

Dan Baum
20 Tharp Avenue
Watsonville, CA 95076
tel. (831) 722-3484
email: danbaum@pacbell.net

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John Bennet
The New Yorker
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20th Floor
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Story Proposal: Jake Walk Blues

Dear John:

John Morgan calls himself president of a one-member Association of Pharmacoethnomusicologists. Officially, he is an M.D. and professor of pharmacology at the City University of New York Medical School. But his first love is black American music and his office at 138th Street and Convent Avenue is stacked with ancient vinyl. Some years back, Morgan was listening to a newly acquired platter of Poor Boy Willie Lofton singing a tune called “Jake Leg Blues” when he felt a thrum of recognition. “I say the peoples they drink the jake on the roadside,” sang Poor Boy.

“They even throw the little bottle away.
The jake limber is a present
That keep ‘em clumsy every day.”

The lyrics took Morgan back to his childhood in rural Ohio. “I grew up in a town called Elmwood Place and in the 1940s there was a legless beggar people called, you should forgive the expression, Nigger John. When I asked my mother why he had no legs, she said he’d had the jake-leg. She said it in a way that didn’t invite further inquiry, and I didn’t think about it again until I heard Willie Lofton. That’s when I started looking for more songs about the jake leg.”

At 62, Morgan is stout, bearded, and rhetorically florid. In his habitual fuzzy tweed jacket and spectacles, he could be the eloquent if eccentric archivist

in the basement of a fusty historical society. When I visited his chaotic office, though, he was playing the drawing-room detective.

“I found dozens more songs,” Morgan said, “and deduced that a new kind of paralysis had appeared in 1930 -- no songs mention it before then.” He began bending back blunt fingers. “The paralysis was brought on by drinking something called ‘jake.’ It afflicted enough souls to instigate an entire subset of folk music. Both black and white artists sang about it, so we know it struck both races. And it was no longer inspiring musicians by 1934, which meant it was a cataclysmic but discrete event.” He sat back with a satisfied grin. “Behold the study, through folk music, of a substance-induced epidemic,” he said. “Pharmacoethnomusicology.”

Once he’d seen the shadow of the epidemic in the lyrics of the blues, Morgan began investigating as a doctor. He uncovered a medical whodunit woven tightly into the racially complicated fabric of the Depression’s early days. I propose to open the piece with Morgan, then delve into the mystery. The story begins on February 27, 1930, when at the Reconstruction Hospital in Oklahoma City a physician named W.H. Goldfain saw a patient who had been struck suddenly with a peculiar paralysis. It wasn’t polio; the man could walk, but only by swinging his drooping feet and slapping them onto the floor. Four more men hobbled through Goldfain’s door that afternoon and by the end of the week, he knew of sixty-five people thus paralyzed in the Oklahoma City area.

There was no Centers for Disease Control in those days to monitor epidemics. The brand-new National Institute – singular – of Health sent afield a 43-year-old Russian émigré pharmacologist named Maurice Smith. A solemn figure with a tiny mustache, a slight Russian accent, and coat-and-tie no matter the weather, Smith arrived in Oklahoma City soon after the Allen Brothers had diagnosed the epidemic with their hastily recorded “Jake Walk Blues:”

I can’t eat, I can’t walk
 I been drinking mean jake lord,
 And now I can’t walk.
 Ain’t got nothing now to lose,
 I’m a jake walk papa
 With the jake walk blues.

“Jake,” as Smith soon learned, was Jamaica Ginger Extract, a patent medicine sold to relieve flatulence, bring on delayed menstruation, and comfort those suffering from catarrh, dyspepsia, and vapors. Consisting of ginger dissolved in alcohol, it also got you drunk, which is why it was popular in the southern and border states that had been partly or totally dry even before the Volstead Act banned non-medicinal alcohol nationwide in 1918. The mystery for Smith was why, after decades of harmless use, jake was suddenly crippling everybody who touched it.

Some 50,000 people were stricken, most living in a line of mid-size cities stretching like a watch chain across the belly of the Midwest: Kansas City, St. Louis, Cincinnati. Most of the victims were men; in Johnson City, Tennessee, a city of fifteen thousand, ten percent of adult males wobbled around with the same overnight malady. Some were unable to walk at all. Others lost strength in their hands as well. Though few told their doctors, some were rendered impotent, as Ishman Bracey described in “Jake Liquor Blues” (1930):

Aunt Jane, she came runnin’ and screamin’
Telling everybody in the neighborhood:
“That man of mine got the limber trouble,
And his lovin’ can’t do me any good.”

