# Origins of the *Go Go Live at the Capital Centre* Concert: The Compared to What Group and Arts Programming in DC Parks

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**ABSTRACT**

This article looks at the origins of Compared to What, a non-profit arts program that was in operation during the 1970s in Washington, DC. It focuses on the organization's collaboration with the National Park Service in several DC-area parks, among them the National Mall, Anacostia Park, and Rock Creek Park, and argues that such engagement prepared the founders of the organization to be a major player in the go-go promotion scene of the 1980s, notably in organizing the *Go Go Live at the Capital Centre* concert.

**On October 9, 1987, the artists Experience Unlimited, Little Benny & The Masters, Rare Essence, Chuck Brown & The Soul Searchers, the Junkyard Band, D.C. Scorpio, Go Go Lorenzo, and Hot, Cold Sweat performed at the Capital Centre in Landover, Maryland.** Organized by G Street Express and CD Enterprises, the concert was a showcase of go-go, Washington, DC's indigenous music made predominantly by and for the District's Black population.

Originating in the 1970s, the style of music blends funk, rhythm and blues, soul, and elements of a growing hip hop scene. At the Capital Centre, audiences heard musical features typical of this burgeoning new genre. Bassists played electric bass lines made popular by funk and disco artists like Prince, Cameo, Earth, Wind & Fire, and Kool & The Gang. Go-go drummers contributed heavy backbeats on the snare drum and swung their rhythms in a manner typical of jazz, blues, reggae, and other Black music. Afro-diasporic percussion instruments like the congas, bongos, and cowbells were ever present. A horn section typically composed of trumpet and alto and tenor saxophones provided rhythmic punctuation to the music, not unlike the horn sections of the famous swing orchestras led by Count Basie during the 1930s and 1940s. Go-go singers at the Capital Centre sometimes rapped, sometimes sang, and sometimes engaged in frequent call-and-response with the audience.[1] As an example, at one point in the show, Experience Unlimited's lead singer repeated a question to the crowd, "Are you tired yet?" The answer from the audience was uniform and in rhythm with the beat of the backing instrumental music: "Hell no." In addition, some bands like Rare Essence wore matching outfits, continuing the tradition of presenting a sleek, uniformed style that was popularized by Motown, soul, rock, and rhythm and blues groups such as The Supremes, The Temptations, or The Four Tops. There were lights, smoke machines, and a video crew who taped the performance. Dancers were on stage. It was a fantastic production.[2]

To sample some go-go music, listen to an excerpt from this backing track by Fachada.

*Go Go Live at the Capital Centre* is one of the most famous concerts in DC's history. About 24,000 people were in attendance. Briana Younger with the *Washington Post* calls it "go-go's biggest night."[3] When the VHS video came out in December 1987, it "lit the stores up," remembers Andre "Whiteboy" Johnson, Rare Essence's lead guitar player.[4] "The whole economics of go-go were impacted by the video," states Carol Kirkendall, co-founder of G Street Express and CD Enterprises and one of the concert's organizers.[5] People in Europe and Japan saw the video and started booking more go-go acts internationally. "It helped us get a lot of gigs in other cities in major venues," recalls Johnson.[6] "Generations just keep getting interested and watching it," says Gregory "Sugar Bear" Elliott, bassist for Experience Unlimited.[7]

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As commercially successful as the concert was, it had roots in an unexpected, non-commercial place: a non-profit's collaboration with the National Park Service (NPS). This article begins with mention of the *Go Go Live* concert to show just how impactful government support of the arts can be. To be clear, federal money did not directly fund this concert. However, Kirkendall, her business partner Darryll Brooks, and their colleagues Gerald Scott and Pat Clark had gained invaluable experience working with NPS throughout the 1970s and much of the 1980s. It was this exposure, this article argues, that helped contribute to the success of one of the city's most revered concerts.

