

# H-Net Reviews

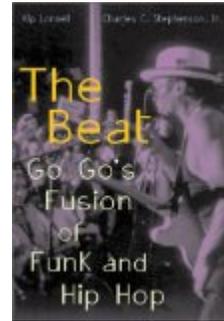
in the Humanities & Social Sciences



Mark Andersen, Mark Jenkins. *Dance of Days: Two Decades of Punk in the Nation's Capital*. New York: Akashic Press, 2003. xviii + 437 pp. \$19.95 (paper), ISBN 978-1-888451-44-3.

Kip Lornell, Charles C. Stephenson Jr. *The Beat: Go-Go's Fusion of Funk and Hip-Hop*. New York: Watson-Guptill, 2001. xii + 260 pp. \$16.95 (paper), ISBN 978-0-8230-7727-4.

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## Representing D.C.! Go-Go and Punk in the District of Columbia

Representing D.C.! Go-Go and Punk in the District of Columbia

Although pundits frequently lament Washington, D.C.'s lack of homegrown culture, the local punk and go-go scenes of the late-twentieth century belie their observations. This fact is documented in Kip Lornell and Charles C. Stephenson Jr.'s *The Beat: Go-Go's Fusion of Funk and Hip-Hop* and Mark Andersen and Mark Jenkins's *Dance of Days: Two Decades of Punk in the Nation's Capital*, the first full-length text studies of their respective genres. While punk rock was and is an international cultural phenomenon flourishing all over the United States, Europe, and elsewhere, go-go was and remains a D.C.-based African-American affair. Nonetheless, these music scenes shared important traits that place them in a larger context. Both go-go and punk were subcultures whose participants had to rely on do-it-yourself (DIY) techniques to make their music heard. Indeed, punk and hip-hop (including funk-based go-go) fostered an independent music explosion in the 1980s and 1990s. D.C. punk and go-go performers also expressed a strong localism that paradoxically revealed a sense of being in a city whose larger character did not represent their identities. Both groups relied on face-to-face, intimate performances that broke down barriers between musicians and audiences, thus countering the anonymity of 1970s large arena shows.

*The Beat* celebrates "the only artistic expression that originated in our nation's capital," tracing go-go from its roots in 1960s soul to its current status today (p. 2). Stephenson brings to the project thirty years of cultural and political activism in the D.C. African-American community, including several years managing Experience Unlimited, an early and important go-go band. Lornell, a skilled ethnomusicologist, has written seven books on American vernacular music. The authors draw on about twenty taped interviews, journal and newspaper coverage, the music itself, and participant observation.

*The Beat's* preface and first chapter ably define go-go and summarize its thirty-year odyssey. Go-go emerged after 1968, during the "post-riot rise in black consciousness" in D.C. (p. xii). Washingtonian Chuck Brown, universally touted as the "God father of Go-Go," assembled the Soul Searchers in 1966, a Top 40 dance band. Over time, the Soul Searchers and other nascent go-go bands began playing original music, developing a unique style by 1976. What distinguishes go-go from other rhythm and blues, soul, or funk is "the beat." Go-go's highly syncopated rhythms create an ongoing groove with no breaks between songs. Instead, near a song's end, the bands breaks the piece down to percussion alone; "the beat" then builds back into another tune, creating continuity. Lornell and Stephenson see many musical influences in go-go. Its syncopation and use of multiple drummers draws on Afro-Caribbean music that came to

the United States in the mid-twentieth century, while the groove reflects the jamming styles of bands such as the Grateful Dead and Funkadelic. Frequent interaction between band and audience harkens back to the call-and-response style present in West African traditional and contemporary music as well as most African-American music.

