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Kymone Freeman, Justin “Yaddiya” Johnson, the Wammies' Jeff Tribble, Ron Moten and Tone P participated in a #DontMuteDC panel discussion held on May 11 in conjunction with the Funk Parade. (Photo by Steven Kiviat)

ARTS AND CULTURE MUSIC NEWS

## The #DontMuteDC go-go protests aren't done. They're expanding.

By Steven Kiviat

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Following the #DontMuteDC protests that helped bring DC's homegrown go-go music back to the speakers outside Metro PCS at 7th Street and Florida Avenue NW – and this month's #Moechella music rally at 14th and U streets NW that reinforced the importance of DC's musical heartbeat – some have wondered if this new cultural activism was finished. The answer is a resounding no.

The waves of activism are still flowing: There was a rally Friday night at Southeast DC's only hospital; there's one today at Freedom Plaza; and a "DontMuteDC" song is newly available as of last week. The original protests and rallies now appear to be only the beginning of a larger political struggle to provide representation, housing and recognition for longtime DC residents displaced by gentrification throughout the city.

"There is still more work to do in the community," said 32-year old Justin "Yaddiya" Johnson, who promoted the #Moechella rally, which featured performances by Backyard Band and ABM. "There's many issues that can't be tackled through pushing one piece of paper. ... This is where I grew up and came from, so it's seamless to me. Stay tuned – we're not done."

When planning the May 7 event, his third U Street NW musical rally this spring, Yaddiya chose the name #Moechella – a combination of "Moe," the black DC slang for friend, and the California festival Coachella. After the success of that event, he has adopted the term for future events and his movement generally.

Yaddiya, who leads the activist group Long Live GoGo, is hosting today's outdoor event at Freedom Plaza from noon to 7 p.m. – a "DC Lobby Day" and "Peaceful Memorial Day Rally," headlined by the What Band and featuring Reaction, Bounce Beat Kings, TOB and CCB. He's already working on the next event, having announced via Twitter, Instagram and the Long Live GoGo website that he will be hosting a "#Moechella Megafest" in August.

On Friday night, the #DontMuteDC organizers who worked on the Metro PCS petition – activists Ronald Moten and Tony Lewis Jr., music producer Tone P, and Howard University professor Natalie Hopkinson – presented "GoGo 4 Justice," a rally with music and guest speakers in the parking lot of United Medical Center, located in Ward 8 on Southern Avenue SE. The flier for the show promised performances by local bands TOB, UCB, Sirius Company, and the Go-go Allstars featuring Michelle Blackwell. However, only TOB and UCB appeared. The crowd was not the size of #Moechella, but the event featured a similar mix of cranking beats, enthusiastic dancing, and impassioned pleas about several current issues in DC.



*The band TOB performs at Friday's rally in the United Medical Center parking lot. (Photo by Steven Kiviat)*

The #DontMuteDC group's goals for the event were varied: promoting United Medical Center, which faces massive budget cuts; helping Banneker Academic High School, which has lobbied for a start to its long-delayed modernization and is embroiled in neighborhood controversy over its proposed relocation; preventing significant funding cuts slated for public schools in wards 7 and 8; and making go-go music and culture a part of the school curriculum and a respected art form in the city.

Before and between bands, speakers such as Ward 8 DC Council member Trayon White, Ward 8 State Board of Education representative Markus Batchelor, and a DC Nurses Association member addressed all four issues, urging the several hundred in attendance to go to the John A. Wilson Building on Tuesday and make their voices heard when the DC Council meets to vote on the 2020 budget. The push builds on canvassing efforts by people with the movement, who met with several council members last week as part of a DC Lobby Day.

At Friday's rally, White — who said the protests are about “the haves and the have-nots” — expressed his unhappiness that a city with a budget surplus would consider cuts that could potentially leave neighborhoods east of the Anacostia River without a full-service hospital pending the completion of a new medical center — a project whose future is currently uncertain.



*The band UCB performs at Friday's go-go rally at United Medical Center. (Photo by Steven Kiviat)*

Friday also saw the release of a new Rare Essence song “#DontMuteDC,” a collaboration between the longtime go-go band, producer Tone P, and local rappers Lightshow and Noochie. Meanwhile, Moten is also developing plans for a go-go museum and the return of the “Go-go Awards” that he presented from 2007 to 2010.

Members of the bounce beat go-go band TOB — who played Yaddiya's first U Street rally on April 9 and performed at “Gogo 4 Justice” on Friday — are planning a June “Bouncebeat and Peace Tour” of DC neighborhoods in an effort to stop gun violence.

Activist Kymone Freeman of Southeast DC's online We Act Radio participated in the rallies outside Metro PCS and has since released a #DontMuteDC mixtape of music and poetry. At a May 11 panel discussion

held as part of the Funk Parade, he announced a 10-point housing and economics plan and said he intends to meet with all of the city's advisory neighborhood commissions to request support. His list includes a push for greater rent control, fully funded community land trusts, increased public housing, and updated affordable housing policies that calculate "area median income" by neighborhood rather than use one figure for the entire region.

