THE DETECTION OF INSIDE-OUT DISK GROWTH IN M33

BENJAMIN F. WILLIAMS1, JULIANNE J. DALCANTON1, ANDREW E. DOLPHIN2, JON HOLTZMAN3, AND ATA SARAJEDINI4

1 Department of Astronomy, Box 351580, University of Washington, Seattle, WA 98195, USA; ben@astro.washington.edu, jdh@astro.washington.edu
2 Raytheon, 1151 E. Hermans Road, Tucson, AZ 85706, USA; adolphin@raytheon.com
3 Department of Astronomy, New Mexico State University, Box 30001, 1320 Frenger St., Las Cruces, NM 88003, USA; holtz@nmsu.edu
4 Department of Astronomy, University of Florida, 211 Bryant Space Science Center, P.O. Box 112055, Gainesville, FL 32611, USA; ata@astro.ufl.edu

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1. INTRODUCTION

The scale lengths of galaxy disks are thought to increase with time due to late time accretion of gas at large radii and exhaustion of gas in the centers of galaxies (Larson 1976; Matteucci & Francois 1989; Burkert et al. 1992; Chiappini et al. 1997; Naab & Ostriker 2006, and many others). This process, which has been called “inside-out” growth, reproduces many of the physical (e.g., Bouwens et al. 1997) and chemical properties of disks. Observations of color gradients in spiral galaxies suggest that the mean ages of the stars decrease from the inside-out (e.g., MacArthur et al. 2004), and observations of extended ultraviolet (UV) disks show that very recent star formation is prevalent in the outer regions of disks (e.g., Boissier et al. 2008). While these trends are consistent with inside-out growth, broadband colors can be biased by variations in star formation, dust extinction, and metallicity, while UV emission probes only the current disk properties. A more direct approach to detecting the products of long-term inside-out disk growth is through measurements of the age distribution of the resolved stellar populations.

The inside-out growth of stellar disks may be most easily detected in low-mass disks. If massive disks formed earlier than low-mass disks (i.e., “downsizing,” Cowie et al. 1996; Lilly et al. 2003; Neistein et al. 2006; Fontanot et al. 2009, and many others), the stars in massive disks have had more time to be mixed by radial redistribution processes (e.g., Roškar et al. 2008). Therefore detecting the signature of inside-out growth using stellar populations may be simplified in low-mass disks.

M33 is the nearest example of a low-mass disk galaxy. It is also a bulge-less system (McLean & Liu 1996), so that there is no confusion between disk and bulge populations. If the stellar disk of M33 grew from the inside-out, the age of the stellar populations should vary with radius, with a higher percentage of ancient stars in the inner disk. Indeed, ground-based observations of M33’s bright stellar populations suggest that its outer disk may have formed at late epochs and may even be ongoing (Davidge 2003; Block et al. 2004; Rowe et al. 2005). On the other hand, M33 has a truncated disk (at $r \sim 8$ kpc, Ferguson et al. 2007) and the age of populations of the outer disk/halo show an age increase with radius based on Hubble Space Telescope (HST)/Advanced Camera for Surveys (ACS) data (Barker et al. 2007b, 2007a), in contrast to the expectations of inside-out growth.

In this letter, we use data from the HST/ACS to study the age distribution of the stellar populations of the M33 disk as a function of galactocentric radius. These distributions show a clear trend: regions nearer to the center formed a higher fraction of their stars at earlier times leading to a steady growth in the disk scale length. Our measurements therefore provide strong observational support for inside-out disk growth.

More rigorous checks of this analysis and more detailed studies of these fields will be provided in a future full-length paper (J. Holtzman et al. 2009, in preparation). We assume a distance of 800 kpc (Lee et al. 2002) for conversions of angular measurements to physical distances. We assume an inclination of 56° (Corbelli & Schneider 1997) for deprojections. We adopt a WMAP5 cosmology for all conversions between time and redshift.