In 1979, Chuck Brown's "Bustin' Loose" achieved great local and moderate national success, garnering some local radio play and creating greater public awareness of go-go. The mid-eighties saw periodic label interest in go-go, but the genre never truly broke nationally. At the same time, rap and hip-hop exploded, influencing go-go to some degree, especially second-generation bands like Junk Yard Band and the Huck-a-Bucks. These younger bands tended to eschew the string, brass, and reed instruments typical of earlier go-go music, favoring instead electronic keyboards and synthesizers. Like most rap, these bands provided "a multi-faceted vocal component backed by dense layers of percussion" (p. 41). By 1990, interest in go-go outside Washington again declined, in part due to the media's connection of the music with drugs and violence. Other factors contributed to go-go's lack of widespread success. The local DIY success of selling tapes recorded off the soundboard during local live shows (public-address system or PA tapes) made touring less appealing, and go-go's format, the non-stop groove that creates an exciting live event, did not translate well to vinyl or compact disc. Nonetheless, the go-go community remains strong today, using websites to reinforce its long-standing DIY methods.[1]

Six succeeding chapters proceed topically, providing further context and detail, with each chapter progressing through its topic chronologically. This overlapping timeline works very well, with chapters building on one another. Lornell and Stephenson explain how go-go provided escapism and a creative outlet, allowing participants to proclaim communally, "I'm black, I'm creative, I'm proud, and I'm representing D.C." (p. 45)! In addition to Chuck Brown, the authors profile other germinal go-go groups such as Rare Essence and Experience Unlimited, and they detail the roles of go-go's entrepreneurs: band managers, security, promoters, label owners, and PA tape distributors. Because go-go has remained largely underground, DIY local entrepreneurship has been very important.

Although Lornell and Stephenson are obviously supportive of go-go, they address some of the negative aspects associated with it: drugs, violence, and sexism.

According to the authors, drugs and associated violence were at their worst in Washington from 1984 to 1991. As was the case across the United States, this violence disproportionately affected black neighborhoods, disrupting life in Southeast and Northeast D.C. In the late 1980s, drug-related violence outside of go-go shows received much media attention and promoted efforts from within the go-go community to spread an anti-drug message. In other words, the violence was incidental to and not caused by go-go. The authors seem less sure about sexism in go-go culture. Although they acknowledge that, even more so than in rap, the "lack of women participating in the performance, promotion, and management of go-go is painfully visible," they only speculate about the reasons why go-go was male-dominated (p. 118). A sidebar essay by go-go fan Soldierette (Ren Dickerson), one of several alternate perspectives offered at strategic points in the narrative, offers a more definitive answer: "Go-go is a man's world, a man's music, according to men. They may not say it, but they think it for sure. I'm here to dispute that" (p. 122). One possible reason for the lack of female involvement is the fact that go-go, according to the authors, is doubly marginalized, both as hip-hop, an urban genre that has only recently entered mainstream culture, and within hip-hop, whose national community remains largely unaware of go-go. This double marginalization may make go-go's men in power all the more inclined to exclude women.

One of the book's most important themes is a running parallel between go-go and Pentecostal Christianity. Many black Washingtonians have ties to rural Virginia and North Carolina, a region with a strong tradition of Pentecostalism. According to the authors, go-go and Pentecostalism have many similarities: both have long "services" and no program; both are face-to-face activities involving ritualized movement and physical activity; and both offer the possibility of transcending experiences, relying on simple, repeated musical or structural patterns in which rhythm is emphasized at expense of lyrics. The prominence of the Pentecostal motif begs for more concrete evidence. It certainly seems logical that musicians who grew up with a strong religious musical tradition would bring aspects of that background to secular music, but the authors offer no evidence of how many go-go players attended Pentecostal churches, much less any proof that experience affected their go-go musicianship.

