

On the road with the Beer Hunter:

John Richards

'Are you rolling?'

It was how Michael, the director, usually began each shoot. The words came naturally, in his distinctive Yorkshire lilt. He was comfortable in front of the camera, glass in hand, an eyebrow raised.

'We're always rolling, Michael.' At first it was a joke, because I was constantly forgetting to switch the camera off between shots. But, over time, as we traveled and I realized just what kind of treasure sat before me, I let the camera run as much as possible.

'And are you rolling sound?' Michael was used to working with film. I was using video, so sound and picture were electro-magnetically one. But Michael, the romantic, preferred to use film terms.

'We've got speed.'

He would pause slightly, then break into an engaging discourse on history, geography, literature, water chemistry and anecdotal observations that would inevitably lead to the beer in his hand. A beer scholar's delight; the editor's dilemma. The purpose of our shooting was to film Michael tasting beers for the

Rare Beer Club, a venture which Michael started with American importer Rob Imeson in 1998. Rob had known Michael for years, and was generous enough to send me out on trips with him that didn't necessarily have anything to do directly with the club. It was here that the idea of a documentary, or another *Beer Hunter* series began. It was, needless to say, a wonderful adventure working with him. And it started the moment we met.

London

One of the most memorable experiences I had filming with Michael was also one of my first. I had just arrived in London from an exhausting, exhilarating week of videotaping vintners and vineyards in New Zealand, Australia, and South Africa for the Rare Beer Club's sister endeavour, the Vineyard Wine Club. At Heathrow I jumped into a London Black Cab which took me into Piccadilly Square and past Harrod's, the Victoria and Albert Museum, and eventually past Fuller's Brewery. It was February, and overcast, but mild compared to back home. I was excited and a bit nervous to meet this icon, The Beer Hunter. Twenty minutes later or so I arrived at Michael's office. It was a simple, white brick garage with green doors,

located on a quiet street in a modest residential area of Hammersmith lined with tidy row houses. Apparently it used to be a brewery. I was greeted at the door by Keith Johnsen, the director of marketing for the Rare Beer Club and an old friend of Michael's, and he ushered me inside.

I'll never forget that first encounter with Michael. Although he was most likely trying to catch up with an overdue deadline before heading out for a long afternoon of filming, he shook my hand and politely began to ask questions about my journey, unfazed by the sudden digression. After a few minutes he was inter-

rupted by Owen Barstow, his assistant, who prodded him to stay focused. Owen and Keith were clearly anxious to be moving on to our shooting appointment, and hovered over Michael as he slowly, deliberately typed away from notes littering his desk area. Michael, as I learned in time, was never a slave to deadlines or the passage of time in general. Which was fine with me, as it gave me time to wander around and absorb the unique spectacle before me.

Michael's office was a fantastic clutter, a wondrous pile of books, journals, whiskey and beer bottles, tasting glasses (many



Figure 1. Michael outside his home and office, Hammersmith.



Figure 2. Michael in *The Beer Shop*, Pitfield Street, London.

still containing a certain amount of liquid), filing cabinets, and drinking vessels of all shapes and materials. Hanging from a pipe on the ceiling were a few chairs and stools. Anchoring the maelstrom was Michael, in the corner at his laptop: serene, calm, his mind an orderly prism of the stimulus piled around him.

As I wandered about, Keith briefed me on the mission. Our schedule was robust, as always: over the course of the next three days we were to film Michael tasting twelve beers at various locations around London, take a tour of his locals and other favourite pubs, and oh, in the middle of that, I was to accompany him on a

quick overnight trip to Paris, where he was the guest of honor at the launch of the French version of *Whisky Magazine*. There was no real business purpose for this, other than to record the event for posterity. I happily agreed.

A few moments later we were in a cab bound for *The Beer Shop*, then Great Britain's 'premier retailer of weird and interesting beers' (according to the owner.) Joining us at *The Beer Shop* was Ben Vinken, publisher of the Belgian magazine *Beer Passion*. He had brought two of Michael's favourite Belgium beers which were to be in the club. One of them was *Malheur*, which was delivered in a

beautiful, 750ml. cork-finished bottle. The other was a Brussels Triple, similarly out-fitted. We set up in front of a wall of beer bottles from all over the world. Keith popped the cork and poured a glass for Michael. Michael asked a few questions about members and delivery dates, then turned to the camera.

