

Arts & Entertainment

DC's Go-Go Sound Becomes Anti-Gentrification Battle Cry

Artists, organizers call genre a symbol of Black D.C. culture



In this image Moechella music rally at the corner of 14th and U street NW in Washington, Tuesday, May 7, 2019. Go-go music, a distinctive Washington DC-specific offshoot of funk, has endured for decades through cultural shifts, fluctuations in popularity and law enforcement purges. Now go-go has taken on a new mantle: battle hymn for the fight against a gentrification wave that's reshaping the city.

By **Ashraf Khalil**
Associated Press

WASHINGTON — It's the soundtrack of "Chocolate City," the nonfederal Washington that has traditionally been a tent pole of Black America.

Go-go music, a distinctive D.C.-specific offshoot of funk, has endured for decades through cultural shifts, fluctuations in popularity and law enforcement purges.

Now go-go has taken on a new mantle: battle hymn for the fight against a gentrification wave that's reshaping the city.

"It's a very deep cultural thing," said Justin "Yaddiya" Johnson, an activist and organizer of several go-go-themed protest concerts. "When you think about go-go, you should think about D.C. culture. It should be the symbol of our culture."

Many longtime Washingtonians fear that culture is being steadily eroded as the city becomes whiter and richer. A recent controversy over an innocuous noise complaint placed go-go at the center of a perfect storm of gentrification symbolism.

The owner of a popular mobile phone store in the historically Black Shaw neighborhood was told to turn off the go-go that he had been playing through sidewalk speakers for more than 20 years. He claims the complaint came from a resident of the gleaming new mixed-used apartment building erected on the next block.

The reaction was fierce. Seemingly overnight, a protest movement and

petition drive sprung up and members of the D.C. Council started weighing in. Within days, the decision was reversed.

The mini-controversy was over almost before it started. But it obviously touched a nerve.

"I think that was messed up. Go-go is our history," said community activist Tiffany Richardson, one of the thousands of fans who turned out on a Tuesday night this month for an outdoor concert/protest featuring go-go mainstays Backyard Band. "They're not going to stop go-go."

The concert, mischievously named "Moechella," was organized by Johnson. And since it was a protest, he didn't need to secure a permit, so police obligingly blocked off several city blocks. The location — the corner of 14th and U streets — was no accident. That intersection was once one of the hearts of Black D.C.; now it's within two blocks of a Trader Joe's and a lululemon.

To the uninitiated, go-go music seems indistinguishable from funk. What sets it apart are a specific conga-driven syncopation, known as the pocket beat, and a culture of call-and-response that turns the crowd into part of the show. Go-go bands feature multiple percussionists and often multiple vocalists — with one usually designated as "lead talker."

"It's the drumming it's the rhythm pattern. It's the feel of the rhythm," said Liza Figueroa Kravinsky, founder of the band Go-Go Symphony. "In go-go, the fans know who the conga

player is more than the guitar player."

The late Chuck Brown is generally considered the godfather of the sound, starting in the early 1970s. And bands like Rare Essence and Trouble Funk have all flirted with mainstream success, but there has never been a full-scale breakout star. Probably the most famous go-go song is "Da Butt" by Experience Unlimited, which was showcased in the Spike Lee film "School Daze."

While the music retains a local fanbase, musicians and devotees say the scene is still recovering from the effects of the crack epidemic, which ravaged Washington and turned go-go shows into magnets for violence. Eventually police began shutting down famous clubs like the Ibex in 1990s and forcing the shows out of the city.

Anwan "Big G" Glover, lead talker of Backyard Band, still recalls the time with bitterness. Authorities blamed the music for drawing violence when he says go-go was simply the ambient soundtrack of a city in crisis.

"Those rave parties in the suburbs with these rich kids — if anything happened there, they could just cover it up. That was the difference," he said.

The purge was especially damaging because go-go is all about live performances. Glover and others say there's a missing generation of fans who weren't exposed to

We're in a Golden Age of Black Horror Films

Octavia Spencer is one of the few Black women to have a lead role in a horror film

By **Robin R. Means Coleman**
The Conversation

In the horror genre, Black is definitely back.

