

CITY

# How Two Distinct Go-Go Movements Are Changing D.C. Culture

*Musicians, activists, advocates, and scholars are energizing a movement to preserve and celebrate the music that makes the city.*

**BY ALONA WARTOFSKY — OCT 17, 2019 6 AM**



# UnMUTED

## Backyard Band

*PHOTO BY DARROW MONTGOMERY, DESIGN BY JULIA TERBROCK*

The night Backyard Band played on the National Mall, the Eastern High School Marching Band and its graceful Lady Gems dance line led the Million Moe March down 7th Street NW. On that September night, Backyard Band leader Anwan “Big G” Glover and vocalist Leroy “Weensey” Brandon Jr. were among those marching against gun violence while advocating for statehood and unity across the DMV.

Down on the Mall, activists—including the D.C. chapters of Black Lives Matter and the post-Parkland March For Our Lives—were out in force. Long Live GoGo, the same organization behind the remarkable Moechella rally four months earlier in May, presented the event. Once again, Backyard Band headlined, this time with cameos from rappers Wale and Pinky KillaCorn. Statehood coalition 51 for 51 distributed free T-shirts, but more folks wore various DontMuteDC tees. Weensey’s shirt read “Go-Go Been Here Way Before You.”

Smaller than Moechella but approaching 2,000 people, the crowd ranged from wide-eyed toddlers in strollers to elderly gentlemen who brought their own folding lawn chairs. Young girls danced joyfully, pigtails flying, near teenage boys in locs who nodded to the beats, their phones held high. Before Backyard's set, Long Live GoGo's Justin "Yaddiya" (or just "Yaddi") Johnson chatted up the audience with the seamless style he perfected during the months he spent emceeing the anti-Trump Kremlin Annex protests.

Yaddi: "In ya best Big G voice, can I get a Moechellllaaa?"

Almost everybody: "Moechellllaaa!"

After the band's set, as the activists packed up their tables, Big G stood on stage, where his lanky form seemed to tower almost as high as the obeliscal monument across the grass. He surveyed the dissipating crowd and leaned down to grasp a few outstretched hands.

"This was awesome, beautiful down here on the Mall—the shots, the people, the energy—everything," he said. "I knew this could happen, but you never think that it will because how they try to mute us and put us in one little box in the corner. Just to have this happen and all these people come out and really enjoy the music. Like I tell people all the time, just give us a chance."



**Anwan "Big G" Glover**  
*DARROW MONTGOMERY*

\*\*\*

As D.C.'s preeminent go-go act, Backyard Band is accustomed to playing multiple shows each week. But in all of its 28-year history, Backyard had not played on the National Mall or at the National Museum of African American History and Culture until last month, when they performed on a Thursday for the Million Moe March, and then four nights later at the museum as part of several days of extraordinary programming courtesy of DontMuteDC.

Six months after Howard University senior Julien Bloomfield's #Don'tMuteDC tweet captured the hearts of a populace fed up with being marginalized by gentrification, the movement that took its name and motto from that tweet continues the good fight. The first battle—versus residents of Shaw luxury high-rise The Shay, who tried to silence the go-go music usually playing outside a nearby store—was easily won. The speakers playing go-go remain right back where they belong outside Donald Campbell's Central Communications, better known as the Metro PCS store, at 7th Street and Florida Avenue NW.

Since then, the DontMuteDC movement has shown staying power and some tangible achievements. Longtime community activist Ron Moten and Howard University professor Natalie Hopkinson, whose book *Go-Go Live: The Musical Life and Death of a Chocolate City* details gentrification's impact on D.C.'s African American population, are the leaders of DontMuteDC. (While the movement initially used the hashtag, now it's generally dropped. "This is bigger than a hashtag," says Moten.) DontMuteDC has directed its energies toward fighting the damage of gentrification and the region's gross disparities in health care.

