

# Michael Jackson and world beers

Tim Webb

Michael Jackson invented modern beer writing by taking the subject seriously when writing for the drinking public.

It is not true to say that he was the first beer writer of the modern era. Frank Baillie, with *The Beer Drinker's Companion*, a collation of every UK craft brewery in production in 1972, or Richard Boston, columnist in *The Guardian*, who began writing about beer at roughly the same time, could each lay a better claim to that accolade. What is true is that Michael was the first beer writer to be read internationally and to have influence in countries far from his own and from the place of origin of the beers about which he wrote.

Few had heard of him before he penned his remarkably fully formed work, *The World Guide to Beer* in 1977, the first ever attempt to create a guide to all the interesting beer styles around the globe. I had been bitten by the beer bug in 1974 through the upsurge in interest in British cask beers created by CAMRA. His noble book, designed to grace a coffee table I might come to own once my student days were over, spurred me on to discover the beers of Germany, Czechoslovakia and Belgium.

While Michael's writing took me off message as far as 'real ale' was concerned, it kept up my interest in beer at a time when this might easily have started to wane. In a practical sense his writing shaped the course of my life more than any other author I have read.

Re-reading the original *World Guide* a third of a century later, it evokes a pre-revolutionary era in which the industrial beer makers were consuming each other and all before them, as they would for decades to come, until they could gorge no more. They had created a world largely devoid of interesting beers, in which the proletariat would be expected to drink only a favourite tinned lager.

World domination was not quite in the bag though, as a few awkward drinking cultures still existed in which beers outside the prescribed norms of the new order continued to be made and enjoyed. Michael's description of this unknown world prompted a generation of beer lovers to go and explore, more confident in their conviction that beer held more interest than other drinks and newly informed about what there was to discover and experience. Conveniently, the richest seam of this secret eccentricity

was to be found less than 50 miles from the Kentish coast, in Belgium.

If you read Michael's early writings about Belgian beer, what comes across is his sense of wonder. His obvious pleasure in discovering a lost world of variations on the theme of grain and hop comes across with infectious enthusiasm that while thankfully lacking out the whoops and cheering, has none of the censored gravitas of his later writings, when he knew that fortunes could turn on his opinion. He balanced attempts to describe the technical differences between types of beer, with his journalist's eye for a story, albeit perpetuating and even creating a few brewing myths in the process. But had he delivered a tighter analysis, would he have captured the imagination of the young men and women who went on the change the face of international brewing? I doubt it.

What he found in the Belgium of the early 1970s was an historical tapestry of brewing so rich in detail that patterns were difficult to disentangle, or to describe as a cohesive whole, though he made a pretty good fist of it. His makeshift categorisation of the subtypes of beer that include all 400 different styles of Belgian beer has stood the test of time pretty well.

What he described then was a brewing industry, if 'industry' is an appropriate collective noun for a ramshackle collection of small family concerns racked by poor investment, that had little sense of

a future and was astonished that a foreigner would take interest in it at all.

A few months after I first read his writings on Belgium, I found myself walking down Spuistraat in Amsterdam, with my girlfriend and a couple of Dutch pals. To this day I cannot explain the supernatural urge that told me to turn into an unpromising little alleyway called Raamsteeg and to discover the newly opened Gollem bar. Here, Michael's book became liquid reality.

I drank for the first time a dry, spritzy, clouded liquid called Oud Hoegaards, from a white stone bottle with embossed blue lettering, made by a man new to brewing called Pierre Celis, who had just started a revivalist wheat beer brewery in his home town of Hoegaarden. I remember trying for the first time a huge brown beer called Carolus, a heavy amber brew named Cuvée de l'Ermitage, something two steps off normal called Orval, a beer called Liefmans that had cherries in it and a filthy but oddly alluring concoction called gueuze, which I vowed never to drink again, or at least only the once.

In those days, lambic makers and small village brewers were locking their doors forever when the old man died or decided to retire to the Ardennes. No doting Belgian father in the 1970s would have looked at their spotty adolescent son and thought, 'If you want to make a name for yourself my boy, take up beer making.' Jean-Pierre Van Roy of Cantillon, Frank Boon, Armand and Guido Debelder of

Drie Fonteinen, the Herteleer brothers at Dolle Brouwers, Chris Bauweraerts at Achouffe and Jean-Louis Dits at Vapeur and were still only dreamers at this stage.

