

Go-Go, Yesterday and Today

by Iley Brown II

The early 1970s in Washington, D.C., marked the beginning of a new musical sound that was still untitled. Basements in neighborhoods throughout the city were converted into after-school stages and rehearsal halls for budding bands and musicians. In many parts of the city, an organist would meet up with percussionists and drummers, who in turn would know of a horn player. Bands were cobbled together, and bonds were formed.

To satisfy audiences of teenagers, young adults, and grown-ups, local “funk” bands would play the radio hits of Mandrill, Kool & The Gang, New Birth, Average White Band, or Herbie Hancock, among others. Musicians and singers began to provide listeners with something extra — a sound they could call their own because it was homegrown.

A fresh new energy with percussion-based funk (bongos, congas, cowbells, whistles) as a bedrock for rhythm and blues, inspired by the national funk and soul music surge, was the beginning of the music known then and now as “go-go.” Instrumentalists in and around Washington, inspired by this movement, were now “jamming” and playing the hits at recreation centers, summer-in-the-park concerts, or “show-mobiles” throughout the city and newly blossoming suburbs of Landover, Pepper Mill Village, Capitol Heights, and Chillum, among others.

Dozens of bands across the city, such as Experience Unlimited, the Young Senators, Chuck

Brown and the Soul Searchers, Trouble Funk, Lead Head, Hot, Cold Sweat, Cro Magnum Funk, Stacy & the Soul Servers, Class Band & Show, Mouse Trap, The Shadows, and go-go icons including Ice Berg Slim and Big Tony, began to add the “live” features of go-go to their shows or recordings: choreography, smoke and fog machines, go-go dances, and extended instrumental solos including the trademark cowbells, whistles, and drum and conga solos added to known radio songs popularized by local radio stations. Radio hits that became go-go hits were “Family Affair” by Experience Unlimited, “Run Joe” by Chuck Brown, and

“Trouble Funk Express” by Trouble Funk, which is a take from “Trans Europe Express” by Kraftwerk.

In live performances audiences engaged the bands in call-and-response segments of songs, usually during percussion breaks ranging from a three-minute teaser — a short percussion solo with strains of the radio version of the song — to as much as 17 minutes of

percussion and call-and-response. Chuck Brown, Trouble Funk, and Reds and The Boys all popularized this style of go-go. And the music lives on today because of the creativity of its style of song crafting. As a full-fledged movement began to grow in D.C. and spread elsewhere, promoters and record labels including TTED - DETT, I Hear Ya, and Jam Tu all released hits. Their contributions have kept the music going for nearly 30 years.

Go-go has enjoyed local, regional, national, and international success, and its influences are evident in the music of hip-hop inventors Africa Bambaataa, Doug E. Fresh, and most recently Will Smith, who included a version of “Pump Me Up”

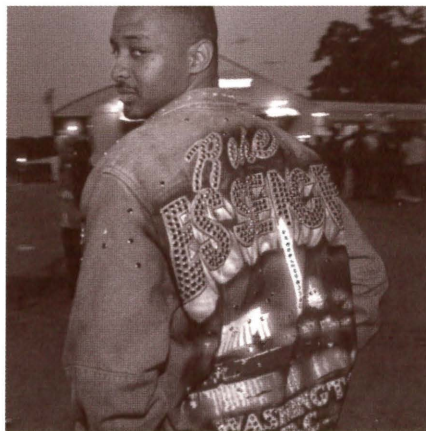


Photo: Go-go has influenced D.C. style, as exhibited in the jacket worn by Rare Essence band member André Johnson.

Photo by Darrow Montgomery



by Trouble Funk on his *Willenium* CD. There are also local record and production companies, including PA Palace, releasing cassette tapes of the ever-popular go-go groups Only 1 Purpose (O1P), Rare Essence, Chuck Brown, and Junkyard. A book documenting go-go will be published by *Billboard* next year.

Iley Brown II is a native Washingtonian and has been a fan of go-go music since its inception. He has worked extensively in the music industry in New York, Los Angeles, and overseas.

“Stepping” Out

by C. Brian Williams

Stepping is a uniquely American, percussive dance genre that grew out of the song and dance rituals performed by historically African-American fraternities and sororities. As discussed by scholar Jaqui A. Malone in her book *Steppin’ on the Blues*, stepping is “one of the most exciting dance forms to evolve in the twentieth century.” The tradition’s “...precise, sharp and complex rhythmical body movements combined with singing, chanting, and verbal play require creativity, wit, and a great deal of physical skill and coordination.” Stepping is, without question, a rising art form with growing popularity among hundreds of thousands of Americans, young and old.

Washington, D.C., more so than any other city in the country, can claim “bragging rights” to this traditional dance form. As home to Howard University, the birthplace of several African-American fraternities and sororities, the city has witnessed the beginnings of the tradition, dating back to 1907, all the way through the first

competitive “step show” at Howard University in 1976. Today stepping can be found on many local campuses, and performances are shared frequently with District residents.

But stepping is no longer just for fraternities and sororities. As stepping has received wider exposure in D.C. and the country, schoolchildren, K–12, are performing the dance with tremendous enthusiasm. Step teams can be found in numerous District high, middle, and elementary schools with teachers using the dance form as a way to foster teamwork, discipline, and community.

D.C.-based churches have also picked up the

form with Gospel step teams found in practically every quadrant of the city.

Stepping is definitely an important part of our city’s daily cultural life.

C. Brian Williams is Director of Step Afrika! USA, and co-founder of the Step Afrika! International Arts & Cultural Festival.

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The Vietnamese Wedding in Washington, D.C.

by Thanh-Thuy Nguyen

Vietnamese Americans are the fastest-growing ethnic group in Washington, D.C. While some Vietnamese, the “boat people,” came after the end of the Vietnam War in 1975, most of the District’s Vietnamese community arrived 15 to 20 years after the fall of Saigon. They are a diverse group, mainly ex-military, government officials, and family members who, having associated with the United States during