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Marion Barry, Go-Go Politics, and the Death of Chocolate City

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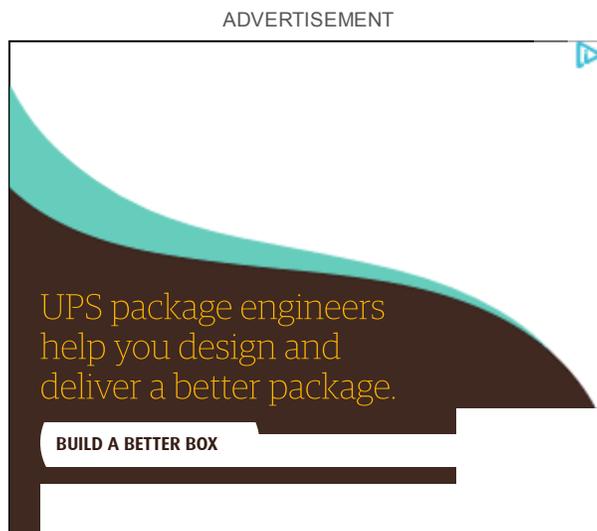


Like go-go music, the longtime mayor was part of the city's counterculture, bringing the underground to the foreground in Washington, DC.



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weren't even allowed to vote for president until 1964. And Congress didn't grant Washingtonians "home rule"—in other words, the right to do things like vote for a mayor or pass city laws—until 1973.



That political powerlessness sparked a slow building revolution in the city's majority black population. Graffiti artists found their voices on the city's walls, while others picked up instruments and birthed a new musical genre, go-go, that became the soundtrack of the "Chocolate City."

That was the soundtrack of Marion Barry's four terms as mayor of the nation's capital. Barry died last week at the age of 78, and the **city begins three days of remembrances today for the former mayor**. While people outside of DC snicker at Barry's crack smoking legacy, he's being remembered for much more than that in Washington; the city he transformed and empowered.

"D.C. has a pulse of itself. Marion Barry came in with a pulse and an awareness. It was like a marriage made in heaven," says Darryl Brooks, a D.C. concert promoter and friend of Chuck Brown, the 'Godfather of Go-Go'—a style and man both as unique to Washington as Barry himself. "His timing was correct for the time that he came into the city," added Brooks.

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when he was four. His mother remarried, raising Barry and his eight siblings in Memphis, Tennessee. While studying for masters in chemistry at Fisk University, Barry became a part of the first wave of sit-ins with the Nashville Student Movement, and later became the first chair of the Student Non-Violent Coordinating Committee, which combated racism all across the Deep South through peaceful but aggressive demonstrations.

In 1965—the year landmark voting rights legislation passed Congress—Barry landed in Washington. Back in those days, he rocked an Afro, which old Washingtonians remember as an extra touch that scared white people both locally and nationally. That didn't matter to Barry, who understood where his power base lied in the Chocolate City. He was first elected mayor in 1979 as the first civil rights leader to lead a large city, and it quickly became evident he marched to his own beat, just as the city did.

Brooks remembers Barry getting in trouble in the press for eliciting campaign donations in strip clubs and bars along DC's bustling 14th Street. "He could go to a strip joint, he could go to a nightclub or he could go to hoity-toity parties and still have a respectable conversation with those folks and also get his point across, because he was consciously and politically aware," he said.

Just as Barry maintained a singular political style that endeared him to Washington voters, go-go music was a unique Washington sound that became the outlet for black youth living in the nation's capital. A few go-go songs were overtly political, but the music itself had a political tinge intertwined into the culture it birthed. The go-go scene was homegrown, and mostly stayed around Washington, offering local residents a personal escape from the blight that surrounded them.

The music wasn't created for stereos. It's something you're supposed to feel in the club, driven by intense percussion and Caribbean-style tempos. Sometimes a dozen musicians perform on stage together, often including a keyboard and a



The real show is on the dance floor. Even a halfway decent go-go performance on stage leaves every single body in the club shaking, swaying, sweating. Musicians aren't afraid of being outdone by the audience—they need them. Hence the traditional call and response from singer to crowd, like a pastor and his congregation.