Concurrently, a separate group called Long Live GoGo, which Yaddi describes as being dedicated to "cultural sustainability and mobilization," is taking on various social justice issues, including statehood, gun violence, and the school-to-prison pipeline. So far, Long Live GoGo's Moechella, held at the Franklin D Reeves Municipal Center at 14th and U streets NW, remains the largest of the protests with an estimated turnout of 5,000 people.

Both movements have raised go-go's national profile. National news outlets covered the early days of the Metro PCS protests, and the controversy was discussed on both New York and satellite radio. In June, even the BET Awards took note with a go-go medley featuring EU's Gregory "Sugar Bear" Elliot and Rare Essence's James "Funk" Thomas performing in front of a backdrop that read "Go-Go Madness #DontMuteDC."

Here, the movements are energizing the go-go culture in a variety of ways. Not only have they changed the way that the rest of the world views go-go, they have also changed the way the go-go community perceives itself. For decades, go-go has been a resilient and self-sufficient subculture that engendered a sturdy underground economy; in it, poor folks could operate a variety of black-owned businesses to provide for their families and send their kids to college. But with the advent of DontMuteDC, something has irrevocably changed. Now and moving forward, go-go represents cultural pride—and a defiant pushback against the forces of gentrification.

"Go-go has now been politicized," says We Act Radio co-founder Kymone Freeman, who has long advocated on behalf of residents east of the river. "The mere act of wearing a T-shirt that says 'Go-Go' or 'I Love Go-Go,' or even just playing go-go is politicized. The art form is now seen as the rebellious drums against gentrification and displacement. We've seen this go all the way to the BET Awards, which is not known for their activism."

Long Live GoGo's Million Moe March took place on the same night, Sept. 19, that DontMuteDC held a "First Ladies of Go-Go" event at the Eaton Workshop downtown. The next night, DontMuteDC followed up with "Battle of the Bands & BBQ: DC VS. NOLA," a free event open to anyone who RSVPed, at the Gateway Pavilion at St. Elizabeths East Campus in Southeast. The lineup included Big 6 Brass Band of New Orleans, along with local acts Black Alley and Proper Utensils. That Sunday, Backyard played again, this time with a panel discussion preceding their performance: "The Sound of Chocolate Cities: Exploring Gentrification Through Music and Culture," which compared the gentrification struggles of D.C., Atlanta, and New Orleans.

"With DontMuteDC, we are very targeted and specific about everything that we're doing," says Hopkinson. "The goal is to stop displacement, gentrification, and cultural erasure, so everything that we do is something that's trying to address that, and we want to be really intentional."

Since April, DontMuteDC leaders have held weekly public meetings at Check It Enterprises, the business and community development outfit on Martin Luther King Ave. SE, where Moten is a partner. They have organized multiple rallies supporting institutions like Southeast's United Medical Center and the city's last halfway house. They have helped the Smithsonian to archive the history of go-go and showcase the music. Their plans include the creation of a go-go museum as well as reintroducing comprehensive music education to the city's public schools. DontMuteDC is also supporting Central Communications' efforts to launch a go-go streaming service with upwards of 30,000 live recordings. Next month, DontMuteDC will present a Go-Go Awards event at Ballou Performing Arts Theater featuring tributes to the go-go stars who attended Ballou High School.

"Go-go has had movements before when hundreds of people came out and we had small victories," says Moten. "This time, it caught on beyond the go-go industry. What happened for [Central Communications owner] Don Campbell was a much-needed victory, and it was symbolic... Now, everywhere in our community people are having meetings, trying to do something. There is resistance."

While the media narrative in the early days of the Metro PCS protests suggested that Bloomfield spontaneously tweeted about go-go being silenced outside the store, the truth is that she chose her words carefully. "To me, the word 'mute' just sounded right," she says. "When I think of mute, it was like you see something is still there, but you're not acknowledging it; you're just completely cutting it out of the picture."

Hopkinson agrees that "mute" is the perfect word to capture what decades of gentrification have done to go-go. "When you're talking about muting go-go, you're talking about muting voices," she says. "We need a voice to proclaim, I'm still here. I exist. I have this culture that has roots in West Africa and Afro-Latin rhythms. That's so important, and it's an easy way to remind people how strong and resilient black culture is, and that we're not just going to go away."

