

Culture wars and 1979 disco demolition night

By Megan VanGorder

The culture wars in the United States are stronger than ever. The gaping partisan divide only continues to widen in a contemporary political and media environment characterized by intensely partisan information silos. High school social studies teachers likely resonate with the imperative to teach hard history but to do so with the careful construction so as not to appear “woke” or otherwise be accused of indoctrinating students with one side of the political debate or the other. James Davidson Hunter’s 1991 study produced the inaugural scholarly inquiry into the American culture wars. He described a fundamental split between “two relatively distinct and competing visions of public life” that clash over a variety of issues including “abortion, child care, funding for the arts, affirmative action and quotas, gay rights, values in public education, or multiculturalism” that date back to the 1960s.¹ After Hunter, historians have worked to trace the history of the culture wars. Between the first and second edition of his book, *A War for the Soul of America: A History of the Culture Wars*, published in 2015 and 2019, respectively, Andrew Hartman observed the cultural melee waning until its intense resurgence in the wake of Donald Trump’s 2016 presidential election. Trump’s insistence to “Make America Great Again,” “evokes the fervent belief among many Americans that the nation is no longer theirs” and “speaks to the narrative of decline that has defined conservative cultural attitudes since the 1960s.”²

In 2023, as the war for the soul of America rages on, Illinois social studies teachers should be heartened by the newly implemented Illinois Learning Standards for Social Studies that serve as an inquiry based and equitable model for history education. These standards stand in stark contrast to the state legislative battles over history teaching and learning that are



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boiling over in states like Florida, South Dakota, and Virginia. This semester, I asked my Fall 2023 student teaching candidates to find and develop an Illinois teaching moment that applies the new standards and engages an inquiry design model. Jacob Sladek, one of my outstanding students at Governors State University and a lover of the *Bee Gees* and base-

ball, was inspired to design a lesson around the 1979 Disco Demolition Night at Comiskey Park. His lesson plan provides students with primary sources from multiple perspectives that addresses the Illinois Learning Standard to “Identify and analyze the role of individuals, groups and institutions in people’s struggle for safety, freedom, equality and justice.”³

Disco Demolition Night was a White Sox promotion for Comiskey Park, advertised by the Chicago shock jock, Steve Dahl. Dahl, a vocal opponent of sensational disco genre, urged other disco critics to join him at the doubleheader against the Detroit Tigers. The event offered admission to spectators for 98 cents on the condition that they bring a disco or R&B record to be ceremoniously destroyed with fireworks in the outfield between games. The response was unexpected. The struggling White Sox saw a massive crowd flood its stands as over 50,000 spectators came out to support Dahl’s “Disco Sucks” imperative. Between games, as the capacity crowd hurled records from the stands, Dahl drove out onto the field in an ill-fitting military outfit and blew up the collected records.⁴ Shortly after the explosion,



Figure 1- The Disco Demolition Night Riot at Comiskey Park, July 12, 1979. Image courtesy of WGN-TV <https://wgntv.com/wp-content/uploads/sites/5/2022/07/AP565435119304.jpg?w=2560&h=1440&crop=1>

thousands of fans stormed the field. They caused extensive property damage to the infield, assaulted players with the debris of the record explosion, and prompted riot police intervention. The response to Dahl's promotion exceeded anyone's expectations and arguably contributed to Disco's decline after 1979.⁵

What was Dahl's beef with the genre? According to Dahl, his disdain for Disco was purely centered on musical taste. His beloved Rock has been replaced in the Billboard charts,

which were saturated by the "Saturday Night Fever" that had captivated the national airwaves. For critics, the disco fad was a rapid craze that distracted from the hellish reality of capitalist America. It was a diversion from ideologically driven Rock music of the late 1960s and its popularity signaled a depressing depravity in American culture. Scholars and Disco enthusiasts have argued that Dahl's antics, coupled with the horde of mostly White middle-class men who followed him into the Comiskey Park outfield, represented both a racist and homophobic battalion of the contemporary culture war.⁶

Disco evolved from different subcultures, with origins in Philadelphia's R&B scene in the late 1960s, featuring Black and Latino musicians and audiences, and in private dance parties in the underground gay community of New York.⁷ The genre's popularity eventually transcended ethnic boundaries and dominated Top 40 lists from 1976-1979. Critics often railed against the music for its "subversively homoerotic and interracial roots."⁸ Despite their protests, popular artists like Cher, the Bee-Gees, and the Rolling Stones brought the dance music to the main-



Figure 2 - Steve Dahl, Chicago's original shock jock.