Many sought odd cures. Thousands flocked to the Golden Rule refinery in Oklahoma City to wallow in the warm slush pools of oil spilled on the property. Others hooked themselves up to car batteries for crude electric shocks. The paralysis, however, was permanent.

The jake leg was a social crisis as well as a medical one. Until February 1930, drinking jake was the height of middle-class discretion. Step into the pharmacy with thirty-five cents, slip a two-ounce glass bottle into your purse or pocket, and nobody was the wiser. The jake walk outed tipplers. That flapping foot was proof no matter how strenuously a stricken schoolmarm cried polio. A gimpy minister railing against the sin of alcohol became known, inevitably, as a ‘jakeleg preacher,’ and jakeleg went on to mean not only hypocritical but charlatan, slapdash, and incompetent, as in a ‘jakeleg mechanic.’”

That the jake walk struck the urban middle class and poor spoke to the economics of Prohibition; the wealthy drank bonded liquor smuggled from Canada, while the rural poor made moonshine. Those with neither cash nor the woods in which to conceal a still got their kick from the drug store. Early news reports and scientific papers on the epidemic called it a whites-only phenomenon and one researcher even fed jake to white and black chickens, taking it as proof, when only the white chickens fell ill, that dark pigment offered resistance. (Nobody was able to repeat his results.) As Smith learned, the jake walk only appeared a white affliction because blacks weren’t welcome at hospitals, and nobody was out canvassing them. But if blacks hadn’t been suffering the jake leg, Poor Boy Willie Lofton and a host of other black artists wouldn’t have been singing about it.

Before Prohibition, jake was a pale-orange, pleasant-tasting, relatively harmless concoction. But in 1920, the Treasury Department’s zealous Bureau of Prohibition ordered the solids in any alcohol-based medicine increased until it became too bitter to be drunk for pleasure. Drinkers responded by mixing it with Coca-Cola. Manufacturers, meanwhile, found ginger too expensive to boost to the required level. Some substituted castor oil, others molasses or mineral oil: all illegal but harmless. With the help of the Prohibition Bureau, because the budget

of his own NIH was tiny, Smith found that whoever was making the suspect jake – and selling it under myriad labels – was boosting the solids with a cheap component of varnish called triorthocresyl phosphate, or TOCP that heretofore nobody knew was toxic.

The culprits – Harry Gross and Max Reisman of Boston – eventually pleaded guilty only to mislabeling and adulterating Jamaica Ginger Extract, a violation of the Pure Food and Drug Act. That their adulterant poisoned thousands of consumers was immaterial. They were given two-year suspended sentences and a \$1,000 fine.

Which brings us back to John Morgan and the framing story. Morgan's other great passion, after black music, is decriminalization of drugs. As a board member of the National Organization of Marijuana Laws and the author of two books on marijuana, Morgan is a prominent opponent of the War on Drugs. The jake walk epidemic, to Morgan, is a textbook example – albeit a forgotten one -- of how prohibition endangers the public health. Prohibit a substance, he says, and government loses control over its purity, while criminals are inspired to develop dangerous concoctions.

Morgan has given me the manuscript of his interviews in the 1970s with jake-walk survivors, an unpublished academic book he wrote in the 1970s, and his CD of collected Jake Walk Blues. He has published a few academic papers, but they have none of the plot, characterization, and color the jake story promises. The National Archives has two full filing cabinets on the episode, including the FDA's independent investigation and Maurice Smith's notes. The epidemic was reported in many newspapers, discussed in Congressional hearings leading to the repeal of Prohibition in 1933, and studied by the U.S. Army in search of nerve agents that cripple without killing. A United Victims of Ginger Paralysis Association numbered 35,000 and presumably has records of its own.

I propose a long article about John Morgan, Maurice Smith; Gross and Reisman; the jake walk epidemic of 1930; the jake walk blues; and the legacies of the scourge.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Dan Baum". The signature is fluid and cursive, with the first letters of "Dan" and "Baum" being significantly larger and more stylized than the rest of the letters.

Dan Baum