

Cultural Chaos at Comiskey: Major League Baseball and Disco's Intersection in 1979

by

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Baseball is America's pastime. The crack of the bat, pop of the glove, and smell of the fresh-cut grass on a summer day have captivated fans for decades. Major League Baseball is a league and a sport that is deeply rooted in tradition. Between the foul lines can be considered a sacred space, where two teams play a game and leave it all on the field. But on July 12, 1979, chaos took over Chicago's Comiskey Park.

As stars Reggie Jackson, Johnny Bench, and Tom Seaver were breaking records on the baseball diamond, disco music dominated the American music landscape in the 1970s. Disco music topped the charts, and the Bee Gees, ABBA, and Donna Summer played across the country. Disco was more than just a genre of music, and the culture that surrounded disco swept the nation, too. *Saturday Night Fever* starring John Travolta debuted in 1977, showcasing the dancing and style of the disco era.¹ Disco balls, blow-dried hair, flashy clothes, and up-tempo music helped define American culture in the late 1970s. Despite its widespread popularity, many opposed the culture and style of music. These people gathered in Chicago at a Chicago White Sox game for a promotion coined "Disco Demolition Night." They were at the game not to celebrate disco but to demonstrate their disgust with the genre. Disco Demolition Night will forever be an infamous promotion in baseball history. The night's events showcase the modernization of professional sports, and the opposition to disco culture in the late 1970s.

In between games of a doubleheader, disco records were put in a box in center field. The records were blown up, exploding across the outfield.² Chaos ensued. Approximately seven thousand fans left their seats, storming the field, setting fires, climbing the foul poles, fist

¹ Peter Shapiro, *Turn the Beat Around: The Secret History of Disco*, 1st ed (New York: Faber and Faber, 2005), 202.

² Mike Huber, "July 12, 1979: Chicago's Disco Demolition Night Results in White Sox Loss and Forfeit," *Society for American Baseball Research* (blog), <https://sabr.org/gamesproj/game/july-12-1979-chicagos-disco-demolition-night-doubleheader-results-in-loss-and-forfeit/>.

fighting, and wreaking havoc on the field of play.³ The umpires declared the field unplayable, and the White Sox had to forfeit the game.⁴ It was a one-of-a-kind night in MLB history, and arguably the most infamous promotion in sports history.

The night was memorable for a number of reasons. In the decades since the chaos at Comiskey Park, Disco Demolition Night has been remembered in many ways: as a night of violent rioting, a promotion gone horribly wrong, and a symbolic end to the disco era. In a 30th anniversary video for MLB Network, narrator Bob Costas asked with a chuckle, “What’s the big deal? Records are meant to be broken.” Costas also referred to the promotion as a “harmless prank.”⁵ MLB Network described the events as a promotional fiasco, but Costas’s language certainly lightened the mood. On the flip side, Disco Demolition Night and its organizers were accused of organizing a racist and homophobic event to combat the rise of disco music and culture. In recent years, scholars and journalists have written about the racism and homophobia involved with blowing up disco records, and the events that took place that July evening in Chicago. There is a clear disparity in how Disco Demolition Night is remembered. Some dismiss it as a harmless prank, while others view the night’s events as racist and homophobic. Disco Demolition Night therefore incites varying opinions in the memories of baseball fans and those interested in and studying American culture in the late 1970s.

On Thursday, July 12, 1979, the visiting Detroit Tigers were scheduled to take on the Chicago White Sox in a two-night doubleheader.⁶ Comiskey Park in Chicago was set to host

³ Burton Alan Boxerman and Benita W. Boxerman, *Ebbets to Veeck to Busch: Eight Owners Who Shaped Baseball* (Jefferson, N.C.: McFarland & Co., 2003), 149.

⁴ Burton Alan Boxerman and Benita W. Boxerman, *Ebbets to Veeck to Busch: Eight Owners Who Shaped Baseball* (Jefferson, N.C.: McFarland & Co., 2003), 149.

⁵ Bob Costas, “MLB Network Remembers with Bob Costas: Disco Demolition Night.” MLB Network, 2009. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=JSVTJn_NMeU

⁶ The first game of the double-header was scheduled to make up for the game on May 2, 1979, which was postponed due to rain.

eighteen innings of American League Baseball. The home team White Sox were struggling, coming into the doubleheader with a 40-46 record in a season that hosted below-average crowds.⁷ Mike Veeck, the son of White Sox owner Bill Veeck and the team's director of promotions, was eager to fill seats. He reached out to Chicago rock disc jockey Steve Dahl, a young but very popular radio host in the Chicago market.⁸ In the 1970s, as disco was gaining popularity, radio stations were changing their format to play more disco music. Just a few months before Disco Demolition Night, Dahl had been fired from WDAI on Christmas Eve in 1978 as the station switched from a rock to a disco format.⁹ Dahl was then hired by WLUP to play rock music. He would constantly denounce disco music, artists, and fans on his new station.¹⁰ He built up a large following and started a group of disco critics called the Insane Coho Lips.¹¹ This devoted and sizeable audience led Mike Veeck to reach out to Dahl to see if he was interested in an anti-disco promotion. Dahl agreed and the promotion was scheduled for a Thursday evening in July.

Fans were admitted into both games for just ninety-eight cents if they brought a disco record to be demolished in center field between games. The price matched WLUP's station frequency, 97.9.¹² During the 1979 season, White Sox averaged just over sixteen thousand fans per game.¹³ That night, they were hoping for and told their security team to prepare for thirty

⁷ Sports Reference LLC. "1979 Chicago White Sox Schedule" Baseball-Reference.com - Major League Statistics and Information. <https://www.baseball-reference.com/teams/CHW/1979-schedule-scores.shtml>.

⁸ Peter Shapiro, *Turn the Beat Around: The Secret History of Disco*, 1st ed (New York: Faber and Faber, 2005), 232.

⁹ Alice Echols, *Hot Stuff: Disco and the Remaking of American Culture*, 1st ed (New York: W.W. Norton, 2010), 206.

¹⁰ Peter Shapiro, *Turn the Beat Around: The Secret History of Disco*, 1st ed (New York: Faber and Faber, 2005), 232.

¹¹ Peter Shapiro, *Turn the Beat Around: The Secret History of Disco*, 1st ed (New York: Faber and Faber, 2005), 233.

¹² Steve Dahl, Dave Hoekstra, and Paul Natkin, *Disco Demolition: The Night Disco Died*, First edition (Chicago, Illinois: Curbside Splendor Publishing, 2016), 19.

