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‘Disco Demolition’ Exhibit Blasts into Town

New exhibit at Elmhurst History Museum chronicles the Night Disco Died

ELMHURST, Ill. – The date July 12, 1979 may not immediately ring a bell for every Chicagoan, but for those who spent that summer wearing black band tee shirts, listening to rock music on FM radio, and sporting long, shaggy hairstyles, it stands out as a memorable moment from the scrapbook of their young adult lives—it was the night that disco died.

More than a few area residents were at Comiskey Park that night—possibly to see a baseball game—but more than likely to attend Teen Night. The event was envisioned as a hook to fill empty stadium seats in the middle of a dismal White Sox season and promote WLUP’s new deejay, Steve Dahl. Dahl was fostering an anti-disco campaign on Chicago air waves after being fired from a local radio station that switched to a disco format. Fueled by a 98 cent ticket price for fans who brought disco records to blow up between games of the doubleheader, the event quickly careened out of control after 50,000+ attendees packed the park and its environs.

In the wake of the explosion, unruly fans took over the field causing baseball fans to shake their heads in dismay and the White Sox to eventually forfeit the second game to the Detroit Tigers. After the smoke cleared, it is said that disco met its demise and Disco Demolition (as it eventually became known) remains one of Chicago’s most infamous baseball history moments. The verdict is still out on how and why the promotion affected Chicago’s baseball and music history, but one thing’s for sure: it’s 2017, and people are still talking about it.

The **Elmhurst History Museum** presents a new exhibit that examines the story of that July night entitled “**Disco Demolition: The Night Disco Died,**” which opens June 9 through October 8, 2017. The exhibit was inspired by a book with the same title by Steve Dahl with journalist Dave Hoekstra and photos by Paul Natkin, and exhibit content is written by Hoekstra. Through video footage, eclectic artifacts, interviews, memorabilia, and Natkin’s photographs, “Disco Demolition” explores the cultural and social context, the music, and the promotion that launched Dahl’s career to new heights and propelled disco down the drain. The exhibit’s media sponsor is The Loop radio station WLUP 97.9FM, which is celebrating the station’s 40th anniversary this year.

Book provides inspiration for curator

Elmhurst History Museum’s curator of exhibits, Lance Tawzer, worked with Hoekstra and Natkin on a prior exhibit of Natkin’s iconic rock photographs. The publication of their book in 2016 reignited his curiosity about Disco Demolition. “I’ve heard a lot of discussion over the years about Disco Demolition, and the book resurrected a lot of the lore and personal accounts about the subject,” said Tawzer. “It made me wonder, what is it about this story that still has people talking about it 38 years later? Digging a little deeper into the details got my wheels turning.”

Tawzer added that working with Hoekstra and Natkin again was appealing. “Dave has a thought-provoking, down-to-earth, and humorous way of telling a story, and I think his writing style resonates with today’s audiences. I was well aware of Natkin’s extensive photo archive, too, as he was one of just a few photographers at Comiskey that night. It got me thinking that this could make a compelling exhibit, add more detail to the story by incorporating artifacts and memorabilia, and maybe put some of the lingering controversy to rest.”

Tawzer acknowledges that there has been much misinformation out there about Disco Demolition over the years, and that the story takes on different hues depending on who is telling it. “There have been numerous articles, a documentary, books, and even a ‘Drunk History’ program on the subject. Dahl himself admits to being tired of discussing the subject,” the curator added. “But what I thought we could accomplish was to fill in some of the gaps and put aside some of the misconceptions through the exhibit. And most of all, to tell an engaging, modern history story that Chicagoans would want to experience.”

Exhibit Highlights

To that end, Tawzer has gathered the Natkin photos alongside some intriguing loaned artifacts to illustrate the storyline, including:

- A letter of apology from White Sox owner Bill Veeck to a disappointed baseball fan and a Comiskey seat signed by Veeck;
- Personal items from Dahl including his trademark Hawaiian shirt, “Do You Think I’m Disco” record, Insane Coho Lips fan club membership card, and other memorabilia;
- A one-of-a-kind Hamer guitar on loan from Cheap Trick’s lead guitarist and songwriter Rick Nielsen;
- The game jersey worn by White Sox catcher Mike Colbern on Disco Demolition Night.

These items and many others will be incorporated into the exhibit experience, which Tawzer has designed to be highly interactive and engaging. Planned features include a blow-by-blow timeline of the event, a music trivia quiz, disco vs. rock culture vignettes showcasing clothing from the era, a collection of rock concert tee shirts, video kiosks with footage from the “Disco Demolition” documentary, and more.