Long Live GoGo's goals are presented somewhat differently. "We have a strong interest in affordable housing, definitely statehood, and we're always talking about violence, unity, and keeping things peaceful," says Yaddi, who refers to himself as "an advocate, not an activist" and is planning a mayoral run in 2022. "We're advocating cultural sustainability. We're advocating for tomorrow."



When both organizations planned conflicting events on the same night in September, neither chose to reschedule. But most in the community downplay any rivalry. After all, their goals are not so different.

“Both groups are working to leverage our political capital,” says WHAT?! Band leader Michelle Blackwell. “They’re both doing something that we should have done a long time ago: realizing that the go-go community can be a powerful constituency. We can be our own super PAC. We have a voice, and we can influence local politics in a very substantial way if we just put our minds to it.”



*DARROW MONTGOMERY*

\*\*\*

When Chuck Brown created the go-go sound in the mid-'70s, his intention had more to do with creating a style that his audiences would dance to than any overt political messaging. As the go-go sound took over the city in the years that followed, most go-go was party music that served the important function of keeping young people off the streets.

Despite the scene's proximity to the federal government, politics rarely entered the music, though oldheads may remember EU's chant "There's a bill up on top of Capitol Hill." Still, go-go artists regularly brought crowds to annual Malcolm X Day celebrations in Anacostia. And many artists did address social issues, particularly the financial pressures prevalent in D.C.'s underserved communities. Rare Essence's 1983 "Back Up Against the Wall" portrayed the rising desperation that

comes when ends don't meet. And the young members of the Junkyard band linked Anacostia's hardships with Reaganomics; their 1986 "The Word" complained that "Reagan gave the Pentagon the food stamp money."

Other go-go records, including Little Benny's 1987 cautionary tale "Cat in the Hat," took on drug use. Responding to the devastating homicide rate that accompanied the crack epidemic in the late '80s, some of the music's top stars collaborated on the anti-violence track "D.C. Don't Stand for Dodge City." Several coalitions of musicians and supporters have previously worked on behalf of the music. In 1987, the Ad Hoc Committee to Save Go-Go campaigned against a curfew aimed at late-night shows, and in 1990, the DC Committee to Save Our Music endeavored to secure radio airplay for go-go records.

But here's an awful truth: Even before gentrification picked up, go-go has been systematically censured over decades. Because of ignorance and racism, the distinctly African American genre was blamed for nearly everything that went wrong in impoverished neighborhoods. During the late '80s when the crack cocaine epidemic wreaked havoc on cities across the country, the media, politicians, and police scapegoated go-go, unwilling or unable to determine the true causes of street violence.

There's no denying that the music has experienced a renaissance in the past decade. These days, it's often included in official events around town, and Backyard even played the Kennedy Center last year. Still, the music continues to be targeted—with the District's Amplified Noise Amendment that sought to silence street performers, as well as the Prince George's County CB-18 Dance Hall Law that shuttered many go-go venues.

After continued systematic marginalization, the Metro PCS debacle seemed different. For one thing, go-go won. And then there was something else, perhaps a perfect storm of Moten's experience and expertise in navigating city government, Hopkinson's informed and eloquent defense of go-go culture, and Yaddi's social media savvy and deep connections with the younger generation. Also, this time many of the musicians seemed to be more actively engaged.

"The disruption of the go-go culture has awakened a sleeping beast," says Charles Stephenson, co-author of *The Beat: Go-Go Music From Washington, D.C.* and an early manager for EU. As one of the organizers of Malcolm X Day and a founder of the late '80s D.C. Committee to Save Go-Go, Stephenson has worked on behalf of the music for decades. "Now the bands are more integral to the movement than we've seen in the past when go-go and politics intersected, and we're seeing a lot of millennials involved," he says.

