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THOMAS SAYERS ELLIS

Excerpts from **CRANK SHAPED NOTES**



GOGO is a nonstop, vernacular dance music unique to Washington, D.C., and the Pocket is the percussive conversation between or beneath GoGo grooves and songs. This series of percussive, lyric comments takes a part of its title from the term “To Crank” or “Cranking” used by the GoGo community to describe a live show with the most locked pockets in it. The goal of the Pocket is Home Rule and the goal of Crank is Statehood, and GoGo’s local, national anthem is “Bustin’ Loose,” Chuck Brown’s classic call for the Bridge. In a city as Capital as Washington, these crank-shaped notes attempt to establish a percussive, folk logic for struggling D.C. residents, the Wind Me Ups, who do the real living and dying in our Nation’s Capital.

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Excerpts from

Crank Shaped Notes

Money burns the pocket, pocket hurts.

Jean Toomer

I DIDN’T TELL ANYONE. I just started practicing, rolling and hitting the three round rototoms, in my room; never mind how I got them and how much they cost. I covered them with towels and thin blankets to keep the noise down. It was important—I knew then to get my arms in order, to get free. I already had karate and drawing in me. I loved the discipline and form of tae kwon do and I loved to sketch. The real work of training my wrists would, hopefully, come later, as would learning the rudiments, accents and strokes. I could tell the difference, by sight and ear, between those who had drama in their style of play and those who had grace. I wanted both, to build the bridge (hear the debris) and cross it.

*GoGo Rally Against
Police Brutality,
TSE 2007*



*Downtown Has Its Head in
a Bucket, TSE 2009*



Washington's famous humidity is not a result of the city being built on a swamp. The sweltering tension comes from the "hot chopped bar-b-que" between local and federal interests. They eat on a hill. We beat on a river.



The word "rototom," looks like a set of rototoms, so much so that you can damn near twist the vowels and tune them into three different sounds, three different insistent accents from a plastic *o*. Now you, now you, now you know.



Dear Person-in-the-Pocket photographer, if your lens is longer than a cowbell, please, either leave it in your car or close your eyes when shooting. Intimacy is as percussive as percussion is intimate. Get close, camera like a stick in your hand, close.



So what if you can't read "their" music in "their" way; they can't play "your" pocket in "your" way. Everyone is illiterate when they are away from home but literate inside of themselves. Music comes from within. It is not an external act of dictation. It is not a system of signs and symbols. Your body is a band and either you believe in the organic orchestra that is within you or you don't, and if you don't, then get out of the way, because you will never GoGo anywhere that really matters.



I'd rather be a cowbell player addicted to the hardest drink at the bar than a set list-dependent Grown and Sexy band. Get those cheat sheets off the stage so the lead talker can work his vocal bottle of two sheets to the wind.



You know "the pocket" is all about community, a family discussion of percussion. That is why you never see the big congas without their juniors, the seeds they got from having their skins hit.



By the time I see the picture through the viewfinder, I've missed the photo-gogo-graphic moment, and by the time you grab your boys, hold up a peace sign and pose, what was left of the photo-gogo-graphic moment has weakened even more. A good photograph should meet or beat your feet to the photo-gogo-graphic beat!



I miss the days when the Hammond B3 was used to foreshadow a groove, the easing before entering, like a literary device. The pocket used to contain so much foreplay and the grooves were structured like lovemaking—touch, taste, togetherness. Your organ did not orgasm without a Leslie.



A percussive way of sense is not a rhythmic way of sense but a rhythmic way of sense can be a vocal way of sense when the humid wind cries Weansie.



GoGo does not have its "own words" except for the term "GoGo," and therefore can only be defined in unrecognizable utterances. A truly percussive definition would break the mind of the definer and the mouth of the reader. Such a local spell has yet to be spelled, alphabetically nationally.



I like to start the photo shoot from behind the drummer where the heart begins. That's how you catch moments like the Junk Yard Band prayer huddle, and how you know the real people in the socket, the Pock-Cranks, cannot be broken. Their work is a form of hornless, curved-bridge worship.



The loudest part of GoGo may be the beat, but the loudest beat in any GoGo pocket is still poverty.



The Black Hole (which includes the entire biblical behavior of the cosmos, including percussive weightlessness) was violent long before the birth of GoGo. This is what the science of bodies in motion teaches.



