of history," says longtime Rare Essence member Floyd, who now leads the band **Familiar Faces**. "Kato has always been our leading historian. Years from now, when somebody comes to look for the story of go-go, that's when Kato's importance will be understood."

Go-go's profound connection to its audience is another major theme of the book, and Hammond's mini media empire has underscored that bond. TMOTTGoGo hosts cookouts and meet-and-greets, where go-go fans can hang out with bandmembers. Hammond has also organized two TMOTTGoGo Honors events celebrating go-go luminaries at the Lincoln Theatre.

Still, TMOTTGoGo earns just enough to keep itself going. Hammond estimates that he pays \$400 a month to operate the website and radio, just about the same amount both earn through advertising. "TMOTTGoGo has never made money," he says. "This is how I think about it. It's like the opening of Chuck's 'Bustin' Loose': 'Keep what you got until you get what you need, y'all/You got to give a lot just to get what you need sometimes, y'all.'"

Hammond supports his family with his own graphic and web design company. And just like the music, Hammond keeps finding a way to go on. "Go-go has always had to be self-sufficient," he says. "Go-go is gonna make its way."

As go-go's style has evolved, with new generations of bands adapting the music and making it theirs, Hammond has been careful to keep up with the proliferating subgenres: There's old school and new school, grown 'n' sexy, bounce beat, krank, gospel go-go, and even a reggae-go-go fusion known as regg-go.

"TMOTTGoGo covers all styles of go-go. Whatever branches grow out of the go-go tree, that's what it covers," says Hammond. "And when a new generation comes in, TMOTTGoGo needs a new generation of writers. That's the key to our survival."

“If one day go-go blows up really big, super big, like on the Grammys and everything, then TMOTTGoGo is already in place.”

Photos by Darrow Montgomery



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