

Go-Go Live

★ *The Musical Life and Death of a Chocolate City* ★



Natalie Hopkinson

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of a Chocolate City

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For Serena and Terrence Hopkinson,
and in loving memory of Beverley Hyacinth McGann

Contents

ix	Preface
xv	Acknowledgments
1	1 ★ A Black Body Politic
14	2 ★ Club U
30	3 ★ What's Happening
46	4 ★ Call and Response
67	Gallery
86	5 ★ The Archive
102	6 ★ The Boondocks
123	7 ★ Redemption Song
144	8 ★ Mr. Obama's Washington, D.C.
162	9 ★ Roll Call, 1986
179	Notes
189	Bibliography
203	Index

Preface

Them black days are gone. You hear me? Chocolate City
and all that foolishness.—BEVERLEY MCGANN, 2010

“There’s a lot of chocolate cities around,” George Clinton of the funk band Parliament announced in a recording of 1975. “We’ve got Newark, we’ve got Gary. Somebody told me we got L.A. And we’re working on Atlanta. . . . But you’re the capital, C.C.!” He was talking, of course, about Washington, D.C., the U.S. capital city that earned the moniker soon after electing its first mayor, a black man named Walter Washington. The cover art of the Parliament album *Chocolate City* was an illustration of the Lincoln Memorial, the National Monument, and the Capitol dome all dipped in chocolate, proof that blacks did not “need the bullet when you got the ballot.”

“We didn’t get our forty acres and a mule,” Clinton sang. “But we did get you, C.C.!”

Indeed, as far as Chocolate Cities go, there is no more extreme case than Washington, D.C., in the second half of the twentieth century. Beyond the federal capital, Washington, lies a very black city,

D.C.: Black families milling around on the streets, waiting at bus stops, driving cars. Black schools taught by black teachers and run by black principals reporting to black superintendents. Black restaurants, black recreation centers. Black universities. Black hospitals run by black doctors and staff. Black suburbs. Black judges ordering black police officers to deliver black suspects to black jail wardens. For much of the past half century, it was entirely possible to live and work in the District of Columbia and not interact with a white person for months.

To wit: My dear friend Lynette recently drove into the Chocolate City with her three-year-old daughter, who woke up and peered out of the window at the corner of North Capitol Street and Florida Avenue. The corner was bustling with black people trash-talking each other on park benches, standing at the bus stop, lining up outside a carryout. Breathless, the girl asked, “Are we in *Africa*, Mommy?”

It was not the motherland, but D.C. ranked among the few major cities in the United States where black people could not be accurately called “minorities,” with the whiff of inferiority that the label carries with it. When you happen to be born black in a world designed for white people, to live in a Chocolate City is to taste an unquantifiable richness. It gives a unique angle of vision, an alternate lens to see world power. In a Chocolate City, black is normal. As a rule, black people strut around town with their chests puffed out—reeking of what my sister Nicole Rose calls “black privilege.” Some might call it arrogance.

So how did this curious scene happen more than a century after the end of legal slavery, in a country in which black people make up just 12 percent of the population? Much of world history has consisted of a series of racial migrations fueled by colonialism and capitalism—a global game of racial musical chairs. All along, the color of one’s skin has served as a convenient shorthand for who has the money and the power and who does not. In the fifteenth century, a white adventurer “discovered” a place where brown people already lived, and he took it. The white settlers in what would become the United States of America needed someone to work the land, so boatloads of free black labor were shipped in from Africa. By the mid-nineteenth century, a new kind of industrial economy took hold, making this free black labor, always morally troublesome, an obstacle to economic progress as well. The Civil War ended slavery, but not the basic color caste system. As industry soared and cities thrived, the descendants of slaves made a steady migration from the fields of the

South to cities in the North in search of work. By the end of the Second World War, whites, in the meantime, already made a steady migration to the suburbs. Add in the gains of the civil rights movement in producing a class of black leaders and you have got Chocolate Cities from Cleveland to Atlanta.