2. DATA ACQUISITION AND PROCESSING

We obtained HST/ACS imaging of four inner fields along the major axis of the M33 disk as part of the HST GO program 10190 (see left panel of Figure 1). The observations were performed from 2004 September 9 to 2005 February 20 through the F606W (wide-V) and F814W (I equivalent) filters. The total exposure time in the innermost field was 6260 s and 6482 s in F606W and F814W, respectively. The total exposure time for each of the other three fields was 21140 s and 26300 s in F606W and F814W, respectively.

We also analyzed HST/ACS imaging of three outer fields along the minor axis of the M33 disk (GO-9479), which have been previously studied by Barker et al. (2007b). Our reanalysis of these fields allowed us to extend our radial profiles to larger radii and provided a consistency check between our analysis technique and those used for previous work.

http://lambda.gsfc.nasa.gov/product/map/dr2/params/lcdm_wmap.cfm.
Resolved stellar photometry was measured using the photometric pipeline of the ACS Nearby Galaxies Survey Treasury (Dalcanton et al. 2009). The pipeline uses the DOLPHOT (Dolphin 2000) software package to measure point-spread function photometry and to determine errors and completeness as a function of color and magnitude using artificial star tests (Dalcanton et al. 2009; Williams et al. 2009). The final stellar catalogs contained 414780, 386894, 407741, and 309249 stars, from the innermost field to the outermost field, respectively. The resulting color–magnitude diagrams (CMDs) are shown in Figure 2. Our measurements of the Barker et al. (2007b) fields yielded 13522, 3958, and 1548 stars from the innermost field to the outermost field. The resulting CMDs were equivalent to those shown in Barker et al. (2007b).

The CMDs shown in Figure 2 qualitatively show the relative number of main sequence stars to giants increasing with the distance from the center of M33, suggesting decreasing stellar ages with increasing radius. To quantify this trend, we measured the star formation history (SFH) of each of the four fields using the software package MATCH (Dolphin 2002), which finds the best-fitting distribution of stellar ages and metallicities that reproduces the observed CMD assuming a Salpeter (1955) initial mass function (IMF) and the stellar evolution isochrones of Girardi et al. (2002) including recent updates (Marigo et al. 2008). The details of the fitting method used were the same as those employed in Williams et al. (2009), where results at old ages were binned to low time resolution to reduce errors and avoid overinterpreting details that could be due to deficiencies in the stellar evolution models. This technique for recovering the SFH from the CMD is well tested and is found to be robust against differences in stellar evolution models and fitting techniques when the distance and mean extinction to the field are allowed to be fitted as free parameters.

Uncertainties were determined by fitting the CMDs with a range of assumed distance and mean reddening values. These uncertainties were then added in quadrature to the standard deviation calculated from Monte Carlo tests where the observed CMD was resampled and refitted one hundred times. A constant mean extinction was applied to all model stars, with a first-order attempt to account for differential reddening, we applied a uniform spread in $A_V$ to the model photometry of 0.6, 0.4, 0.2, and 0.0 magnitudes for the innermost to outermost fields, respectively. These values improved the quality of the model fits compared to fits with a single uniform reddening value for each field. However, differential reddening did not significantly alter the inferred SFHs (see Section 3.4), which are shown in Figure 3.

3. RESULTS

3.1. Star Formation Histories

The M33 disk is naturally divided into two components: the inner disk and outer disk. These components are divided by a break in the exponential density profile located at a radius of $r \sim 8$ kpc (Ferguson et al. 2007). The radius of this truncation point is located between our outermost field and the innermost Barker et al. (2007b) field.

The SFHs of the fields (see Figure 3) show that the bulk of the stars in each ACS field formed at different times, as can be seen most easily by looking at the cumulative fraction of stars formed during each time bin. This value is plotted as a function of age for all four inner fields in the right panel of Figure 1. The plot clearly shows that, while the majority of the stars near the center of the disk had formed by $z = 1$, the bulk of the stars farther out in the disk formed later.