'Are you rolling?'

'Yes.'

Michael's face took on a more serious tone, he raised an eyebrow, and I recorded the first moments in three years of filming with him:

'You know, I've always argued that Belgium treats beer more like wine than any other country does. And when you look at a champagne style bottle like this, this is something you see an awful lot of in Belgium. I'm very strongly in favour of this, because I think that beer deserves to be treated with more respect, beer is a drink of equal complexity and nobility to that of wine. So I'm always pleased to see it presented properly.'

And in that Michael summed up a reoccurring theme to his work: beer deserves the same respect as wine. No more, no less. He continued on with a family history of Malheur, of his love for the zany enthusiasm and quirkiness of Belgian brewers, and a short treatise on Belgian beer as a whole. Somewhere in there I realized to just let the camera run at all times.

After that he moved into the Brussels Triple, and much of the talk concerned beer's advantages in pairing with food *versus* wine. The Triple, in particular, paired very well with asparagus.

That night we dined at fancy hotel restaurant with Owen and Michael's agent, Francis. There was wine, as well as beer on the table, and Michael of course proved equally comfortable talking about literature, politics, and the nuances of wine as he did of any other subject. And he insisted we sit down for a dram of one of his favorite nightcaps in the parlour. It was a fitting end of my first day with the Beer Hunter, a man with a myriad interests.

The next morning we took a tour of Michael's neighbourhood, past his old local, as well as a side trip to the famous pub on the Thames, The Dove. One of the best things about travelling with Michael is that we had to visit and film at some of the best pubs in the world. Michael loved the pub: it was a place where you could order a pint and sidle up to a complete stranger and talk about whatever you felt like. Michael, erudite in most subjects, and a natural conversationalist, was a particularly adept pub-goer. The Dove was a great place, and since it was around 10am, we had it to ourselves. In the alley out front, we began our shoot.

'What do you want me to do, JR?' Michael asked. I was surprised that the Beer Hunter was asking me for direction.

I mumbled back something to the effect of, 'just talk about the Dove and where we are.'

'Okay, and who am I looking at?'

'Well, me.'

'Right, okay. But it's not like a piece to camera, it's like I'm chatting to you or something?'

'Sure. That sounds great.' I was thinking to myself, 'Is he serious? Does he really think that *I'm* the director here?' I realized then how humble Michael was.

'Okay' Pause. 'This is the original, main street of Hammersmith, my neighbourhood.

100 years ago, or 150 years ago, it was a market garden area, established right here on the river Thames, because a smaller river, a creek really, flows into the River Thames here, and right here, is one of London's most famous pubs, it's a pub called the Dove. But it's called the Dove on one side, and The Doves on the other, because no one can really decide if it's singular or plural. It's a landmark here on the day of the boat races between Oxford and Cambridge.' Take.

We went inside, where a roaring fire cast a glow in the dark interior. On the walls were signatures of famous people, mostly writers, who had frequented the Dove. Michael chatted with the owner, as he always does, in that way that puts