But as the twentieth century drew to a close, yet another round of musical chairs began. U.S. suburbs sprawled, wreaking havoc on the environment, lengthening commutes, and reducing the quality of life outside the cities proper. An information-based economy now took hold. Concentrated public housing located in city centers disproportionately filled with black residents across the United States was dismantled. This coincided with a general march back to cities, increasing the population, reviving tax bases, and sparking new development. This also has led to the displacement of black communities and a slow death of the Chocolate City.

I saw it firsthand in 2000, when my husband and I house-hunted for our first home. We saw a curious scene at open house after open house in black D.C. neighborhoods: black renters being evicted and hordes of eager young white buyers hovering, waiting to pounce. For the first time in generations, billions of dollars in development had poured into D.C. Tens of thousands of luxury apartments and condo units went up. Abandoned Victorian houses in the center of the city were being snapped up and renovated. For me, the moment that punctured the veil of black invincibility came one evening, when I saw a pack of white people on rollerblades moseying down my block in the city's Logan Circle neighborhood, long after the sun had set. The words of my former political science professor at Howard University echoed in my ears: "When you see white people in a neighborhood after dark, that means they are about to take it over." "White flight" was what happened in our parents' generation. We were witnessing a "white return."

In urban centers throughout the country, this kind of racial paranoia was not new, as the desperate plea in 2006 by the New Orleans mayor Ray Nagin evinced. After Hurricane Katrina had ravaged his city, the Associated Press quoted him vowing, "It's time for us to rebuild a New Orleans, the one that should be a chocolate New Orleans. . . . This city will be a majority African American city. It's the way God wants it to be. You can't have New Orleans no other way; it wouldn't be New Orleans."

For as long as U.S. inner cities have been declining, allowing black people to make political and economic inroads there, we have been won-

dering when white people with money and power would decide to snatch it back. In 2001, as a young reporter at the *Washington Post*, I wrote an op-ed, “I Won’t Let D.C. Lose Its Flavor,” as a warning, a dare and a challenge to my middle-class black peers — plentiful in the D.C. area — with the means to do an about-face from the ’burbs. In buying our home not far from the “Africa” corner, my husband and I managed to snatch our piece of the Chocolate, I gloated immodestly in the *Post* essay; our peers needed to do the same before prices got completely out of control. But my message was not mature, nor was it nuanced or subtle. “We damn sure won’t let white people buy up all the property in DC,” I wrote.

Fast-forward ten years. The release of the U.S. census figures in July 2011 made it official: “This city, the country’s first to have an African-American majority and one of its earliest experiments in black self-government, is passing a milestone,” the *New York Times* soberly announced. “Washington’s black population slipped below 50 percent this year, possibly in February, about 51 years after it gained a majority.” Similarly, in 2010, New Orleans elected its first white mayor in a generation.

It is easy to romanticize Chocolate Cities because of their unique contributions to U.S. culture. There is so much to love about them. Located at the geographic center of the urban experience in the United States, they provide a much-needed counterdiscourse, an alternate view on everything from politics to art. George Clinton and P-Funk popularized the moniker used by the city where they found their greatest and most loyal fans, fans who, under the brilliant direction of Chuck Brown, would create a whole genre of popular music called “go-go” — the beating heart of the Chocolate City. As the poet Thomas Sayers Ellis once explained to me, go-go music is the most “radical opposition to English syntax” that exists. In the chapters of this book, I sometimes use *go-go* as a verb. At other times it becomes a noun, at others still an adjective. Throughout go-go serves as a metaphor for the black urban experience in the second half of the twentieth century.