Stephenson hopes that this momentum will lead people to get out and vote. "People need to understand that not to do so is to acquiesce, to allow gentrification to run right over them," he says.

Chris Procter, 29, is one of those millennials who has stepped forward to support go-go culture. The founder and leader of bounce beat band TOB views the group's participation in both Long Live GoGo and DontMuteDC events as an obligation. "We needed to be there standing up with our community, standing up for what we believe in," says Procter.

Recently, Procter has added The Temptations' 1971 protest song "Ball of Confusion" to TOB's sets. "We're seeing gentrification. We're seeing people dying, losing their lives. People are stressed out," Procter says. "Ron Moten taught me that I could use my popularity to uplift our community."

Even with all these efforts in full swing, go-go still is regularly excluded. In May, Rare Essence collaborated with local rappers Lightshow and Noochie to release the track “Don’t Mute DC,” but local radio largely ignored the single.

And in August, the band celebrated its 40th anniversary with a free concert at Fort Dupont. The show attracted an audience of approximately 15,000, but where was the press? A simple internet search of mainstream media yields nothing. Imagine any other local music group performing for an audience of that magnitude—would editors and producers consider that worthy of coverage? The District’s elites still regularly dismiss go-go culture, and that’s why these protests really matter. White Washington can ignore an audience of 15,000 in Southeast, but it cannot ignore Moechella shutting down the streets around the Reeves Center.

Rare Essence bandleader Andre “Whiteboy” Johnson believes that DontMuteDC’s injection of energy contributed to the Fort Dupont show’s turnout. “We’re hearing go-go blasting from cars like we did in the ’80s and ’90s,” Whiteboy says. “It’s too bad that it took an effort to mute one of the most famous and favorite go-go spots in town to raise awareness, but we are happy that the sound is pumping through the streets of D.C. again.”

According to Hopkinson, the continued survival of go-go is inherently political. “Everything about go-go is like it shouldn’t be there. That it shouldn’t actually exist; there shouldn’t be this industry that’s been around for more than 40 years providing jobs for people. There shouldn’t be something that has resisted mass culture, because hip-hop has really dominated youth culture,” she says. “Now is the time, while we have people’s attention, to institutionalize support for the music, provide support for the musicians and support the preservation of go-go.”

Many in the community are looking forward to what comes next. “Now that go-go is looked at as political, the question is whether it will become political,” says Freeman. “I challenge so many of the artists ... They need to look at themselves not as entertainers, but as leaders. They need to educate themselves and inform the public. It’s not enough for them to bring an activist on in the middle of the set.”

“We’re at a crossroads now,” continues Freeman. “We have a lot of bands performing at political rallies. In fact, it’s gotten to the point that you can’t have a significant D.C. political rally without a go-go band performance. That is an accomplishment, but we have to take it to the next level.”





**Leroy “Weensey” Brandon Jr. at the National Museum of African American History and Culture**  
*DARROW MONTGOMERY*

\*\*\*

Like most die-hard music fans, go-go folks love to debate the minutiae of the music. RE or BYB? Bounce beat or nah? But one thing that is universally agreed upon is the value of public school music education. Music in the schools was a key element of go-go’s golden age of the late ’70s and ’80s, when the bands played multiple shows per week—sometimes three in a single night—and just about every neighborhood had a band. School marching bands and orchestras fed well trained musicians to go-go groups. Donnell Floyd, who joined Rare Essence while he was still a student at Duke Ellington School of the Arts, was one of many high school musicians hired by area bands.

“Our go-go artists? They learned in public school. Government support of the arts was everything,” says Blackwell.

But funding for music in the school curriculum dried up during the late ’80s, a result of the decentralization of the management of school resources. Many high schools reduced arts programs. According to go-go historian Kato Hammond, the impact on go-go culture was tremendous. “I strongly believe that those cuts played a part in the focus on percussion, where percussion became much stronger than any other instrument during the ’90s era, because the kids coming up could easily self teach themselves to play percussive instruments,” Hammond says.

