

Area resident and Charleston River Dogs co-owner Michael Veeck is infamous in Major League Baseball circles for his role in planning "Disco Demolition," considered by many to be the worst promotional event in sports history. The son of legendary Chicago White Sox owner Bill Veeck, Michael Veeck joined with local disc jockey Steve Dahl in the summer of 1979 to offer fans admission to a doubleheader between the White Sox and the visiting Detroit Tigers for .98 cents and an unwanted disco record. Between games Dahl exploded the records in a large crate in center field at which point thousands of fans rushed the field and rioted until Chicago police regained control.

In the following excerpts, Veeck discusses his family's longstanding ties to professional baseball. He acknowledges that "Disco Demolition" ruined his career in Major League Baseball, but boasts that it succeeded in bringing the disco craze to an end. He also recalls the conversations and events that led to the ill-fated promotion. Veeck offered his comments in Kerry Taylor's "US History since 1945" class on November 17, 2008.

Clip 1 (veecks in baseball)

Michael Veeck: When Kerry called me and he said that he'd like me just to discuss Disco demolition, I said to him in almost 30 years of being sorry for this event, I've never been called about its place in history. But there's an interesting element to it as I started to think about it, was that overnight, it was a Thursday night and by Friday morning, and by Monday morning, every disco station in America shut down and became something else. They changed programming. So over the next few minutes I'm just going to tell you some funny stories about how to ruin your career if any of you are into that.

And it's true that my grandfather wrote for the old *Chicago American* newspaper and the Wrigley family were running the Cubs. And my grandfather wrote under the byline of Bill Bailey and every single day he devoted his column, and his life actually, to attacking the Wrigley family and how inept they were running the Cubs. Which if any of you are baseball fans, or unfortunate Cubs fans, you'll know continues to this day. One hundred years without a World Series win, they weren't any better back then.

And one day Mr. Wrigley called my grandfather up and he said, "if you're going to pound me in the newspaper like this, sir, I'd like you to come over here and run the Chicago Cubs," thinking of course, that he would back off it. And my grandfather said, "I'll be over in ten minutes." And he showed up and for the next fourteen years he ran the Chicago Cubs, with varying degrees of success. Back then of course it was only eight and eight, so he won a pennant three times and never won a World Series. He was a terrific operator and he spawned my father, who had no appreciable talents so he went to work for my grandfather when he was, you know, twelve years old, he worked in the box office, and he sold pop. He learned the business from the ground-up. He planted actually the ivy that still adorns the walls, the most famous horticultural display. He planted that because that was the only thing that he and Mr. Wrigley agreed on—that and their love for baseball. So in 1947, actually '46, my old man purchased, right after the war, he was a Marine, lost his leg in the Pacific, and he came back over and put together a group and he bought the Cleveland Indians. And after he was injured during the war he'd had this idea that because all the major league players were over fighting, that he could put together, from the old Negro leagues then, a team that would be the best in Major League Baseball. And of course, the barons of baseball blocked him. So knowing that he bought the Indians in '46, in '47

he signed Larry Doby, who was the first African American to play in the American League. And won a world championship in '48.

Now I tell you this history because it's oral history, it's a family history; it's no different than yours. We're proud, hopefully, of our lineage, but my dad devoted his life to making me miserable. He liked baseball so much that he had nine kids. Think about it [*laughter*]. And when the DH was introduced, my mom, she left town.

Clip 2 (veeck on the origins of Disco Demolition)

Veeck: We were from the "Just Say Yes Generation." I don't know what you guys are, I'm sure it's still the "Just Say Yes Age," but they probably don't call you that now. You can say that out loud man, we're all thinking it. So at three o'clock in the morning there's Jeff Schwartz, a record plugger and some radio guys, and we're all sitting around. And we thought "we drew 22,000 people for a dance contest. I bet if we invited everybody who hated this music to come out, we could burn the joint down." And at five o'clock we all went home. 1977 after the disco dance contest, sponsored by Coca Cola, it was as saccharine as it gets. Fast forward now, I'm walking down Michigan Avenue I hear that song and I'm thinking to myself, "man I remember something."

And the next day, Jeff Schwartz, the record plugger who had been there, calls me and he says, "turn on Steve Dahl on WLUP. He just blew up a disco record on the air." So I tune him in and sure enough he uses all the sounds effects and he's formed a group called the Insane Coho Lips. And they're dedicated to obliterating disco from the American scene. I call him up when he gets off the air and I said, "You want to do that live and in person at a ballpark?" And he said, "I don't know. I'm doing it at a shopping center this weekend and I don't know if it will draw." I said, "Well why don't you go to the shopping center, it is in Indiana. You know, nobody will miss it if you blow something up there." And he went to Indiana and he drew 3,000 people and he called me up on Tuesday and he said, "we drew 3,000 people for a shopping center, that's not very many." He said, "we need to push this thing." I said, "well let's do it on July 12, because I don't have a single ticket sold and I'm going be fired." And so we agreed to do it and we started to pump. Now Chicago has two huge stations: WLS, 50,000 watts and WCFL "The Voice of Labor," also 50,000 watts. And we were on WLUP a little 5,000 watt radio station in downtown Chicago that played nothing but classic rock and roll and a disc jockey named Steve Dahl who hated disco and we united. And we announced to everybody in Chicago that on July 12th, if they brought a disco record between games of a twi-night double-header, between the White Sox and Detroit, we'd put them in a dumpster with a stick of dynamite and blow them up [*laughter*].

Thank you. I want you to know that people love things—who knows better than you all—people love things that blow up! You can say all you want about how civilized we are, you blow something up and you can attract a crowd. It's just the way it is. So Steve Dahl every morning on the radio starts talking about how, "come out to Comiskey Park, between games, bring your disco record, we're gonna blow them up."