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FEATURE

GO-GO FOREVER

THE RISE, FALL, AND AFTERLIFE OF WASHINGTON, D.C.'S ULTIMATE RHYTHM



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MTV

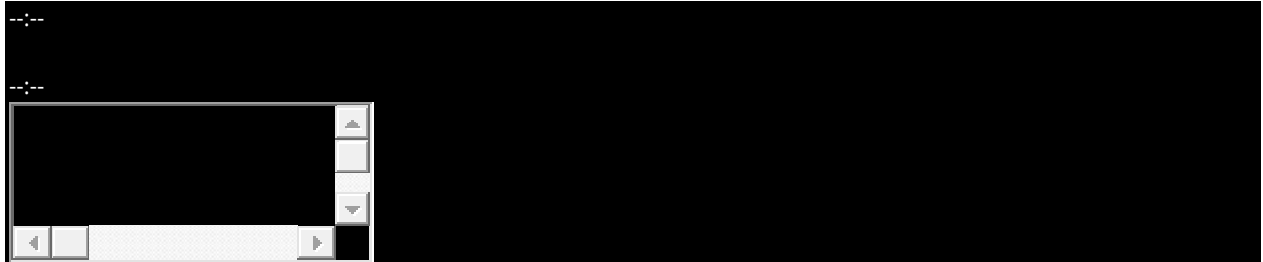
ERICKA BLOUNT DANOIS

Ericka Blount Danois is based in Baltimore and writes about music and culture. Her first book, 'Love, Peace and Soul,' about the show 'Soul Train,' was published in 2013.

We had made plans to walk the more than 10 treacherous blocks to the show that Saturday autumn night in the Chocolate City. So we walked from my friend Cheryl's building on 14th and Fairmont Streets all the way to The Black Hole, one of the most popular go-go spots in town, strolling past hustlers and the infamous Clifton Terrace projects as we went. We weren't in heels, like most girls going to nightclubs. We wore New Balance tennis shoes with our Guess jeans. At The Black Hole, you had to be prepared to run at any moment.

In Washington, D.C.'s 1980s go-go scene, The Black Hole was what CBGB was to punk rock, what The Paradise Garage was to dance music. You couldn't call yourself a true go-go head if you'd never stepped past its hefty bodyguards after wading through the mass of bodies stretching down Georgia Avenue whenever a show was happening. It was a hole in the wall, really — a former car garage that regularly packed in excess of 400 sweaty teenagers. And it was our spot to hear uncut go-go, dance all night, and be seen. Dancing there was the closest thing that a non-churchgoer could find to catching the spirit at a Pentecostal church, and as close to a juke joint as a saved soul could experience. The Black Hole offered some kind of gutter-funk bucket madness that you just *had* to have. Once you did, you were willing to sneak out the house and walk through murderous blocks to get back to it.

Go-go clubs like The Black Hole could be a safe haven of sorts from the epidemic of violence that would eventually force the NBA's Washington Bullets to change their name to the Washington Wizards in 1997. Even so, it was the height of the crack era, and despite the widely replicated social programs that Mayor Marion Barry created for young people in the city, there were ridiculous amounts of fast money to be had, and territorial rivalries were never far behind. Teenagers from all walks of life, from various parts of the city, ended up at the go-gos, and fights broke out regularly between warring crews who ended up in the same space. Bands would shine the spotlight and stop the music when a fight broke out. Some, like The Junkyard Band, came up with slogans like, "One fight, good night!"



That night, I foolishly thought that crimped and sprayed hair would withstand the heat of all those teenage bodies, gyrating and shaking to nonstop percussion for hours. Most of the boys carried white hand towels to wipe their sweat periodically. We were 14 years old — this was an all-ages show, with no alcohol being sold — and that night's bill was headlined by Rare Essence, "The Wickedest Band Alive." Inside the club, kids held JVC boom boxes and Sony Walkmen in the air to record fan favorites like "One on One," with its call-and-response chorus:

When school was closed, it was good to go, we didn't want to leave until we closed the show. Sho nuff?

"Sho nuff!" the teenagers cried in unison.

School is open ...

"School is open," we repeated.

Gonna return ...

"Gonna return!"

Open those books and really learn!

"Open those books and really learn!"

We danced with intensity. From time to time, guys tried to grind up on us. There was no escaping the seductive, sexual element of go-go, even for prepubescent kids. "There were rumors of people having sex in The Black Hole, though I never saw anything like that," recalls local promoter Faith Newman, who worked on early go-go shows including one bill with Trouble

Funk, Bad Brains, and Herbie Hancock in 1984. "The music was so funky. It would become hypnotic after a while. It was about losing yourself in the music."

