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CAN YOU TASTE THE MUSIC?

Breweries and Bands Collaborate on Beers Inspired by Song

The first blending session happened backstage at the Roseland Theater in Portland, Ore., when Eric Salazar, wood cellar supervisor at New Belgium Brewing Company, delivered a few growlers of Stout and a few more of sour ales to the hard rock band Clutch, then on tour supporting Motorhead. “I remember mixing a sample of what I thought Clutch beer might taste like, taking it upstairs, and watching Motorhead just put it down,” says drummer Jean-Paul Gaster. “I thought the beer was pretty good, went back and mixed another one, and then another. By the end of the night I was pretty convinced that all of it tasted good.”

That was in 2011, when collaborations between breweries were already commonplace, but only a handful of breweries had taken the creative process further by developing beers with like-minded musicians. “My idea was that there were a lot of brewery collaborations, but that it’s not just brewers who love and think a lot about beer, so we should probably bring somebody else into this picture,” Salazar says. “I had been talking to Clutch a lot at that time, and realized these guys think very deeply about beer and that they would be a good group for a collaboration.”

The result was Clutch, a wood-aged American Wild Ale in New Belgium’s Lips

of Faith series made from 80 percent Stout and 20 percent sour. Stock dried up within months of the limited-edition beer’s release in August 2011, due at least in part to built-in demand from two fan bases as well as the collaboration’s novelty.

“We were very hands on. We went to the brewery, talked about things we liked, and actually brewed,” says Gaster before a soundcheck on a gray winter afternoon in Amsterdam, several weeks in advance of New Belgium’s re-release of a second, slightly tweaked version of Clutch in December. “That’s one thing that I’m proud about—that we were active in its concept and development.”

Today the Clutch ale has far more company. In 2016 alone, craft breweries across North America and Europe offered new beers inspired by or developed in tandem with The Descendents, Deftones, British Sea Power, 311, Millencolin, The Motet, and Stereophonics, to name a few. Many more “band beers” arrived before this latest wave, the majority of which reflected the kinship shared between rock and heavy metal bands and craft brewers. “I talk to a lot of brewers across the country, and it’s funny hearing how often we tend to have the same tastes in music,” says New Belgium’s Salazar.

“We were in Canada for a festival and a very entertaining character, [Unibroue brewmaster] Jerry Vietz, came in and we hit it off right away,” says Megadeth founder, guitarist, and lead singer Dave Mustaine, explaining the genesis of À Tout le Monde, a Belgian-style Saison made by the Quebec brewery. “Jerry is a rock fan, so he approached this as a sort of ‘rock metal’ brew. We wanted it to be uninhibited, something that had no boundaries; something that you would experience more than just a couple of flavors.”

Explaining that he knew little about brewing prior to the Unibroue project, Mustaine says the experience has been illuminating. “I learned the first time I went to the brewery that I didn’t know shit, and I barely know more than that still,” he admits. “But I’m one of those guys that really likes to learn about stuff. I don’t like to half-ass things, and I think that’s given Unibroue assurance that I’m not in it just to put my name on it and make money.”

Parallel yet distinct, the brewing and music industries have clearly found fraternity as they continue exploring with greater frequency the creative possibilities and the mutually beneficial reasons for collaboration. To mention marketing and profit potential is not to cast shade. Because, whether it’s written on the bottle label or in the liner notes of an album, every beer and every recording expresses its own narrative and hopes to gain a sympathetic audience.

As these collaborations become more mainstream—pop singer Rick Astley is currently developing a “fruity Pilsner” with Mikkeller—the stories behind the finished products have also become, in some cases, more esoteric (or gimmicky, depending on your point of view). For instance, Stillwater Artisanal Ales’ Sensory Series features brews that were inspired by a single song from an indie band, and the brewery tagged each bottle with a QR code linking to a video of a private performance of that song. According to the company’s website, the collaborations aim to “create a full sensory experience—sound, sight, smell, touch, and taste.” And in Somerville, Mass., Aeronaut Brewing teamed up with rockers The Lights Out on a 7.5 percent “Imperial Session IPA.” Dosed with Galaxy hops, T.R.I.P. included printed instructions on its can labels for accessing a free download of the band’s sci-fi-inspired album on Twitter.

