

The Washington Post

Democracy Dies in Darkness

'Where's my go-go music?' Residents say turn up the funk after a complaint silenced a D.C. intersection.

By **Marissa J. Lang**

April 9, 2019 at 7:13 p.m. EDT

(Update: 'The music will go on': T-Mobile CEO says go-go music will return after complaint silenced a D.C. store)

On the corner of a District street named after "the Godfather of Go-Go," passersby craned their heads Tuesday toward an electronics store known for pumping go-go's distinct percussive funk into the open air.

"So, it's true then," shouted a man, running to catch a bus on Chuck Brown Way.
"Where's my go-go music?"

The employees inside waved and shrugged. They don't like it, either.

Central Communications, a Metro PCS vendor on the corner of Seventh Street and Florida Avenue NW, has become ground zero in what some call the District's latest culture war.

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Days of protests and a town hall have sprung up to address issues at its root: gentrification and a growing feeling that D.C. culture is being eroded.

About a month ago, a resident of a nearby luxury apartment complex, the Shay, complained to T-Mobile about the loud thrum of go-go emanating from the store. The cellular company asked Central Communications' owner, Donald Campbell, to "tone it down," Campbell said.

Employees tried turning down the volume and playing softer, jazzier strains of go-go. But about a month ago, as first reported by DCist, the speakers that usually sat outside the Shaw neighborhood store were unplugged and moved inside.

"That was the day the music died," said Julie Guyot, 47, who lives in the neighborhood. "I walk my children to school every day, and we pass this shop every day, and we move to that go-go as we cross the street because this is the beat of D.C. I don't understand how one person's discomfort is enough to trump the will of the people in this community."

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Residents who were used to the loud corner beat were confused at first. They thought the store had closed. Those who noticed the shop was still open walked in to demand the business put the music back on, employees said. But, the workers told them, there was little they could do.

Then, on Sunday, the hashtag #DontMuteDC was born.

Julien Broomfield, a senior at nearby Howard University, published a series of tweets, including a video contrasting the quiet outside the store with the lively music of a street festival nearby.

The tweet was shared thousands of times. An online petition titled “Don’t Mute DC’s Go-Go Music and Culture” followed. As of Tuesday afternoon, it had been signed by more than 44,000 people.

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Campbell has received dozens of calls from city officials, journalists and D.C. activists. On Monday, a protest convened outside the store’s front door.

“They were trying to work it out quietly with T-Mobile,” said community activist Ron Moten, who helped organize protests Monday and Tuesday in front of the Frank D. Reeves Center of Municipal Affairs at 14th and U Streets NW.



Oh So Fine
@__KMichelle

This is a landmark in the city and should be treated as such. Our youth even know this. #DontMuteDC



7,461 11:55 AM - Apr 8, 2019

4,381 people are talking about this

Campbell “didn’t want to do anything that might threaten his relationship with the company because that’s his livelihood,” Moten said. “But I told him, ‘This is bigger than you. This is bigger than the store. This is about our community.’ ”

T-Mobile did not respond to a request for comment.

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The Shay issued a public statement Monday after the DCist report to distance itself from the growing controversy.

“The Shay is not involved in any action regarding the Metro PCS store,” the company wrote on its Facebook page. “We respect the importance of Go-Go music to the local and indeed regional culture. We believe we can all enjoy Shaw when we respect one another.”

Several city officials, including Mayor Muriel E. Bowser (D) and city council members, have thrown their support behind the Metro PCS store and efforts to bring the music back.



Muriel Bowser

@MurielBowser

I'm with you [#DontMuteDC](#)

Sign the petition: change.org/p/ronald-moten...

Celebrate DC & Go-Go on Emancipation Day this Saturday:
emancipation.dc.gov/page/concert-l...



623 1:08 PM - Apr 9, 2019 · Washington, DC

401 people are talking about this

Go-go music was born in the District in the 1970s and became known as the pulse of “Chocolate City.” For decades, it could be heard pouring out of nightclubs and concert venues. But over the past several years, the genre has struggled as the city has changed.

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“There are people who come into this city believing that nothing was here before they arrived — certainly nothing of value — so, when they go past these speakers playing music, they think it’s just loud noise. They have no idea the rich history they’re stepping through,” said Natalie Hopkinson, a professor at Howard University and author of the book, “Go-Go Live: The Musical Life and Death of a Chocolate City.”

