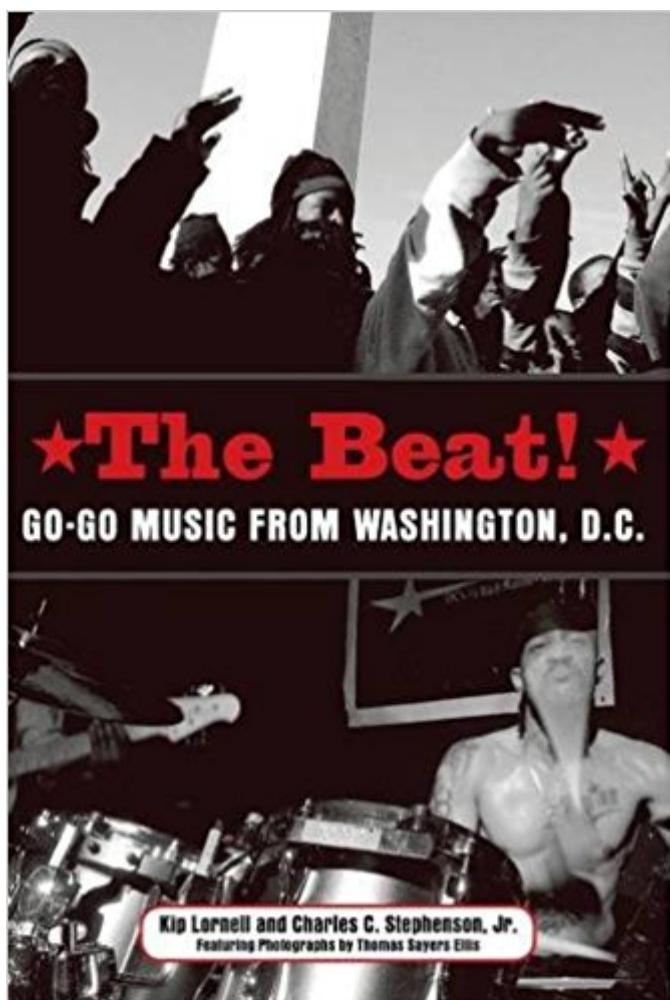


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# The Beat: Go-Go Music From Washington, D.C. (American Made Music Series)



## **Synopsis**

The Beat! was the first book to explore the musical, social, and cultural phenomenon of go-go music. In this new edition, updated by a substantial chapter on the current scene, authors Kip Lornell and Charles C. Stephenson, Jr., place go-go within black popular music made since the middle 1970s--a period during which hip-hop has predominated. This styling reflects the District's African American heritage. Its super-charged drumming and vocal combinations of hip-hop, funk, and soul evolved and still thrive on the streets of Washington, D.C., and in neighboring Prince George's County, making it the most geographically compact form of popular music. Go-go--the only musical form indigenous to Washington, D.C.--features a highly syncopated, nonstop beat and vocals that are spoken as well as sung. The book chronicles its development and ongoing popularity, focusing on many of its key figures and institutions, including established acts such as Chuck Brown (the Godfather of Go-Go), Experience Unlimited, Rare Essence, and Trouble Funk; well-known DJs, managers, and promoters; and filmmakers who have incorporated it into their work. Now updated and back in print, The Beat! provides longtime fans and those who study American musical forms a definitive look at the music and its makers.

## **Book Information**

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## **Customer Reviews**

A history of the distinctive, U.S. Capital sound that fuses hip-hop, funk, and soul

Kip Lornell teaches in the music department at George Washington University. He has published nearly one hundred articles and liner notes as well as ten books, including *Introducing American Folk Music* and *The Life and Legend of Leadbelly* (with Charles Wolfe). Charles C. Stephenson, Jr., is a political and cultural activist, the original manager of Experience Unlimited, cofounder of the Malcolm X Day Celebration, former chair of the D.C. Commission on the Arts and Humanities, and a member of the Washington Area Music Association and NARAS.

Best Book I ever read on GO GO music by far.

This book portrays an excellent source of the role of music in giving voice and visibility to an otherwise unrepresented group of Americans.

Excellent book, very informative...

Great!

There's not too many books on this subject, so it was a treat to finally read about the history of Go-Go.