¹³ Sports Reference LLC. "1979 Chicago White Sox Schedule" Baseball-Reference.com - Major League Statistics and Information. <https://www.baseball-reference.com/teams/CHW/1979-schedule-scores.shtml>.

thousand fans.¹⁴ Some members of the security team laughed and thought it was funny that the organization was hoping for thirty thousand fans. The appeal to attend was to watch two baseball games and see an explosion of disco records. Drawing even more fans to the game was simultaneous marketing of the doubleheader as “teen night.” Chicago teenagers were still admitted at a discounted price, even if they didn’t bring a disco record, and were given a small gift upon entry.¹⁵

The morning of the promotion, White Sox owner Bill Veeck felt that something might be wrong and feared that the promotion could get out of hand.¹⁶ Veeck was right. As the first game of the doubleheader started, fans continued to fill the stands. Comiskey Park’s capacity was 44,492.¹⁷ But the promotion drew an overcapacity crowd, as a recorded 47,795 fans packed into the stadium for the first game.¹⁸ This was a season high, and on paper, the promotion appeared to be a great success, as the stadium was packed. But the crowd grew restless during the first game and began to throw disco records and golf balls onto the field, some in the direction of Tigers players.¹⁹ The game had to be stopped multiple times because of the crowd’s actions. Players and fans recalled that the smell of marijuana filled the air, and people moved around the stadium and

¹⁴ Steve Dahl, Dave Hoekstra, and Paul Natkin., *Disco Demolition: The Night Disco Died*, First edition (Chicago, Illinois: Curbside Splendor Publishing, 2016), 31.

¹⁵ Gillian Frank, “Discophobia: Antigay Prejudice and the 1979 Backlash against Disco,” *Journal of the History of Sexuality* 16, no. 2 (May 2007): 277

¹⁶ In fact, Bill Veeck had been hospitalized the morning of the promotion to receive treatment on his leg. Veeck lost his leg in World War II and battled health issues for the rest of his life. He was in the hospital for a good portion of the 1979 season and was less involved with the team. Worried about what could happen at the park, he checked himself out. Paul Dickson, *Bill Veeck: Baseball’s Greatest Maverick*, 1st U.S. ed (New York: Walker & Comp., 2012), 314.

¹⁷ Bill Veeck and Edward Linn, *Veeck as in Wreck: The Autobiography of Bill Veeck*, University of Chicago Press ed (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2001), 388.

¹⁸ Sports Reference LLC. "1979 Chicago White Sox Schedule" Baseball-Reference.com - Major League Statistics and Information. <https://www.baseball-reference.com/teams/CHW/1979-schedule-scores.shtml>.

¹⁹ Peter Shapiro, *Turn the Beat Around: The Secret History of Disco*, 1st ed (New York: Faber and Faber, 2005), 233, 244.

paid little attention to the game.²⁰ Nonetheless, the first game continued and ended in a 4-1 Detroit Tigers victory.²¹

Despite the over-capacity crowd, fans continued arriving at Comiskey Park. Gates were closed, and some regular attendees were turned away. Persistent fans climbed the gates and made their way into the stadium. By the time the demolition promotion was to begin before the second game, the size of the crowd had grown to more than fifty thousand fans inside the stadium. Reports say that fifteen thousand fans loitered outside of the stadium once they learned they could not gain entry.²²

It was then time for the main event. Steve Dahl took the field in a jeep, dressed in army combat gear. He had a microphone, leading the crowd in “disco sucks” chants that echoed outside of the stadium.²³ The crowd was amped up, and Dahl made his way to the outfield. With a crate of disco records in center field, Dahl pressed a button that shattered records and sent the shards across the outfield. The crowd roared and cheered. Steve Dahl began to leave the field, and the emotionally charged promotion appeared to be coming to an end. But the fans didn’t want the fun to end. Seven thousand fans then jumped over the fences and stormed the field, ultimately destroying it. They set fires in the bleachers and on the field, fought each other with fists, and climbed the foul poles.²⁴ The demolition promotion to attract fans to attend a doubleheader had gone horribly wrong.

²⁰ Dan Epstein, *Big Hair and Plastic Grass: A Funky Ride Through Baseball and America in the Swinging '70s*, 1st ed (New York: Thomas Dunne Books/St. Martin’s Press, 2010), 242.

²¹ Sports Reference LLC. "1979 Chicago White Sox Schedule" Baseball-Reference.com - Major League Statistics and Information. <https://www.baseball-reference.com/teams/CHW/1979-schedule-scores.shtml>.

²² Joseph G. Preston, *Major League Baseball in the 1970s: A Modern Game Emerges* (Jefferson, N.C.: McFarland, 2004), 232.

²³ Gillian Frank, “Discophobia: Antigay Prejudice and the 1979 Backlash against Disco,” *Journal of the History of Sexuality* 16, no. 2 (May 2007): 277.

²⁴ Joseph G. Preston, *Major League Baseball in the 1970s: A Modern Game Emerges* (Jefferson, N.C.: McFarland, 2004), 232.

There seemed to be no way to stop the mob that had invaded the playing field. Bill Veeck got on the microphone and pleaded with fans to return to their seats so the next game could begin. Fans didn't listen, and the scene on the field continued. White Sox play-by-play announcer Harry Caray even got on the microphone and sang his famous rendition of "Take Me Out to The Ballgame" that he would routinely sing during the seventh-inning stretch of home games throughout his career.²⁵ Caray's vocal cords were not enough to stop the thousands on the field, and it became apparent that the chaos was not going to stop. A SWAT team, police officers on horseback, and the fire department had to intervene to stop the chaotic fans.²⁶ Thirty-nine fans were arrested, and six fans had to be taken to the hospital.²⁷ It became clear that the field's conditions were not fit for a Major League Baseball game, and crew chief Dave Phillips decided the game wasn't going to be played.²⁸ Bill Veeck pleaded to the umpires to play the game and promised that the field would be okay once the fans returned to their seats.²⁹ Phillips and the other umpires resisted his entreaties, telling Veeck there was no way that the game could be played. Phillips recalled Veeck kicking a locker shut out of disgust and frustration, sending a booming sound across the locker room.³⁰

²⁵ Hall of Fame Broadcaster Harry Caray is famous for singing "Take Me Out to the Ballgame" during his career with the Chicago White Sox and Chicago Cubs. Bill Veeck was the one who encouraged Caray to sing to the crowd. Caray was initially hesitant because he said he couldn't sing. Veeck said that was the point, and Caray began leading the stadium in the song in 1976. A tradition that is remembered fondly by Chicago sports fans was encouraged by Bill Veeck. Caray's rendition of "Take Me Out To The Ballgame" during Disco Demolition Night was criticized by members of the media and said to have increased the violent actions on the field.

²⁶ Steve Dahl, Dave Hoekstra, and Paul Natkin., *Disco Demolition: The Night Disco Died*, First edition (Chicago, Illinois: Curbside Splendor Publishing, 2016), 31.

²⁷ Dan Epstein, *Big Hair and Plastic Grass: A Funky Ride Through Baseball and America in the Swinging '70s*, 1st ed (New York: Thomas Dunne Books/St. Martin's Press, 2010), 243.

²⁸ Dave Phillips and Rob Rains, *Center Field on Fire: An Umpire's Life with Pine Tar Bats, Spitballs, and Corked Personalities* (Chicago: Triumph Books, 2004), 54.

²⁹ Dave Phillips and Rob Rains, *Center Field on Fire: An Umpire's Life with Pine Tar Bats, Spitballs, and Corked Personalities* (Chicago: Triumph Books, 2004), 54.

³⁰ Dave Phillips and Rob Rains, *Center Field on Fire: An Umpire's Life with Pine Tar Bats, Spitballs, and Corked Personalities* (Chicago: Triumph Books, 2004), 54.