The movie "Ma," which premiered on May 31, stars Academy Award winner Octavia Spencer as Sue Ann, a lonely middle-age woman who clings to a group of teens to the point of obsession.

"Ma" comes on the heels of Jordan Peele's critically acclaimed "Us," which is also led by an Academy Award winner, Lupita Nyong'o. And let's not forget that Peele's previous film, "Get Out," won the Academy Award for best screenplay last year.

Black actors have always had a role in horror films. But something different is taking place today: the re-emergence of true black horror films.

Rather than simply including Black characters, many of these films are created by Blacks, star Blacks or focus on Black life and culture.

Objects of violence and ridicule

For most of film history, Black actors have appeared in horror films in supporting roles. Many were deeply problematic.

In my 2011 book, "Horror Noire: Blacks in American Horror Films from the 1890s to Present," I describe some of these tropes.

In the early 20th century, many films — horror or not — had White actors appearing in blackface. The characters could find themselves on the receiving end of especially horrific violence. For example, in 1904's "A Nigger in the Woodpile," a Black couple's home is firebombed and the pair staggers out, charred.

In the 1930s, there was a spate of horror films that took place in jungles, where Blacks were depicted as primitive — sometimes indistinguishable from apes. A decade later, Black characters started appearing in horror films as objects of ridicule. Actors like Willie Best and Mantan Moreland appeared as comic relief — characters for audiences to dismissively



This still shows Duane Jones as Ben in "Night of the Living Dead," one of the first fully developed characters in an American horror movie.

mock.

To be sure, there were some instances in which Black actors assumed leading roles. The 1934 film "Chloe, Love is Calling You" starred Black actress Georgette Harvey as the vengeful Mandy. In 1957, Joel Fluellen portrayed the smart and reliable Arobi in "Monster from Green Hell."

However, often these characters existed to support the survival of their White counterparts.

From placeholders to full participants

For a brief period, in the 1960s and 1970s, horror films began to treat Blacks as whole and full subjects.

Many of these narratives centered on Black culture and experiences. More often than not, Blacks played the role of hero. For example, the 1972 film "Blacula" begins in 1780 and is an indictment of the slave trade and its lingering effects. In the 1974 film "Sugar Hill," a Black female protagonist named Sugar, with the help of her Black zombie army, lays waste to a murderous White crime boss and his cronies.

Then there was Bill Gunn's 1973 art-house horror film, "Ganja & Hess." A gorgeous and deliberative treatise on race, class, mental illness and addiction, it won the Critics' Choice prize at the Cannes Film Festival. However, no Hollywood studio was willing to distribute the film.

The classic of the era is George Romero's 1968 "Night of the Living Dead," which stars Duane Jones as Ben, a strong, complex Black character who leads a group of Whites during a zombie apocalypse. Confounding the clichéd trope of "the Black guy dies first," Ben is the lone survivor of the terrifying battle.

In a turn of realism, he emerges triumphant — only to be summarily shot down by a militia of White police and civilians. Ben's death, which comes at the movie's conclusion, is as unexpected as it is powerful. The scene demands that audiences consider who among us is truly monstrous.

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SHOWTIMES



Week of
Friday, June 7 through
Thursday, June 13

SHADOW (NR)

Fri-Thu: 1:55 PM, 9:10 PM

MISSING LINK (PG)

Fri-Thu: 12:10 PM, 4:30 PM

SHAZAM! (PG-13)

Fri-Thu: 6:35 PM

CAPTAIN MARVEL (PG-13)

Fri-Thu: 11:50 AM, 4:40 PM,
7:15 PM

US (R)

Fri-Thu: 2:15 PM, 9:50 PM

SPIRITED AWAY (SEN TO CHIHIRO NO KAMIKAKUSHI) (PG)

Fri-Thu: 11:20 AM, 4:20 PM, 6:55 PM

SPACEBALLS (PG)

Fri-Thu: 2:25 PM, 9:30 PM

\$4 adults, \$3 seniors (65+),
\$3 kids (12-)

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Babysitting: Children 2 to 8 years old. Fri: shows starting between 3:30 pm and 8 pm. Sat - Sun: shows starting between 1 pm and 8 pm. \$9.50 per child for the length of the movie. Call to reserve a spot, no drop ins.

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