Several scholars have shown how government sponsorship bolsters artistic production. The desire to engage in soft-power diplomacy during the Cold War meant that everybody from dance troupes to symphony orchestras were sent abroad on tours.[8] Jazz musicians benefited from such sponsorship of the arts, although given the state of race relations back home, they frequently performed in subversive ways.[9] During the 1970s, avant-garde jazz music was often subsidized by non-profits such as the Ford Foundation and government entities like the New York State Council on the Arts.[10]

Building on this scholarship, this article shows how public support can bolster private enterprise, even years later. The first section contextualizes the *Go Go Live* concert by placing it, and its organizers, within a history of government sponsorship of DC's go-go scene. In the late 1960s, the National Capital Region division of NPS created a "Summer in the Parks" (SITP) program which brought, among other cultural events, music to DC-area residents. It was thanks to these events that musicians would form some of the earliest go-go groups and residents would have the opportunity to hear this new style of music. The SITP program ended in 1976, but that did not mean music was suddenly absent from national parks. From the early 1970s to the early 1990s, Anacostia Park was home to the long-standing Malcolm X Day Festivals, which merged go-go music with speeches given by local activists. However, go-go musicians, fans, promoters and NPS did not always get on amicably, as seen in attitudes prevalent amongst park officials working in Rock Creek Park's Carter Barron Amphitheater.

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The second section of the article demonstrates that these stories are important during a moment when federal arts funding is being cut nationwide. Public support is vital not just for the sake of the arts.[11] As I demonstrate, it also serves as job training. The producers of *Go Go Live* learned project management skills. They learned to organize large events. They developed their ability to engage the community. When funding disappears, so too does the development of a wide range of non-musical skills.

This article relies on interviews with Brooks, Kirkendall, Scott, and Clark to better understand their work experience and the lessons they learned while collaborating with NPS in the years prior to the *Go Go Live* concert. Congressional reports, concert pamphlets, and *Washington Post* articles also detail a rich, and in one instance rather fraught, relationship between government and non-governmental actors.

## GO-GO AND NPS

The origins of the NPS's engagement with DC's go-go scene can be most immediately traced to the formation of the SITP series. As historians Felicia Garland-Jackson and Debra Lattanzi Shutika have shown, the SITP began amidst urban uprisings that were sweeping cities like Harlem in 1964 and Watts in 1965. Washington, DC, was not immune to such racial tensions and the city exploded in the aftermath of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.'s assassination. In an effort to atone for the history of segregation in recreation and also serve as a preventative measure against more uprisings, park officials in DC felt that they should offer free activities for the city's Black youth. Through the program, NPS organized nature retreats and camping trips. They also offered music programming, either bussing youth to concerts, supporting local bands, or bringing music performances to neighborhoods.[12]

Go-go musicians, like the ones that would ultimately perform at the *Go Go Live* concert, benefited from this program. Through the SITP, and in collaboration with the city's Parks and Recreation Department, NPS provided a "showmobile" that would travel to various neighborhoods. A repurposed truck, this showmobile functioned as a mobile stage, providing kids the opportunity to perform. Residents also benefited from the showmobile tours as they were able to listen to free music. Elliott, the bassist of the go-go band Experience Unlimited, recalled that, aged 17, he was able to play

two paid shows a week on it.[13] Fans similarly remember hearing these early go-go bands through the SITP series. "I've got my whole litany of remembrances of Summer in the Park …. My first concert or go-go was in Anacostia Park and what band was playing up on the stage? Experience Unlimited."[14]

The SITP series stopped in 1976 as the Park Service became more committed to Bicentennial programming. However, that does not mean that music ceased to exist in public spaces. Anacostia Park, located in the National Capital East region, was a particularly fruitful musical site, especially as host to the annual Malcolm X Day Festivals. Founded in 1972 by Charles Stephenson, manager of Experience Unlimited, the festival was an opportunity for DC's residents to rally and discuss issues of employment, education, and drug addiction. Lasting until the mid-1990s, the celebration attracted between 30,000 and 50,000 participants annually. Most of the events took place at Anacostia Park, and residents had the opportunity to hear local activists such as Damu Smith and Randall Robinson speak about environmental racism or South African apartheid. A poster from the 14th annual festival, which took place on May 19, 1985, shows the type of music that was also heard.[15] Melvin Deal's African Heritage Drummers and Dancers performed traditional diasporic music. Go-go was the feature, though, with bands Ex-Slaves,