The next day, Bill Veeck and the White Sox Organization were blasted by the press. Veeck was accused of disgracing the sport.³¹ American League President Lee MacPhail decided the second game would be forfeited because the White Sox had been unable to provide playable field conditions. Bill Veeck accepted full responsibility and was sincere in his apologies.³² Although his son Mike was the one that organized the promotion, Bill took the blame himself. He said that he didn't do the necessary research before the promotion. Veeck should have looked more into Steve Dahl and the Insane Coho Lips. He said that he was truly sorry for what happened. There was an effort by the White Sox to separate the fans rioting on the field and the average baseball fan. Veeck said that the people that rioted on the field were not baseball fans.³³ Disco Demolition Night was a black eye for the White Sox, Bill Veeck, and Major League Baseball. Despite the absolute disaster of a night, the promotions at Comiskey Park didn't stop. Two nights after Disco Demolition Night, the White Sox hosted Irish Night. Twenty-four thousand fans enjoyed a 12-4 White Sox win, and according to the Chicago Tribune fans gleefully danced in the aisles.³⁴

Disco Demolition Night should be viewed as a transitional moment in 1970s disco and baseball culture. Learning about how the night came to be illustrates key aspects of baseball and disco culture in the 1970s. Disco Demolition Night showcased the modernization of baseball in the 1970s, a time when the game was drawing more viewers on television, player salaries were exploding, and a new wave of owners were buying Major League Baseball teams in the new era of free agency. Disco Demolition Night also demonstrated the widespread and hostile anti-disco sentiment evident by the end of the decade as the genre became increasingly associated with gay

³¹ Paul Dickson, *Bill Veeck: Baseball's Greatest Maverick*, 1st U.S. ed (New York: Walker & Comp., 2012), 316. "Veeck Asked for It," *Chicago Tribune (1963-1996)*, July 14, 1979.

³² Richard Dozer, "Veeck Protests Sox Forfeit, but Accepts Responsibility," *Chicago Tribune*. July 14, 1979.

³³ Richard Dozer, "Veeck Protests Sox Forfeit, but Accepts Responsibility," *Chicago Tribune*. July 14, 1979.

³⁴ Bob Logan, "Washington's 3 HRs Lead White Sox Explosion," *Chicago Tribune (1963-1996)*, July 15, 1979.

and minority communities. Disco Demolition Night wouldn't have happened in any other city, with any other team, at any other time. There was a perfect storm of events that allowed the promotion to be scheduled, and for it to go horribly wrong. Throughout Bill Veeck's career in baseball, he was always open and interested in trying new things to get fans excited about his teams. Veeck often invited chaos into the stadium, and that night it took over.

Bill Veeck's name, for right or wrong, will always be attached with Disco Demolition Night. Making sense of Disco Demolition Night requires a deeper understanding of Veeck as an MLB owner and as a person. Baseball was in Veeck's blood, and he spent his entire life in the sport. His father was the President of the Chicago Cubs, and Veeck spent much of his youth around the game.³⁵ At different points of his career, Veeck owned the Cleveland Indians, St. Louis Browns, and Chicago White Sox.³⁶ He won a World Series with the Indians in 1948.³⁷ He had a larger-than-life personality and was beloved by those he interacted with. He was inducted into the MLB Hall of Fame in 1991 for his many contributions to the modernization and growth of the sport.³⁸ Bill Veeck was a promotional genius, a common man, and a progressive and caring leader.

Disco Demolition Night was far from Veeck's first promotional stunt. He had been hosting outside-the-box promotions since the late 1940s, and throughout his career, he was always successful at drawing big crowds. He was great at selling baseball and attracting different types of people to come to the games. Veeck was infamous for sending a little person up to bat in

³⁵ Christopher Atwater, "A Passion for People: The Unconventional and Innovative Business Success of Bill Veeck," *Sport in Society* 23, no. 9 (September 1, 2020)

³⁶ Paul Dickson, *Bill Veeck: Baseball's Greatest Maverick*, 1st U.S. ed (New York: Walker & Comp., 2012), 3.

³⁷ After winning the World Series in 1948, Veeck's Indians got out to a poor start in the 1949 season. To show fans that the team had moved on from the championship and would improve their poor play on the field, Veeck staged a promotion where the team marched around the field with the World Series Champions banner, and then buried it. Paul Dickson, *Bill Veeck: Baseball's Greatest Maverick*, 1st U.S. ed (New York: Walker & Comp., 2012), 3.

³⁸ "Bill Veeck," Baseball Hall of Fame, accessed April 10, 2022, <https://baseballhall.org/hall-of-famers/veeck-bill>

1951. As the owner of the St. Louis Browns, Veeck sent 3-foot-7-inch Eddie Gaedel up to bat.³⁹ Gaedel drew a four-pitch walk and jogged down to first base.⁴⁰ However, Veeck relied on more than publicity stunts to draw in crowds. Veeck put a nursery in the outfield so mothers who were responsible for watching children could come to the ballpark and enjoy a game.⁴¹ He hosted a game early in the morning so people who during normal game times could come to the park; for this event, he directed the ushers to distribute breakfast foods.⁴² Veeck once said that a team can't win every game, but you can make every game entertaining. Veeck wanted all different types of people to come to games and was open to trying unconventional ideas to attract fans.

Veeck was known for his outlandish promotions, but he also had ideas that made the games a lot more enticing for fans and players. He was the first person to have an “exploding scoreboard.”⁴³ After the White Sox hit home runs, the scoreboard shot fireworks into the sky. This has become a norm at stadiums in many sports across the world. Veeck was the first to put players' last names on the back of their jerseys, making players more well-known to fans.⁴⁴ His outside-the-box mindset made him a successful owner. Veeck was a natural entertainer and truly cared about the fan experience while spending time at his ballparks. He worked to make baseball more accessible to everyone and invited all different kinds of people into his ballparks. Bill

³⁹ Bill Veeck and Edward Linn, *Veeck as in Wreck: The Autobiography of Bill Veeck*, University of Chicago Press ed (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2001), 15. Gaedel's plate appearance was not Veeck's only promotion with little people. He used them as beer vendors so they wouldn't block people's view of the game. This only lasted one game. Ray Sons, “Veeck a Leader for Civil Rights,” *Chicago Sun-Times*, February 28, 1991. Gaedel also made another promotional appearance for Veeck. Gaedel and a few other little people dressed in regimental Martian clothing and jumped out of a helicopter onto the field. Bill Veeck and Edward Linn, *Veeck as in Wreck: The Autobiography of Bill Veeck*, University of Chicago Press ed (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2001), 20.

⁴⁰ Bill Veeck and Edward Linn, *Veeck as in Wreck: The Autobiography of Bill Veeck*, University of Chicago Press ed (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2001), 19.

⁴¹ Bill Veeck and Edward Linn, *Veeck as in Wreck: The Autobiography of Bill Veeck*, University of Chicago Press ed (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2001), 126-127

⁴² John C. Hoffman, “Squirrel Night at the Brewers,” September 1943. Accessed via Baseball Hall of Fames archives department.

⁴³ Bill Veeck and Edward Linn, *Veeck as in Wreck: The Autobiography of Bill Veeck*, University of Chicago Press ed (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2001), 342.