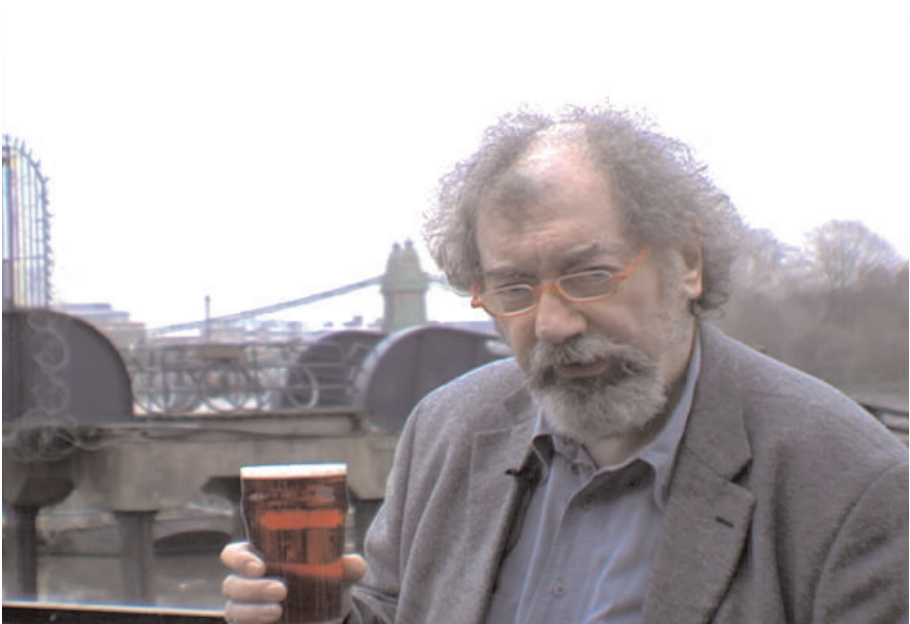


Figure 3. Michael outside The Dove, Hammersmith.

everyone at ease. He was refreshing her memory on the history of the pub, but not didactically. Michael was a man of the people, and never once did I see him put on airs or act in any way that was not respectful and generous to our hosts. Not all directors can say that.

We sat out back and enjoyed a wonderful, early lunch of typical British pub food: fish and chips, bangers and mash, fried mullet and a salad. The food was delicious.

After we went down to the back wall of the patio, which looked out over the river, to finish our shoot. Michael held up a fresh pint of Chiswick Bitter, eyed it thoughtfully, took a small sip, and uttered what would become the introduction to our DVD:

'Well, half past ten. Got to leave fairly soon, go get a plane. That's the downside sometimes, when you're just enjoying a beer, isn't it? But that's what you have to do if you're a Beer Hunter. It's not all cakes and ale, you know.'

He took a few sips, set down his half-full beer, and with that, we were off.

A few hours later we were at the airport in Paris. In the cab to our hotel Michael attempted to converse with the cabbie in French. Michael loved interrogating cabbies - he found them to be some of the most interesting people he met in his travels, and they were always a source of journalistic material.

Michael was the guest of honour at the launch of the French version of *Whisky Magazine*. The tasting took place at Lavinia, a large, elegant liquor store on Boulevard de la Madeleine. We popped in briefly, were whisked off to our hotel a few blocks away, and were back at Lavinia within the hour. There commenced a six-hour, three-part tasting with the magazine launch, press tasting, a two public tastings with questions and answers. Michael tasted along with his good friend Martine Nouet (the publisher of the French version of *Whisky*) and Scottish whisky expert Dave Broom, in a blind format. After each tasting the audience was supposed to guess which whisky they were tasting from around 16 bottles set up before them.

It was there I learned that Michael was just as highly regarded (some say more highly) in the whisky world as the beer world.

The event was long. The tasting started around 4pm, as I recall. After two hours of filming, I punched out and turned to tasting whisky, which I considered pretty rough compared to the nice, cold Chiswick I had that morning. I calmed my empty stomach with a fairly constant supply of small French sausages and chunks of cheese, baskets of which were placed all around the tasting room. After a few hours of that, my stomach, not to mention my head, was feeling a bit dodgy. And Michael was getting crabby. He was hungry, but our dinner reservations weren't until 11pm. Nonetheless, he

graciously sat down with his friend Martine and tasted a beer to camera.

Michael opened it, looked to the camera.

'Are we rolling, J.R.?'

'We are.'

'This is a beer from Corsica. It looks like a fairly normal beer, I think it's based on a Pilsner type beer, it's got a wonderful head, and a dense, very well-retained head. But the special feature of this beer is that it contains chestnuts. I don't quite know how they get the chestnuts into the beer, because I haven't been to the brewery yet. I was concerned that the oiliness of the chestnuts might flatten the head, but it's holding up very well.'

He noses the beer. 'It's got a very nutty, fruity kind of aroma.'

He takes a sip and ponders the flavours for a long moment. 'I taste a little bit of Japanese whisky, and, a little bit of Irish whisky aged in Madeira, and a little bit of Scottish coastal whisky.' While Michael could get testy - he was human, after all - his threshold for complaint was incredibly high, and he never lost his sense of humour.