*The Beat* targets an audience interested in a particular genre of music or D.C. history, doing so in a scholarly yet accessible style. This scholarship shines in Lor-

nell's striking ability to help readers understand the music itself by clearly describing concepts such as "duple meter" and "syncopated, dotted rhythm," while connecting them to their cultural influences on go-go (p. 12). Close attention to local historical and social context is another of the book's strengths. The authors note, for instance, how important D.C.'s Department of Recreation was for the first generation of go-go musicians by providing music lessons and hiring local bands to play their summer "Showmobile." Conversely, *The Beat* would benefit from more discussion of a national context. For instance, the authors mention the political apathy of D.C. residents, who lack Congressional representation, as one reason go-go's escapist celebrations developed. However, D.C. residents earned home-rule during the 1970s, electing the city's first mayor since the nineteenth century. What about political apathy in the rest of the country during the 1970s, or Nixon-era reversals of certain civil rights gains—were go-go's escapist desires part of larger national trends? Another, relatively minor criticism of *The Beat* concerns the photographs included in the book. While *Dance of Days* contains photographs that span the time period under discussion and advance the narrative, *The Beat* includes only two images from prior to 1985 and no photographs of club events, the prime venue of go-go. Readers thus miss an opportunity to visualize historic progression or get a peek into the intimacy and interaction that defined go-go.

While *The Beat* discusses a virtually all-black cultural phenomenon, *Dance of Days: Two Decades of Punk in the Nation's Capital* is a close-to-the-ground recounting of D.C. punk, an overwhelmingly white story. Left-wing political activist Mark Andersen and journalist Mark Jenkins, both long-time punk fans, have produced the first book-length text history of D.C. punk. Their work uses participant observation as well as exhaustive research collected predominantly by Andersen, including newspaper articles, punk fanzines, lyrics, and interviews. In certain ways, punk rock's history is more complicated than that of go-go, for the artistic precedents and inchoate sentiments that grew into punk surfaced simultaneously in many geographic areas. Punk first coalesced into a recognizable, though disparate, musical movement in New York City in the mid-1970s, then spread to London, Los Angeles, and finally across the United States and the United Kingdom.[2] Punk flew in the face of mainstream rock, which according to punk wisdom, had become a complacent, commercialized shadow of its former self.

Jenkins and Andersen describe the first wave of D.C.

punks as roots-rock bands such as the Slickee Boys as well as art-rock groups like Tiny Desk Unit. During 1976-1978, these bands played an instrumental role in opening doors for original rock in the local bar scene, which previously had booked mostly cover bands or country, bluegrass, and folk groups. On a national level, punk's cultural seat had shifted to Los Angeles by 1979, and a new form of punk arose from L.A.'s suburbs, one claiming to be "harder, faster, and louder" than earlier incarnations. This "hardcore" punk also tended to be younger and angrier, and was more likely to be performed and appreciated by males. Washington, D.C.'s own unique, early contribution to hardcore's origins was highly unusual in terms of race. The Bad Brains, a group from Southeast D.C. and the only all-black punk band in this era, set the tone for the group "D.C. harDCore" with their musical speed and intense DIY ethic.[3] The Bad Brains, together with British punk, inspired a group of teen-aged D.C. punks dubbed affectionately, or otherwise, "teeny punks" by the older art- and roots-rockers. The club opportunities secured by older punks benefited the younger hardcore punks little. Being underage, they could not attend most bar shows, and they had difficulty attaining bookings due to their more radical music and young fan base. Thus teeny punks followed the Bad Brains' DIY example, playing shows anywhere they could: basements, community centers, churches.

In 1980, three teeny punks formed Dischord Records with the simple goal of putting out a single to document their band that was breaking up. They found other local teeny punks wanted to put out records, and by 1982 Dischord was one of the best-known punk labels in the United States. D.C. punk flourished through the early 1980s but foundered by 1985. Some in the local scene wished to revitalize punk and thus engineered "Revolution Summer," a major turning point in *Dance of Days*. As the teeny punks entered their twenties, many found it no longer enough to rail against their peers and parents and began addressing larger issues such as homelessness and South African apartheid. This shift expressed itself in Punk Percussion Protests and the establishment of a local Positive Force branch, a left-wing punk political action group founded in Nevada. Concurrently, certain bands traveled away from the "harder, faster, louder" rules of earlier hardcore toward a wider range of emotions, a style eventually termed, by people outside of D.C., "emo punk." During this period, women assumed more important roles in the punk scene as well.