George Washington University music professor Kip Lornell's biggest critical framework here is the tension between taking go-go national and keeping it real to its D.C. roots, a tension that Lornell seems to think should have gone the opposite way it did. He has some interesting history about the glimmers of the mainstream that go-go managed to catch in the mid-1980s, most of which would be useful for a reader who goes to this because he or she is unfamiliar with the genre. But the poor prose and even worse research render this book a failure overall. Lornell seems to be stuck in a time warp from 1981, when horns and professional R&B and funk musicians dominated go-go bands. To him, this is the only true go-go music -- anything that's contains rap or overt hip-hop influences is just fakin' it. In other words, this is the typical line of Baby Boomer criticism, wherein these kids today just don't get it. Lornell is your quintessential "Rockist" critic -- only dinosaur-styled bands of virtuoso musicians who play their instruments and sing need apply. All of this is strikingly surface-level for an analytical paradigm, since go-go and rap were pretty similar to begin with (go-go with its constant shout-outs and all) and that the two have only become more closely intertwined over the two full decades before Lornell wrote this edition. When I was in high school in the mid-90s, for example, although everyone respected Chuck Brown, Little Benny, Trouble Funk, etc., all the

action was in rapping bands like NEG, Junk Yard, Backyard, and the Huck-a-Bucks (everyone still loved RE). The old stuff was basically what you'd hear at a block party while the old folks were still out and about. And as far as instrumental virtuosity, that's pretty much a given since only a virtuoso would be able to stay in the go-go pocket for three-hour stretches. But Lornell wants to cryogenically freeze (shades of the EU Freeze?) the genre to keep it from evolving. Strange from a guy who thinks go-go deserves much wider recognition. Lornell's writing ability is rather shocking. The book is more like a research paper written by an undergraduate, or even a high school student, who isn't really interested in the subject enough to revise it or research its content. He repeats himself endlessly, yet not enough to support his arguments through evidence. He goes on and on about lack of radio airplay for the genre in the D.C. area, but you've got to take his word for it because he has nothing else to back up the claim. Taking his word is tough at times. When he lists the stations that do play go-go, the list is embarrassingly incomplete -- how could anyone not list the WKYS 93.9; it's the People's Station, for god's sake. He also seems to be totally unaware of "Flavor" 1580 A.M., the area's first all hip-hop station, which also played go-go (maybe this oversight is yet another example of the book's rockist bent). My recollection of growing up inside the Beltway involves NEG's "Van Damme" being the song of summer of 1993 and Huck-a-Bucks' "The Bud" and "Sexy Girl" dominating other time periods. I'm curious if I'm remembering this through a distorted prism or if it really was that way, but Lornell doesn't do the research to inform me. If this seems to be nit-picky, note that this book is not a labor of love but rather an academic book written by a professor and published by a university press. Yet Lornell and his unsupported opinions leap off the page as if the thing is a blog post. What kind of academic goes around hurling accusations of racist motives about people he doesn't know? There he is, among other examples, recalling a meeting he went to with a bunch of high school teachers from Loudoun County, Va., and when they tell him they don't go to D.C. frequently, he chalks it up not to their living 90 minutes away but rather to D.C.'s being "too black" for them. The really interesting topics here, meanwhile, too frequently don't get developed fully. I give Lornell credit for discussing gender and sexism in go-go, but I would have loved to have heard a thorough analysis about his claim that punk and rave music have received far more latitude in the press and from parents than go-go has. That is not at all my understanding of the histories of those two genres in the District. The comparison to punk and rave would be great fodder for analysis, but his treatment of the subject is purely superficial. In actuality, punk became Satan's Tool pretty quickly during the Straight Edge era, possibly because rather than in spite of the fact that it was a genre that a lot of white kids liked. And raves were constantly shut down by authorities because of the evils of ecstasy. Then again, Lornell blithely, and completely incorrectly,

states that those two genres were all-white, which is a laughable notion for anyone who knows anything about those scenes (then again this is an author who thinks the 9:30 Club is/was in Georgetown). Those two scenes also experienced the same tensions between mainstream and insider as go-go. In the same era, even -- ask Kurt Cobain about how that worked out. Or better yet, ask Ian MacKaye or Travis Morrison, both local go-go fans. But the only interviews Lornell seems to have conducted are with obscure industry types or self-promoting bloggers. Chuck Brown gets a biography of a couple of paragraphs, but all the other band histories in here completely lack any details whatsoever. I bought the updated, Obama-era edition of this book because I assumed it would reflect the changing nature of go-go and the newer aspects of its history along with the gentrification of D.C. It did none of those things but rather only differed from the first edition through a short transcription of a conversation between Lornell and his co-author, the well-intentioned old-timer Charles Stephenson. Lornell, true to form, manages to sound like Clint Eastwood in "Gran Torino" with his doomsday proclamations about what these kids today have done with go-go. But there's no new history to be found. No discussion of anything like Nelly's use of Chuck Brown's classic "Bustin Loose" for a huge hit in the early 00s. No discussion of the Washington Nationals' use of the same song for their home run anthem. No discussion of Wale, none of Va Beach natives Pharrell Williams and Chad Hugo's interpretations of the genre in tunes like "Drop It Like It's Hot" and so many Clipse songs. They do praise Mambo Sauce, to their credit (of course they are the most prominent classicists on the scene). But no mention of where "Let Me Clear My Throat" fits in or "The Wire" or bounce beat. Don't get me wrong, I have nothing against old coots like Lornell. And I don't think every author, especially academics, needs to write like Shakespeare to be effective. My main problem is that this is an academic book, and while the absence of good prose is forgivable, the absence of effective research and passable analysis are not.

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