Red and green poster by the Globe Printing Company promoting the 14th Annual Malcolm X Day Festival in Anacostia Park. REPRODUCTION COURTESY OF THE DISTRICT OF COLUMBIA PUBLIC LIBRARY AND MARYLAND INSTITUTE COLLEGE OF ART


**MALCOM X DAY CELEBRATION –** Founded in 1972 by Charles C. Stephenson as an opportunity for DC residents to rally and discuss issues of employment, education, drug addiction, and housing. At its peak, the celebration attracted between 30,000 and 50,000 participants annually.

**GO-GO MUSIC –** Experience Unlimited (EU), Class Band, Junk Yard Band, Ex-Slaves, and Physical Wundor are go-go bands. Go-go is a style of music unique to DC's Black community. Originating in the 1970s, the music mixes elements of funk, disco, rhythm and blues, soul, and hip hop. It was designated DC's official music in 2020.

**AFRICAN HERITAGE DRUMMERS & DANCERS –** Company and music group formed in the mid-1960s by Melvin Deal that informed DC residents about the music, dance, and culture of the African diaspora. Throughout Deal's tenure, his troupe would travel the country giving workshops at schools and community centers.

**RANDALL ROBINSON –** Founded the TransAfrica Forum in 1977. This was an advocacy organization that, through letter-writing campaigns, hunger strikes, and other protests, compelled the United States to take a stronger stance against apartheid in South Africa.

**DR. CALVIN ROLARK –** Entrepreneur who created the *Washington Informer* in 1964, a newspaper dedicated to printing good news about the Black community instead of crime stories prominent within the white-dominated media of Washington.

**HON. WILHELMINA ROLARK –** Elected city council representative of Ward 8 in 1976, Rolark helped bring cable television to DC, signed laws that took a tougher stance on crime, and improved job training resources, bus routes, and recreational facilities within public housing.

**RON CLARK –** In 1970, when jail was a common punishment for those suffering from substance abuse, Clark founded the Regional Addiction Prevention, Inc. His organization was an important treatment center that served a public health need.

**DAMU SMITH –** Environmental activist who brought attention to the levels of toxicity in Black neighborhoods. Also led and co-founded several justice organizations, among them the Artists for a Free South Africa and Black Voices for Peace.

**MALIK EDWARDS –** Artist who helped rehabilitate a vacant apartment in the Valley Green Housing Project where Experience Unlimited would rehearse. Also designed the album art to Experience Unlimited's album, *Free Yourself*. Edwards helped organize, along with Charles C. Stephenson, the Malcolm X Day Celebrations.

**UNITED BLACK FUND –** Founded by Calvin Rolark in 1969 as a nonprofit charitable corporation that raised money for local health and welfare agencies. The United Black Fund helped fund the first successful security guard agency comprised of ex-convicts. It supported the mobile health unit of Howard University Sickle Cell Disease Center. By 1990, it had financed more than 150 DC organizations. It has several national affiliates and is still in operation today.

**"NO DRUGS" –** During the 1980s, deaths by drug overdoses in DC routinely numbered more than 150 per year. To bring awareness to this crisis, Rare Essence, Experience Unlimited, and other bands joined together to participate in the Go-Go Drug Free Project. This project culminated in an anti-drug song released in 1986. It also featured a media campaign that combated associations between go-go, Black culture, and drug usage.

