

1. Vance “Head-Roc” Levy: What Is D.C. Music?

Head-Roc: What’s D.C. music? What’s the default answer?

Audience: Go-go!

Head-Roc: That’s the default answer—what is D.C. music? When you’re giving that answer, you say go-go. I think for me the answer is—go-go is true, that’s part of it, but it’s much deeper than that. So, the question I ponder is, what are we saying when we say go-go? What does that mean? That’s a very powerful thing. What does it mean in the nation’s capital, the capital of the United States of America, that D.C. music is defined as *go-go*, which is this distinctively African-backed, -based, percussive music that is played largely by the descendants of enslaved Africans brought here to build the wealth of this nation? That is humongously significant to me. So I wanted to dive a little deeper in that.

Go-go music has tackled social issues, especially in the beginnings of go-go music. Some of those social issues are the struggle for D.C. statehood, there’s national and international issues, there’s human rights issues, there’s civil rights issues, local government autonomy, and then of course the overarching class of race, culture, and class.

Looking at these subjects with D.C. music, I realized go-go isn’t the only genre of music that tackles those subjects in this town. So, my premise is that D.C. music, going with these topics—I know that the punk community makes songs like that. I definitely know that D.C. hip-hop deals with those issues as well, but jazz tackles those issues as well. There’s also country music. There’s bluegrass music that tackles those subjects.

2. Katy Otto: The D.C. Punk Scene

So to me, punk is a music of resistance, and I grew up in Prince George’s County, Maryland. I kind of stumbled into punk when I was an angry teenager. I started listening to bands like Nirvana and Hole, but then a friend of mine when I was in high school said, “Hey, you should come down with me to the mall. We’re going to watch this band called Fugazi.” And I’d never heard of them before, but he was like, “You need to see this. This is important.” So when I was sixteen, I went and saw them for free, and I think I was just blown away by the experience.

But another important aspect for me was that I grew up in public school in Prince George’s County, and I had seen go-go because go-go bands would come through my middle school, and I also didn’t realize that that was just specific to where I lived. I thought, “Oh this is just music. This is what everyone knows.” When I first saw Fugazi, to me it was like, “Oh, they clearly listen to go-go. This is very percussive music. This is music about fighting back and fighting for human dignity.” And I became convinced that I wanted to play drums.

3. Ras Lidj: The Reg-go Sound

What a nice place to live, Washington

You see the problem is, the politicians

What a sweet place to live, D.C. town

And around where I live, the tour bus don't come

Tour buses never come around Southwest, Southeast

Tour buses never come around Simple City

Tour buses never come around Martin Luther King, Malcolm X, Valley Ave, or Kennedy Street

This one is reg-go.

All round the 234, 95

Go-go is alive and I will never let it die,

Reg-go come and give it the breath that it need to breathe,

Conscious lyrics, roots based on top of the beat

My sound come hard as your life support machine

Go-go get you hype, it gives you 'nuff energy

Never know to have this much positive speech

From the microphone like Ras Lidj bring

Keep it districts, straight street, feel me, DMV?

Play me the reggae music and link it with a go-go beat