Sure, such tactics will attract publicity, but maybe these aren’t just marketing plays. In fact, emerging brain research indicates that there might be parallels between the cognitive pathways that process taste and those that process sound.

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Which begs the question: could these mash-ups of music and flavor accurately embody a given band’s sound and spirit? More specifically, and perhaps more interestingly from a scientific perspective, is it possible to make a beer with flavors that somehow evoke or correspond to the *sound* of a band’s music?

One fairly obvious way brewers attempt to tangibly link a beer’s flavor profile with a band is by choosing meaningful ingredients. Bill Batten, a punk music fan and the brewmaster for Mikkeller Brewing

San Diego, handled production of Feel This, a 7.3 percent coffee IPA brewed in collaboration with famously caffeinated punk musicians The Descendents. Batten used a custom blend called Hypercaffium Spazzinate—named after the band’s latest album—from Chicago-based roasters Dark Matter. “I’d like to think that by infusing the special blend of coffee created for this beer it created the ‘feel’ the band desired to make this collaboration unique,” says Batten.

But beyond their participation in its



development, can a namesake ale truly mirror the spirit of a band? “I listen to funk, jazz, reggae, blues—all these things shape how I hear the drums, and I think because of that my approach to the drums is different than most other guys playing in heavy bands,” says Gaster of Clutch. “You can make that analogy with the beer: on its face value you look at it and see a Stout, but then you get into it and there’s this sour thing happening. It doesn’t have to be all Stout, just like it doesn’t have to be all funk. You can add these things in to create its own entity.”

Such musings on flavor identity raise compelling questions about how our senses are related, and a nascent field of academic research on sensory perception has taken steps toward proving, in controlled experiments involving alcohol, that the separate senses of taste and sound may have greater cross-modal interaction than once commonly thought. In other words, it could theoretically be possible to create beers that actually sound—and taste—like certain kinds of music.

“Sound can have a significant effect on flavor perception, and when I work with sound I try to work with music because it’s a big part of the auditory universe,” says Felipe Reinoso Carvalho, a Ph.D. candidate in electronics and informatics at Vrije Universiteit Brussels in Belgium. “Music is also about emotions, so I try to understand how we can use it as a source of pleasure in the tasting experience.”

Over the past two years Carvalho and his colleagues conducted research that looked for “natural trends” when participants were asked to evaluate beers while listening to different sounds and songs. In one study, Carvalho asked people to taste different beers and use tuners to choose a specific frequency they thought best matched each flavor. “The groups clearly differentiated the sweet beers toward high-pitched frequencies, and the bitter beers toward low-pitched frequencies,” he explains. “We could conclude then that people have these natural trends to associate bitterness with lower pitches and sweetness with higher pitches.”

In another study, Carvalho played

sounds made to be congruent with bitterness, sweetness, and sourness while listeners tasted the same beer twice, without knowing it was the same beer. “We found that besides the fact that these sounds enhanced the corresponding taste attribute, the bitter soundtracks also enhanced the beer’s perceived alcohol strength,” he explains. “That was an unexpected finding.”

Last year, Carvalho applied his research to a collaboration between British rock band The Editors and Brussels Beer Project in Brussels, Belgium. To make Salvation, head brewer Yves Leboeuf chose a beer style (English Porter) to reflect the “dark emotional” identity of two songs from the band’s latest album, infused the beer with a meaningful ingredient (Earl Gray tea), and then used Carvalho’s findings to inform his decisions on everything from the alcohol strength to the flavor itself. The result was a 5.3 percent ale with mild bitterness and hints of citrus. “I will continue to work with these studies, but need to understand the different structures of the different types of music before pairing or creating new beers,” says Leboeuf.

Does Salvation taste as intended? In a roundabout way, Carvalho put the beer to the test in another experiment, playing moody, dark songs by The Editors while participants tasted Salvation. “We weren’t looking for this, but found that those who were familiar with The Editors’ music liked the beer more than those who did not know the band,” he says. “So we saw that when you add these creative boundaries between music, food, and drinks, people may like the product more if they like the music.”