Roll calls were a highlight of every show. That night, Rare Essence's lead talker, Funk, shouted out people and crews from "Uptown" to "8th and H" to the "A-Team," recognizing faces in the crowd or reading off slips of paper that eager concertgoers passed up to him. Others in the crowd showed off their Coca-Cola logo shirts, their Fila and Sergio Tacchini velour tracksuits, or their new K-Swiss tennis shoes. We left that night only when the lights came on and the music stopped. Our sweat-soaked shirts were plastered to our chests, and our hair was wilted and matted. The sun had risen, but we weren't worried as we walked past fresh-faced people starting their day. We'd be back for more soon.

"Once you go to a go-go, it's like making love for the first time," says Big Butch, a go-go promoter from the genre's height.

There are many theories about how go-go — a fusion of Latin music, jazz, funk, and gospel — got its name. Davey Yarborough, a jazz saxophonist who played with Lena Horne and Billy Eckstine, says that the genre originated at local dance houses known as go-go halls. At first, R&B bands playing slow songs filled the halls. At some point in the years after Smokey Robinson & the Miracles' 1965 hit "[Going to a Go-Go](#)," newer acts including Black Heat and Chuck Brown & the Soul Searchers arrived. Brown became known for playing songs continuously in an effort to prevent people from leaving the dance floor between numbers. His songs' call-and-response structure kept the audience's and the band's energy up, and the shows wouldn't end till sunup.

"To me, go-go is nothing but the evolution of rhythm and blues," Yarborough says. "It was dance music. You danced and sweated so much you had to go to the restroom. Chuck Brown was doing jazz tunes like '[Take the "A" Train](#)' and '[It Don't Mean a Thing](#).' It had the heavy influence of the 2 and the 4 [beat], but the vibrato of the hi-hat was in a jazz-swing pattern, with the groove of Latin instruments on top of that."

Go-go historian Kevin "Kato" Hammond, author of *Take Me Out to the Go-Go* and former lead guitarist for Little Benny and the Masters, traces the genre's nonstop percussion, unrelenting funk, improvisation, and emphasis on the downbeat back to James Brown. "All of the bands during that time were playing on Fender Rhodes keyboards," says Hammond. "The go-go element really comes from James Brown. It all comes from that funk."

Hammond notes that D.C. had always been a town of live bands, rather than celebrity club DJs. "It became a competition," he says. "If bands kept the percussion between songs before going to the next song, you kept people on the dance floor."

The most popular early bands in the 1970s were led by the “Godfather of Go-Go,” guitarist Chuck Brown, and his band The Soul Searchers, who mixed jazz standards with hardcore percussion; Trouble Funk, a band that mixed funk with a hard-hitting punk edge; and Mass Extinction, with their robust horn section in the style of Earth, Wind & Fire. The ’80s and ’90s brought a heavier focus on percussion, with bands like Little Benny and the Masters, whose lineup featured bassist Michelle Johnson (later Meshell Ndegeocello) and its namesake trumpeter, who impressed audiences by playing two horns at once; Rare Essence, who brought a progressive-jazz style with a nonstop groove; the percussion-heavy Junk Yard Band; and Experience Unlimited, who mixed funk, rock, and soul.

Go-go bands had some of the best musicians in town. Chuck Brown had drummer Ricky Wellman, who had toured and recorded with Miles Davis as well as playing with Carlos Santana and Chick Corea; Brown’s bassist played with Chaka Khan, Natalie Cole, and Grace Jones. JuJu from E.U.’s résumé ranges from Arrested Development to Hank Williams Jr. This was D.C., after all, a city whose arts scenes had long mingled across genre and cultural lines. Cool “Disco” Dan, a graffiti artist, would sell live concert recordings (known as PA tapes) during the day in front of the shops on F Street and paint graffiti with his punk-rock friends from D.C.’s burgeoning hardcore scene at night. Go-gos were popular at prestigious private schools like Maret, St. Albans, and Sidwell Friends, where presidents’ children attended.