Chuck Brown—go-go's godfather—mastered the technique before dying in 2012 at age 75. Just a year before his death he was still able to rev up the audience at D.C.'s famous 9:30 Club.

"Wind me up Chuck," the crowd would scream at the start.

"What you want me to do?" came Brown's gravelly response.

"Wind me up Chuck!" the audience would demand again, more arms waving in the air.

"One more time," says Brown, as his seven-piece band eggs on the crowd.

"Wind me up Chuck!"

"I don't hear you!"

"Wind me up Chuck!"

"Oh yes I do," Brown would chuckle before unleashing the full force of the band and funky vocals on the ecstatic crowd.

Brown was a master of the audience. But if Brown mastered the call on stage, it was Barry who mastered it on the city's streets. "He was mayor of the culture that that music was the backdrop of, basically, so it kind of goes hand in hand

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One of the biggest problems facing Barry and other big-city mayors in the 70s and 80s was urban flight, as a lack of jobs drove up crime rates, squalor, and drug use. Barry helped combat that by starting the Summer Youth Employment initiative, a program that also helped spur the go-go scene. "That was like a big thing," Hammond said, noting that he was hired by city's Department of Recreation in 1980 to play music for the n at public spaces around the city. "It helped inspire us in the area of music and you can also say that it helped encourage the music and helped the growth of music."

"The musicians in these bands, in these go-go bands, these were our jobs. I'm not sure a lot of people realized that," he added, remembering that friends played for the city during the week and at clubs on weekends.

Over a drink in the rapidly gentrifying DC neighborhood of Bloomingdale, Natalie Hopkinson, the author of *Go-Go Live: The Musical Life and Death of a Chocolate City*, explained that go-go was also political. Go-go was everywhere, she said, and touched most everything in Washington in those days.

"So there's a whole economy of bands—there's the promoters, there's the graphic designers, there was a huge clothing industry that it supported," Hopkinson said. "There were all these networks of mom and pop businesses, there were all these storefronts, that it supported."

With go-go, as with Barry, "the underground became the foreground," said Hopkinson. And like the music, the mayor was also part of the city's counterculture. That's what made him the perfect fit for a Washington trying to confront and tear down the racial and economic power structures that dominated the nation in the seventies and eighties.

"He's uppity. He didn't know his place and so I think he really got underneath people's skin – in power – over the years and that's part of what makes him,"

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Barry's personal flaws have tainted his record, at least outside of Washington where he's best known as the mayor busted by the FBI for smoking dope at the Vista Hotel. "He is a joke. He is a laughing stock," Hopkinson said of the national perception of Barry. "People can't get that Vista Hotel out of their mind. They can't imagine that anyone can have any human value after seeing that."

But Barry is remembered differently in Washington, where he is credited with creating jobs, and beloved for programs like his annual turkey drive for poor people in his community. Despite his crack bust, he was reelected as mayor in the nineties, and as a sitting city councilman—a political comeback that most people outside of DC will likely never understand.

"For DC, he will always be that person who to the very end fought for the little guy, was a champion of the people, had love for the people, and never benefited personally because he was broke," Hopkinson said.

Now, as gentrification pushes much of DC's black community into the surrounding suburbs, many people in the capital are mourning the death of both Barry, and also of his Chocolate City. But Hopkinson maintains that Barry, who was also known for heavy drinking and womanizing, was much better at taking care of the city than of his own body, and left the city, and its people with a legacy that is stronger than his own.

"He was physically frail and lived hard, and all of that," she said. "Go-go is definitely much healthier. And I think the black community and what's left of the Chocolate City is a lot healthier than what Barry was."



A new Marion Barry mural on the corner of Randolph and 14th Streets in Washington, DC. Photo by Andrew Wiseman via Flickr

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