

Michael Jackson: the personal view of a brewer

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I have been asked two questions. How did Michael and his writings influence me and how did he influence British brewing? Well the first one is easy - after all it is about my favourite subject, me! The second is harder, or is it? In fact it's the same question really, after all I am a British brewer working in the most English of breweries. Michael helped change British brewers (including me) and therefore changed British brewing.

So what was British brewing like before Michael? I joined Wilson's Brewery (part of the Watney group) in Newton Heath, Manchester in 1974. The brewery overlooked the railway yards where Newton Heath Loco football team was formed. It also overlooked the pitch where they played. I played for Wilson's on that very pitch. Newton Heath Loco later became Manchester United, the team I support (I am, after all, from Manchester). Those facts, I would find out later, would delight Michael. He loved the background as it made the brewer a real person. This was just before Michael's book, *The World Guide to Beer*, was published in 1977. So I guess I can give my view on British brewing pre Michael.

Back then, brewing was dominated by the so-called 'Big Six' of Bass, Whitbread,

Allied, Watneys, Guinness and Scottish and Newcastle. They led the way in technological innovation in barley brewing, enzyme use, filtration and kegging for example. The regionals were seen as backward, dull and largely uninteresting (unless you wanted to buy them). The big boys employed the brightest of people, the regionals employed what was left. Indeed, if you felt like early retirement from a big company you would write to a regional and tell them you would like to be their Head Brewer. Micro Brewers did not exist.

Unfortunately for the beer drinker, all those great brains were employed to make beer cheaper to produce, not better to drink. The aim of reducing costs resulted in the rise of keg beer (easier to look after) and longer shelf life beers (easier to warehouse and deliver). Removal of flavour was a by-product of this, because beer with less flavour was easier to control. This also demeaned and reduced the influence of the brewer who was now being seen as merely a tool to achieve what the cost-conscious Big Six wanted.

Meanwhile, the best regionals continued with their traditional views, which included that the brewer was a person to be

valued and who was responsible for the flavour of the beer. Perhaps their most important viewpoint was that your beer was something to be proud of.

As a young laboratory technician in the great Watney Empire, all my friends and work colleagues were drinking beer. Not Watneys, Allied or Whitbread but Robinsons, Boddingtons or Oldham Breweries. I wasn't particularly proud of the beer I was helping to produce. Perhaps the marketeers were wrong. Perhaps there was a different way.

Then along came CAMRA and Michael. I was aware of CAMRA at that point but not Michael. CAMRA's influence was more immediate, Michael's took longer to manifest itself and it was different and more personal.

I left Watneys in 1977 and went to Heriot-Watt to study Brewing and Distilling. Heriot-Watt is in Edinburgh. This is a great city to be a student in but the beer was awful. A beer and a chaser was a lager and a vodka, not a pint of heavy and a single malt. I then joined Fuller's in January 1981. By then I had heard of Michael and the world of brewing was beginning to reveal itself to young brewers like me. That was the start, without Michael it might never have happened or it would certainly have taken a whole lot longer.

Brewers were not used to talking to beer writers. Brewers were not used to talking to anybody other than other brewers!

Some still have this problem. I do not. One of the reasons for this is that Michael was so easy to talk to. Most of our conversations would include all sorts of topics. Beer would merely be part of it, sometimes not even the most important part. I learnt to trust beer writers and enjoy their company from my first exposure to them. Brewers in the Big Six found this a problem. You can guess why. They had nothing to talk about. Cutting costs was not on Michael's agenda. Older brewers at regionals found talking to beer writers like Michael a problem too. I think this was more of a trust issue or maybe it was because Michael wasn't technical, therefore by default he was something to do with marketing!

I was very lucky as a young brewer. I worked for a great company and a great boss in Reg Drury. I became good friends with Ken Don the Head Brewer of Young's. But I also benefitted from having Michael Jackson on my doorstep. Michael's early influence on me was through these two great brewers. My direct discussions with him were really just part of a group of people talking about beer. I started to read his books and I watched his TV programme. I began to have an opinion on how we could develop new beers. British brewing was changing, and I was too.

So what part of this change did Michael influence?