30 years on, the craft brewers of Belgium are held in awesome regard around the world, in a few cases for reasons that are entirely unjustified. Over 60% of beer brewed on Belgian soil is sent for export and most of Belgium's unique styles of beer are imitated, with varying degrees of success, by brewers who have never set foot in the country. Sceptics point out that this growth appears greater than it is because of the rise to glory of the former giants of Belgian brewing, Piedboeuf and Artois, whose merger in 1988 begat Interbrew that begat InBev that begat AB InBev, which brings us Stella and Leffe and Hoegaarden. This is true but shuffling in behind that monstrous wake are dozens of smaller companies, whose craft beer businesses and license to be inventive comes not from their sales in local village cafés but rather the state of their order book with importers across Europe, North America, the Far East and elsewhere.

Michael's legacy to Belgian brewing should not be measured in the sales of global brands that had their origins in Belgium but rather in the fact that we can now drink Gouden Carolus on the waterfront at Cape Town, Cantillon's Lou Pepe Kriek in chic ale houses in Brooklyn and Brasserie de la Senne's Taras Boulba and Zinnebir in specialist beer bars in Tokyo. From being a dying local trade in

the 1970s, barely mentioned in economic texts, brewing is now routinely cited as one of Belgium's key national industries.

As with the rest of the craft beer revolution that sea change did not occur naturally a process of gradual organic change. It was made to happen, against the trends of the day and while Michael did not bring it about on his own, he played a crucial role. By the time of his death he had compiled six editions of his *Great Beers of Belgium*, the last published posthumously. He was widely read all round the English-speaking world and beyond and was little short of a national hero in Belgium, where there is now an annual award, equivalent to 'craft brewer of the year', named in his honour.

Although Michael was not single-handedly responsible for the revival of Belgian craft brewing I doubt it would have happened without him. Indeed it is questionable how much of the global craft beer movement would have happened had he not lived and written and spoken when he did. Flemish writer and international beer judge Joris Pattyn summed it up best when he said,

Michael showed us in Belgium that we had a great beer culture. It was as if, up to that point, we did not know it or had forgotten.

Thanks to the revolution he inspired there is now in Belgium a new generation of enthused and positive young brewing execs, studying marketing, business methods, brewing science and green

technology before they take over their revived family concerns or else launch their own, carefully conceived craft brewing businesses. Unlike their forebears four decades ago, they are all pretty sure that if they choose to stay with it they will have a future in continuing to make and sell great beers, taking their market share from the big guys and not the other way around.

I was once privileged to see Michael perform live, in Washington DC, back in 1999. I was in the US for reasons that had nothing to do with beer but I spotted on the plane that the chain hotel where my hosts were putting me up happened to be a couple of blocks from the Brickskeller, a bar with a reasonable claim at the time to having the widest selection of beers in the world. I got to the hotel at about 18:00 Washington time, 23:00 UK time, and knew I had a reception event to endure a couple of hours later. After unpacking, showering and changing my clothes I had a little time to do some exploring, so I wandered up to the Brickskeller for a couple of local beers, to acclimatise. As I sat at the bar, busily mapping out my week's evening itineraries, one of the bar staff, spotting my English accent, intruded into my increasing tiredness with,

We have Michel Jackson speaking later this week, Thursday to Saturday to be exact. It's mostly sold out but we have a few tickets for Thursday if you're interested.

How could I refuse? Although I knew Michael reasonably well by this time I had

never heard him do his shtick. By now I had written three editions of *Good Beer Guide Belgium & Holland*, already seen in the US at that time as an alternative, which is to say ruder and cruder, take on the Belgian beer scene. I had no intention of cramping his style by letting him - or anyone else - know I was there, let alone get into any public discussion, so I just sat at the back, wearing a flat cap, and soaked it all in. What I remember most was that he was funny. Not just clever-witty funny, though there was enough of that, but laugh-out-loud-and-make-yourself-look-like-a-dork funny. The other thing I remember is that he was irreverent. Among what he took to be friends he was able to say what he thought about modern brewers and their better known beers.

Most beer writers, and in this Michael was no exception, must be constantly on the look-out for where the next writing assignment will come from. Even when times are good, much of the money for beer writing comes from sources closely connected to those parts of the brewing industry that specialise in creating big-brand products that are technically immaculate but deathly dull.