Disco Demolition Programs

The Elmhurst History Museum staff has planned a summer filled with related programs to enhance the “Disco Demolition” exhibit’s learning experience:

June 25: Disco Explosion Community Event, 3-6 p.m., FREE—The Museum celebrates the exhibit opening and everything ‘70s with a little disco, and a little rock ‘n’ roll. Grammy-winning rocker and songwriter Jim Peterik (Survivor, Ides of March) will perform some of his hits with School of Rock, and The Shagadelics band represents disco with funky gems from the era. Legendary White Sox organist Nancy Faust will perform ball park favorites, and Hoekstra and Natkin will be on hand to sign books. **Location:** Elmhurst History Museum grounds.

July 12: Block-to-Block Dance Party, 5:30-8:30 p.m., FREE—July 12 marks the 38th anniversary of Disco Demolition Night, and Elmhurst City Centre is celebrating by traveling back in time with a live deejay and disco dancing by the fountain. Local dance troupes will provide inspiration with dance demonstrations. **Location:** Elmhurst City Centre, York and Schiller St. in downtown Elmhurst.

July 23: “Chicago in the 1970s” Panel Discussion, 2 p.m.—Dave Hoekstra moderates a lively discussion on Chicago’s music, sports and radio scene in the ‘70s. Special guests include: *Mike Veeck*, former White Sox promotions manager; *Mitch Michaels*, WLUP deejay; *Jeff Schwartz*, former WLUP general sales manager; *Jim Rittenberg*, Faces dance club general manager; and *Bob Chicoine*, a Comiskey Park vendor on Disco Demolition Night. **Location:** Elmhurst History Museum Education Center. **Reservations required:** elmhursthhistory.org (Adult Programs section).

August 2: 40th Anniversary Screening of *Saturday Night Fever*—Classic Cinemas and Elmhurst History Museum present the 1977 cult classic, *Saturday Night Fever*, with digitally remastered picture and sound. Professor and film historian *Peter Hawley* of Tribeca Flashpoint College and Fandango’s managing editor *Erik Davis* will introduce the film that brought disco out of the clubs and to the masses, followed by a brief Q&A session. **Location:** York Theatre, 150 N. York St., Elmhurst **Tickets:** \$6.50, available at theatre box office.

In addition, monthly family programs explore exhibit-related themes through learning and craft activities for kids age 5-12 with a caregiver. For more details and registration information on these and other programs, go to www.elmhursthhistory.org.

This summer, take a trip back to 1979 to explore the sports, music, culture, and style that collided on a warm summer night when a little-known deejay rose to fame—and disco hit the dirt. “***Disco Demolition: The Night Disco Died***” will be on display from June 9 through October 8, 2017 at the Elmhurst History Museum, located at 120 E. Park Ave. in downtown Elmhurst. Exhibition hours are: Sunday, Tuesday through Friday from 1 to 5 p.m. and Saturday, 10 a.m. to 5 p.m. General admission is free, and limited free parking is available. For the latest exhibit and program information, please visit www.elmhursthhistory.org or call (630) 833-1457.

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The Elmhurst History Museum is a department of the City of Elmhurst supported by the Elmhurst Heritage Foundation. The Museum is located at 120 E. Park Ave. in downtown Elmhurst. General admission is free with fees for some programs. For more information, call 630-833-1457 or www.elmhursthhistory.org.

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SHORT EXHIBIT BLURB:

June 9-October 8, 2017

Disco Demolition: The Night Disco Died

It started as an off-beat baseball promotion called “Teen Night” designed to sell tickets at Comiskey Park and gain listeners for a fledgling FM radio station—until it devolved into one of the most infamous events in Chicago’s rich baseball history. Disco Demolition Night exploded on July 12, 1979 in the middle of a White Sox doubleheader and it remains one of the city’s most controversial sports history moments. Inspired by the book by Steve Dahl with journalist Dave Hoekstra and photographer Paul Natkin, the exhibit uses video footage, artifacts, interviews, memorabilia, and photographs by Natkin to examine the culture, the music, and the conflict that came to a head on a warm summer night when the wheels came off a promotion—and disco met its demise. *Media sponsor: WLUP-FM*

Location: Elmhurst History Museum, 120 E. Park Ave., Elmhurst

Hours: Sun., Tues.–Fri., 1-5 p.m.; Sat. 10 a.m.–5 p.m.

Admission: FREE

More info: elmhursthistory.org or 630-833-1457