**GLOBE POSTER PRINTING CORP. –** Founded in 1929 in Baltimore, Maryland, Globe Poster delivered eye-catching posters to promote concerts, drag races, circuses, carnivals and more. Fluorescent colors, bold wood type, and lettering that shook and shimmied defined Globe's iconic style, attracting clients from James Brown and Marvin Gaye to Experience Unlimited. Globe ceased production in 2010, and the Maryland Institute College of Art (MICA) stepped forward to purchase a substantial portion of Globe, including wood type, letterpress cuts, and posters. The acquisition by MICA keeps Globe's legacy alive as a working press, a teaching tool, and source for research.

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Physical Wundor, Class Band, Junk Yard Band, and, of course, the Stephenson-managed Experience Unlimited all performing in Anacostia Park. Reflecting on his experience working with NPS, Stephenson said it was a rather supportive relationship.[16]

This is not to say go-go was always well received by park officials, though. In Rock Creek Park, the Carter Barron Amphitheater had been providing music to Washingtonians since it opened in 1950. By the 1980s, its programming was primarily geared towards DC's Black residents who, in 1970, comprised 71% of the population. Classical music and theater still made an appearance. However, musics like smooth jazz, contemporary r&b, doo-wop, and blues predominated. World music, particularly those from the African diaspora, such as Jamaican reggae and ska and Caribbean calypso, were also well represented.[17]

Yet, go-go, despite its local prominence, occurred very rarely at the Carter Barron Amphitheater. As one park manager recalls, officials were generally hesitant to program the style.[18] This position largely resulted from the fact that, by the late 1980s, go-go was associated with DC's climbing crime and murder rates. In 1981, there were 237 homicides in DC. By 1993, that number had risen to 496. Black men aged 20 to 29 were particularly affected. During the 1980s and 1990s, they regularly comprised more than 70% of the victims.[19]

A debate ensued regarding violence and go-go amidst this context. As historian Natalie Hopkinson notes, on one end were police, politicians, and press who linked go-go music to crime.[20] On the other end were those invested in the go-go scene like Pearl Pratt, manager of the band Northeast Groovers. She argued that if police wanted to prevent crime, they would actually promote more go-go music and not try to curtail it. "I have seen [Northeast Groover's rapper] Chris tell a whole crowd to be quiet and say a little prayer because someone has been killed," she stated in 1994. "These are supposedly hard-core kids that will stand still and do it. So, they are more or less contained and controlled at that moment, off of the streets, out of respect for who they are listening to. A lot of parents don't have as much control and respect from their kids as these guys get onstage from those kids out there."[21]

Despite the efforts of activists like Pratt, NPS park officials still feared that it was "too much of a risk to bring go-go back to the park." Audiences "weren't going to know how to act" and a concert might "incite violence" due to the association between go-go and a "certain population of people."[22] Such hesitancy plays out in the data. A list of ticket stubs provided by park rangers at Carter Barron shows that there were at least a thousand shows between its opening in 1950 and the venue's closure in 2017. Go-go, at least according to those sources, was only performed there a handful of times.[23]

However, even with this hesitancy, go-go music retained some support from park officials. Several go-go artists got their start playing thanks to the NPS's SITP series. In addition, a partnership between Charles Stephenson and Anacostia Park meant that go-go bands made regular appearances at the Malcolm X Day Festivals.

The next section focuses more specifically on the organization Compared to What. It highlights the importance of their job training programs, specifically at Rock Creek Park. It also shows how cooperation between NPS and this arts non-profit helped lead to one of the most famous go-go concerts in DC's history.

## COMPARED TO WHAT, NPS ARTS PROGRAMMING, AND THE ROOTS OF THE *GO GO LIVE AT THE CAPITAL CENTRE* CONCERT

About a decade and a half before they organized the *Go Go Live at the Capital Centre* concert, Brooks and Kirkendall began a non-profit arts group called Compared to What. The organization's name was deliberate, taking inspiration from the title of a political song by Gene McDaniels written in 1966. "The President, he's got his war / Folks just don't know what it's for," McDaniels writes regarding the burgeoning Vietnam War. The fourth verse critiques blind adherence to religion ("Preachers fillin' us with fright / They all tryin' to teach us what they think is right"). "Unwed mothers need abortion," he exclaims amidst a growing feminist movement. Each verse ends with a rhetorical question: "Tried to make it real, compared to what?"