Council member Brianne K. Nadeau (D-Ward 1), who represents the Shaw area, wrote a letter Monday to T-Mobile’s senior vice president for government affairs, Kathleen Ham, outlining the city’s history and go-go’s place in it.

“Many music venues in the neighborhood around 7th and Florida Avenue NW used to have go-gos several times a week,” Nadeau wrote. “Those venues have been squeezed out by an increase in property values and an influx of residents who are unfamiliar with go-go. . . . This corner is often where many hear go-go for the first time.”

AD



Brianne K. Nadeau
@BrianneKNadeau

#DontMuteDC I'm in touch with @TMobile to inform them of the important history of this corner. See my letter to them:



Council of the District of Columbia
John A. Wilson Building
1350 Pennsylvania Avenue, NW
Washington, DC 20004

Brianne K. Nadeau
Councilmember, Ward 1

Chairperson
Housing Services Committee
Committee Member
Housing and Neighborhood Revitalization
Government Operations
Health

Kathleen Ham
Senior Vice President, Government Affairs
T-Mobile USA

April 8, 2019

Dear Ms. Ham,

As the Ward 1 Councilmember for the District of Columbia representing the U Street, Shaw, and Pleasant Plains communities, I strongly urge you to reconsider your recent decision to silence the go-go music from your Metro by T-Mobile store at 1915 7th Street NW in Washington, DC.

Go-go is a blend of funk, hip-hop, Latin, and other genres that emerged in the 60s and 70s. It is a unique product of DC and its Black residents. To this day, it is the indisputable sound of DC and its suburbs.

Many music venues in the neighborhood around 7th and Florida Ave NW used to have go-gos several times a week. Those venues have been squeezed out by an increase in property values and an influx of residents who are unfamiliar with go-go, but you can still hear the beat playing out of car windows, at block parties – and on this corner in Shaw. This corner is often where many hear go-go for the first time. The music that has played there since at least 1995 – and the CDs sold next door – have kept this cultural spirit alive.

It is my understanding that T-Mobile recently acquired this property and asked store

Florida Avenue and T Street. In 2007, the DC Council chose to recognize Chuck Brown – the creator and “Godfather of Go-Go” – by naming this street in his honor.

While I understand that T-Mobile may be concerned about threats of enforcement, I have had numerous interactions with the Department of Consumer and Regulatory Affairs (DCRA) regarding the music at this property. As the enforcement agency for DC’s noise control ordinances, DCRA has taken measurements of noise levels at this corner several times and has never had to take enforcement measures.

I am also aware of accessibility concerns about the auditory crossing signal at this intersection. I am willing to find a solution that will address those problems and work for all involved.

I hope you will listen to the voices of those in the community and recognize the history and landmark importance of this corner and the music from Mr. Campbell’s store. Please feel free to follow up with me or my office if you have any questions or concerns.

Sincerely,

Brianne K. Nadeau

Brianne K. Nadeau
Councilmember, Ward 1

785 5:01 PM - Apr 8, 2019

407 people are talking about this

D.C. officials have responded to several noise complaints about the music at the store — although the rate of complaints has increased along with an influx of nonblack residents in recent years, Campbell said. Officials have regularly measured the decibel level of the music, but, Campbell said, he has never received a citation.

The music falls within the range legally allowed in the District, council member Trayon White Sr. (D-Ward 8) said in a statement.

“The business is not in violation of any noise ordinance laws,” he said. “It is an insult that newcomers to the District are calling for this integral piece of our culture to be muted.”

Anita Norman, an Advisory Neighborhood Commission representative for the area that includes the Metro PCS store, told DCist that the music “has been such a problem for years” and cited concerns that visually impaired D.C. residents couldn’t hear the beep of crosswalk signals at the busy Florida Avenue intersection.

But the District Department of Transportation said Tuesday that it has never received a complaint about that intersection from blind or visually impaired residents.

As the foot traffic outside the shop picked up late Tuesday afternoon, 7-year-old Ryan-Camille Guyot positioned herself at the front of the store, her mother hovering nearby. The girl held up a homemade sign, the words “the day the music died” scrawled on cardboard.

“The consequences of silencing this music is profound,” Julie Guyot said. “I don’t want my children to live in a D.C. that has lost its culture. And if we lose this, we don’t live in D.C. anymore. We live in that federal city named Washington.”

