

1. MIKE AND BILL VEECK

Every good story has a point of conflict. Steve Dahl's career ascended after Disco Demolition. Mike Veeck's career crashed, and never really recovered.

Bill Veeck, Jr. took the blame for Disco Demolition.

The elder Veeck sold the White Sox two years after the event and spent the last summers of his life in the center field bleachers at Wrigley Field. Veeck died of cancer in 1986 at the age of seventy-one and was inducted into the Baseball Hall of Fame in 1991.

The first time I came into Comiskey was the last time I felt safe in this world," his son, Mike Veeck, said during a conversation on a rainy spring afternoon at U.S. Cellular Field in 2015. "I remember holding Dad's hand and seeing this beautiful green diamond in the midst of all this macadam. It seemed like he knew everybody in the world. Everybody said, 'Hi Bill!' It was the most wonderful thing."

Mike Veeck had a promising career in Major League Baseball until the night of the promotion.

"I'm the one who triggered it," Veeck said. "My old man did what a good leader does. He took the heat. For ten years it was very painful for me. Steve Dahl's career took off. I couldn't get a job in baseball. I was red hot with soccer clubs because they like riots, and every radio station in the world wanted me as a promo director. I went to hang drywall in Florida. I got divorced. I never wanted to hear the phone ring again.

"Why do you think I disappeared at the bottom of a bottle for ten years? I drank two bottles of VO a day, Extra Calvert was my favorite, not the Lord Calvert. My Dad was the only person in the ballpark who understood exactly how I felt. We weren't the greatest father and son, in terms of Ward Cleaver. But professional to professional there was nobody better, and he knew this was one that got away—from everybody. I know the event stung my Dad."

Actually, Veeck didn't even have the soccer crowd.

In the aftermath of the event, the late Chicago Sting soccer team owner Lee Stern said in the *Chicago Tribune*, "When I heard about the success of this Dahl guy and his anti-disco nights, we looked at the possibility of having him come to one of our games. But after seeing that weirdo on TV tonight, there's no way we'd do it now."

Veeck sat in the open air patio at U.S. Cellular Field as we talked. Members of the Cincinnati Reds were running laps. Yes, the Reds who beat the White Sox in the 1919 World Series, rigged by gamblers. The series is on record. It was worse than Disco Demolition.

“I never talk like this, you know this,” Veeck said. “I invented skyboxes. I was on fire in 1979. I was twenty-eight and every day was an idea. I never thought I would be judged on one promotion. These private party areas that are the background of sports marketing? They were invented here.” Bill Veeck, Jr.’s “Picnic Area” was created at Old Comiskey Park, across the street from the site of Disco Demolition. It became known as “The World’s Largest Saloon.”

“Every area of Old Comiskey that wasn’t being utilized, we turned into a money maker,” Veeck said. “It changed the way sports was marketed. Comiskey had the old Chicago Cardinals press box.” The forlorn Cardinals press box was along the third base line attached to the roof of the ball park.

Veeck nodded at the sky over the empty ball park and continued. “I looked up there one night when I was shooting fireworks and there was the press box in the reflection. You would go to the press box and get two cases of Stroh’s and a rib dinner. Dad was trying to sign (outfielder) Chester Lemon. He needed 70,000 dollars. I said, ‘We’re going to sell that Cardinals press box.’ He said, ‘What are we going to call it?’ They had ‘Owners Boxes’ in the great Astrodome. When I saw the reflections in the fireworks I said, ‘Let’s call it a skybox.’ There wasn’t even a bathroom in it, which is why you only got two cases of beer. My dad got 70,000 dollars in seventy-two hours. It was a great thing. He said, ‘It’s a terrible idea, Mike.’ I said, ‘Why is that? I created money out of nothing.’ He said, ‘It’s elitist.’ I didn’t see that.

I was doing something for my dad.”