There is nothing or no one in the GoGo community simultaneously more Old School and more New School than the drum. It attends every body because its instructor, the human heart, is All School.



What a groove feels like: A neck so sensitive it demands choke. Good itch-scratching, back and forth, like a hardness only flow can stroke.



I lost my rototoms and timbales to college, so now my instrument is writing, and I do it by twisting the rhythm in my tuned eyes and by tuning the listening in my focused ears. I never have to be in just one band ever again. These days I use my art-sense to play for everyone, to dodge the sentence of singularity.



The “flashy stuff” (like extra arm movements and spinning in circles, etc. while playing the congas) is just like camera flash, and truly only necessary when there is not enough available light or talent or when the lens is too slow to handle the amount of darkness onstage. Most of the stuff we attribute to skill is, perhaps, really just an expression of physical style. The real purpose of flash and flashiness, for some, may not be to illuminate but to evaporate.



William “JuJu” House plays with his whole torso, with unlimited experience, like he is bringing sculpture to life, and that is why his arms are always in control of his content, always in control of his form. It’s Olympic to watch him, especially when he knows that you are watching him. His body competes with the living myth of itself, not with rumors.



Repeat after me: Today is the day I stop using the camera to see the way I already see and the way they see me, and today is the day I stop using GoGo to hear the way I already hear and the way they hear me. Them no longer posses me, my inner sense, in a total groove.



Walk the streets of D.C., your home, the same way you perform—like everyone in the audience knows you or like you have a birth-dirt connection to everyone and everything in the city: past, present, and future—and like the very act of beat-breathing, life itself, feet-beating, is the show you can’t wait to get to, a show full of continuance, atmospheric continuance, the air that keeps going.



The poetry of GoGo has nothing to do with words. In fact, it is limited by the packaging nature of words, the same way the old D.C. is limited by the packaging nature of marble. The poetry of GoGo can hurt any poem that dares to steal its home: up in the air, ready for hands. Now leasing the expensive spaces between blocks and between stanzas left by construction.



The drum is more African than baseball is American, which b’rer-leaps me to the subject of steroid use in Sports (Oops, ’cuse me butter fingers), I mean steroid use in GoGo. “Yes,” the old folks and pioneers say, “Test these youngins’ for the hardheaded, grooveless, growth hormone (HGGH), and get rid of them, that Bounce Beat, with Rototom Ritalin!”



Our home is unique because it is the seat, the seat of government. The term “Government” is just a political, manmade name for drumming. It should be called Drummer-ment. The drum lets the drummer sit in the seat but the drum, not the drummer, is responsible for its own proper council in the streets, a coalition. A good coalition is like a good seamstress, making sure every pocket has at least three pairs of talking hands in it.



There are people among us (from D.C. and not from D.C.) who believe that GoGo is some secret, tribal, survival, blood code that hates them and won't let them fully in da mixx. They feel attacked by it, especially by the cowbell, which hits the closest to their sense of arrival guilt, and dig this—their skin prefers the suckling sting of a West Potomac River mosquito to the sound of it.



The sky is clear tonight but I don't see you, not even your faint, local light—out on the town, the real town, eating in nice healthy restaurants, rolling up and down the avenues, signing autographs and enjoying your status, on the ground-sky, as a star. What kind of eclipse or city council black hole is preventing you from standing out in your own nebula, how will you continue as a groove in a galaxy that has a hard time accepting and dealing with nonredemptive, dark matter? It will take you light years to become even a Crew not to mention a cluster in the Constellation of the Sacred, Great Gold Tooth, so how will you shine?



There are things they use us for, reasons they need us to make money and things they say we are slaves to—like the rhythm. These are backwards expressions of us. They sound good but they are thin. Moments like this GoGo could use a few really good GoGo Abolitionists (and not just a journalist or poet or someone from the Upper Crest of N.W.) but a hard hitting GoGo Activist Party to guide the community toward counter-listening, counter-buying and counter-dancing, someone who will stand

on the steps of the District Building and march the facts, one of which is that (when properly pocketed) the rhythm is actually a very ritualistic and powerful slave to the people!