After the tasting had concluded and Michael had signed his usual quota of books, we hopped into a cab with Martine and the organizers of the tasting and soon found ourselves at the door of 'La Cave de L'Os à Moelle' (Cellar of the

Bone Marrow). Travelling with Michael was very much like travelling with a Rock Star. You always got the best tables and the best service at the best places. The bistro was small, lively, with stone walls and low ceilings. A group of men sat around the bar, smoking cigarettes and carving thin slices of meat off a huge pork leg that sat on the bar. We were ushered into a small room where a long table was set with rustic flatware, silver, and bowls of bread. In the corner a wood stove held pots of food, and there were a few large terrines on the table. It was the epitome of the romantic Parisian bistro. We gorged on terrine, cheese, bread, and country food that was served family-style off the stove in the back of the room.

At around one in the morning we were allowed back to our hotel. After all, we needed to be at the airport at 6am the next morning, so we could get back to London in time to finish another full day of tastings for the beer club. So we retired to our rooms, our departure looming, and attempted to sleep. That's when it hit me. I'm not sure whether it was food poisoning, or just an overload of pork fat, cheese, and whisky, but I did not spend much time in my room that night. I did pass Michael a few times in the hallway, and it appeared that neither of us getting a good sleep. At dawn we crawled into our cab, a bit hallucinatory from lack of sleep.

We both fell asleep the moment we hit our plane seats. When we awoke, it was to the stewardess gently shaking us. The plane was completely empty. It was just

Michael and I in the back. Though I could still hardly speak, Michael noticed something in the stewardess's accent.

'Are you from such and such village outside of Manchester?', I recall him saying.

'Why, yes', replied the stewardess, surprised. And then they went on for ten or fifteen minutes, chatting about the subtle acoustic differences of certain villages outside of Manchester. Such was travelling with Michael.

On the way back to his office to meet Keith, Michael got to chatting with the cabbie as usual. He discovered that the driver was a home brewer, and member of a small local craft beer club. He didn't appear to have ever heard of Michael Jackson, but he did lament the fact that it was difficult to find a good IPA in England. When we got to the office, Michael immediately went inside and returned a few moments later with two large bottles of IPA, one from England, and one from America.

Back at the White Horse pub, Parsons Green, a couple hours later, we were into our second beer tasting with six more to go. A waitress came up with menus, but I couldn't eat a thing, which was rare. On my second day of filming with the legendary *Beer Hunter*, instead of taking a civilized lunch with him at one of the most revered pubs in Europe, I lay on the ground behind a table in the foetal position, napping off whatever it was that had invaded my body. Had it been anyone

else but Michael, the experience would have been humiliating. Michael took it all good-naturedly, though, and later on he fell asleep on camera, between takes. It was our first bonding experience.

The catalyst for any contemporary video record of Michael, and one of the unsung heroes of the craft beer movement, is Rob Imeson. Rob was one of the original founders of MicroStar Keg Management, and had been in the import business his whole life. He founded the Rare Beer Club with Michael in 1998.

In many ways, Rob was the Yin to Michael's Yang. Where Michael was a calm in the eye of the storm, Rob was the storm. Rob was the mover, the behind-the-scenes shaker, the tall American with the hearty laugh and the ability to have four conversations at once. He was always the loudest guy in the room, whereas Michael was the quietest. Rob is just one of the most fun people to work with and be around, and Michael had a fond regard for him. But much to Michael's chagrin, Rob's do-everything personality was also embodied in his itineraries, a fact which did not fit well with Michael's penchant for digression. Such was the case in the Czech Republic.

Czech Republic

One of my favourite trips with Michael was that following October, to the Czech Republic, where we spent three whole

days, an eternity compared to most of our itineraries. But those three days found us running from one impossible appointment to another. We spent a great deal of time in the village of Breznice, at the Herold Brewery, about an hour outside of Prague. The brewery was old, historic, and needed some upgrades, but was a wonderful example of a traditional Czech Brewery brewing traditional styles of beer. The brewery had its own maltings, and at the time of our visit, ripe barley was brought in and spread out on the concrete floors to begin the malting process. Down in the cellar were the open, concrete fermenters, where the beer evolved under piles of thick foam. At

one point the head brewer went to a secondary fermenting tank and pulled a long draught of ale into his large, brass brewer's mug, and passed it around, starting with Michael. Michael immediately identified it as a 12 degree ale. It was one of the most delicious beers I had ever tasted: fresh, malty, a slight hoppiness, it seemed to have the essence of fresh bread. After tasting through the rest of their beers, and a lunch that went on far too long, we rushed back to Prague, late for a press conference with Michael at a local pub. We were well over an hour late, which was typical, as Michael always gave everyone we met his full time and attention. Regardless, the pub