⁴⁴ Burton Alan Boxerman and Benita W. Boxerman, *Ebbets to Veeck to Busch: Eight Owners Who Shaped Baseball* (Jefferson, N.C.: McFarland & Co., 2003), 149.

Veeck was known for outlandish stunts that were meant to draw bigger crowds to baseball games.

Despite his publicity stunts, Veeck presented himself as a down-to-earth guy. He spent time in bars discussing his teams with local residents and even talked to fans in the restroom.⁴⁵ Veeck responded to fan letters regarding the team and was receptive to criticism or others' ideas.⁴⁶ He believed fans were entitled to the smell of fresh-cut grass when watching a baseball game, showcasing his care for the fan experience and perspective.⁴⁷ In his later years, he was a regular in the bleacher seats at Chicago Cubs games. He watched games shirtless, drinking beer, and spending time as a fan.⁴⁸ It is difficult to imagine professional sports franchise owners selling a team today and spending the last few years of their life in bleacher seats with their shirts off. Veeck never lost sight of who he was as a person and maintained true to serving fans throughout his career as an owner.

While Veeck worked tirelessly to support the fans, he was also an incredibly caring owner for his players. Veeck was also essential in working to integrate baseball. When he owned the Indians in 1947, Veeck signed the first black player in American League history, Larry Doby.⁴⁹ Doby was the second black player signed in MLB history, after Jackie Robinson.⁵⁰ Doby and Veeck had a close friendship after Doby retired; they attended jazz shows together. Doby

⁴⁵ Bill Veeck and Edward Linn, *Veeck as in Wreck: The Autobiography of Bill Veeck*, University of Chicago Press ed (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2001), 342.

⁴⁶ Hank Greenburg, *Unforgettable Bill Veeck*. Undated. Accessed via Baseball Hall of Fame Research Department.

⁴⁷ In the 1970s, AstroTurf playing surfaces became the norm in Major League Baseball. Veeck opposed this and insisted on keeping a traditional grass field. Dan Epstein, *Big Hair and Plastic Grass: A Funky Ride Through Baseball and America in the Swinging '70s*, 1st ed (New York: Thomas Dunne Books/St. Martin's Press, 2010), 51.

⁴⁸ Richard Favarty, *The New York Times*, June 1982. Accessed via the Baseball Hall of Fame.

⁴⁹ Paul Dickson, *Bill Veeck: Baseball's Greatest Maverick*, 1st U.S. ed (New York: Walker & Comp., 2012), 127.

⁵⁰ Jackie Robinson was signed by the Brooklyn Dodgers, a National League Team. Doby was the second black player in Major League Baseball, but first to play in the American League. Ira Berkow, "When Baseball's Circus Came to Town," *New York Times*, October 20, 2005.

referred to Veeck as the “greatest humanitarian he had ever known.”⁵¹ Veeck also signed legendary Negro League pitcher Satchell Paige to a Major League contract in 1948.⁵² Veeck was also a caring owner. In 1951, an 18-year-old player, J.W. Porter, lost both his father and girlfriend in a tragic car accident. Veeck took the vulnerable player under his wing, and even let him stay at his house. Veeck would play catch with Porter and throw him batting practice at night.⁵³ When Porter needed someone after the deaths of his father and girlfriend, Veeck was there for the young player.

After owning the Indians and Browns, Veeck became the head of an ownership group that bought the Chicago White Sox in 1959.⁵⁴ The White Sox had great success on the field and with attendance. The team made it to the World Series in 1959 and broke attendance records in both 1959 and 1960.⁵⁵ Veeck was a popular owner but decided to sell the team in 1961 due to health issues. Veeck had suffered a serious leg injury in World War II, leading to an amputation after the war. He used a prosthetic leg, and underwent many surgeries throughout his life to maintain his ability to walk and to avoid infection.⁵⁶ Veeck didn’t let losing his leg hurt his spirits, as he would often remove his wooden leg and dance on his good leg.⁵⁷ He even had an ashtray carved into his wooden leg, so he made the most out of his situation.⁵⁸

Veeck spent the next fifteen years out of baseball, but his health improved throughout the 1960s and early 70s. He regained ownership of the White Sox in 1975, and his second stint with

⁵¹ Untitled. Undated. Accessed via Baseball Hall of Fame Research Department.

⁵² Paul Dickson, *Bill Veeck: Baseball’s Greatest Maverick*, 1st U.S. ed (New York: Walker & Comp., 2012), 45.

⁵³ Paul Dickson, *Bill Veeck: Baseball’s Greatest Maverick*, 1st U.S. ed (New York: Walker & Comp., 2012), 204.

⁵⁴ Joseph G. Preston, *Major League Baseball in the 1970s: A Modern Game Emerges* (Jefferson, N.C.: McFarland, 2004), 232.

⁵⁵ Paul Dickson, *Bill Veeck: Baseball’s Greatest Maverick*, 1st U.S. ed (New York: Walker & Comp., 2012), 235-236.

⁵⁶ Burton Alan Boxerman and Benita W. Boxerman, *Ebbets to Veeck to Busch: Eight Owners Who Shaped Baseball* (Jefferson, N.C.: McFarland & Co., 2003), 144

⁵⁷ Paul Dickson, “Bill Veeck: The Maverick Who Changed Baseball,” *American Heritage* 62, no. 1 (Summer 2017).

⁵⁸ Paul Dickson, “Bill Veeck: The Maverick Who Changed Baseball,” *American Heritage* 62, no. 1 (Summer 2017).

the organization was full of promotions. A friend of Veeck's joked that he had fifteen years of promotional ideas stored up and ready to go. On opening day in 1976, Veeck, manager Paul Richards, and business manager Rudie Schaffer marched around the field in Revolutionary War gear to honor the bicentennial.⁵⁹ In Veeck's first season back with the White Sox, attendance was up 21.8 percent despite winning eleven fewer games than the season before. Veeck hosted many nightly promotions that were a big hit with fans. A standout included band night, when fans were admitted for free if they brought a musical instrument; that evening, the fans in the ballpark played "Take Me Out to The Ballgame" together.⁶⁰ Veeck even invented a new sport for fans to play during games: beer case stacking. Three-man teams competed against each other on the field to see who could stack cases of beer the highest and the quickest. Beer would often fall and spray all over the contestants, which Veeck encouraged.⁶¹ Veeck also celebrated Chicago's diversity with many different ethnic nights.⁶² Every day there was something new for fans to enjoy and make them want to come back to Comiskey Park.

These promotions were important to draw fans to the games because the White Sox were a losing team. In Veeck's five seasons from 1976 to 1980, the White Sox finished with a winning percentage above .500 just once and never finished above third in the American League.⁶³ In the late 1970s, Major League Baseball was changing too. Throughout the 1970s, more games were being shown on television, which changed two major aspects of the game. First, fans could now

⁵⁹ Dan Epstein, *Big Hair and Plastic Grass: A Funky Ride Through Baseball and America in the Swinging '70s*, 1st ed (New York: Thomas Dunne Books/St. Martin's Press, 2010), 186.