You will find no arguments against this particular art form here. But you will find arguments about the inherently separate but unequal milieu that produced it. When boiled down to their essence, as I attempt to do in this book, Chocolate Cities are also just an expression of America’s original sin, the birth defect that began with slavery and lived on through segregation. Persistent assumptions around race uphold the same color caste system that preceded the country’s founding. Segregation is a cir-

cumstance, which however relatively privileged, dumps a single group of people with a disproportionate share of historical baggage and social and economic burdens, while limiting access to opportunities for greater peace and prosperity. Adding insult to this injury is the persistent but wholly false narrative that black people have destroyed urban centers and that therefore for progress to continue, black people must now be pushed out of the way.

Change is inevitable. As the poet E. Ethelbert Miller famously quipped to the *Washington Post* in 2011, “Well, chocolate melts.” The rise of the multicultural, “Neapolitan” city has the potential to change the way Americans think about cities, the way we think about communities, the way we think about race, the way we think about the United States. It is a new chapter for this country, an opportunity, really. The cynic would expect for the country to slide back into a familiar pattern with the same old winners and losers. But as long as we understand and appreciate the larger historical and socioeconomic factors that led to the rise and fall of the Chocolate City, we have the potential to forge ahead toward a tolerant, inclusive, multicultural society.

In D.C. the music tells the story. In the African oral tradition, drums hold the history, tell the story, and give warning of what is to come. Just as the Chocolate City was taking its last gasps of air in 2008, news spread that Barack Obama had been elected president of the United States. Conga drums appeared on U Street. Hundreds of people of every color gathered to celebrate just as the drums appeared in streets of Nairobi.

So it goes in this book. Washington, D.C.’s go-go music and culture—the personalities, the artists, the fans, the entrepreneurs, the ministers, the fashion designers, the politicians—tell the story of race and the U.S. city in the second half of the twentieth century.

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1 ★ A Black Body Politic

“So . . . are you a go-go fan?”

I was just trying to make small talk with the woman sitting next me. LaTanya Anderson and I were among the thousands of mourners gathered at the Washington, D.C., Convention Center in June 2010, where the body of the legendary go-go trumpeter Anthony “Little Benny” Harley was lying in state in a baby blue casket topped by red roses. Well, the District of Columbia is not legally a state; so it was the Chocolate City equivalent of a state funeral. The mayor, city council, and the District’s representative in Congress sat on a stage above the body of the forty-six-year-old trumpeter, who had died unexpectedly in his sleep. The night before, he had played a gig with his mentor, the “Godfather of Go-Go,” Chuck Brown. Little Benny would not be recognized outside the Beltway, but inside the city limits, he was the kind of superstar who would bring out six thousand people to pay their respects in the middle of a workday.

Dead or alive, these were the kind of coattails you might want to ride if you were a politician facing a tough primary.

“Am I a *fan*?” repeated LaTanya, who was a forty-something government analyst, looking at me as if I had just landed from outer space. “That’s a strange thing to ask. I’m a *fan* of Erykah Badu. I’m a *fan* of Ronald Isley. To me a fan is something removed, not part of your culture, part of your blood. Something you grew up with, watched develop. That’s like asking someone from New Orleans if they like jazz. It *is* them. It’s the culture. It’s the food.”

It is as the ethnomusicologist Kip Lornell and the cultural activist Charles Stephenson Jr. explained in their groundbreaking ethnography,¹ *The Beat: Go-Go’s Fusion of Funk and Hip-Hop*: “Go-go is more than just music. It’s a complex expression of cultural values masquerading in the guise of party music in our nation’s capital.”²

Indeed, three generations of Washington-area residents had been grooving to go-go, ever since the guitarist Brown had created the sound in the mid-1970s, borrowing the Caribbean flavor he had picked up playing for a Washington Top 40 band called Los Latinos. Go-go has been compared to everything from funk to hip-hop and reggae, but it is best described as popular music—party music—that can take many forms. When you hear it, you know it’s go-go by the beat: slow-boiling congas, bass drums, timbales, cowbells, and rototoms layered with synthesizers and a horn section. You also know it’s go-go because the audience is part of the band. Together the musicians onstage and the people below it create the music live—always live—through a dialogue of sounds, movements, and chants.