Veeck sighed. Sometimes it’s difficult for Veeck to talk about his father. “People acted like Disco Demolition was the first besmirching of my dad’s career,” he continued. “Well, they don’t know much about the Veeck history, going back to Capone days. He testified for a character in Cleveland who buried the 1949 pennant in Cleveland and got murdered the next day.”

Later in life, Bill Veeck became the only Major League Baseball owner to testify on behalf of Curt Flood in the outfielder’s 1970 lawsuit against the organization.

His son said, “When you’re a legend, all of that goes away.”

M.C. Antil worked in the White Sox group sales department in the late 1970s. “The media was taking dead aim on the event,” Antil reflected. “Bill deflected all the blame and said, ‘This was mine.’ That stuck with me—his willingness to stand in front of media to shield Mike from it. It’s something that isn’t talked about. Bill didn’t have anything to do with Disco Demolition, he was trying to run a baseball team and Mike was running the business side of it.”

“That was real noble of Bill,” said WLUP-FM’s 1979 Promotion Director Dave Logan. “It is important that Mike Veeck is noted as someone who had the balls to do this. He got hosed.”

Mike Veeck did not listen to WLUP. He liked the wide range of pop, rock, and R&B on AM radio, a child of WLS and WCFL radio. "Somebody told me there was a guy blowing up disco records on the air," Veeck recalled. "So I couldn't get to the station fast enough. I'm scaling the Hancock building. I went to call on Dahl when he got off the air. I didn't have any idea it was going to draw. Dahl didn't know if it was going to draw. Four thousand people would be fine as far as I was concerned. We did Disco Night in 1977 and drew 20,000 people, and there were about twenty dance clubs from around town. That was the night the seeds of anti-disco or whatever you want to call it were sewn."

After the Disco Night game, Veeck ushered a group of White Sox front office staff to Miller's Pub, a favorite Loop watering hole of Bill Veeck. Schemes and dreams about music, baseball, and promotions lasted until 3:00 a.m.

"We said, 'Let's do a night for people who love rock 'n' roll and never thought about it again,'" Veeck recalled. "Jeff Schwartz (WLUP's General Sales Manager in 1979) and I were the ones who never let it die. I didn't have a relationship with Dahl but I worked a lot with Schwartz; he had a lot of product and a lot of records. Then Schwartz went to work for Heftel (WLUP). A little known fact is that Heftel hired me a few weeks before the event to do the sports on Dahl's show.

"I lost that gig, too."

Longtime Chicago sportscaster Les Grobstein replaced Mike Veeck. In May, 1979 WLS News Director Reed Pence asked Grobstein for an audition tape. "Reed said I had the inside track," Grobstein said. "I called back in June and he said they were getting close. Eventually he called back and said, 'We have our sportscaster.' I thought it was me. He said, 'Are you sitting down?'"

It was Mike Veeck.

Grobstein was incredulous. "I said, Mike Veeck knows as much about doing a sportscast as I know about owning a baseball team. Mike did a handful of shows. He never mentioned the Cubs or Bears training camp. All he did was a commercial for the White Sox. Then Disco Demolition happened and he disappeared." Grobstein finally debuted on Larry Lujack and Bob Sirott's shows in October 1979 and remained at WLS-AM until December 1989.

Jeff Schwartz had been at WLUP for a year by the time Disco Demolition rolled around. Schwartz is a native of the Albany Park neighborhood of Chicago, where he went to elementary school with Bob Sirott. During the mid-1980s, Schwartz was an advertising consultant of the now defunct Flipside Records and was the cartoon character "Mr. Cheap" in the chain's advertising campaign.