Carvalho isn’t referring to synesthesia, where one sense functions as another, but rather sensory transference, which occurs when we apply an experience with our perception of one given entity to our experience of another. For instance, you learn that one of your favorite country singers has a hip-hop side project and find yourself feeling receptive toward it.

If this research is largely on point (and that’s a big “if” at this stage), it could profoundly impact band and brewery

Band Beers Roundtable

We gathered five beer and music enthusiasts to sample a few band-brewery collaboration ales while listening to the corresponding group. Here are a few reactions:

PHANTOM BRIDE IPA | 7.1% ABV
The Deftones & Belching Beaver Brewery
“Great flavor and smells like I imagine a Deftones concert would smell: weed, stale beer, man-sweat, more weed.”

CLUTCH | 8.5% ABV
Clutch & New Belgium Brewing Company
“Typically I don’t like dark beers, but like sours and love this one; the more beer I drink the better the music sounds.”

FEEL THIS | 7.3% ABV
The Descendents & Mikkeller Brewing San Diego
“Weird aroma, but I like the IPA-coffee combo; this beer is taking me back to my punk days.”

À TOUT LE MONDE | 4.5% ABV
Megadeth & Unibroue
“A nice Farmhouse Saison, but nothing too special; Mustaine sounds a little like a cartoon character villain.”



“You can see how [bands] make music by the way they talk about beers.”

collaborations in the future. What if, for instance, a brewery developed a beer with a flavor profile neurologically cohesive with a band’s music, and a venue sold that beer at the band’s concert? In theory, the beer would enhance the music and vice versa, and, keeping sensory transference in mind, concertgoers would potentially leave with deeply positive associations with the brewery, the band, and maybe even the venue, too.

That scenario, minus the scientific foundation, served as the spark for Signature Brew, a London craft brewery with an identity built around music, right down to

can labels that look like backstage passes. “We weren’t happy with beer quality at venues and thought a cool way to improve it would be to get together with a band, make a beer with them, sell it to their fans at gigs, and problem solved,” says Sam McGregor, who left a career in music marketing to co-found the company with his cousin Tom Bott.

Since 2011, Signature Brew has worked with a number of bands, including Mastodon, Millencolin, and The Skints. After an initial chat with the band, McGregor tries to pinpoint an appropriate beer style before meeting them for

a tasting session. “One of the things I’ve learned from doing band tastings is that you can see how they make music by the way they talk about beers,” he says. “When we did one with [British rockers] Enter Shikari, they all said completely different things about the beer, which makes sense because if you listen to their music, it has all these different bits together, but it works.”

McGregor is keen to incorporate science into future band collaborations. “There are challenges,” he admits. “Proving the science exists without sounding too pretentious is one, and learning how to manipulate it and do what you want to do is another.”

Alex Brandmeyer, a Berkeley, Calif.-based Ph.D. researcher who studies cognitive neuroscience, finds some validity in Carvalho’s work and other related findings, but leans toward sensation transference, rather than interlinked sensations, as an explanation for some of these sound and taste associations. “It is not clear that these systematic relationships are neurobiological in nature,” he says. “The idea that listening to a specific type of music might enhance the taste of beer, in my mind, speaks to the emotive and cultural identity phenomena associated with general ‘mood enhancement’ effects, where sensory experiences are enhanced when individuals are deeply engaged during a particular activity.”

Whether or not there are neurological networks of taste and sound is still an open question, with potential implications that go far beyond the beer industry. In either case, it’s a fun question to ponder with some loud music and good beer. “People often describe sour beers as having some funk to them,” Gaster says, “so ‘Struck Down’ [off 2009’s *Strange Cousins from the West*] is a little like the Clutch beer: heavy-handed, but at the same time it’s got some funk in it.” ■

Brian Spencer is a Singapore-based freelance writer currently spending a few months a year in London. He has seen countless Clutch shows since the first in Flint, Mich, in 1994.