Go-go comes with distinctive dance moves, slang, hand-signs, and clothing—all customized and unique to life in the area surrounding the U.S. capital city. A so-called lead talker presides over the show as emcee, calling out fans and rhyming free-style. There is also usually a rapper and an R&B vocalist singing original compositions and covering pop artists from Ashlee Simpson to Ludacris. Much like jazz artists, the D.C. musicians completely transform popular standards in the live environment, funkifying them up with the heavily percussive go-go swing.

At Little Benny’s funeral, Brown collapsed at the dais, breaking into tears mid-note during an emotional rendition of “A Closer Walk to Thee.” Until his unexpected death in May 2010, the diminutive Little Benny was both a bandleader and trumpeter (sometimes blazing two trumpets

simultaneously). He and some buddies at his Southeast Washington elementary school had started the seminal go-go band Rare Essence. At the time of his death, go-go had still not much broken out of the D.C. area; there were only some crossover hits from Brown, EU, Trouble Funk, Wale, DJ Kool, and others. There was also a national film release, *Good to Go*, by Chris Blackwell's Island Visual Arts (a spinoff of Island Records) in the late 1980s, followed by a memorable go-go scene in Spike Lee's musical *School Daze* of 1987, which spawned EU's Billboard hit "Da Butt."

Go-go did not stay outside D.C. for very long. But there was plenty of work for go-go musicians in the Chocolate City. Hundreds of musicians played go-go in the D.C. region seven nights a week anywhere the genre's musicians and audience gathered — backyards, street corners, high school proms, firehouses, community centers, parks, government buildings, restaurants, skating rinks, corner stores, nightclubs, and college campuses. The most popular go-go bands, such as TCB, still played four gigs a week, drawing anywhere from two hundred to one thousand fans per night, with clubs turning people away at the door on a good night. The foundation of go-go was a large, extended network of local and almost exclusively black-owned businesses. Mom and pop storefronts sold local clothing lines of urban wear, live recordings, and concert tickets. Graphic design firms created and printed advertisements. The city's most popular FM stations (WKYS 93.9 FM and WPGC 95.5 FM) had nightly go-go hours devoted to the music. Then there were security companies and club and restaurant owners. By the early 2000s, as gentrification steamrolled the city core, much of the go-go industry had been shoved deeper and deeper into exurban Maryland.

The majority of go-go enthusiasts were black. But blacks do not make up a monolith, especially in the Chocolate City. Not *all* black Washingtonians liked, or even supported, go-go. As Lornell and Stephenson noted, go-go "wears the mantle of low-class or blue-collar music."³ It would be rare to find go-go music on, say, the campus of historically black Howard University. Club owners of various races and ethnicities openly banned the music, keeping deejays from playing the rump-shaking music and turning away bands that carried the telltale conga drum sets.⁴ D.C. politicians often railed against the music as a magnet for violence and illicit activity. A few politicians in Maryland and the District pursued aggressive campaigns to yank the liquor licenses of venues hosting go-go music.⁵ In early 2010, the District of Columbia police force boasted at a news con-

ference about an initiative called the “Go-Go Report,” designed to keep tabs on what band was playing where and when. Officers credited this surveillance of conga players with the falling murder rate and with changing D.C.’s reputation as the “Murder Capital.”⁶

In the late 1990s and early 2000s, hip-hop artists were subject to some of the same police scrutiny after a spate of well-publicized killings, including the deaths of the rappers Biggie Smalls and Tupac Shakur. After years of denying rumors of a “hip-hop task force,” New York and Miami police admitted to the *Village Voice* in 2004 that they had units keeping tabs on hip-hop artists.⁷ This revelation sent everyone from the rap mogul Russell Simmons to the former NAACP leader Ben Chavis Muhammad and Georgetown University law professors howling. “Hip-Hop behind Bars” blared a *Source* magazine cover. In the Chocolate City, however, there were few political consequences for disparaging go-go, as class often trumped race—except, of course, during an election year.