They were also popular with rappers across the nation. Scarface, the influential Houston rapper, is a talented bass guitarist, and he was known to play onstage with go-go bands whenever he was in D.C. On an episode of TV One’s *Way Black When*, [Doug E. Fresh](#) revealed that his most memorable live experience was a show he performed in D.C. where he watched thousands of people dancing in unison to a go-go song in a way he described as “tribal.” At the same time, go-go bands were a primary way for locals to hear new hip-hop at a time when D.C. radio stations weren’t playing much of it. “I went to see Essence play, and they were vamping ‘Wild Wild West,’” says Hammond. “I was like, *Damn, this joint is good as a mug*. Then I saw the Kool Moe Dee video and was like, *OOOH! That’s a Kool Moe Dee joint!*”

Over on the pop charts, Grace Jones picked up the go-go beat for her 1985 hit “[Slave to the Rhythm](#)”; decades later, in the early 2000s, D.C.’s own Rich Harrison referenced the distinctive rhythms of go-go with his production on Beyoncé’s “[Crazy in Love](#)” and Amerie’s “[1 Thing](#),” and Virginia Beach’s Pharrell Williams borrowed the groove and the hook from Chuck Brown’s 1979 hit “[Bustin’ Loose](#)” for Nelly’s “[Hot in Herre](#).”

But even as it influenced the mainstream in both subtle and obvious ways, go-go had trouble breaking out much farther than the city’s limits, parts of Maryland and Virginia, and black college campuses — a familiar, frustrating story for fans and artists of the genre.

One night after school during my ninth-grade year in 1986, my father was sitting on the floor of our apartment on 16th Street in the Mount Pleasant section of the city, going through his record

collection held up by cinder blocks. He enjoyed all kinds of music, including the hip-hop and go-go music of my generation. I asked him why go-go never made it out of D.C. How come the live sound didn't translate well to records? My father answered simply: "It's too African."

What he meant was that go-go was too pure an art form to be contained on a cassette or CD. It wasn't radio-friendly enough. The music went on without breaks until everybody was exhausted. It was improvisational, dependent on the reaction of the audience. It wasn't just the music, it was the whole experience.

Melvin Deal, a musician and pioneer in African dance and drumming, has been teaching young people in the District since the late '60s. A Howard University graduate, he has also studied at the University of Ghana and the University of Ibadan in Nigeria. At his house in Prince George's County, Maryland, he's surrounded by art and instruments from dozens of African nations. He is the consummate teacher, even-keeled and youthful in spirit, energy, and physical appearance. He's nearing 90 years old, but could easily pass for half that.

"Black people have to constantly improvise in order to stay alive," he tells me, tapping on one of his large collection of drums. "Our music reflects that. Jazz, calypso music, samba, zydeco, hip-hop — it is a joyous celebration of the present."

Deal traces go-go's musical origins back to the batá drums, bongos, and timbales of Nigeria and Cuba. The lead talker in go-go, who acts as the conductor for the band and the audience, is similar to a talker, griot, or *djeli* in parts of Western Africa, who names the people who are present at a gathering and narrates important social events that are taking place in the community. Scholar Joy DeGruy has written that if a person arrives late to such a meeting, the speaker may stop what they are doing in order to introduce that person and catch them up on what they've missed. Similarly, the call-and-response at a go-go gives audience members the feeling of full participation. The band is no more important than the audience. When the talker puts people in the crowd and neighborhood crews on "display" by shouting them out as the music plays, he is acknowledging these people. The result can be a show that goes on and on until it *feels* like it has truly finished.

"I went to Africa in 1988 and checked out some indigenous Somalian music," longtime D.C. crime reporter Tom Morris Jr. says in the 2012 graffiti documentary *The Legend of Cool "Disco" Dan*, narrated by D.C. punk mainstay Henry Rollins. "They were drumming and it took me right back to Anacostia Park in D.C. It was this revelation: Go-go is Africa. It's D.C. and Africa."

Deal believes that go-go music goes on and on, sometimes with bands playing until the morning, because the spirit is inexhaustible and continuously regenerates. The pageantry that comes with the clothing, the hairstyles, the picture posing, the entourages of people, and the shout-outs has a deep spiritual purpose.

"Everything is sacred because everything is God," says Deal. "When E.U. sings 'So-and-so has a big ole butt,' God is not so long-faced and conservative that He can't receive praise for a butt. She is shaking that butt for *Gaaaawd*."

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=FShE0VifCYs>

In 1979, a volunteer named Derrick McCrae was supervising a school band made up of kids aged 9 to 14 from the Barry Farm projects in Washington, D.C.'s Southeast section. After budget cuts had slashed public-school music programs, McCrae encouraged the kids to use anything they could find and afford to make go-go music on their own. They used overturned five-gallon plastic buckets for drums; soda cans, Quaker State oil cans, and bean cans for cowbells; and silverware and antennas for drumsticks. For the sound of a snare drum, they would take a hubcap and cut it so it vibrated just so when placed on top of a bucket drum. Because most of the found instruments were best used for percussion, the kids tried to emulate the sound of Mass Extinction rather than Rare Essence, who had a horn section as robust as Earth, Wind & Fire's or Mandrill's.