⁶⁰ Bill Veeck and Edward Linn, *Veeck as in Wreck: The Autobiography of Bill Veeck*, University of Chicago Press ed (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2001), 394.

⁶¹ Joseph G. Preston, *Major League Baseball in the 1970s: A Modern Game Emerges* (Jefferson, N.C.: McFarland, 2004), 232.

⁶² Dan Epstein, *Big Hair and Plastic Grass: A Funky Ride Through Baseball and America in the Swinging '70s*, 1st ed (New York: Thomas Dunne Books/St. Martin's Press, 2010), 240.

⁶³ Sports Reference LLC. "1979 Chicago White Sox Schedule" Baseball-Reference.com - Major League Statistics and Information. <https://www.baseball-reference.com/teams/CHW/1979-schedule-scores.shtml>. Finishing above .500 means the team has more wins than losses. In this era, only two teams from each league advanced to the playoffs.

consistently watch the games from home. If a team was struggling, fans could save their money and watch their team from their living rooms. The White Sox were not winning a lot of games, and fans usually don't support losing teams as well as they do winning teams. Veeck leaned on his promotional skills to attract fans and bring them back to the ballpark. Second, owners were making a lot more money from these growing television deals.⁶⁴ This made baseball a much better investment, and a new wave of wealthier people were more interested in purchasing teams.⁶⁵ In the 1970s, wealthy businessmen George Steinbrenner and Ted Turner purchased Major League Baseball teams.⁶⁶ These wealthier owners had more money to spend on free agents to improve their teams.⁶⁷ Baseball was changing, and its players were starting to make a lot more money than in previous years.⁶⁸ Veeck didn't have the capital to spend on free agents in comparison to Steinbrenner or Turner. In fact, Veeck hardly had any money to run his team. Veeck told the team's general manager Roland Hedmond, "Don't bother drawing up a budget. We don't have any money. We'll think of something."⁶⁹ Clearly, Veeck was out of place amongst the new age of wealthy owners in baseball's new era of free agency. He sold the team after the 1980 season to Jerry Reinsdorf and Eddie Einhorn.⁷⁰

Bill Veeck needed these promotions to attract fans, maintain his career commitment to entertainment, and keep his head above water financially. In addition to his lack of funds,

⁶⁴ Paul Dickson, *Bill Veeck: Baseball's Greatest Maverick*, 1st U.S. ed (New York: Walker & Comp., 2012), 313.

⁶⁵ Joseph G. Preston, *Major League Baseball in the 1970s: A Modern Game Emerges* (Jefferson, N.C.: McFarland, 2004), 209.

⁶⁶ Steinbrenner bought the New York Yankees in 1973, and Ted Turner bought the Atlanta Braves in 1976.

⁶⁷ Major League Baseball free agency began in 1976. The free agency era began after Curt Flood challenged his contract's reserve clauses after he was traded to the Philadelphia Phillies in 1969. Flood lost his court case, but it was a major step in the right direction towards players gaining the right to free agency. Bill Veeck testified on Flood's behalf. This was between Veeck's stints owning the White Sox, so he was not currently an MLB owner. This was much to the dismay of other owners and showcases Veeck's care for the players. He put people above money. Joseph G. Preston, *Major League Baseball in the 1970s: A Modern Game Emerges* (Jefferson, N.C.: McFarland, 2004), 13-21.

⁶⁸ John Schullian, "Generation Gap: End of Veeck Era," *Chicago Sun-Times*, August 24, 1980.

⁶⁹ Warren Corbett, "Bill Veeck," Society of American Baseball Research, <https://sabr.org/bioproj/person/bill-veeck/>.

⁷⁰ Joseph G. Preston, *Major League Baseball in the 1970s: A Modern Game Emerges* (Jefferson, N.C.: McFarland, 2004), 235.

Veeck's health began declining again. He was in and out of the hospital during the 1979 season, as his amputated leg caused him a lot of trouble.⁷¹ In part due to his unstable health, Veeck named his son Mike the White Sox's director of promotions. This meant that Bill Veeck was less involved in the day-to-day operation when Mike reached out to Steve Dahl to host Disco Demolition Night.

Historians have failed to appreciate how Disco Demolition Night fit into a longer history of promotions invented by Bill Veeck. Most scholars mention only in passing that Bill Veeck was the owner of the team and Mike Veeck's father. They do not consider his background in promotions, and his positive overall influence on baseball, making the game more accessible for everyone. Disco Demolition Night's origins begin to make more sense after understanding Veeck's history of promotional stunts, and financial situation in the current landscape of Major League Baseball. Combined with his poor health, and his less experienced son, Veeck's lack of research before the promotion is more understandable. Disco Demolition Night was very much a night that showcased baseball promotions, Bill Veeck's career, and the modernization of baseball due to free agency and lucrative television contracts. Nevertheless, Disco Demolition Night would not have descended into chaos without Steve Dahl and his followers' hate for disco music and culture in the late 1970s.

While Veeck struggled to field a competitive baseball team, disco music and style increasingly defined American culture. The era was flashy and the music was fast paced. Disco music was everywhere in the mid to late 1970s. The hit 1977 movie *Saturday Night Fever* featured the music and style of the disco era; the film's accompanying soundtrack, featuring

⁷¹ Paul Dickson, *Bill Veeck: Baseball's Greatest Maverick*, 1st U.S. ed (New York: Walker & Comp., 2012), 314.

songs by the Bee Gees, sold millions of copies and spawned several hit songs.⁷² The movie helped propel John Travolta's acting career and popularized disco style and music even further. While many idolized Travolta's character, others disliked his style and willingness to dance to the popular disco hits.

Many Americans hated disco music, culture, and how popular the genre and style had become. Disco was disliked for a few reasons. Some people simply disliked the style of music and preferred rock. But, as disco music became more popular, and radio stations were switching their format from rock to disco, fans of other genres felt left behind. Even bands and singers that had risen to the top playing rock music now released disco-style hits due to the genre's widespread popularity. Kiss and the Rolling Stones released disco songs, and the style of music was heard by even more people.⁷³ Even Frank Sinatra released disco songs in the late 70s, further contributing to the disco craze.⁷⁴ Rock bands pumping out disco songs speaks to the overall commercialization of the genre and culture in the late 1970s. Disco was everywhere and unavoidable. Even children's television show *Sesame Street* released two disco records that played during episodes.⁷⁵ Historians studying disco culture have argued that this

⁷² The Bee Gees wrote six songs of the seventeen disco songs used in the movie. The soundtrack climbed the charts and made the Bee Gees one of the most popular music groups of the late 1970s. Hit Bee Gees' songs *Stayin' Alive*, *How Deep is Your Love*, and *Night Fever* were written for the movie, and the *Saturday Night Fever* still contains one of the most successful soundtracks of all time. John Travolta played Tony Manero, a young Brooklyn man who spends his weekends dancing with girls in New York City's discotheques. Travolta dances wearing colorful clothes with big collars and a white three-piece suit during the movie. *How Deep is Your Love* reached gold status in December 1977. *Stayin' Alive* reached platinum in March 1978. *Night Fever* went platinum in May 1978.

