

# Introduction

Pete Brown

It's with a mixture of shame and relief that I must now admit I'd never read Michael Jackson until well after I'd finished my first book and decided I wanted to be a fully-fledged beer writer.

Shame, because it exposes how little of a clue I had about the world I was entering, a world I thought I was doing something new in.

And relief because, if I had read Jackson's work, I probably wouldn't have bothered trying. In his contribution to this volume, Roger Protz hits it on the head when he compares the experience of reading Michael Jackson's work to Fay Weldon's comment on reading Isabel Allende's *The House of the Spirits*: 'Now that's written, the rest of us can all go home'.

Now I'm getting things off my chest, I have a second shameful confession: as a beer writer, I actually find a substantial chunk of beer writing a little boring.

As Jeff Evans tells us here, Michael set the template for much modern beer writing when he gave us *The World Guide to Beer* in 1977. Twenty years later, when a callow adman tried to learn something

about beer, that template had become somewhat debased. Trawls of bookshops (often bargain shops full of remaindered stock) yielded a shelf full of books that had copied Michael's format slavishly, repeated it, and not done it quite as well. It all seemed a bit samey, a bit rigid and narrow. Read one book that had chapters on the brewing process, beer's ingredients, then a gazetteer of great beers from around the world, and you've read 'em all. Or so I believed.

Of course, it wasn't just Michael's work I'd missed. There was loads of good stuff out there and, again, it was only my ignorance preventing me from finding it. But when I began my first book, I thought I was tearing up the rulebook of beer writing and doing something completely different. Years later, when I became familiar with Michael's work, I had the same feeling Roger Protz described another beer writer having, when visiting a brewery in Papua New Guinea, believing he was the first beer aficionado to do so, only to be asked by the brewer 'You're from England? Tell me, how is Michael Jackson?'

Wherever we go in beer writing, we find that Michael has been there before us. I

wanted to write about the sociability, the cultural aspects of beer, the stories behind it. In my youthful arrogance I believed that no one else had done this. But when I finally read Michael's work, what I had previously assumed to be dry articles on brewery visits that would talk about brew lengths and malt varieties turned out instead to be perfectly formed little stories, full of the engaging and often hilarious digressions that those who knew Michael well were so familiar with. This volume is full of examples from people who similarly thought they might attempt something new and different in beer writing, only to find Michael did it first.

I only met Michael on a few occasions. As a newbie, I was nervous to approach him at beer functions - he was always surrounded by acolytes, and I didn't feel I had yet earned the right to stroll over and start chatting.

But there was an evening in 2005 when, in one sentence, I believe he taught me how to write properly.

I was lucky enough to be at a dinner at the White Horse, Parson's Green, with landlord Mark Dorber, Michael, home brewer James McCrorie, and two young, unknown brewers: Thornbridge's Stefano Cossi and Martin Dickie (the latter would soon leave to set up Brew Dog). It was an intimate occasion. The two brewers, who at that time came across as a beery equivalent of Liam and Noel Gallagher, were thrilled to be able to present their

beers to the Master. They had just created Kipling, which they believed was the first beer in the UK to use a hop variety from New Zealand called Nelson Sauvin. The citrus aromas and delicious tartness of the beer were raising eyebrows, and Michael was interested in how it had come about. I sat in complete silence as he quietly quizzed them. And just when I thought he was going to go into lots of dull questions about bitterness units and alpha acids, he asked, 'So how did you feel when you knew you'd created such a special beer?'

That question remains the biggest lesson I've ever been taught in my writing career.

In the end, rather than making us throw in the towel and say 'What's the point?' Michael's writing inspires us to try harder. We can never match what he did, never have anything like the same impact, but we can explore and develop the themes he created.

And that's what you'll find here: stories of how Michael inspired and influenced the writers of these pieces are threaded through a collection of work that seeks to map out the full extent of Michael's immense and unsurpassable contribution to beer writing.

Jeff Evans begins by charting the genesis of the watershed book: *The World Guide to Beer*, telling us how and why the book came about, and why it remains so influential.

Martyn Cornell then forensically unpicks the origin of the notion of beer styles, and shows how this too, in the form we understand it, was Michael's creation.

Tim Webb describes how Michael played a key role in rescuing the Belgian brewing industry, transforming a moribund tradition, unknown by the world and dying along with its aged brewers, into one of the most celebrated beer scenes on the planet.

Zak Avery explores how Michael developed a way of describing beer flavour, charting the fascinating development of Michael's own style, and how that legacy is evolving with the next generation of beer writers today.

Roger Protz draws some of these threads together by summarizing Michael's contribution to the development of beer writing as a discipline, capturing perfectly the emotions and observations we all feel who carry on that discipline today.

The theme of personal reflection in Roger's piece continues with two other people who knew Michael well. Carolyn Smagalski maps out the final major chunk of Michael's legacy in an account of his role in the rebirth of American craft brewing, combining meticulous research with personal experience.

John Richards then gives us a first-hand, moving and often hilarious account of the time he spent filming Michael, giving us a unique insight into his world and the way

he worked. 'JR' also whets our appetite by revealing his plans for the hours of footage he recorded.

John Keeling of London's Fuller's Brewery gives us his personal memories of Michael, and uses this to comment on his legacy to brewers everywhere, inspiring them to create great beers and warming them up to talk to beer writers, helping create a dialogue that has done much to popularize great beer around the world.

Appropriately, we end by looking forward, not back. Mark Dredge describes the next chapter in beer writing: the revolution online, with blogs, social media and video opening up the world of beer writing to thousands of amateurs, democratizing the discipline Michael defined, moving into new areas and possibilities.

In 2009, the British Guild of Beer Writers renamed its most prestigious award after Michael. Thanks to my third book, I became the inaugural recipient of the Michael Jackson Gold Tankard for Beer Writer of the Year. It goes without saying that this was a huge honour. It's the top prize in what we do, and to win it that year, of all years, made it very special indeed. On the basis of that award, I was approached by Tim Holt of the Brewery History Society to guest edit this special edition of the Society's journal. It was a privilege to accept. Tim deserves all the credit for making this happen - it was an inspired idea. The speed with which all the authors approached agreed to con-

tribute is testament to the regard in which Michael is held.

As is the quality of their work.

Did I say beer writing could be boring? Never. I could not put this collection down. Every writer here is at the top of their game, and the work they have sub-

mitted in each case shows their talents at their best. This volume is compelling, wide-ranging, full of digressions, and beautifully written. It's everything beer writing should be, and as such, it's a very fitting tribute to Michael and his influence.

But of course, he got there before us.