The song registered with DC residents like Brooks and Kirkendall because of its association with singer Roberta Flack. Born in North Carolina, Flack moved to Arlington, Virginia, at a young age. By nine she was playing organ, piano, and singing in her local churches. She attended Hoffman-Boston High School, the only secondary school available to African Americans in Arlington. Then she won a music scholarship to Howard University and graduated in the late 1950s when she was only 19 years old. After a stint teaching music back in North Carolina, Flack returned to DC and taught at two junior high schools, Rabaut and Brown. Then, in 1968, she began performing regularly at Mr. Henry's, a jazz club located at 6th and Pennsylvania Avenue in DC's Capitol Hill neighborhood. Her residency there was an immense success. Word

spread, and in due time, jazz pianist and vocalist Les McCann visited her, immediately getting her a deal with Atlantic Records and helping record her first album.[24] The result, *First Take*, featured a famous rendition of "Compared to What." It contains a syncopated bassline played by Ron Carter (of Miles Davis fame). Flack not only sings soulfully but also lays down bluesy dominant chords on the piano. William S. Fischer directs a horn section to play percussive stabs. Prominent session drummer and rhythm and blues stalwart Ray Lucas plays a funky drum beat. This was not the first recorded version of McDaniels' song. In 1966, McCann recorded a version on *Les McCann Plays the Hits*. However, Flack's was certainly one of the more popular. "Compared to What" was released as a single and helped propel *First Take* to #1 on the *Billboard 200* and *R&B* charts.[25]

It only made sense that Flack's popularity and message resonated with a group of burgeoning DC activists like Brooks and Kirkendall. The city was physically and emotionally devastated after the assassination of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. and the uprisings of 1968 that ensued.[26] Brooks and Kirkendall wanted to heal the local, particularly Black, community via arts programming, and so in the early 1970s, partnered with artists, entrepreneurs, and activists to develop a community organization devoted to this end.

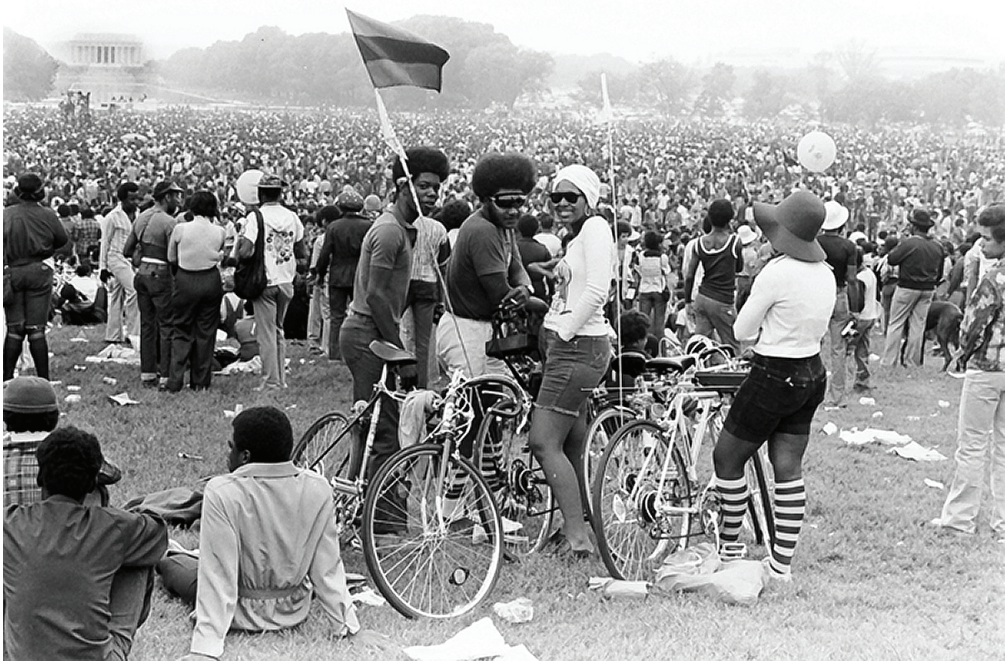
One of Compared to What's first major events was Roberta Flack Human Kindness Day. It took place on April 22, 1972, on the National Mall, a National Park Service site, and was offered in conjunction with the popular aforementioned SITP program. The festival featured art and writing contests for 7th- and 12th-graders. There was also a prayer breakfast and a marathon run.[27] Flack performed at Sylvan Theater, a public gathering place on the grounds of the Washington monument. The whole event drew 25,000 people. Programming was the same the following year and the featured artists were similarly impressive. Brooks and Kirkendall worked with Tony Taylor, the owner of the famous jazz club Bohemian Caverns, to get contact information for prominent musicians. Local artists and activists, such as Lloyd McNeil, also helped. Brooks was also able to tap into his own networks while working as a photographer for a public relations company.[28] There, he managed to get in touch with comedian and actor Dick Gregory, who headlined the 1973 event. With Gregory's help, the festival attracted 35,000 people.[29]