The growth is also shown in Figure 4, which plots the reconstructed cumulative stellar mass density profile of the M33 disk at five different epochs. This plot shows that most of the stellar disk growth occurred at radii of $r \sim 3$–7 kpc, rather than at the center, leading to an increase in the scale length of the inner disk $(r < 8 \text{ kpc})$ with little change in the central stellar surface density. In contrast, while the density profile of the inner disk has flattened as the disk has aged, that of the outer disk has steepened.

3.2. Implications for the Inner Disk

We have fit the inner disk $(r < 7 \text{ kpc})$ with an exponential profile and plotted the results in the central panel of Figure 4. The scale length of M33’s disk has increased by a factor of $\sim 2$ from 10 Gyr ago to the recent past. Most of this stellar disk growth occurred from 10 Gyr to 5 Gyr ago. This growth is similar to the predictions of Mo et al. (1998), which are based on simple scaling models for the evolution of the virial mass and virial radius.

The current stellar mass scale length is longer than that of the $K$-band light (Regan & Vogel 1994, 5.8 in $K$ versus 7.7 here), suggesting a changing $M/L_K$ with radius. This discrepancy has been seen in a dynamical estimate of the scale length of M33’s mass (Ciardullo et al. 2004). However, the $K$-band scale length is similar to the scale length we calculate for the stellar mass that had accumulated 5 Gyr ago.

The right panel of Figure 4 shows the extrapolated central surface density of the exponential fits to the stellar mass density profile. The uncertainties are significant, and the data are consistent with no evolution in the central surface density of the stellar disk (solid line). We compare the central surface densities with the expectations from the scaling laws of Mo et al. (1998); however, those laws track only the mean distribution of the baryons and formally predict a decrease in surface density with time. This prediction is not easily compared with our measurement for the stellar disk, for which such a decrease is likely to be unphysical.
Based on Figure 4, we conclude that most of the stars outside of the innermost field formed since $z = 1$. However, this conclusion differs from what has been seen in the outer disk of more massive spirals, such as M31 (Brown et al. 2006), M81 (Williams et al. 2009), and the Milky Way thick disk, in which most of the stars appear to have formed prior to $z = 1$. This early
formation of the disks of massive spirals is also seen in redshift surveys, which are sensitive to equally massive spirals beyond $z = 1$ (Lilly et al. 1998; Ravindranath et al. 2004; Papovich et al. 2005; Sargent et al. 2007; Melbourne et al. 2007). Such surveys are not sensitive to low-mass disks like M33. The difference between our results for M33 and more massive disks may be due to the fact that such low-mass galaxies are thought to perform most of their star formation at later epochs, an effect that has been deemed “downsizing.”

### 3.3. Comparison to the Outer Disk

There is a striking difference between the age gradient seen in our data for the inner disk and that seen in the far outer disk by Barker et al. (2007b). Within their series of outer disk fields, their measurements show the mean age of the stars increasing with radius. In contrast, our analysis shows the opposite effect within the break radius, marked by the vertical gray line in the left panel of Figure 4. Similar differences between the inner and outer disk are seen in current simulations of disk formation, where radial mixing redistributes older stars to larger radii. This mixing produces a break in the exponential disk profile, inside of which stellar ages decrease with increasing radius and outside of which stellar ages increase with increasing radius (Roškar et al. 2008). Although this radial mixing scatters stars into the outer disk, the majority of the stars in the inner disk remain close to their formation radius. Thus, while mixing produces the break and age gradient in the outer regions, it is not sufficient to erase the radial age gradient established during the formation of the inner disk.

Our independent reduction of the Barker et al. (2007b) data and derivation of the SFH reproduces their observed increase in mean age with radius in the outer disk. The resulting surface densities of these outer fields are included in Figure 4. Fits of a single exponential to the full broken exponential (see center panel of Figure 4) average the inner and outer disk gradient and thus show no significant change in scale length with age. This exercise demonstrates the importance of measuring profiles of the disk inside and outside of the disk break separately.