For Andersen, the maturation and perhaps apex of the D.C. punk scene came in the late-1980s and early-

1990s. As an activist, he admired punk's increasing political and feminist bent. In this period, Dischord band Fugazi rose to national prominence. Fugazi's complicated rhythms, precise guitar work, and often intensely political lyrics represented the great shift in Dischord music away from juvenile thrash. In the avenue of feminist punk, Bikini Kill and Bratmobile, progenitors of the Riot Grrrl movement and residents of Washington state, relocated briefly to D.C. in the early 1990s, advocating a "revolution girl style now!" (p. 307). Riot Grrrls quickly gained much media coverage, generating great controversy for, among other things, their attempts to be both sexy and life-affirming. Disputes about and among feminist punks probably would not have created much media attention had it not been for the mainstream success of *Nevermind* (1991) by Seattle punkers Nirvana. With national attention, debates within punk intensified. Perhaps the most prominent conundrum brought by success was this: where does spreading the punk message of DIY, individual thinking, and egalitarianism end, and selling-out begin?

The first edition of *Dance of Days* closed in the mid-1990s with debates over the meaning and ownership of punk still raging. Where punk once "meant facing potential assault" for looking different, now "it was ... accepted, even fashionable" (p. 375). But what did that mean? Had the system changed or had the punks (p. 376)? For Andersen, who had thrown himself into punk as way to revolutionize the world, this was a very personal issue. Some saw a clear-cut answer: stay away from major labels, product endorsements, and the mainstream. For others it was not so simple. Was it acceptable for Nirvana, whom many punks came to see as sell-out rock stars, to play a Positive Force benefit for the Washington Free Clinic, knowing they would have a huge draw? Was it okay to write an article about Positive Force and D.C. punk for a mainstream periodical that took ads from companies who employed sweatshop labor if in doing so you spread the word to tens of thousands of people beyond the organization's usual reach? Accordingly, the edition reviewed here includes a brief coda on punk and activism in D.C. from 1995 to 2003.

Contested ownership of the music is one of many themes go-go and punk share, and like many of their potential readers, the authors of both books have deep emotional investments in their subjects. Mark Andersen's affection for his topic is most evident. According to co-author Jenkins, *Dance of Days* "is overwhelmingly Mark Andersen's book," for it was his brainchild, he did

most of the research, and produced the first draft. Jenkins, a journalist, says his job was to "focus the narrative" and provide some objectivity (p. vii). Andersen's investment in punk, but more specifically, his investment in the sort of activist punk evident in Positive Force, results in a narrow focus on a fairly small group of D.C. punks. For example, while *Dance of Days* acknowledges the importance of earlier, older punk rockers such as Razz and Overkill, they receive scant attention and drop away from the story almost completely when Dischord comes on the scene. Granted, from a national perspective, the Dischord crowd is probably the most influential element to emerge from D.C. punk, but important bands such as 9353, Half Japanese, and the Urban Verbs get a short shrift. The reader cannot help but notice that Andersen's attention to Dischord must reflect the label's eventual importance in punk activism, an unmistakable teleology scholars will find difficult to overlook.

A second shortcoming of *Dance of Days* is its failure to historicize its subject. The book opens with an autobiographical preface by Andersen. His discussion of coming of age in the 1970s sets the stage for punk as an effort to revive rock'n'roll and a potential community for misfits such as himself. This sort of context is largely missing, however, from the bulk of the work. The book's nuts-and-bolts approach means the narrative sometimes bogs down in names of bands, the dates they formed and disbanded, where they played and when, etc. Although potentially fascinating to punk fans, this approach, almost a week-by-week account, does not lend itself to the sort of critical analysis scholarly readers will expect. For instance, while Riot Grrrls were certainly motivated by their perceived marginalization within punk, the authors provide little perspective on the historical timing of their emergence. Though we learn some Riot Grrrls brought with them insights from women's studies courses, these contextualizing observations are few and far between and never receive explication. It is impossible to understand the full importance of Riot Grrrls without realizing they are products of mature second-wave feminism (the same phase of feminism that produced the women's studies courses from which they benefited), an identity politics movement whose members, "much like punk," struggled for definition and ownership of the movement(s) in the 1970s and 1980s.