DontMuteDC's plan to help reintroduce a music curriculum in public schools may be its most crucial endeavor. "The only way this is gonna work is if we involve the youth," says Go-GoRadio Live owner Nico Hobson. "The first thing we have to do is put music back in schools. If we can't give the children a positive, creative outlet, how you gonna complain about children hanging out in the street? Music in the schools helps fully develop the brain and also gives kids options. We are limiting our children's options, and that's a sin within itself."

While occasional programs like Teach the Beat offer valuable lessons on go-go's history, they cannot replace quality music education. Blackwell points out that enhanced music in the schools and other new public programs would be an all-around win. Summer programs could provide go-go artists with additional income during a time of the year when live shows typically slow down.

"Go-go artists and musicians are an untapped resource that can be utilized in summer youth programs or arts mentorship programs," says Blackwell. "Families are coping with drugs and violence... and children are going through traumatic experiences." She believes that go-go artists provide a positive outlet for young people. "We are perfectly capable of taking up the mantle."

Blackwell is also looking to DontMuteDC to help solve another significant problem: A number of go-go artists have died remarkably young, possibly due to lack of adequate health care, including "Little Benny" Harley, Ivan Goff, and most recently, EU guitarist Valentino "Tino" Jackson. Blackwell believes DontMuteDC should examine this issue. She suspects that many of the artists who have died may not have had health insurance. "I've made it clear at these DontMuteDC meetings," she says. "Go-go is not just going to be a means to an end. The artists and musicians need help as well."



### **Backyard fans at the National Museum of African American History and Culture**

*DARROW MONTGOMERY*

\*\*\*

Blackwell was one of the performers who participated at “The Ladies of Go-Go” at the Eaton Workshop the night of the Million Moe March. It comes as no surprise to her that during the performance, the hotel fielded a noise complaint from the condo across the street. Still, she is able to find a silver lining. “One of the good things about gentrification is that we have some diversity in our audiences,” she says. The WHAT?! Band’s weekly Thursday shows at the Aqua often attract some white patrons. “They love go-go music,” she says.

On the other hand, some say there may be downsides to the go-go movements. Promoter Dawayne Nutt suspects that the rallies are keeping audiences away from weekly club dates. “What’s happening is that folks are going and supporting the events, but then they’re not coming out that week at all,” he says. “They’re thinking, ‘Oh, I can go see the band outside for free, so I’m not gonna pay the cover charge to see the band this week.’”

“DontMuteDC is great in terms of the messaging and getting the folks out, and those things are all fine and dandy,” adds Nutt. “However, they don’t translate in terms of building a fan base that’s coming out to support the bands.”

But so much is being gained.

The night Backyard Band played in the National Museum of African American History and Culture, the well dressed audience enjoyed a splendid buffet courtesy of the museum's renowned kitchen. There was a celebratory mood in the air as folks posed for group pictures, and nearly everyone put down their plates when the band started its popular cover of Adele's "Hello." Several band members wore colorful, patterned shirts acquired last year during their historic trip to Ghana.

Like the band's performances in Africa, the museum concert served as the highest affirmation for musicians who deserve so much more. Standing in the museum's concourse atrium, Backyard timbale and conga player Keith "Sauce" Robinson imagined how his late parents would have experienced this night, and he thought about his children.

"Our accomplishments seem like they're getting bigger and bigger," he said. "Playing in Ghana gave me a great sense of pride. Our music is being respected in Africa, which is where the music started, and it's being respected in the Museum of African American History. I feel a great sense of pride in our music. I felt that way before DontMuteDC, but that feeling is even greater now. I feel like I belong to something that's special for generations to come."

---

Like what you're reading? [Support our journalism](#) and help us make more like it!

## RELATED

MUSIC

**The Go-Go World Mourns EU Guitarist Tino Jackson**

---

MUSIC

**How Knife Wife Cultivated Their Distinct "Disconcerting Melodies"**

---

MUSIC

**The Founders of All Things Go Fall Classic Talk Turning 6**