So they kept giving them things, small things, local things, things they never had, things like parks and murals and art openings even as it was becoming harder for them to hear themselves and feed themselves and clothe themselves and school themselves and health themselves, impossible in their own pockets, impossible and illegal, even as they were dying and being shut down and not reading and dancing at funerals and showing up for reunions, they kept giving them things, everything they needed except the state of equal human hood.



The most progressive act in the pocket is “the moose call,” the glide from one pitch to another a conga player makes by sliding his finger and thumb across the surface of the skin of the drum. This form of friction, of party talk, is a tension stabilizer as well as a warning to partying elephants and donkeys that a percussive glissando might be forming, like a tsunami, along the coasts of Constitution Avenue and Independence Avenue.



A crank note is the opposite of a car note.
A car note hurts the pocket.
A crank note locks it.



Sometimes I take photographs and post them and sometimes I write poems and publish them, but mostly I am just someone who believes in keeping-it-real, real creative, and someone who believes that GoGo culture should be expressed in multiple art forms that challenge and celebrate one another. It shouldn't matter that I used to play for Petworth Band and Show or that my first book of poems is called *The Maverick Room* or that I am the only person to ever have a solo exhibition of

GoGo-related photographs. I have done it all to be known as my-own-community-self and to de-decorate intelligence because wherever I go, everywhere I go, “there I go, there I go, there I go, I go” as one of GoGo’s talking shoes, its traveling drum major of progressive resistance.



You can’t really say you love GoGo if you don’t love the way it looks, the way it “really” looks, as much as you love the way it sounds. One of the big purposes of my GoGo photography is to (at least) try and emancipate GoGo from its recognition, piggyback dependency on images of the U.S. Capitol and other national, not local, monuments. There are people on “The Hill” trying to kill GoGo and the relationship between “locking it” and “local” is “unlocked” every time we, visually, fake going national. National must be taught to go us because we are before the monuments, not behind them.



Nowadays GoGo is the same two, loud words over and over again: Get Out!



The photographer’s dream GoGo would have the band playing on a glass stage, so that the photographer could capture the band from underneath. The monitors would each contain a large-format Polaroid camera with timers set to shoot every fifty-first cymbal crash. There would be cameras facing the audience attached to the back of all of the frontline microphones. The conga skins, like sensitive lenses, would focus when fingered and zoom when smacked, and the rototoms would f-stop when twisted. The new sound of the foot pedal would be the sound of a shutter, manually posing the groove, while the snare advanced every leg (on the floor) like the lever that cranks film through the club’s darkroom of nondigital bodies. All of which, of course, could be controlled from a board (in the head) similar to a PA System, small and nonthreatening though, and known as the Eye Socket.



A groove is built the same way the hip bone connects to the thigh bone and the thigh bone connects to the leg bone, so although Hip Hop may have the advantage of narrative, lyric content over GoGo—but Funk, the life force of the physical, human body working out to achieve its aim, is the advantage GoGo has over Hip Hop. The body houses everything, including God.



To destroy the content of crank, trace the shape of the black body with white chalk, then call it art.



What if the main ingredient in crank is race?



Crank say, They say crank can’t say that, can’t say its own shape. Shape say, Crank can, Crank can say, Crank can shape, and crank say Thanks. Thank you thanks for being crank-shaped. You’re welcome, Crank. Thanks say that, out in the open, hi-hat closed. You’re welcome.



Being “in the pocket” has just as much to do with “the pocket” being in you as you being in it. Inside the pocket you are valuable and you can feel the percussive worth of self, every level and layer, flowing into the from-of-you. The pocket inside you was always there, yearning to be heard into, long before you were ever filled or emptied by the touchlike reach of money.



I don’t have a dream but I do believe crank wakens us.



It wasn't until I was standing next to one of our drums along the Potomac raising and lowering a tambourine like a wreath around the neck of a poem that I finally and fully realized the truest possibility of the pocket and its contents. The pocket is a citizen of Change and the purest, percussive, definition of "lock it" is Love.



The citizens (young and old) who gifted and continue to gift D.C. a sound for the town, the sound of struggle, a cry we need and love, are only half of the bright miracle that is GoGo. You out there, the community audience, are equally responsible for this miracle because when GoGo began, souling and searching, you accepted the call to the floor. You didn't need a seat, Senate or House, to be recognized or heard, or to fill the room, Panorama or Maverick, with the birth of our most lasting vote: Us!



Soul Searcher, TSE 2012

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