On the other hand, the actual craft of telling the story of D.C. punk must be admired. A monumental amount of research allows D.C. punk rockers to tell their own story to a large degree. The authors skillfully weave in frequent quotes from interviews with an astounding

140 people. Additionally, the book includes wonderful images—“zines, photographs, album art, flyers” from the earliest days of D.C. punk through the 1990s that illustrate themes of D.C. punk: DIY, youth, gender, and localism. In the end, the reader must recognize that the authors’ goals in *Dance of Days* were not to delve into broader historiographical issues. Instead, this book serves two purposes. First, it is a deeply personal account that seems to serve a therapeutic function for its main author, Andersen. In the introduction and conclusion Andersen offers a self-reflexive vulnerability by sharing some of his personal demons and how punk activism helped him stay centered. Turning his years of research into a book was a cathartic event for him. Second, the book is an attempt at “Putting D.C. on the Map” (Dischord Records’ motto), staking a claim in punk rock history, and in this regard, it is quite successful. Andersen closes the work in true punk fashion. For readers who disagree with his methods or focus, he advises: “If you need to, I hope you’ll say ‘fuck you’ to me, to everyone in this book, to all our varied ideals and dreams. Find your own ideals, your own dreams” (p. 401).

In closing, how do these two books contribute to the historiography of Washington, D.C.? First and foremost, the two books go far in arguing for a level of local cultural vibrancy often overlooked in the District. Furthermore, the works attest to the ongoing impact of de facto segregation in D.C. Additionally, they inadvertently contribute to the ongoing debate about the city’s regional identity. Was (is) D.C. a southern or northern city? Is a “modernizing” narrative appropriate? Go-go helps make a case for D.C.’s ongoing southern identity: Stephenson and Lornell stress that go-go fans and performers draw heavily on their rural southern heritage, especially its Pentecostalism. Punk, on the other hand, supports a modernizing theme in recent years. While D.C. punks wanted to create their own form of the genre and had strong pride in their city, they also looked to punk centers in New York, London, and Los Angeles as they created their scene. Furthermore, many punk rockers were

transplants (an important fact not addressed in *Dance of Days*) and gained allegiance to the city for the first time only with punk. Taken together, then, these works buttress Carl Abbot’s assertion that Washington’s southernness “has been repeatedly undermined, redefined, and reinforced.” It has been “northernized, nationalized, and internationalized,” but this process has not erased regional identity.[4]

#### Notes

[1]. The best-known website is “Take Me Out to the Go-Go” at <http://www.tmottgogo.com/>.

[2]. There is still some debate about whether punk originated in England or the United States. In the 1980s, scholars and journalists often cited British origins. See, for instance, Tricia Henry, “Punk and Avant-Garde Art,” *Journal of Popular Culture* 17 (Spring 1984): pp. 30-36. This was due largely to the higher visibility of British punk during the late 1970s, beginning with the media frenzy surrounding the Sex Pistols. More recent writers trace the beginnings of punk in the United States. See, for instance, Legs McNeil and Gillian McCain, *Please Kill Me: The Uncensored Oral History of Punk* (New York: Penguin, 1997). My own research, done for my current dissertation, “We Accept You, One of Us: Punk Rock, Community, and Individualism in an Uncertain Era, 1974-1985,” supports the notion of the American origins of punk rock.

[3]. The Bad Brains fused punk’s long-standing emphasis on DIY with advice from an odd source for punk rockers, a 1930s self-help book for businessmen with the central message of “success through a Positive Mental Attitude.” See Napoleon Hill, *Think and Grow Rich* (1937; new and (New York: Hawthorn Books, rev. ed., 1966); and, Napoleon Hill and W. Clement Stone, *Success through a Positive Mental Attitude* (Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice-Hall, 1960).

[4]. Carl Abbot, *Political Terrain: Washington, D.C., from Tidewater Town to Global Metropolis* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1999), pp. 22-24.

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