Image courtesy WBEZ Chicago.

stream in the late 1970s. The movement presented a fleeting moment of popular cultural equality for traditionally marginalized groups like those in the queer community and the diverse artists who pioneered the genre.⁹ In

a singular event at Disco Demolition Night, that sense of cultural acceptance was curtailed by the publicity stunt turned violent event carried out by a conventionally dominant social group.

Mr. Sladek's lesson plan asks students to use primary sources to investigate these competing cultural contingencies that converged on Disco Demolition Night and perform formative tasks to answer: "What is the role of LGBTQ community, police, racially diverse disco artists, Steve Dahl, the Insane Coho Lips, or radio in limiting or allowing for safety, freedom, equality and justice in reference to Disco Demolition Night?" Students follow the Inquiry Design Model to guide them through the lesson and answer compelling and supporting questions.¹⁰ After students have considered the sources independently, Mr. Sladek suggests a class-wide examination of the White Sox club's decision to celebrate the fortieth anniversary of the event, demonstrating the persistence of the culture wars across historical eras. Lessons like this one push students to interrogate historical origins of present and local issues. Through local inquiries like Mr. Sladek's, students gain knowledge about a variety of American perspectives.

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Educator Program at Governors State University. Her research broadly centers on the Civil War era and focuses on women's participation in the development of medical institutions during and after the war. As a former secondary teacher and future-teacher trainer in Illinois, she is on a mission to illuminate local histories as a key factor to student investment in U.S. history courses. 

Footnotes

¹James Davison Hunter, *Culture Wars: The Struggle to Define America* (New York: BasicBooks, 1991), 107, 42.

²Andrew Hartman, "The Culture Wars are Dead: Long Live the Culture Wars!" *The Baffler*, no. 39, May 2018) <https://thebaffler.com/outbursts/culture-wars-are-dead-hartman>

³Illinois State Learning Standards for Social Sciences, "SS.9-12.H.7," 23.

<https://www.isbe.net/Documents/Social-Science-Standards-K-12-ILSS-2021-Draft.pdf>

⁴The Insane Coho Lips was the name of Dahl's anti-disco army.

⁵Steve Dahl, Dave Hoekstra, Paul Natkin, and Bob Odenkirk. *Disco Demolition: The Night Disco Died*. (Chicago, Illinois: Curbside Splendor Publishing, 2016).

⁶See Gillian Frank, "Discophobia: Antigay Prejudice and the 1979 Backlash Against Disco," *Journal of the History of Sexuality* 16, no. 2 (May 2007): 276-306, 347.

⁷See scholarly works such as Alice Echols, *Hot Stuff: Disco and the Remaking of American Culture* (New York: W. W. Norton and Co., 2011); Craig Hansen Werner, *A Change Is Gonna Come: Music, Race & the Soul of America* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2006); Peter Shapiro, *Turn the Beat Around: The Secret History of Disco* (London: Faber and Faber, 2005); Tim Lawrence, *Love Saves the Day: A History of American Dance Music Culture, 1970-1979* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2003).

⁸Reebee Garofalo, "disco," *Encyclopedia Britannica*, February 15, 2023.

<https://www.britannica.com/art/disco>.

⁹For a local iteration that explores Chicago's Disco scene, listen to *Curious City*, "When Disco Ruled Chicago's Dance Scene," Podcast audio, March 23, 2023, <https://www.npr.org/podcasts/401317007/curious-city>.

¹⁰Kathy Swan, John Lee, S. G. Grant, Walter Parker, and John Kelly Lee. *Inquiry Design Model: Building Inquiries in Social Studies* (Silver Spring, Maryland: Copublished by National Council for the Social Studies, 2018).