McCrae called the group that emerged from his makeshift music program The Junk Yard Band. They soon took off as a novelty act, getting gigs around the city. One show in the parking lot in front of the Riggs Bank on 19th and M Street drew a crowd that spilled so far into the streets that someone reportedly got hit by a car while trying to hear the band.

"We were making as much money as the bands that played in the clubs," says Moe Shorter, the band's manager at the time. "And we were reaching a diverse group of people, including white people that came to Georgetown."

In the late 1970s, Marion Barry's summer youth employment program employed young musicians on the Showmobile, a large tractor-trailer with a stage for go-go bands. The Showmobile traveled around to various neighborhoods in the city, and at times the mayor himself would show up unexpectedly at venues all over the city. (Barry was equally supportive of the punk scene that was flourishing around the same time, remembers Johnny Temple, a former member of the D.C. post-hardcore act Girls Against Boys — Fugazi, Bad Brains, and the short-lived State of Alert, featuring a young Henry Rollins, all benefited from the financial and artistic support of the city.)

Junk Yard's sound influenced other bands like Northeast Groovers and Backyard Band to move from the more jazz- and R&B-influenced sound of Chuck Brown & the Soul Searchers, the big-band horn sections of Rare Essence, and the Hendrix- and Zeppelin-influenced Experience Unlimited into something more hard-funk-driven, with the percussion section as the lead.

By 1985, with The Junk Yard Band playing steady gigs around D.C.'s clubs, rental halls, and skating rinks, they were earning \$600 per gig — a lot of money for teenagers, Shorter recalls. The band's profile began to rise after a [TV ad](#) for a local clothing store and a small role in Rick Rubin's *Tougher Than Leather* where the group, still in junior high and wearing matching

sweatsuits, led by talker Buggs, plays at a house party as the members of Run-D.M.C. arrive, with Jam Master Jay executing a mean wop. Rubin signed the band to Def Jam that year, releasing a hard-bass-driven, politically conscious single called "The Word." The B side, "Sardines" — a former football cheer, outfitted with a go-go beat played with buckets and cans — became a definitive go-go hit. But as popular as Junk Yard was in D.C., Rubin couldn't figure out how to market them nationally. "At the time, Rick was really focused on death-metal music," recalls Faith Newman, who was working in Def Jam's publishing department at the time. Junk Yard wound up on the shelf until Shorter, a Howard alum who had cowritten "The Word," bought out the group's contract and signed them to Liaison Records and Street Records, where they were able to draw enough local sales to make a very comfortable existence.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=wEZveq0tZh8>

Other groups ran into similar problems when they began signing major deals around this time. Rare Essence saxophonist Donnell Floyd recalls hiring a group of dancers from Howard University called the NY Three in the late '80s for a big date at the Capital Centre — a huge venue that required a powerful stage show. During rehearsals, one of the dancers was so out of sync he couldn't keep up. Floyd eventually fired him. The dancer was so upset that he gave up dancing, and later quit school to work as an apprentice at Uptown Records. That ex-dancer's name was [Sean Combs](#).

Rare Essence ended up signing to Uptown/MCA in 1991, after mainstream interest in go-go was sparked by Experience Unlimited performing "Da Butt" in Spike Lee's 1988 film *School Daze*. When the group met with label head Andre Harrell, he schooled them on product and marketing, and talked about how go-go was going to make it big. He wanted to introduce them to a hot new producer who was familiar with go-go after having attended college in D.C. The door swung open — and it was Combs. He rejected their songs, and they were eventually dropped from the label. "He still hates me to this day," says Floyd.

Experience Unlimited encountered similar marketing problems at Virgin Records, despite their hit with "Da Butt." "It was devastating," remembers Sugar Bear, E.U.'s lead talker and bassist. "A lot of labels wanted to sign us, but they didn't know what to do with us. They wanted to market us like a rap group. Then they tried to market us like a band like [L.T.D.](#)"

Music historian Iley Brown says the reason for go-go's failure to find nationwide success is simple: "Go-go didn't break out of D.C. for the same reasons it was successful in D.C. Record companies won't change their format — three and a half minutes, play on the radio, verse, chorus, break, bridge, verse, vamp, finish."

In the end, go-go bands covered more ground by working locally and independently. Young people led the way by selling the tapes they recorded on their boom boxes at the shows. The bands were playing every night of the week in the city, so a tape that was recorded on Monday might be old news by Tuesday. Tapes generally sold for \$10 to \$20 and could be purchased from sidewalk hustlers between 12th and F Streets downtown; they became a lo-fi form of promotion, traded like baseball cards.

