

Michael Jackson and beer writing

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The publisher of a leading beer magazine in the United States told me back in the early 1990s that if I wanted 'to make it' in America I would have to write more like Michael Jackson. I told him I had no intention of changing my writing style: like it or lump it. And I wondered at the time what Evelyn Waugh or Graham Greene might have told their American publishers if they'd been advised 'to write more like Ernest Hemingway'. Their replies would have been illuminating, and probably unprintable.

I didn't turn down the offer because I thought my writing skills were superior to Michael's. On the contrary: he was a great stylist, a beautiful writer, a one-off. He had that rare ability to make words, phrases and sentences sing from the page and remain for years in the memory. In the late 1970s, I sat up until the wee, small hours reading the first edition of the *Pocket Beer Book*, his selection of the world's best beers. As a relative newcomer to beer writing, I marvelled at his knowledge, erudition, grasp of brewing techniques and, above all, his astonishing skill at describing beers in a way that made them fascinating and demanding to be tasted. A year or two earlier, when I had just started to write about beer and

was grappling with the need to understand how British cask-conditioned beers were made, a large tome called the *World Guide to Beer* landed on my desk. I realised as I turned the pages that there was a whole new world of beer waiting for me beyond the boundaries of the British Isles. Courtesy of Michael, I discovered that 'lager' made in Germany or Czechoslovakia was not a pale, fizzy, insipid brew but a style with a history and tradition as rich as that of ale. At a time when the Cold War was still a chilling presence in all our lives, it was a revelation to learn that great beers were brewed behind the Iron Curtain. The book also taught me that the French and the Americans made good beer but you had to tease them out from the wine culture of France and the cold embrace of the mass market 'suds' in the United States. Most revealing of all was the news that, just across the North Sea from England, Belgium offered a positive cornucopia of beer, with such mesmerising styles as Sour Red, Lambic and Trappist.

What made the book an inspiration as well as an eye-opener was the quiet passion of the author. I have heard Michael criticised in some quarters for not being a campaigning journalist. That misses

the point of his writing. He loved beer and, in particular, he loved the traditions and the culture that underscore beer. Consider this on Pilsener from the Czech section of the *World Guide*:

Elsewhere, many brewers use the term 'Pilsener' for any golden lager. All Pilseners are pale lager; not all pale lagers are truly Pilseners. Unfortunately, there is no universally accepted term for a lesser lager derived from the Pilsener style. It can only be described as being broadly in the Pilsener style. In the New World, this is what people mean when they say 'beer'. All their everyday beers are distant derivations of Pilsen's original. A distant derivation indeed: comparing a serious Pilsener from another country with the Czech original is rather like comparing a Californian Chardonnay with one from Burgundy.

There's no hyperbole in that paragraph, no grab you by the collar and shout in your face. But it makes it crystal clear that Michael thought that many so-called Pilseners are not worthy of the name and true members of the style should be celebrated and cosseted.

That section of the guide is illustrated by a striking photograph of a Czech brewer testing the clarity of his fermenting beer with light from a candle. I longed to see that at first hand but had to wait several years before I followed in Michael's footsteps, made the difficult journey through the curtain and saw the celebrated brewmaster Josef Tolar at the Budweiser Budvar brewery checking his beer with

the aid of candlelight. We all followed in Michaels' footsteps. When Neil Hanson finished his stint as editor of the *Good Beer Guide* in the 1980s, he went to Australia to follow his other passion, Rugby League (a passion, incidentally, he shared with Michael). But Neil found time to drink a few beers and visit some breweries. When he heard there was a brewery in Papua New Guinea he took the short flight and, as he crunched across the golden sands, thought that he must surely be the first beer writer from the northern hemisphere to have made the trip. But Robinson Crusoe quickly found that Man Friday had been there first. The brewer greeted him warmly and said: 'You're from England? Tell me, how is Michael Jackson?'

The *World Guide* established Michael's reputation but it was his writing on Belgian beer that brought him international acclaim. His work in Belgium and the several editions of his Belgian guide stand as a testimony to his remarkable skill as a writer, a skill honed in the rough trade of provincial newspaper reporting. As Owen Barstow, Michael's personal assistant for many years, says, he was a copious note-taker and would also record interviews that Owen would then transcribe. I have seen him at first-hand in breweries, asking questions about ingredients and brewing methods that made lesser mortals marvel and even experienced brewers scratch their heads. Michael steeped himself in Belgian brewing practice. He mastered the astonishing micro-biological behaviour that produces

lambic and gueuze. But, unsatisfied by that depth of knowledge, he went to Spain to study the way in which *flor*, the cap of yeast on fino and manzanilla sheries, protects the wine from air and oxidation in a similar fashion to lambic in its oaks casks. Even today I visit Belgian breweries with a degree of trepidation for fear I make some fundamental error in my reports that will have Michael sadly shaking his head from the Great Saloon Bar in the Sky.