Figure 4. At the Herold Brewery.

was absolutely packed when we arrived. I was supposed to film the event, but I couldn't even get close. Cameras and microphones and reporters were everywhere. It was quite a reception, and even Michael was surprised and quite delighted. I think he worried that his work would become irrelevant, that he would be forgotten, like the styles of beer that he wrote about. To have such an enthusiastic reception from the Czech press was very encouraging to him at that point in his career. He was not forgotten there.

The next day, we were taken on a pub tour through downtown Prague by the manager of Herold Brewery, American transplant David Porteous. One of our stops was dinner at the Tiger, where we were treated to a tasting of fresh Pilsner Urquell in the old cellar. For dinner we were served the Tiger's traditional family-style dish: slow roasted pork in a thick brown gravy, with a hint of red pepper. It was a memorable meal, and the owners asked Michael to sign the guest book. He put his name not far from another signature: Bill Clinton.

After dinner at the Tiger we were brought to a night club, called Jama, that was owned by an American, Max Munson. Max ushered us up to a small room on the top floor, with a view down onto the stage and dance floor. Max immediately passed around shots of distilled 'beer', made from spent grains, which Michael reluctantly took a sip of. It had been another long day, and we had walked more than a few miles. His leg was hurting, and it was time

to retire. After a round of beers, our group of four had to leave for the train station to catch a night coach to Italy for our next assignment. We left Michael to the company of a small group of Czech men who enthusiastically pressed him to autograph their copies of various books he had written. My last memory was looking back to say good bye to Michael, and seeing him surrounded, politely signing and answering questions as best he could as we slipped away unnoticed. We still laugh about that night, and how we left poor Michael to the wolves.

Ireland and Belgium

Other trips stand out: our journey to Ireland, in particular. We started our three-day junket filming in Galway, at the Biddy Early, a wonderful little brew pub not far from the coast. Owner Niall Garvey provided a beer for the club that was made from local honey, taken from bees that frequented a rare species of flower that only grew on the nearby Burrens. We took a trip to the Burrens the next rainy afternoon, and walked upon the barren rock features and admired a distant rainbow over the ocean. The next day we crossed the island to Dublin, where Michael tasted beers at the venerable Porterhouse Microbrewery, one of the few microbreweries in the country. Again, it was the red carpet everywhere we went. Michael typically went to bed early, and I noticed that for someone who tastes beer for a living, he never did really drink that much.

In June of 2005 we spent a few glorious days in Belgium, tasting all kinds of beers at various pubs and attending the Beer Passion Festival. Michael was very much in his element here, and the Belgian beer press was always close at hand. But still, even here, Michael was very much a cult figure. The young people in Belgium were now turning to cocktails, to Budweiser, to soda and cola. Or so the older generation of beer enthusiasts felt. It was a topic that surfaced often, during tastings, how centuries-old recipes and traditions were slowly fading, despite the efforts of writers like Michael.

USA

But over in America, it was a different story. It was in the US that Michael received the most enthusiastic reception. He was nothing less than a Rock Star to the craft brewing community. His writing had found fertile ground, perhaps because there were as yet few traditions, and he sparked the careers of many a home, and professional, brewer. Everywhere we went, he packed bars and halls and restaurants and spent countless hours signing books afterwards. With each signing he took the



Figure 5. Taking notes, Yard's Brewery, Philadelphia, 2004.

time to have a short conversation with whomever he was speaking to, and took care to sign something that fit with their conversation. The holy grail of American home brewers, was to smuggle their own beer into his hands for a tasting. During many a book signing individuals would produce a bottle from under their coat, and often a glass. Michael always obliged.