Yet at the time the city made arrangements to pay for Little Benny’s funeral, black working- and middle-class D.C. voters were united around one sentiment: the mayor, Adrian Fenty, had become a problem. Polls showed Fenty to be in deep political trouble, losing support to his rival, the sixty-seven-year-old city council chairman named Vincent Gray. True, Fenty, a hard-charging thirty-nine-year-old triathlete, kept the trains running. Under his watch, the renaissance of the city raced ahead, with new doggy parks, renovated schools and recreation centers, and sparkling new libraries. But Fenty seemed to relish any opportunity to defy establishment elders as he made an aggressive show of remaking D.C. into what he called a “world-class city.”⁸ In a city that often communicated via subtext, many wondered if by “world-class” the mayor meant the opposite of “Chocolate.”

As the city gentrified, it grew more diverse, but it remained far from a postracial melting pot. In fact, the influx of wealth into the city made the economic disparities between white and black residents in the city even more dramatic. Much like the rest of the country, D.C. was in the midst of heated class warfare about how public resources should be spent. Whites in the District had a median household income of \$92,000, while blacks earned a median income of \$34,000. (Latino and Asian D.C. residents also out-earned blacks, with a median household income of \$44,000 and \$4,000, respectively.⁹)

When Fenty was sworn in as mayor in 2007, D.C. had a higher con-

centration of people living in extreme poverty—10.8 percent—than any of the fifty states, including even Mississippi and Louisiana, the latter still reeling from the effects of Hurricane Katrina.¹⁰ Four years later, as Fenty campaigned for reelection, the increase in poverty among the city's black children was even more breathtaking: it had shot up to 43 percent, from 36 percent in 2008 and 31 percent in 2007, according to an analysis of U.S. census data.¹¹ By comparison, the white median income had grown, and the number of white children living in poverty was 3 percent at the time of Little Benny's funeral.

The bottom line was that D.C. remained a Chocolate City, and black residents still outnumbered white residents by a margin of one hundred thousand. Black residents were more likely to look to the city to provide a social safety net, while white residents looked to the city to provide the perks, brick sidewalks, bike lanes, and doggy parks now available thanks in part to the extra taxes they had brought into the city.

D.C.'s large and politically active black middle class could have provided a swing vote for Fenty, especially since the mayor was one of them, a D.C. native; member of a black fraternity, Kappa Alpha Psi; and a graduate of Howard University. As his London-raised wife Michelle Fenty said in an interview, "He doesn't just care; he grew up with these people."¹² But Fenty had antagonized many black middle-class voters, too, with his aggressive overhaul of city agencies, whose jobs and contracts had helped to produce the black middle class in the first place. Fenty appointed few black faces to the upper levels of his administration. This would not seem odd if the city were not home to the most educated, accomplished concentration of black talent in the country, many of whom knew their way around D.C.'s odd, quasi-colonial government structure.¹³ Then there were the mass firings of veteran black public school teachers, replaced en masse by young, often white, Teach for America temporary workers recruited by his schools chancellor, a young education entrepreneur named Michelle Rhee.¹⁴

Few things infuriated black voters of all income levels more than Fenty's scorched-earth, erase-everything attitude toward their schools.¹⁵ Parents in the District had spent a generation learning how to navigate the resource-starved public school system, which had, for at least a century, been a plaything of Congress. Like the rest of the city services that took a hit during the lean years when the city experienced a shrinking tax base and deteriorating infrastructure, the schools were far from ideal. But