Michael's output was remarkable, even more so when you consider his working habits. He once told me he had been dismissed from the voluntary role of secretary of his local Labour Party because of his shambolic lifestyle that led to the loss of vital papers and minutes. When I was editing *What's Brewing*, to which he contributed a monthly column, I asked if he would send his copy on disk rather than paper. He replied, plaintively, that he did not know how to copy. Lacking such elementary skills, how did the books and articles flow from him in an unending stream, books that involved obtaining samples of beer from around the world, and writing and storing meticulous tasting notes? The answer to this conundrum came during a long and informative pub lunch with Owen Barstow. Long before Owen arrived, Michael had the good fortune to work for publishers who provided back-up research assistance. Under Owen's firm guidance, not only were articles copied on to disk - now largely an irrelevance - but Michael also ran a website and fully entered the digital age.

Owen said that before Michael became ill with Parkinson's, he would divide his day between journalism in the morning and book writing in the afternoon. Where newspaper and magazines articles were concerned, he would make a simple plan, with just a few key words, then go back and write the full text. As I suspected, he was a great re-writer and polisher, but he did so at speed, conscious of the need to meet his deadlines. Before illness took its grip, Michael was rarely late with articles or books though, in the finest traditions of journalism (which have not been lost on the editor of this compilation) if a deadline was midnight then the copy would arrive precisely at 12pm. Towards the end of his life, when he found it difficult to type, he would dictate. 'It was stream of consciousness,' Owen said, 'but incredibly - if he were asked for 1,200 words - it would fit.' That was the newspaper reporter in Michael coming out, recalling his days on the *Huddersfield Examiner* when he would phone 500 words to a copy-taker in the office. He never forgot - in fact he extolled - that training. A few years ago, when I commissioned him to write an essay for the *Good Beer Guide*, he asked if he could 'see a black' of another writer's contribution to avoid duplication. 'Black' is ancient journalese for a carbon copy. When he was fully fit in the 1980s and 1990s, his writing was exemplary and made the rest of us stand back in awe and sometimes outright despair.

In 1989, he contributed an essay to the *Good Beer Guide* on beer and lager that

is a small masterpiece, worthy of reprinting in full. His task was to tackle the age-old statement posed by many people: 'I don't like beer - but I do like lager'. Michael uses irony and humour by way of answer. This is dangerous territory for even the best writers. It can all go horribly wrong. Irony can tip over into sarcasm, humour can fall flat and you end up accused of being patronising and even rude. But Michael didn't put a foot wrong.

Lager has its place. Let us not be niggardly; it has its places. There are at least three of them: Czechoslovakia, if you would like to try the golden-coloured, dry flowery style of lager that was first made in the town of Pilsen, Bohemia; or Vienna, if you think you might prefer a fuller-coloured, spicier lager; or Bavaria, if your taste could run to a lager that is sweetly malty and sometimes in the original, dark brown, style.

Real lager is dark? I never knew that.

Not many people do, but you won't learn much about lager from drinking the British stuff.

I drink Ersatzenbrau. That's German.

German-ish. It's brewed under licence in a place you thought was nothing more sinister than a missile silo, at a convenient intersection of trucking routes between three major centres of population.

Ersatzenbrau! That's stunning, brilliant ... and very funny.

In 2003, Julie Johnson, the editor of *All About Beer* magazine in the US, asked her regular contributors to name books on the subject that had influenced them most. It took me only a moment's thought to choose my book and I wrote:

Most beer books are transitory; too many are just stale rehashes of earlier work. One book that stands the test of time is Michael Jackson's *Beer Companion*, his finest work, first published in 1993 but just as valid today as it was a decade ago. The British novelist Fay Weldon said when she read Isabel Allende's *The House of the Spirits*, 'Now that's written the rest of us can all go home.' Michael's book had a similar impact on me, though - in common with Fay Weldon - I continue to write!

It begins with the memorable paragraph, 'No one goes in to a restaurant and requests "a plate of food, please". People do not ask simply for "a glass of wine", without specifying, at the very last, whether they fancy red or white, perhaps sparkling or still. More often, they trouble to decide whether the red should be American or Australian, from Burgundy or Bordeaux, and choose a vineyard and year. When their mood switches from the grape to the grain, these same discerning folk ask simply for "a beer", or perhaps name a brand, without thinking about its suitability for the mood or moment. What the British call "plonk" and the Americans "jug wine" is often well-made and good value, but there is more to the grape than that. It is well understood that there are 'fine wines', but less widely appreciated that beer can be equally varied, complex and noble. The

similarities between wines and beers are far greater than the differences. Wines begin with fruit (usually, but not always, the grape), while beers start with grain (customarily, but not necessarily, barley); both are made by fermentation; and many of the flavour compounds naturally formed are shared between them. Distil wine and you have brandy. Distil beer and you make whisky.'

I ended my contribution to *All About Beer*:

From there he goes on to extol the joys of beer, its methods of manufacture, and then takes us on a dazzling world tour of regions and styles. It is encyclopaedic, passionate,

lucid, committed and beautifully written, a tour de force that will survive when other beer books have turned to dust.

I think that assessment was right. Just before I finished this piece, I visited Veltins brewery in North-west Germany, where a fine interpretation of Pilsener is made: Michael, of course, had been there before me. As I toured the brew-house, I spotted in a prominent position in the laboratory a German translation of one of his books, titled simply *Bier*.

The song is ended, but the melody lingers on.