Finally, our results show some very old stars at all radii in the disk. However, in disk formation and evolution simulations, radial redistribution places stars of the oldest ages throughout the disk, including much larger radii than where they were formed (Roškar et al. 2008), suggesting that the oldest stars seen at larger radii could have been formed closer to the galaxy center. The oldest stars may also have been accreted. In any case, the inner disk apparently had a shorter scale length in the past, and the trends seen in mean age and scale length in our measurements mimic those seen in simulations and semianalytic models of inside-out growth.

### 3.4. Reliability Tests

Because our conclusions rely strongly on the reliability of our technique to measure SFHs from resolved stellar photometry, we have performed several tests to check the robustness of our measurements. Our conclusions draw upon the age distribution of stars with ages of 2–12 Gyr, resolved into four time bins. We performed multiple binnings to check the sensitivity of our results to binning scheme and verified that the same age gradient was present even for larger more conservative time bins than those finally adopted.

While such high time resolution in the 2–12 Gyr range is more robust at the depths of the outer three major axis fields, the ability to distinguish between stars with ages of 5 and 10 Gyr may be less reliable in the shallower innermost field. We therefore calculated the scale length of the inner disk as a function of time excluding the innermost field and found the trend to be equivalent to that measured when the innermost field is included.

We also tested the effects of forcing the distance to be the same in each fit by assigning a fixed distance of $(m - M)_0 = 24.6$
to all of the fields. This test decreased the scale lengths at all epochs, but left the trend the same.

The CMDs contain stars with a spread in reddening, such that the red clump appears slightly smeared along the reddening line. To test the effects of our assumption that differential reddening effects are less severe in fields farther out in the disk (see Section 2), we refit our data first assuming the same spread in reddening \((A_V = 0.6)\) in the innermost three fields and again assuming no differential reddening in any of the fields. While these changes affected the resulting overall scale lengths, causing the trend to be from \(1.0 \pm 0.1\) kpc to \(1.7 \pm 0.2\) kpc for a spread of \(A_V = 0.6\) and from \(1.1 \pm 0.1\) kpc to \(2.0 \pm 0.2\) kpc for no spread at all, the changes did not significantly alter the resulting SFHs or change the trend of increasing scale length with time. More sophisticated tests of these effects will be reported in the more comprehensive paper on this dataset (J. Holtzman et al. 2009, in preparation).

We also checked for consistency with previous work. Our measured SFHs for the Barker et al. (2007b) fields were consistent with theirs within the errors except for a factor of \(\sim 2\) offset in the normalization, due to the IMF. Since Barker et al. (2007b) assumed an IMF that flattens at low masses, their models required lower star formation rates to reproduce the observed CMD. When normalized to produce the same number of stars from 1 to 100 \(M_\odot\), the ratio of the total number of stars produced by their adopted IMF to that produced by our adopted IMF is \(\sim 0.5\). Correcting for this offset puts our resulting SFHs in good alignment with theirs. Changes in the IMF and mass cutoff serve only to shift all of the surface density data in Figure 4 up or down. The scale lengths and fractional changes in central surface density are thus unaffected by these IMF issues, unless the true IMF varies with radius (Meurer et al. 2009).

4. CONCLUSIONS

We have modeled the CMDs of seven HST/ACS fields in the M33 disk at a range of galactocentric radii. Four of these fields are newly observed and lie along the major axis of the inner disk. The resulting stellar age distributions demonstrate that, within the inner disk, the age of the majority of the stars decreases with increasing distance from the galactic center. In addition, most of the disk stars outside of \(\sim 3\) kpc formed since \(z = 1\), later than what is seen in more massive spiral galaxies both in stellar populations studies and in redshift surveys. Comparisons of the stellar population properties in these fields with those of the outer M33 disk as measured by Barker et al. (2007b) show an inversion of the radial dependence of stellar age, providing support for some current simulation results. Together, these results provide strong observational support to inside-out growth of low-mass spiral stellar disks, downsizing, and the significance of disk breaks in formation models of galaxy disks.

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