NPS and local government were appreciative of such programs. On May 7, 1974, John A. Nevius, chair of the District of Columbia City Council, issued a proclamation that commended Compared to What for their "valuable and beneficial service" that encouraged and guided "artistic expression in our city's young people through year-round activities." The proclamation also extended its support to the upcoming Human Kindness Day event and provided encouragement for "all young artists who participate in Compared to What programs."[30]

As Nevius would have expected, the festivals in 1974 and 1975 were similarly engaging. There were art and writing contests, a run for "human kindness," and a breakfast with community leaders. There were clowns, free juice, local bands, and an award ceremony. The Smithsonian Institution even hosted an exhibit. Theatrical troupes such as the Ebony Impromptu Company and Silk Screaning [sic] Company performed as well.[31]

Unfortunately, though, these two years were marred by violence. In 1974, 55,000 people attended thanks to an appearance by Nina Simone. But issues with the stage's sound led to audience frustration. Such dissatisfaction merged with a feeling of continued racial animus and

Black and white photo from the 1975 Human Kindness Day Festival. View of attendees next to the Washington Monument.
PHOTO AND REPRODUCTION COURTESY OF NANCY SHIA



ultimately led to 24 arrests. The following year was worse. Organizers thought they had addressed issues with the sound, but the police were still viewed unfavorably by many of DC's Black residents. Therefore, Compared to What felt that it would be better to hire a security force composed of volunteers as opposed to relying on a heavy police presence. Doing so, they thought, would help ease racial tensions. Unfortunately, the decision meant there was not enough crowd control. By the time Stevie Wonder took the stage, some attendees began to attack other audience members. A civil servant who was passing by the area was stabbed and lost his eye. Brooks has been adamant that his festival was not responsible, claiming that the individual was attacked by attendees of another event nearby.[32] Nevertheless, there were 500 reported robberies, 600 injuries, and 150 hospitalizations, prompting a congressional hearing on May 15, 1975.[33] Senator Robert C. Byrd questioned Jack Fish, regional director of the National Capital Region, at length. After numerous questions about budget, police presence, and safety, Byrd ended by asking Fish, "What are your future plans for Human Kindness Day?" It was a rhetorical question. "We have no future plans," Fish responded. The festivals were no more.[34]

Human Kindness Day was the most visible event promoted by Compared to What. However, it was not the only one. In 1972, after encouragement from Ira Hutchinson, NPS's community programs chief, the organization received a grant from the National Endowment of the Arts to create a "Summer Hut" program. This program ran daily for six weeks every summer between 1972 and 1975. It took place primarily in Anacostia Park. School children were bussed to the program daily by DC Public Schools and McDonald's provided lunch. There were concerts that featured local talent.[35] Students were taught about bicycle and pedestrian safety. They built an African Village. There were reading lessons and students engaged in debates and conversations called "rap sessions."[36] Nightly attendance was about 10,000 and kids came via their bikes from across the District.[37]