Musician Liza Figueroa Kravinsky of the Gogo Symphony has circulated a Change.org petition to get the Kennedy Center to host more go-go concerts and consider complementing its existing jazz and hip-hop initiatives with one focusing on go-go. Diana Ezerins, director of public programs for the Kennedy Center, told The DC Line that pioneering go-go act The Chuck Brown Band will participate in the center's opening festivities in September for its "The Reach" building expansion. Ezerins also said she and other officials are discussing the possibility of scheduling more go-go performances on the Millennium Stage, at the center's other venues and as part of festivals elsewhere in the city, she said.

The rallies have drawn some pushback. Tania Jackson, chief of staff for Ward 1 DC Council member Brianne Nadeau, reported that a constituent had complained, "These Moechella things are going to lower our property values." Nadeau, however, continues to support the movement, as does at-large Council member Robert White. Anti-Moechella commenters on a Popville blog post accused the protest organizers of failing to coordinate trash pickup after the May 7 rally; Yaddiya told The DC Line that he and his crew did clean up and arranged for the city to bring in trash collection and street-sweeping vehicles.

Notwithstanding the criticism, the peaceful U Street rallies have drawn crowds in the thousands, according to promoters, and largely favorable press. "The energy there was unexplainable," Yaddiya said. "You didn't have to be from the culture to be amazed."

Yaddiya, previously a go-go show promoter, said he was the first to take bouncebeat go-go bands like TCB out of town. More recently, he was the emcee for the "Kremlin Annex" nightly anti-Trump protests outside the White House, where he received assistance from some go-go musicians. Yaddiya is pushing for legislation establishing a DC go-go day. "The newer people in the city have to learn to understand the culture of the city, and that is mostly done by commemoration and festivities," he said.



*Kymone Freeman, Justin "Yaddiya" Johnson and Tone P participate in the May 11 panel discussion held in conjunction with the Funk Parade. (Photo by Steven Kiviat)*

Producer Tone P hopes to garner more local and national attention for go-go through his “DontMuteDC” song with Rare Essence, as well as future go-go and rap hybrid compositions. Born Ernest Price and raised in Southwest DC, he worked with DC rapper Wale on over 30 records – including “Pretty Girls,” which incorporated go-go, and “LoveHate Thing,” which was included by President Barack Obama on a 2016 playlist.

Tone P said Rare Essence’s Andre Whiteboy Johnson reached out to him about a week after the Metro PCS shutdown and said, “Tone, it’s time for an anthem.” Tone P and his collaborators on the track – which fuses hip-hop, R&B and go-go – finished it in a week. He and the other participants, including rappers Lightshow and Noochie and members of Rare Essence, will be recording a video for the song Thursday in front of the Metro PCS store. The fast-paced song’s lyrics include an homage to Chuck Brown and lines like “They try to tell us to turn that noise down,” “Nobody cares about us but us,” and most ominously, “You already took the hood, now you’re trying to take the soul.”

Among the movement’s leaders, Moten has the longest history of activism, some of which has drawn controversy in the past. He co-founded the since-dissolved nonprofit Peaceoholics in 2004, a group focused on resolving gang disputes. The DC government filed a lawsuit against Moten and his partner alleging misappropriation of funds for personal use. Moten settled with the city in an agreement that did not admit wrongdoing but included a plan to pay back \$10,000. DC Attorney General Karl Racine has since dropped the payback requirement so that Moten can again get contracts to work with former felons on crime prevention efforts. “They would have locked me up if I had really done anything wrong,” Moten said in an interview.

Moten – who has referred to himself as “the only Republican you like,” an allusion to political leanings that stand out in DC’s black community – has also been heavily involved with the go-go scene, running a Go-go Awards program for three years that ended due to the cost of the event and a lack of funding. In 2017 with assistance from a Jack Kemp Foundation grant, Moten opened Check It Enterprises, a clothing store staffed in part by LGBTQ youth who belonged to a gang in Anacostia.

Moten is now seeking to buy the store’s 1920 Martin Luther King Jr. Ave. SE building and the adjoining properties; he would keep the store and build a go-go museum and affordable housing for musicians. At this summer’s Smithsonian Folklife Festival, Moten will be presenting his vision for the go-go museum and pushing for the digitization of the Metro PCS store’s go-go tape and CD collection as part of the D.C. Music Preservation Pop-Up at the Freer Plaza on Saturday, June 29, from noon to 6 p.m.. He also said he thinks that go-go has become “hip” enough again that he can find the funding to revive the Go-go Awards.

Some might see the activism of recent months as an epilogue of sorts for Hopkinson's seminal 2012 book *Go-Go Live: The Musical Life and Death of a Chocolate City*, which covers the genre's early days in the 1970s but primarily focuses on its evolution amid demographic changes that left African Americans no longer a majority in the District. Hopkinson herself sees the movement as a pivotal and hopeful moment. In an interview, she said the millennials she has met in recent meetings on go-go "really give me hope for the future of DC. I am encouraged that go-go is helping the Chocolate City to find its voice again. It is really coming right on time."



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