Anthony Hogg, *The Development of Popular Music Function in Film: From the Birth of Rock 'n Roll to the Death of Disco*, Palgrave Studies in Audio-Visual Culture (Cham, Switzerland: Palgrave Macmillan, 2019), 124. Alice Echols, *Hot Stuff: Disco and the Remaking of American Culture*, 1st ed (New York: W.W. Norton, 2010), 167, 206.

⁷³ Peter Shapiro, *Turn the Beat Around: The Secret History of Disco*, 1st ed (New York: Faber and Faber, 2005), 229.

⁷⁴ Peter Shapiro, *Turn the Beat Around: The Secret History of Disco*, 1st ed (New York: Faber and Faber, 2005), 229.

⁷⁵ Peter Shapiro, *Turn the Beat Around: The Secret History of Disco*, 1st ed (New York: Faber and Faber, 2005), 228-229.

commercialization drove the quality of disco music down, making the genre significantly less popular by the 1980s.⁷⁶

A discussion of disco culture in the 1970s is incomplete without considering its roots and growth in minority and gay communities. Before Travolta danced to Bee Gees songs in 1977, disco music was written by predominantly black groups and became popular in the early 1970s. Groups like KC and the Sunshine Band, Chic, and Kool & The Gang defined early disco music. The genre was especially popular in black and Latino communities, where hit songs were played in nightclubs to large crowds. Disco music was also a staple in gay bars and nightclubs, making the genre popular in the gay community in the early 1970s.⁷⁷ Before disco became the number one music genre at the end of the decade, it was black, Latino, and gay communities who popularized it. Some white Americans simply looked at disco as “black music,” and disliked it only because of its popularity in black communities.⁷⁸ Its popularity in gay communities also made the genre and culture susceptible to homophobic attacks. Disco would not have swept the country in the late 70s if it wasn’t for the growth and support from black and gay communities earlier in the decade.⁷⁹

People disliked disco for several reasons at its peak in the mid to late 1970s. With a lot of people opposing the music and the groups with which it was associated, Steve Dahl became both an organizer and face of the anti-disco sentiment. Before Dahl was in center field blowing up records at Comiskey Park, he was a 23-year-old disc jockey for Chicago rock station WDAI in 1978. Dahl’s shows produced great ratings, and he was one of the highest-paid morning radio

⁷⁶ Peter Shapiro, *Turn the Beat Around: The Secret History of Disco*, 1st ed (New York: Faber and Faber, 2005), 228-229.

⁷⁷ Peter Shapiro, *Turn the Beat Around: The Secret History of Disco*, 1st ed (New York: Faber and Faber, 2005), 191.

⁷⁸ Peter Shapiro, *Turn the Beat Around: The Secret History of Disco*, 1st ed (New York: Faber and Faber, 2005), 150.

⁷⁹ Anthony Hogg, *The Development of Popular Music Function in Film: From the Birth of Rock 'n Roll to the Death of Disco*, Palgrave Studies in Audio-Visual Culture (Cham, Switzerland: Palgrave Macmillan, 2019), 124.

FM personalities in the country.⁸⁰ But as disco became more popular throughout that year, the station decided to switch to a disco format at the end of 1978. As a rock disc jockey, Dahl was terminated from the station on Christmas Eve.⁸¹ Dahl soon landed another radio job in Chicago with WLUP playing rock music. Now working for a competitor of his former station, he had a newfound hatred for disco music that he brought to the air on WLUP every morning. It is easy to understand why he would want to seek revenge against disco as a young disc jockey fired on, out of all days, Christmas Eve.

Each day, Dahl spent time trashing disco songs, singers, and its surrounding culture. He played snippets of disco songs and then would play an explosion sound effect over the music.⁸² Dahl said he didn't like disco music, but especially hated disco's surrounding culture.⁸³ Dahl parodied Rod Stewart's hit disco track, "Do Ya Think I'm Sexy?" with a song of his own titled, "Do You Think I'm Disco?"⁸⁴ Dahl changed the lyrics and sang the song as a character named Tony, who shared a name with Travolta's *Saturday Night Fever* character, Tony Manero. Dahl sang about spending hours blow-drying hair, wearing tight clothes, and dancing with girls wearing "sleazy" dresses.⁸⁵ Dahl said the song and its lyrics were based in humor, and just blew off steam about disco's popularity.⁸⁶ Not everyone found Dahl's song humorous. Sex and gender scholar Gillian Frank viewed Dahl's lyrics as a homophobic attack. Frank also wrote about

⁸⁰ Rogers Worthington, "Deejay Steve Dahl Hits FM Airwaves with the Rock of Humor: Dahl's Humor Is No Joke in FM Ratings War," *Chicago Tribune (1963-1996)*, May 3, 1978.

⁸¹ Steve Dahl, Dave Hoekstra and Paul Natkin, *Disco Demolition: The Night Disco Died*, First edition (Chicago, Illinois: Curbside Splendor Publishing, 2016), 84.

⁸² Gary Deeb, "Deejay Goes on Record: Disco Is a Disease: Deejay Dahl Unites Rockers in a Record-Breaking Antidisco Campaign," *Chicago Tribune (1963-1996)*, July 5, 1979.

⁸³ Gillian Frank, "Discophobia: Antigay Prejudice and the 1979 Backlash against Disco," *Journal of the History of Sexuality* 16, no. 2 (May 2007), 280.

⁸⁴ Stewart is another example of non-disco artists releasing popular disco style songs in the late 1970s. Steve Dahl, Dave Hoekstra and Paul Natkin., *Disco Demolition: The Night Disco Died*, First edition (Chicago, Illinois: Curbside Splendor Publishing, 2016), 16.

⁸⁵ Gillian Frank, "Discophobia: Antigay Prejudice and the 1979 Backlash against Disco," *Journal of the History of Sexuality* 16, no. 2 (May 2007), 294.

⁸⁶ Steve Dahl, Dave Hoekstra and Paul Natkin., *Disco Demolition: The Night Disco Died*, First edition (Chicago, Illinois: Curbside Splendor Publishing, 2016), 16.

Dahl's tendency to lisp the word disco on air.⁸⁷ Studies have shown the stereotype attached to lisping words and gay speech.⁸⁸ Dahl's language and antics have been accused of racism and homophobia, linking Disco Demolition Night to criticism too.

Dahl has refuted these claims over the years, saying he is worn out from defending himself for leading Disco Demolition Night. He said that his anti-disco campaign had nothing to do with race or sexual preferences, and it was just a group of people who didn't like a musical genre.⁸⁹ He has said that he wants people to view Disco Demolition Night through the lens of 1979, saying people attacking the night are engaging in "revisionist history."⁹⁰ Dahl believes people have misremembered the event, and taken what happened out of context. In 2016, Steve Dahl released a book with author Dave Hoekstra and photographer Paul Natkin. The book, *Disco Demolition Night: The Night Disco Died* is a collection of oral histories, containing unique perspectives and stories of the night. Dahl and Hoekstra said the book was written to set the record straight and tell what they consider the true story. Everyone interviewed in the book looks back at Disco Demolition Night with overall positive memories, except for Comiskey Park groundskeeper Roger Bossard.⁹¹ The book paints Dahl as a misunderstood figure, who became popular with an anti-disco schtick and ran with it. Hoekstra's interviews portray Dahl as a young kid who was passionate about restoring rock music and keeping it mainstream. While we will never know Steve Dahl's true intentions, and whether his hate for disco was real or a

⁸⁷ Alice Echols, *Hot Stuff: Disco and the Remaking of American Culture*, 1st ed (New York: W.W. Norton, 2010), 206.