After the Summer Hut program ended, Compared to What continued to bring arts education and programming to DC children. In 1977, it rented out DC's Miya Gallery, a space dedicated to creative expression from the African diaspora, and showed a movie. It was *Independence Day*, a semi-documentary dramatic feature about the struggles of a Southern black couple who settled in Los Angeles.[38]

One of Compared to What's more distinctive programs was the Technical Arts Apprenticeship program, which helped instruct students in stage design and audio engineering. On the one hand, it was not unique, as something similar was already offered by NPS and DC government: Mayor Marion Barry's Summer Youth Employment Program. Founded in 1979, this was a program that gave young workers a modest paycheck. Although it was open to every Washingtonian, it was particularly popular within DC's burgeoning punk scene. Brendan Canty, best known as the drummer in Fugazi, got his first job through the program. He was 13 years old and was tasked with picking up trash at Fort Reno in a largely upper-class section of Northwest DC. Local Neighborhood Planning Councils (NPCs) often helped coordinate this summer employment program and one of them, which met on NPS property, was popular with burgeoning punks. At what was called the "Chesapeake House," located at the intersection of Chesapeake, 41st and Bell Streets NW, youths could apply for jobs through the city or the NPC. It was also the office where they fulfilled some NPC-related employment.[39]

While punk musicians took advantage of this collaboration between NPS and the city, Compared to What provided apprenticeships specifically for Black youth. As one *Washington Post* article commented in 1980, job prospects for this particular demographic were "bleak."[40] While the overall rate of unemployment in the city was 6.4%, it was about 39% for those between the ages of 16 and 21. For Black youths of a similar age, it was nearly 50%.[41]

To address this issue, in stepped Compared to What, who offered technical training in a field typically segregated from Black Washingtonians. As musicologist Leta Miller notes, the practice of segregated union locals was common in the American Federation of Musicians during the first half of the 20th century.[42] Such issues played out in DC. Local 22 of the International Alliance of Theatrical Stage Employees was only desegregated in 1981 and provided no opportunities for Black stagehands. Therefore, Compared to What's program helped place aspiring students in Local 224A, DC's Black local.[43] It partnered with Howard University to provide classrooms and training sessions. Local 224A also relied on NPS's Carter Barron Amphitheater in Rock Creek Park as its staging ground. This decision was deliberate. The White union had exclusive access to the large stages in the area, such as the Kennedy Center and Constitution Hall. However, Carter Barron was not seen as a prominent venue. The fact it was only open during warmer months led to it being relegated to the Black union.[44]

Nevertheless, Local 224A and Compared to What took advantage of the space. There, they held weekly workshops

plus three regular class sessions. By the late 1970s, they had around eight regular student apprentices. About half of them were women. They set up the concerts, and operated lights and sound. Some ran the box office as well. Compared to What co-founder Gerald Scott considered it a job training program and successful apprentices from the program found that they had been trained in a lucrative field. They toured with the likes of Parliament Funkadelic and received their yellow cards, which entitled them to join a union as a full member. One was eventually paid $18,000 by Earth, Wind, and Fire to work as a full-time technician.[45]

Around this time, Kirkendall and Brooks were transitioning their efforts from "non-profit" to "profit making." Together, they developed a new company called Tiger Flower and Co. Inc. It became one of the area's leading promoters, responsible for bringing the Rolling Stones, Rick James, and Earl Klugh to the city.[46] In 1977, they brought Parliament Funkadelic to the Capital Centre. The show was such a success that Tiger Flower was hired to book and manage the band's American tour.[47] In 1984, they made use of the Capital Centre again when they brought Prince to the venue during his legendary *Purple Rain* tour. They also booked a free show for students at DC's Gallaudet University, the oldest university for Deaf students in the country. It featured loud guitars and bright lights, with the student body stomping their feet to better feel the vibrations.[48] Brooks and Kirkendall further made their mark when hip-hop gained national prominence during the 1980s. They were the management company for acts such as Salt-N-Pepa and promoted NWA, Beastie Boys, Grandmaster Flash, and Run-DMC on national tours.[49] By the time 1987 rolled around, the duo was well prepared for the *Go Go Live* show.