"We had the hottest station in town," Schwartz said in a summer 2015 interview in Los Angeles. At the time, he was Vice President of Strategic Corporate Marketing for Yahoo! Sports Radio. "I get a call from Mike Veeck. The team was struggling. We met at Yes Sir, Senator (the now defunct Barney's Market Place restaurant in the West Loop). I was a

big fan of reefer and a couple of other light substances. So I'm smoking a reefer on the way to the restaurant and Mike Veeck was there with (Bill Veeck's assistant and idea man) Rudie Schaffer's son David, who was head of security. They're drinking. I never drank but I was pretty stoned. They said, 'We gotta do a promotion together.' I really liked Mike and Schaffer's kid. We were having a nice steak dinner. True, and no disrespect to anybody, the exact words I said [were], 'You have the exploding scoreboard, right? And I've got Dahl in the morning blowing up disco records. Is there any way we could take that to the field as a promotion?' And I left the rest of the thinking up to them. Dahl and I did not have the greatest relationship.

"Dahl and I had as good a relationship as you could with Steve."

Sirott said, "I was well aware of Jeff's involvement with Disco Demolition. I think Jeff was stoned in the third grade. I remember he had one of the first head shops with the blue light in the neighborhood. He's always been someone who was into analyzing show business. When we were in grade school, maybe it was after Jack Parr left The Tonight Show and before Johnny Carson became host, they had guest hosts take over The Tonight Show. At recess Jeff would be holding court analyzing the pros and cons of how this person did as host of The Tonight Show. He was into show business."

But it was Mike Veeck who took the heat, as he continued to reminisce at U.S. Cellular Field.

"It was all my fault," Veeck said. "I knew there was going to be 35,000 people. That was the number I gave the police. The morning of the game I said to security, 'We're going to have 35,000.' They thought that was the funniest thing, when the club is averaging 21,000." (According to Major League Baseball, the average was 20,458.)

"The mistake came with Old Comiskey: portable ticket booths out front. Guys who are in their [mid-sixties] now are in portable ticket booths. The security guys call me and say the kids outside trying to get in [the park] are rattling the portable ticket booths. The old guys are worried and anxious. So we moved fifteen [security guards] from the field out there. Crowd control is a misnomer. You rely on the idea that the crowd never thinks as one. Our crowd was already stirred up. The place was packed. They see fifteen yellow jackets leave the field and this was one time they thought as one: 'That idiot Veeck moved security out, let's go on the field.' It was perfectly logical. It was my mistake.

"The next day the commissioner's office, the Bowie of Kuhn sends out a memo about 'no negative promotions' because it was anti-disco."

It took Veeck a decade to move in a positive direction.

In November 1989, he joined The Goldklang Group (including Marv Goldklang and actor Bill Murray) and in 1990 became team president of the Miami Miracle, helping relocate the team to Fort Myers, Florida, in 1992. Today the Goldklang Group owns and operates the minor league Charleston RiverDogs (Veeck is president, although he does not have ownership), the St. Paul Saints, and the collegiate baseball team Pittsfield

Suns. Veeck also has an interest in the Normal, Illinois CornBelters and the River City Rascals, outside of St. Louis and separate from the Goldklang group.

In 2005, Veeck wrote a book, *Fun is Good: How to Create Joy and Passion in Your Workplace & Career*. Wilmette, Illinois born Bill Murray contributed the blurb, "Fun should be the driving force behind most any decision."

Veeck arrived in Charleston in 1997, and staged "Bill Murray Night," "Drag Queen Night," and "Nobody Night," which insisted no fans were allowed to enter the padlocked ballpark, at Joseph P. Riley, Jr. Park. And now his son, Mike "Night Train" Veeck, named after the late Detroit Lions linebacker Dick "Night Train" Lane, is a White Sox executive in charge of fan engagement.

Veeck used to receive roughly twenty-five requests a year to stage Disco Demolition II. He consistently declined, but on July 19, 2014, after a RiverDogs game at Joseph P. Riley, Jr. Park, he blew up Justin Bieber and Miley Cyrus records on the field. Grainy footage of the original Disco Demolition was shown on the center field scoreboard. In a heartfelt speech after the game, Veeck thanked the sold out crowd of more than 6,000 fans for giving him a new start in life.

