

Crab Hole Mosquito Blues—The Story

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[Ted Pestorius] Hello. I'm Ted Pestorius and I'm talking by phone today with Dr. Bill Dietz, the director of the Division of Nutrition, Physical Activity and Obesity here at the CDC. We're talking about a song that is online in the May 2011 issue of CDC's journal, Emerging Infectious Diseases. This song is a humorous look at a very serious human and equine disease written and performed by the MARU Health Angels Band. Welcome, Bill.

[Bill Dietz] Thank you, glad to be here.

[Ted Pestorius] Yeah. We are glad to have you.

[Ted Pestorius] So, what is the MARU Health Angels Band?

[Bill Dietz] Well, MARU was the Middle America Research Unit. This was a virology laboratory funded by NIAID at NIH, and the Health Angels band had recorded one song, and that is the Crab Hole Mosquito Blues.

[Ted Pestorius] Alright, I believe that debuted on Billboard Magazine?

[Bill Dietz] [laughs] I wish.

[Ted Pestorius] Alright, maybe next one. So, who are the members of the band and what kind of work are they involved in?

[Bill Dietz] This was recorded in 1971, so what the members are doing are now is quite different than what they were doing then. The members were Carl Johnson, that's Carl K. Johnson, who was the head of the laboratory at the time, subsequently came to CDC and started the Stage 4 Viral Facility; David Martin, who was fresh out of an internal medicine residency, I don't think he'd done his infectious disease fellowship just yet; Tom Walton, who was a veterinarian; Doug Antczak, who was a summer student from veterinary school at Cornell and later went on to establish an equine research lab at Cornell; and me, and I had just finished an internship in pediatrics in Philadelphia.

And my history is a little bit different than everybody else in the band, because I was interested in under-nutrition infection and immunity, and that's what took me to Panama. I ended up doing arbovirology and loving it, but that wasn't really the reason that I had come to Panama. We were there in this outpost because of a need to have a sentinel virology facility that sat across the crossroads afforded by Panama, the crossroads between North and South America. And that was a useful location to be, in terms of Venezuelan equine encephalitis, which usually emerged from South America and worked its way north, and Panama was really the blockade for the virus traveling to the United States.

[Ted Pectorius] So, why did you decide to do a song about Venezuelan equine encephalitis, or V-E-E?

[Bill Dietz] Well you know, I don't remember exactly what led to the song. I--what happened one evening is that we were sitting around Carl's house aided by a little Johnny Walker and I think we got the idea of doing a song. Doug played the guitar, I played jugs and kazoo and sang, and Tom Walton did spoons and I think he might have also done washboard. And the notion of putting this to music I think was a group notion, and as I recall the composing the lyrics was a group effort; I think Carl took a leading role in this as I remember. I don't know exactly when that decision was made, but the decision was made and we had a good time doing it. It took a whole evening to record because it's a lengthy song and as we were singing it I think I remember revising some of the verses to make them more coherent, or rhyme, or stay in rhythm.

[Ted Pectorius] Did y'all have to do research to do this? Or did everybody already, I mean, it's a long historical exercise in VEE.

[Bill Dietz] Well, no. We were doing the research that led to the song, so it was really a matter of putting the research that we already knew and the information that we already had to music. Venezuelan equine encephalitis was the main focus of this laboratory, and as the song said there were, there was a lot of work being done on typing the virus because there are a lot of subtypes to the virus; that was Dave Martin's work. I was interested in why some of these strains that were local protected horses against the virulent infections, and my work involved understanding the immunopathology of these infections. We were assisted in that by Tom, because we were infecting horses both peripherally and into the spinal fluid with both strains of virus, both the virulent strains and the avirulent strains, and Carl was overseeing all this. Carl's efforts at the time were less about VEE, although he oversaw the lab and I'll come to a moment on how brilliant he was in anticipating this outbreak, but he was working on mechupo and, or Bolivian hemorrhagic fever. Carl's role, Tom's role, and David Martin's role was in anticipating this epidemic. This was a couple of months before I arrived in the lab. They had gone up into Costa Rica and northern Panama and bled horses and humans to see who was immune and who wasn't and brought all those specimens back. And then we got news that the virus had hit in Costa Rica, and so everybody went back to study the epidemic and that was when a lot of this information about the protective effects of the local strains against the virulent strains emerged. What was so brilliant about that was anticipating that that epidemic might happen and garnering the baseline data so that when the virulent strain hit, the lab could go back and study it and figure out, you know, what was going on and why some people and some animals were protected and others weren't.

[Ted Pectorius] It's a great history. So you put it all to music; did it wind up having any public health impact?

[Bill Dietz] [laughs]

[Ted Pectorius] [laughs] Yeah, I know. Or was it just a good time?

[Bill Dietz] We presented this publicly prior to this publication at least two times. I think the one time I remember distinctly was at a reunion of MARU that occurred at the tropical medicine meetings in Orlando, and we performed this on stage at that time. I think most of us had to have the lyrics in hand to remember them. But and I dimly remember a performance, and maybe it was just a playing of the recording at a meeting I believe in Central America, but I'm a little uncertain of that. That would have been in, also in the '70s. But until this was published, it had only been performed once, or maybe twice to my knowledge.

[Ted Pestorius] So did the MARU Health Angels write any other songs?

[Bill Dietz] No that was it. We're a one hit wonder.

[Ted Pestorius] Alright, I hear it went way up the Panamanian dance charts. Yeah, it's a wonderful history, these are nice stories. Thanks Bill, I-we appreciate your time.

[Bill Dietz] Well, thanks for the interview and thanks for publishing this paper. We're really pleased at—that it's seen the light of day, it's wonderful that it's open to a broader audience accompanied by the history that's footnoted for the song.

[Ted Pestorius] I've been talking today with Dr. Bill Dietz about a song that's online in the May 2011 issue of CDC's journal, Emerging Infectious Diseases. You can hear the entire song, and sing along if you wish, at www.cdc.gov/eid. If you'd like to comment on this podcast, send an email to eideditor@cdc.gov. That's e-i-d editor – one word - at-c-d-c dot gov. I'm Ted Pestorius, for Emerging Infectious Diseases.

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