⁸⁸ John Van Borsel and Anneleen Van de Putte, "Lisping and Male Homosexuality," *Archives of Sexual Behavior* 43, no. 6 (August 2014): 1159–63,

⁸⁹ Steve Dahl, Dave Hoekstra and Paul Natkin., *Disco Demolition: The Night Disco Died*, First edition (Chicago, Illinois: Curbside Splendor Publishing, 2016), 16.

⁹⁰ Steve Dahl, Dave Hoekstra, and Paul Natkin., *Disco Demolition: The Night Disco Died*, First edition (Chicago, Illinois: Curbside Splendor Publishing, 2016), 16.

⁹¹ Steve Dahl, Dave Hoekstra, and Paul Natkin., *Disco Demolition: The Night Disco Died*, First edition (Chicago, Illinois: Curbside Splendor Publishing, 2016), 174.

promotional shtick, his increasing popularity amongst Chicago rock fans in 1979 on WLUP was evident.

Despite Dahl's positivity looking back at Disco Demolition Night, his role in the anti-disco movement was clear. Right from the start of his tenure with WLUP in March 1979, Dahl organized an anti-disco army that he named the Insane Coho Lips.⁹² In just a few months, the Insane Coho Lips had seven thousand members. The group was comprised of people "dedicated to eliminating disco dystrophy in [their] lifetime."⁹³ Disco Demolition Night was not Dahl and the Insane Coho Lips' first anti-disco event. An article was published in the *Chicago Tribune* on July 5, 1979, exactly one week before Disco Demolition Night, outlining the group's origins and their activities. In early June, Dahl hosted an anti-disco event at a nightclub in Hanover Park, Illinois. The capacity of the club was one thousand, but four thousand people came. Dahl broke disco records over his head, and performed his parody song "Do You Think I'm Disco?" The remaining three thousand people loitered outside and threw bottles that broke a few windows. Police responded to what they described as a "riot situation."⁹⁴ Dahl also gave away tickets to a Village People concert, encouraging his followers to throw marshmallows at the "disco freaks."⁹⁵ Dahl described his army's hatred for disco as heavy and a bit scary⁹⁶. The article told readers about Disco Demolition Night and said that the Insane Coho Lips planned to invade Comiskey Park the following Thursday.⁹⁷

⁹² Peter Shapiro, *Turn the Beat Around: The Secret History of Disco*, 1st ed (New York: Faber and Faber, 2005), 233. Dahl created the name after the coho salmon, a fish placed in the Great Lakes to eliminate the lamprey eel, which was killing most of the Great Lakes' fish population.

⁹³ Rogers Worthington, "Deejay Steve Dahl Hits FM Airwaves with the Rock of Humor: Dahl's Humor Is No Joke in FM Ratings War," *Chicago Tribune (1963-1996)*, May 3, 1978.

⁹⁴ Rogers Worthington, "Deejay Steve Dahl Hits FM Airwaves with the Rock of Humor: Dahl's Humor Is No Joke in FM Ratings War," *Chicago Tribune (1963-1996)*, May 3, 1978.

⁹⁵ Village People released disco hit song *Y.M.C.A.* in 1978

⁹⁶ Rogers Worthington, "Deejay Steve Dahl Hits FM Airwaves with the Rock of Humor: Dahl's Humor Is No Joke in FM Ratings War," *Chicago Tribune (1963-1996)*, May 3, 1978.

⁹⁷ Rogers Worthington, "Deejay Steve Dahl Hits FM Airwaves with the Rock of Humor: Dahl's Humor Is No Joke in FM Ratings War," *Chicago Tribune (1963-1996)*, May 3, 1978.

Steve Dahl is an interesting and important character in Disco Demolition Night. Without him, there would have been no Disco Demolition Night or a riot on the field which resulted in the game's cancellation. . Dahl's firing from WDAI demonstrates the widespread popularity of disco at the perceived expense of the rock genre. Dahl's subsequent popularity and growth on WLUP showcased Chicago's rising anti-disco sentiment during the disco era. Finally, Dahl's on-air rhetoric at the very least raises questions about the homophobia and racism involved in the disco era. Therefore, Dahl is a figure who showcased and embodied all aspects of anti-disco culture.

The riot on the field during Disco Demolition Night may have been an accident, but it certainly wasn't a fluke. There is no simple answer to questions about why the promotion happened. In effect, it was the perfect storm of events and people at the exact right time. The White Sox were a mediocre baseball team who were struggling to attract fans in an era when it was harder to convince people to come to games. The mediocre team was owned by Bill Veeck, who had spent his entire career hosting outlandish promotions to attract fans to the games. The riot also occurred in a decade when a new genre of music rooted in minority and gay communities took over the music landscape. Bill Veeck owned a team in Chicago, the same city where Steve Dahl, a radio disc jockey, built an anti-disco army opposing this new genre and its surrounding culture. With Bill Veeck in poor health, his son Mike Veeck was named head of promotions. Mike reached out to Steve Dahl for an anti-disco promotion, and the rest is history. Disco Demolition Night wouldn't have happened in any other city, for any other team, in any other stadium, at any other time, under any other owner, or led by any other disc jockey.

How is Disco Demolition Night remembered? How should it be remembered? The answers to these questions depend on who you ask. More than four decades later, Disco

Demolition Night is most often remembered for its chaos and uniqueness. In some ways, Disco Demolition Night is celebrated with nostalgia for a different era in American history. Steve Dahl's helmet from that night is on display at the National Baseball Hall of Fame in Cooperstown, New York.⁹⁸ The Hall of Fame's mission is to "preserve the sport's history, honor excellence within the game and make a connection between the generations of people who enjoy baseball."⁹⁹ It is certainly an interesting piece of baseball history, but its place in the Baseball Hall of Fame is questionable. Costas and MLB Network portrayed the event as a promotion that went wrong but didn't consider the chaos an issue. The White Sox organization itself has capitalized on the event in marketing schemes. On June 13, 2019, the White Sox gave out t-shirts to the first ten thousand fans in the stadium for the 40th anniversary of the promotion to mark its historical nature.¹⁰⁰ The White Sox organization continues to profit from the infamy of Disco Demolition Night decades later.

Many were furious that the White Sox decided to give out t-shirts and honor the anniversary because of the anti-disco campaign's homophobic and racist roots. Journalists all over the country covered the 2019 giveaway and blasted the White Sox organization.¹⁰¹ Disco Demolition Night's alleged problematic intentions have been discussed in recent scholarship and popular work. Gillian Frank's 2007 journal article, "Discophobia: Antigay Prejudice and the 1979 Backlash against Disco" portrays Disco Demolition Night as a homophobic event where straight white people attacked disco's popularity in both popular and gay culture. Disco

⁹⁸ Cassidy Lent, email message to author, March 1, 2022.