During the summer of 2015, Veeck reflected, "Disco Demolition made me great at what I did the rest of my life. Until then I really believed that you can control something. That taught me the greatest lesson. It made me relax and made me take chances. Control anything? I don't think so.

"In the late 1980s they had a twenty-five-year retrospective on rock 'n' roll. They used Disco Demolition to end the first half of this look back. I'm laying on a couch at a place I'm renting. I had my son Wednesday night and Saturday. Never missed a day. I had a sodie pop with my landlord. She was rough. Finally I looked around and said, 'Disco Demolition was a cultural event.'"

One sunny day in early May 2015, Omar Vizquel, coach of the Detroit Tigers and former White Sox shortstop, hailed a cab with his wife from their downtown hotel and headed to the Northwest Side to visit Paul Natkin. Vizquel wanted to see Natkin's photographs of Disco Demolition.

Vizquel played in the major leagues for twenty-four years but had seen nothing like this. "I'm interested in this from a historical point of view," Vizquel said, flipping through more than fifty black and white Disco Demolition photographs. "I've never heard of anything like this at a baseball game. I never heard of such a commotion where you bring your LP, throw it in a box and blow it up. Obviously the whole thing went crazy.

"I was twelve years old in 1979. I lived in Venezuela, but I didn't know about [Disco Demolition] until [2014] when I saw the ESPN special. I saw Paul [in the Commando Jeep], holding on and snapping pictures. I thought, 'How cool would it be if I can get ahold of this guy and he can show me some of the stuff he shot that day? He was

right in the middle of the action. So I called (White Sox photographer) Ron [Vesley] to help me find Paul.”

Vizquel played more games as shortstop than anyone in baseball history. He is an eclectic athlete in the manner of Cubs manager Joe Maddon and NBA Hall of Famers Phil Jackson and Kareem Abdul-Jabbar. Vizquel is not defined by a singular style. “I’ve always been curious,” he explained. “I ask my players to go to museums and galleries with me. They’re not interested. In August, they are doing a Dancing With Stars salsa contest for charity in Detroit. They are looking for players to participate in the event—all they have to do is dance with beautiful girls for two minutes. How many players do you think wrote their name down? One. So I had to write my name down.

“Salsa is more in my blood than disco. When I first heard disco in Venezuela I was eight years old. We saw the movies like Thank God It’s Friday with Donna Summer and even Grease with John Travolta. You could dance to the music. I like so many different things, baseball sometimes looks secondary. You like pictures, music, architectural work. Why do you have to buy a piece of furniture for 1,500 dollars when you can put it together yourself for 300 dollars? The process of getting there is even more exciting.”

Vizquel collects photographs and vintage cameras and plays drums. He draws and paints portraits with water colors, including a portrait of Tigers coach and former White Sox manager Gene Lamont.

A Seattle resident, Vizquel does not hear much disco in the Tigers’ clubhouse. “There’s lots of EDM (Electronic Dance Music),” said Vizquel, whose walk-up music included Led Zeppelin’s “Black Dog” and “The Immigrant Song” to honor his Venezuelan roots. “We play ‘Fireball’ by Pit Bull when we win. Every team I know has a song they play after they win. Last year was (DJ Snake’s) ‘Turn Down For What.’ As far as disco coming back, that’s weird. I listen to all kinds of music, but mostly rock ‘n’ roll. When I was a kid I loved KISS. They play a little bit of ‘Detroit Rock City’ in Detroit and that’s kind of cool.

“But to see what happened on that day of Disco Demolition? People were ripping shirts off each other. Short shorts on the field. Guys burning stuff in the outfield. They stole home plate. I’ve seen fights and burning stuff in the stands in Venezuela, but never anything like this on that night in Chicago.”

Excerpted from “[Disco Demolition: The Night Disco Died](#),” by Steve Dahl with Dave Hoekstra and Paul Natkin, with a foreword by Bob Odenkirk.