"The bands weren't tripping off not making money off these tapes," remembers Woody Wood, who opened a store called InnaCity Go-Go on Georgia Avenue to sell tapes. "They were 18, 19 years old and playing at the Capital Centre. We were just having fun."

Tapes were also an opportunity for audience members to hear their names recited by bands during roll call. Regulars like "Lisa of the World" became famous in their own right from frequent appearances on PA tapes.

Soon, realizing that their fans were making money hand over fist, bands started recording their own tapes, which became the dominant commercial medium for the music. Major record stores like Kemp Mill and Tower Records sold PA tapes locally. One band, Northeast Groovers, was known for putting out PA tapes as soon as their shows were over — in an early precursor to the "instant bootlegs" sold by jam bands today, they'd run each night's tape through the dubbing machine, which took about six minutes, and sell the copies right as the crowd was leaving the venue.

In 1988, I saved up money from my summer job and bought a car of my own to drive to clubs and go-gos — a 1982 red Ford Escort, a stick shift with no muffler and a penchant for backfiring and cutting out in the middle of driving down a major thoroughfare. My friends nicknamed it the Red Baron, and it took us all over the city when it was running. I had a stereo system that I pulled out and hid under the driver's seat using a [Benzi box](#) each day. Nonetheless, on three different occasions, thieves ripped out my speakers and the radio and my cassette tapes from the glove compartment.

One night I was driving the Red Baron down 18th Street with three of my girlfriends, Tina, Nwenna, and Tammy, heading to a go-go in Southeast D.C. Out of nowhere, a chubby kid landed in front of me. He'd been playing a game with his friends, holding on to cars' bumpers and seeing how long he could run without letting go, when he lost his grip and ran smack into my front bumper and rolled onto the hood. As I skidded to a stop, he jumped up and yelled out, "I'm all right!" A police officer saw the whole thing and filed a report and assured me I wouldn't be in trouble because it wasn't my fault. But I knew I would once I got home.

Even so, we pushed on and managed to get to the go-go *and* dance without a care in the world until the sun came up. Not much could stop the groove.

I left D.C. and went to college at the University of Pennsylvania in Philadelphia in 1990. That January, Mayor Barry was arrested in a highly criticized FBI sting operation. A year later, D.C. recorded 482 murders; by the mid-'90s, the city instituted a curfew for teenagers as the murder rate continued to rise. Meanwhile, in Philly, I tried in vain to explain go-go music to my roommates.

"It all sounds the same," they told me whenever I played them my collection of PA tapes.

I didn't care what they thought. I heard things differently. We were ghetto superstars — the go-go bands and the audiences that kept them going. All I could hear was Trouble Funk as they started their roll call:

Say whatcha gonna do, Southeast crew?

We're gonna start this thing off right, 'cause Rikki's in the house tonight.

We're gonna start this thing off right, 'cause Brenda's in the house tonight

We're gonna start this thing off right, we got Dean in the house tonight

Sho' sounds good to me, talking 'bout T-R-O-U-B-L-E ...

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- SCARFACE
- RARE ESSENCE
- EXPERIENCE UNLIMITED
- TROUBLE FUNK
- SOUL SEARCHERS
- LITTLE BENNY
- JUNK YARD BAND



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And that was just the beginning...

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'HIS BIRTH WAS A LITTLE SCARY': HOW KAILYN'S FOURTH *TEEN MOM* 2 DELIVERY WAS LIKE NO OTHER

Baby Creed just made his debut on the long-running show

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She now believes her oldest son shouldn't decide where he stays

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GAL GADOT LASSOS FLYING BULLETS IN ACTION-PACKED WW84 CLIP

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CHALLENGE COUPLE KAM AND LEROY JUST CELEBRATED A SPECIAL MILESTONE

Cheers to one year!

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'I THOUGHT I WAS GOING TO HELL': LEAH DESCRIBES THE 'GUILT' SURROUNDING HER *TEEN MOM* 2 ABORTION

The young mother revealed that 'the miscarriage that played out on TV' was a different reality

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Plus tunes from Beach Bunny, Katya, K/DA, and more

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The 22-year-old actress went toe-to-toe with Sarah Paulson, broke cinematic ground, and became a star

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POP

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CHRISTIAN SERRATOS PORTRAYING SELENA IS 'A WAY TO THANK HER'

The actress dives deep into her role as the late Tejano music star in 'Selena: The Series'

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Dad's hand: big and tattooed. Baby's hand: small and new.

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Find out if the two are a couple -- or if they called it quits

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The young mother admitted 'it's so hard to believe anything that anyone says'

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