One evening, during an epic tour of the mid-Atlantic region, we filmed Michael attending a special dinner at the Monk's Cafe, in Philadelphia. It was in conjunction with the Book and the Cook weekend. Earlier that day Michael gave three consecutive sold-out tastings to over 1,000 people who packed the University of Pennsylvania's Lower Egyptian Hall, as they had done year after year for the event. After dinner at Monk's, Michael retired to the back of the restaurant, to tell a 'quick story' to a large group of people who had gathered there after the dinner to hear him speak some words. I sent my production assistant, Clarke Paschall, in to film it. A full hour later, he was struggling to hold up the camera, as Michael continued to engage the audience in story after story. You would think there was a stand-up comedian in the room, to listen to the laughter that erupted from that room.

But it is still that first encounter with Michael that left a lasting impression: sitting in his office, chatting with the owner of his local, walking around to his favourite neighbourhood pubs and beer haunts. He was home. From that point

on, we were mostly on the road together. I was always amazed at the schedule Michael kept. He was constantly on-the-go, constantly 'on.' He never complained about our schedule, about last-minute additions or changes, about late nights and the inevitable early morning. When we found out he had been suffering from Parkinsons, we were stunned. Not by the diagnosis, which we had suspected by then, but by how strong and clear he remained despite his medications and condition. By spring of 2006 our shooting schedule had concluded, and I didn't speak to Michael for a long while. I was busy editing my own show about wine and travel, inspired by my experiences with Michael and the Vineyard Wine Club.

One evening, back in Colorado, I received a call from Rob. He said, 'I have a friend here that wants to speak with you.' In a moment a voice came on the line. 'JR! How are you?'

There was noise in the background. At first I didn't recognize the voice.

'It's been too long. Are you still fussing around with wine?'

Suddenly I realized who it was. At first I was shocked. 'Michael. How are you! Yes, I am still working on our wine show.'

'Well, you've chosen the wrong beverage,' he remarked wryly.

'I know. But how am I supposed to compete with you?'

He sounded in excellent health, and even better spirits. He was in love. He was thinking of moving to Philadelphia. We chatted for a few moments. He had to get back to his dinner, and his hosts.

'Great talking with you, JR. We need to talk more about another *Beer Hunter* series, you know.'

'I know. I look forward to it. Let's coordinate something with Rob soon. Goodbye Michael.'

'Goodbye JR.'

I hung up and enjoyed the moment. To

have a moment like that with Michael was special. I never thought it would have mattered, but it did, coming from someone who I had grown to admire so much.

In the few months after, I started thinking about another *Beer Hunter* series, how it would be distributed, who would fund it. During our last shoots together we talked frequently of producing another series. Michael was frustrated that so far, no network had come forward to help fund or distribute the idea. Apparently no studio executive thought beer was a commercially viable television idea any more. I kept thinking the internet would



Figure 6. Michael in his local, the Andover Arms.

somehow provide a starting point to reach the many thousands of beer enthusiasts in the US and beyond who enjoyed Michael's work. We didn't need a distributor, or a network to sign off. YouTube and the blogosphere would be the new frontier for the *Beer Hunter*.

Then the email came, on that morning in August of 2007, when the world stopped briefly. Michael had passed on.

In the months after, grief turned to shock, shock turned to sadness. None of us could really believe that Michael was gone. There was no notion of a documentary at first. It was too soon, and too sudden.

But over the course time, we realized that Michael's legacy needed to be preserved. His story needed to be told, correctly. One day I sat in my office, and started looking through my tapes again: Ireland, Czech Republic, London, Philly, National Geographic, Dogfish Head, Anchor Steam, and on and on through the litany of great breweries, pubs, and cities. I knew I had to do something with the footage. It was too precious to keep

locked up on a tape. I spoke with Rob about making a movie of Michael's life. We started talking about even doing another *Beer Hunter* series, using old and new footage. Michael would have liked that.

That was two years ago. Since then I have been slowly logging the tapes, and going through the long, sometimes frustrating process of producing a documentary and keeping a day job. I'm lucky, though, as I get to live with Michael from time to time, sometimes for hours in a day. I hear his stories, relive our adventures, and agonize over what parts of his life to include in the edit, which words to keep and which to cut. I want to share that with everyone that knew and loved him, and those that don't even know him yet.

And as I sit in my office, editing through footage of Michael, I hear that refrain often:

'Are we rolling?'

To which I silently reply, 'Yes, Michael. We're always rolling.'