⁹⁹ "Mission," Baseball Hall of Fame, accessed April 11, 2022, <https://baseballhall.org/support-the-hall/mission>

¹⁰⁰ Phil Rosenthal, "White Sox and Steve Dahl Defend Disco Demolition T-Shirt Giveaway amid Criticism: 'What Happened?'" *chicagotribune.com*, accessed April 7, 2022, <https://www.chicagotribune.com/sports/white-sox/ct-spt-white-sox-disco-demolition-t-shirt-controversy-20190612-story.html>.

¹⁰¹ Phil Rosenthal, "White Sox and Steve Dahl Defend Disco Demolition T-Shirt Giveaway amid Criticism: 'What Happened?'" *chicagotribune.com*, accessed April 7, 2022, <https://www.chicagotribune.com/sports/white-sox/ct-spt-white-sox-disco-demolition-t-shirt-controversy-20190612-story.html>.

Demolition Night was back in the news in 2020, after the release of the HBO Documentary, *The Bee Gees: How Can You Mend a Broken Heart*, that told the story of the Bee Gees, and their rise and fall during the disco era. In the film, Disco Demolition Night was depicted as a night that led to the demise of disco, and the disappearance of disco as fans knew it.¹⁰² The story is incredibly critical of Disco Demolition Night for its racist and homophobic roots.

Bob Costas' and Gillian Frank's contrasting views show how differently Disco Demolition Night is remembered. It is likely that the event held multiple meanings for different participants. Some fifty thousand people were in Comiskey Park that night. It is impossible to place them all in the same category as to why they attended the two-night doubleheader. A family of four could watch eighteen innings of baseball for just four dollars if they brought old disco records. People who preferred rock music could enjoy a baseball game and have fun chanting disco sucks. Racists and homophobes had the opportunity to wreak havoc on a culture that threatened them. Some people likely wanted to poke fun at the Bee Gees' high voices and John Travolta's dance moves and tight clothes. Others simply disliked the style of music because it was popular among black and gay people. Labeling them all as innocent or guilty is an oversimplification of a complicated event. Disco Demolition Night, and anti-disco culture absolutely had racist and homophobic roots and overtones, and these attitudes were an essential part of the story of the chaos on the field.¹⁰³ Nevertheless, defining the event as strictly a homophobic and racist demonstration isn't fair either.

¹⁰² Disco music had a steep decline after the summer of 1979. Going into 1980, disco music was much less popular.

¹⁰³ For more information on racism and homophobia in the disco era see: Peter Shapiro, *Turn the Beat Around: The Secret History of Disco*, 1st ed (New York: Faber and Faber, 2005), Alice Echols, *Hot Stuff: Disco and the Remaking of American Culture*, 1st ed (New York: W.W. Norton, 2010), Gillian Frank, "Discophobia: Antigay Prejudice and the 1979 Backlash against Disco," *Journal of the History of Sexuality* 16, no. 2 (May 2007).

Any analysis of Disco Demolition Night is incomplete without a fuller discussion of the role of Bill Veeck.¹⁰⁴ Considering the event through a wider lens than gender and sexuality reveals that Veeck's career of promotional stunts allowed and encouraged this night to happen. A fuller examination of the night's roots and events must include Bill Veeck. He wasn't just any owner, and the White Sox weren't just any team in the late 1970s. Scholarship that attaches Bill Veeck's name to racism but doesn't mention his background in promotions and the integration of baseball is missing an integral part of the story.¹⁰⁵ This comprehensive examination of Bill Veeck's role that night truly complicates how we should perceive it.

How should we remember Disco Demolition Night? In my view, the public spends too much time focusing on arguing against or defending it. When the story is told, parts are often left out depending on who is talking. There are so many layers to this story, and all are important in understanding how and why the promotion happened. It's complicated, and historians should embrace that fact when studying it. Lessons can be learned from the promotion, and it tells us a lot about culture in July of 1979. Disco Demolition Night has been remembered incompletely. Rather than focusing on whether the promotion should be celebrated or shamed, its importance lies in what it tells us about that moment in time.

The story of Disco Demolition Night contains fascinating characters who shed light on the 1970s disco era. The crowd who shattered disco records, started fires and fistfights, and engaged in general mayhem between the foul lines at Comiskey Park that July evening illustrated

¹⁰⁴ Gillian Frank's thesis and writing about homophobia in the disco era is an essential part of understanding the chaos of Disco Demolition Night. Frank views the promotion through a gender lens. My biggest critique of Frank and many others who harshly critique or attack Disco Demolition Night would be their omission of Bill Veeck. Frank Gillian Frank, "Discophobia: Antigay Prejudice and the 1979 Backlash against Disco," *Journal of the History of Sexuality* 16, no. 2 (May 2007), 298.

¹⁰⁵ Don't forget, Veeck is the same guy that Larry Doby called "the greatest humanitarian he'd ever met." Just because Veeck wasn't racist doesn't mean Disco Demolition Night can't be racist, but he isn't just Mike Veeck's dad either. Untitled. Undated. Accessed via the Baseball Hall of Fame Research Department.

the intersection of many facets of 1970s American culture. Disco Demolition Night is, in part, a story about an owner who did all he could to entertain fans. Veeck is an admirable figure with a storied career, who accomplished a great deal for baseball. He was a pioneer who brought African American stars like Larry Doby and Satchell Paige into Major League Baseball. He knew professional sports were more than just a game, but a show. He put entertainment first and greatly valued the fan experience. His struggles late in his career suggest that he was out of place in a game that was becoming increasingly modern, as the free agency era no longer allowed Veeck to compete financially. His promotional stunts were thus an effort to entertain and more importantly, remain part of the game. Veeck walked the line between fun and bedlam throughout his career, and that night the line was crossed. He invited a fun type of chaos into his ballparks each night, but that night the Insane Coho Lips took over.

Disco Demolition Night can be understood through the rise of disco. To understand its opposition, you must understand its growth and popularity. Black artists popularized a new style of music that defined a decade and shaped music forever. This genre became an outlet in the gay communities and provided them spaces to be themselves. On the flip side, Disco Demolition Night illustrated the sad realities of how cultural forms could be attacked when they were popular in minority and gay communities. The intersection of sport and music makes it a complicated event to study and draw conclusions about. Instead of deeming the promotion right or wrong, it is necessary to acknowledge and analyze the positive and negative aspects with their respective substories.

On the surface, Disco Demolition Night is a story that appears to be about seven thousand people storming a field and canceling a baseball game. But when further examined, it is about the modernization of professional sports, and the popularity and opposition of disco culture in

the 1970s. Disco Demolition Night can help us learn about so many things taking place in American culture. This paper discusses John Travolta, Jackie Robinson, television deals in professional sports, the Bee Gees, exploding scoreboards, Chicago radio stations, promotional stunts, music in gay nightclubs, prosthetic legs with ashtrays, *Sesame Street*, a 3-foot-7-inch professional baseball player, and Kool & The Gang. This list appears to be just a random assortment of people, places, and things. But when examined together they provide a more complete context and impetus for Disco Demolition Night's occurrence. one of the most infamous and misunderstood promotions in the history of sports.

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