instead of leaving the city for greener suburban pastures, generations of Washingtonians had stayed loyal and learned to make do. Now, thanks to a booming local economy and skyrocketing real-estate values, the city finally had the resources to do more. Public school parents—three-fourths of them black—resented the disparate impact of school “reform” that eradicated neighborhood schools in some black communities. While traditional public schools in majority-white neighborhoods were largely left alone, black neighborhood schools were allowed to wither on the vine before being closed. (In the rash of 2008 closures that followed Fenty’s election, the city’s green, leafy, and majority black Ward 5 community, for instance, was left without a single freestanding neighborhood middle school.¹⁶) They also resented the implication of Rhee’s portrait in *Time* magazine, on whose cover she appeared wearing a grim expression and wielding a broom. Did “reform” mean that black people were the dirt being swept away?¹⁷ They did not believe there were no qualified black professionals available to run schools. They also balked at Fenty’s and Rhee’s statements—often to national corporate audiences they courted for donations—that the system was such a morally decrepit wasteland that parents and teachers should have no input in their reform.¹⁸

Fenty, who had a white mother and a black father, had attended D.C. public schools during the “Murder Capital” 1980s. He also attended Oberlin, and then the Howard University School of Law. So he could not pretend to be naïve about the racial undertones governing change in D.C. The city was replacing public housing projects located on prime real estate with so-called mixed-income housing. The scarcity of affordable housing disproportionately hit the poorest—and blackest—corners of the city. Construction and other blue-collar jobs once held by blacks were now going to Latino immigrants. The black middle class was feeling the squeeze too. Far from reflecting a postracial meritocracy, the city’s elite institutions in academia, in the think tank, the nonprofit organization, on Capitol Hill, and in the media were generally whiter than a Sarah Palin rally, even in 2010. Now their grip on the Chocolate City institutions that provided them professional and economic refuge was slipping away.

There were a few notable black exceptions to Fenty’s colorblind hiring policies. A few of Fenty’s fraternity brothers got multimillion-dollar no-bid parks contracts at greatly inflated rates, which raised the ire of government watchdogs and the city council.¹⁹ And Ronald “Mo” Moten, an ex-con turned go-go promoter and antiviolence activist, got \$10 million

in no-bid city contracts for working with “at-risk” youth.²⁰ Yet for the most part the young mayor charged ahead with a racially blind overhaul of what many were calling the “new D.C.” As Fenty “classed” up the joint, the subtext was clear: black meant decline, white meant progress. Census projections showed that black voters would soon be a minority of the city’s population. But Fenty, along with almost the entire establishment news media,²¹ governed the city as if black people were dead weight—or worse, already gone.

When the voices of angry black citizens from across the city became too loud to ignore as his reelection campaign was well under way, Fenty turned to the go-go community for help—in particular to one associate, Moten. With Mo at his side, Fenty hosted go-go concerts, code-switched, spoke Ebonics from park stages, and did old-school go-go dances at rallies. He put out a video, “Go-Go 4 Fenty: We Got the Facts, Not Fiction,” featuring endorsements from popular go-go artists including Chi Ali of Suttle Thoughts, Big G of Backyard Band, and Sugarbear of EU.

And, of course, Moten—and Fenty—were front and center at Little Benny’s funeral. Among the audience in the Convention Center, filled with customized “RIP Little Benny” T-shirts and embroidered work uniforms, there were plenty of sighs, whispers, and eye rolls at the spectacle of Fenty and the rest of the city’s political brass shamelessly standing above the trumpeter’s dead body, giving what amounted to stump speeches. As the mayor took his turn at the dais, a string of boos rang out from among the mourners, many of whom had already moved to Maryland. Reverend Deron Cloud, who had delivered a eulogy backed by a go-go band, jumped to the microphone to chastise the crowd for spurning the mayor as though he had just sung off-key at the Apollo. “This is the house of the Lord,” he snapped. “We are not here for that, family.”

Well, not exactly. This was not the house of the Lord. And they were not “family.” The Convention Center was the \$800 million house of District taxpayers. Even so, as Little Benny was laid to rest that June, it was Fenty who quickly arranged for the public to pick up the tab.

A Black Public Sphere

Little Benny’s funeral was just one example of how go-go embodied a certain racialized part of the public in the nation’s capital. The centrality of music to Washington’s local political scene is a throwback to the African