The Jake Walk Blues: A Toxicologic Tragedy Mirrored in American Popular Music

Abstract

In 1930 thousands of cases of muscle pain, weakness of upper and lower extremities, and minimal sensory impairment occurred in the United States. The illness was caused by the consumption of an adulterated Jamaica ginger extract ("Jake"), an illicit beverage then popularly used in the southern and midwestern United States to circumvent prohibition statutes. The additive tri-ortho-cresyl phosphate caused severe, only partially reversible damage to the spinal cord and peripheral nervous tissue. Victims with resultant gait impairment, sometimes permanent, were said to have the "Jake Leg" or "Jake Walk." Twelve commercial phonographic recordings made between 1928 and 1934 by southern rural artists, white and black, refer to Jake or Jake-induced infirmity. These reveal preepidemic cultural familiarity with Jake, and the later, postepidemic performances reflect a whimsical, even cynical, cultural attitude that those with "Jake Leg" were suffering the wages of sin and should not be regarded as objects of pity or sympathy.
Though “Jake Walk Blues” tells of personal loss and failure, it is an upbeat number, accompanied by a banjo, kazoo, and guitar. The earliest report of Jamaica Ginger Paralysis, as it would come to be known, occurred in February 1930, when Dr. Ephraim Goldfain of Oklahoma City started seeing a series of patients, all men, exhibiting the same symptoms. The Annals article was subtitled “A Toxicologic Tragedy Mirrored in American Popular Music.” In it, Morgan briefly discussed the medical background of Jamaica Ginger poisoning before moving on to the songs. Morgan apparently felt it necessary to engage in Cliff’s Notes-style explanations such as “commercial recording of rural southern artists (black and white) began in the 1920s.” Ginger Jake. A striking example of OPIDN occurred during the 1930s Prohibition Era when thousands of men in the American South and Midwest developed arm and leg weakness and pain after drinking a “medicinal” alcohol substitute. The drink, called “Ginger Jake,” contained an adulterated Jamaican ginger extract containing tri-ortho-cresyl phosphate (TOCP) which resulted in partially reversible neurologic damage. The damage resulted in the limping “Jake Leg” or “Jake Walk” which were terms frequently used in the blues music of the period. The Jake Walk Blues. A toxicologic tragedy mirrored in American popular music. Annals of Internal Medicine. 1976 Dec;85(6):804-8.