The brewing industry has changed enormously. No more Big Six. International

companies now owning our biggest breweries. The rise of the micros. Regionals becoming the big boys. But we need to look at the brewers to see Michael's influence.

Brewing production had been split into two areas. The big production units are producing big volume commodity products. The brewers (or should we say 'production managers') at those companies are producing high quality, consistent beer. They still work for people looking primarily to cut costs. The beer lacks character and flavour. They are still clever people with lots of knowledge and very occasionally they are let off the leash. When they are, they make far more interesting beers. If it wasn't for Michael this would never happen

The other area is that dominated by regional and micro brewing. This is where we can see so much of Michael's influence. The brewers working in this area sought to make beers with interesting, distinctive flavour and great character. They were less interested in consistency and certainly less interested in KPIs or SKUs. They learnt to work with marketing and accountants instead of for them or even against them. Although I have long maintained that if both accountants and marketers worked for brewers, the world would be so much better! The better marketers began to understand the brewers but they needed Michael to help their understanding. Both marketers and brewers became proud of their beers. Michael helped this world of micro and regional brewers to flourish. He greatly

influenced the huge micro revolution in the USA and in turn this has influenced our micro revolution. He encouraged brewers to let their character show through into their beers and to let their drinkers get to know them. This was of course where beer writers came in. I would like to ask a question. How do you get character into beer? The answer? You let characters make it.

In 1999 I became the Brewing Director of Fuller's, in succession to Reg. This led to more direct meetings with Michael and more one-to-one discussions. I am a Lancastrian and he was a Yorkshireman but we were both professional Northerners and thus we had a common bond. The conversation flowed. We both loved sport, he loved Rugby League. I told him my team was Wigan. My dad supported Wigan, Lancashire CC and Manchester United FC. Therefore so did I. So did my brothers. One of my brothers lives in Huddersfield. 'Do you know the pub The Sair?' Michael asks. 'Yes, he lives about five doors from it' says I. We were connected not just by beer but by a common thread of life experience. He asked about Heriot-Watt. He too had lived in Edinburgh. Something more that we both had in common.

Although we never socialised our relationship was always about friendship. He called to ask for a favour. He invited us for a visit to his workplace. I discussed beers with him and took advice. He certainly helped make it possible for friendships to exist between brewers and beer writers.

Fuller's was the closest brewery to Michael's Hammersmith home. He was kind to his brewery neighbors in his writing and he did love Chiswick Bitter. Chiswick is the brewers favourite too. He visited Fuller's on numerous occasions. I gave a tutored tasting on Vintage Ales which was great fun and it was the first time Michael heard me lecture. Afterwards he said that Reg had a School Masterly approach to brewing while I, on the other hand, was more like a Rugby League scrum half! A nice compliment to both of us I think!

He later asked me about the World Beer Cup and why I was not going. I said I would love to go but I had not been invited and I would have to clear it with my boss. At that moment Michael Turner and John Roberts appeared and started a conversation with Michael. During that conversation Michael suggested to my bosses that a great brewery like Fuller's should have its Head Brewer at the World Beer Cup. My tickets and hotel were duly booked!

I have since been to four World Beer Cups and greatly enjoyed them. Not only has it enabled me to meet many brewers from around the world but it also gave a moment to be proud of. Fuller's managed

to win the Gold Medal for ESB in 2006. I was on hand to receive the award. As I walked up to the stage I passed close to Michael's table. He jumped up and shook my hand. A proud moment for me but it was also vindication for Michael for getting British brewers to the World Beer Cup and to become less insular.

So Michael has influenced both marketers and brewers. He made them understand their roles within the brewery. He has helped breweries and brewers to become proud of their beers. He felt that brewers had to be characters with opinions. He knew it was a world of beer, not just Britain, and he made brewers understand this too.

Brewers now are ambassadors for their breweries, they love talking to beer writers, they work better with marketing, they understand that beer has to have flavour and character. There is a world of beer that gets bigger by the day. Brewers make better beer because of all of this.

Michael was definitely one of the people who started the ball rolling, perhaps he gave it the biggest push. He would certainly be pleased that the ball continues to roll and gain momentum.