Michael was able to stay busy enough to keep the wolf from the door, through his whisky writing. He was never guilty of promoting beers he believed to be unworthy of attention. However, he did not have leeway politely to disregard the 'also ran' beers whose creators had been invited to sponsor whatever event

he was addressing, or book he was writing. This is the curse of sufficiently independent minds supported by insufficiently independent means.

In Washington there was no sponsor to risk upsetting. His elegantly withering wit turned hither and thither, deflating one puffed up icon after another, interspersed by brief but eloquent introductions to some favourite beers, described in that lush yet simple style that was his hallmark. After he had finished he drew the raffle tickets and I won first prize - a short denim jacket with full Brickseller regalia. My cover blown, we talked into the night. He signed across the shoulder in marker pen. I have never cleaned it. I never will.

If I were to suggest that at the time of his death Michael was at the height of his powers, those close to him would know I was lying. The last time I met him was at the Annual Dinner of the British Guild of Beer Writers, in the December before he died, when some kind soul sat us at the same table. I had heard stories in Belgium that he had been in a dreadful state at some ceremony or other, barely able to speak or stand up straight, which of course prompted rumours that the demon drink had finally got to him.

Until earlier last year I was an NHS consultant psychiatrist, with a particular interest in neurological conditions. I called it my day job - independent means and all that. The skills of interrogation and analysis I learned in that pursuit have often come in useful in my night

job, writing about beer. On this occasion I would have preferred to have been unskilled. Parkinson's Disease, especially the more aggressive form that Michael clearly had to endure for the last ten years of his life, not only causes the sufferer to shake, it can also interfere with speech and posture. I could well understand why people would think he was drunk, but he took only a few sips of beer that night. Enough to taste and no more. Although he did not mention what condition he had, it was obvious that he was seriously unwell with something. This was not befuddlement by drink - acute or chronic. I know enough about diseases of the nervous system to spot a malignant one, sadly.

I had wanted to ask him what it felt like to look back and know you have been responsible for changing the world in a small but discernible way. And what he thought about his column in *Whats Brewing* being dropped because its readership of CAMRA members did not like the fact he usually wrote about foreign beers. And whether he thought the early signs of a revival in the fortunes of authentic gueuze and kriel would last. And what his desert island beers were. But his speech was so constrained by illness that none of that was possible.

I found my mind wandering back to an evening at 't Brugs Beertje in Bruges in October 1986, when a small band of hacks, linked only by the facts that we wrote about beer for money and had been invited by the West Flanders tourist

authorities to spend a few days looking round their re-emerging beer scene, decided it was time that British beer drinkers became more ambitious.

Michael's contribution had been to say that it was essential that they be lead towards Belgian brewing in order to stretch their horizons. Brian Glover, then editor of *What's Brewing* and the man who persuaded Michael to write for the paper, cautioned that in a country busy reviving weak, low carbonation, draught beers, getting people to appreciate strong, fizzy bottled ones was a big ask.

We all agreed that CAMRA should found a publishing company, that Britain needed the sort of guild of beer writers that wine writers had formed, and that if the people in the bar that night did not make it happen, nobody else would. At least that is a *précis* of a conversation that began around 21:00 and ended shortly before 03:30. It was quite a night.

In 1977 *The World Guide to Beer* struggled to devote ten pages to the beers of the USA, relying heavily on photographs and illustrations, and mainly re-telling the story of how that countries massive brewing corporations had developed. Today's equivalent would struggle to contain its commentary to five times that space, as America's 1,600 and more microbreweries push their share of the massive US beer market to over 10%

for the first time before even considering its vibrant import culture which takes in craft beers from all over the world.

In Denmark, whose smaller breweries warranted one page in 1977, there are now close to a hundred new craft brewers, some making ground-breaking ales. In Argentina they have 120 craft breweries making beers in styles derived from places as far apart as Dublin, San Francisco and the Ruhr. In Italy they make sherry beers. In Vietnam they now make some pretty good stouts.

Michael's real legacy to the world is that he helped to create a state of affairs in which talented brewers can make old-style and newly created beers of imagination for the enjoyment of all and the betterment of our collective future. It is quite an achievement.

## Bibliography

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