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## CONCLUSION

Reflecting on the origins of Brooks and Kirkendall's success, long-time employee Pat Clark, dates it to the early 1970s. The Summer Hut shows, Human Kindness Day events, and the Compared to What programming allowed Brooks and Kirkendall to "prototype" their shows. With support from the National Park Service, they put on "pilot concerts," according to Clark, that taught them lessons about music booking, promotion, and production.[50] The duo agrees. When asked about the origins of *Go Go Live*, Kirkendall cites her work with NPS in Anacostia Park in the early 1970s. It was because of Summer Hut and other NPS concert series such as SITP that she first encountered go-go musicians. Eventually these same artists would grace the Capital Centre.[51] Similarly, when asked what unifies his music programming, Brooks cites his origin story. "With Human Kindness Day, you had a day for the arts with [socially] conscious entertainment that whole families could attend."[52] Throughout their career, that was the spirit that they always tried to harness.

This article focused on Compared to What as one case study in a story about the importance of non-profit arts sponsorship. To be clear, this organization was not the only one to benefit from NPS's interest in promoting DC's local music scenes. Looking just at the support go-go received, the SITP program, the showmobiles, and the Anacostia Malcolm X Day Festivals all played prominent roles. That is not to say that such support was always uniform. Officials at Rock Creek Park were rather reluctant to regularly book go-go acts, even though the Carter Barron concerts were devoted almost entirely to promoting other Black popular music.

Go-go is, as of 2020, DC's official music.[53] The Go-Go Museum and Café recently opened in Southeast DC. Teach The Beat is an organization dedicated to bringing go-go drumming to students in DC schools. The DC Public Library maintains an archive dedicated to go-go and even reserves its rooftop for live shows.

However, such support is at risk. In May 2025, hundreds of arts groups received emails notifying them that their federal grants had been terminated. In July, President Donald Trump began dismantling libraries and museums.[54] Agencies like the National Endowment for the Arts, the National Endowment for the Humanities, and the Institute of Museum and Library Services have been cut and dismantled.[55] Such funding supports arts educators, professional development, and public music programming. In addition, as this article has shown in its investigation of Compared to What, arts organizations double as civic education institutions. The Summer Huts taught DC youth about how to safely walk and bike to school. Compared to What provided instruction in public speaking. It doubled as technical skills training so that youth could enter the workforce possessing audio engineering skills. And the likes of Carol Kirkendall, Darryll Brooks, Pat Clark, and Gerald Scott, thanks to NPS support, gained experience in

event planning and project management. They then used this knowledge to organize one of the most important concerts in DC's history.

Amidst such political decisions, stories about Compared to What and NPS's support of the arts are important. They attest to the historical importance of encouraging free expression, particularly amongst under-represented groups. Continuing to do so will ensure that many more *Go Go Live at the Capital Centre* concerts can occur.

## ENDNOTES


1. Kip Lornell and Charles C. Stephenson, Jr, *The Beat: Go-Go Music from Washington, D.C.* (Jackson, MS: University Press of Mississippi, 2009); Natalie Hopkinson, *Go-Go Live: The Musical Life and Death of a Chocolate City* (Durham. NC: Duke University Press, 2012); Allie Martin, *Intersectional Listening: Gentrification and Black Sonic Life in Washington, DC* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2025).
2. *Go Go Live at the Capital Centre*, directed by Darryll Brooks (G Street Express, 1987), video, **https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=MSZs12crwsc**.
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4. Younger, "'Go Go Live'".
5. Younger, "'Go Go Live'".
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