You Thought It Was The Other Way Around: Music Makes Beer Taste Better

By Hank Campbell — August 5, 2016

In that important oral monograph "Ten Rounds With José Cuervo [1]", the musical scholar Tracy Byrd discusses that in the first experiment of a 10 test study, a band which was un-listenable when he entered the lab sounded much better after a shot of tequila, and after two they sounded pretty darn good.

This was in line with the long-standing hypothesis that alcohol in moderation makes a lot of things better to the vast majority of people. Yet a new psychology paper turns that on its bottle cap [2] and finds that instead it may have been the music that led to shots three through 10. Music may have made the drinks taste better rather than the other way around.

They surveyed 231 drinkers (163 males, 68 females, mean age just under 36) about a beer under three different conditions and one of them involved listening to a song by a band ("The Editors") that says it wrote the music while thinking about the porter-style beer created by The Brussels Beer Project. I don't know how real writing music thinking about beer is but there may be something about complementary sensations [3] - sometimes we remember food or drink as tasting better because of the setting or the company.
I don’t even like beer but one year I was in Bavaria during Oktobefest and the beer was pretty good, I recall.

Those who listened to the beer-inspired music rated beer as tasting better than when the tasting was conducted in silence. Perhaps that is why there are bands in bars - it makes drinks taste better and so people have more of them. There is no end to psychological speculation available here. You can’t really prove anything wrong.

The confounders are obvious: 83 percent of the participants were The Brussels Beer Project clients, so this is basically a publicity stunt, but that doesn’t mean the hypothesis is bad. Environmental Working Group also puts out a list of bad foods every year as a publicity stunt, that doesn’t mean a cupcake you buy at the Whole Foods bakery is good for you.

Is a custom soundtrack going to be the wave of the future for beer connoisseurs? Perhaps, I am a guy who doesn’t even like beer but I have a special glass that optimizes the foam. I don’t see why serious drinkers wouldn’t want the perfect music to enhance the flavor even more.