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THE BIG PONDER

Beer

By Sally McGrane and Axel Scheele

Justin Wilcox: Here comes the Shiner Bock beer song for you, ladies and gentlemen. A-one, a-two, a-one, two, three, four.

[MUSIC]

Justin Wilcox: I'm Justin Wilcox, I grew up in East Bernard, Texas. Pretty much lived here my whole life. Been playing music since I was about 16.

[MUSIC]

Justin Wilcox: The song – we wrote it, it's probably going on 18 years old now. We were at the house, and we were doing some songwriting. My parents were out of town, so we cleared out the living room, set up drums and amps for an entire weekend, and we were trying to write some songs. And we couldn't think of anything to write about. And we happened to be drinking some Shiner beer, and Mike the drummer said: Why don't we write a song about Shiner Bock beer? And 30 minutes later, we penciled some stuff down and put some music to it.

[MUSIC]

Sally McGrane: In Texas, one of the most famous beers, a Bock, is actually German. That doesn't surprise a Berlin beer historian.

Hanno Hochmuth: My name is Hanno Hochmuth, and I'm a historian at the Leibniz Center for Contemporary History in Potsdam, and I'm specializing in urban and public history. And in Germany, there is a very old tradition of brewing beer, and Germans are very proud that one of the oldest laws from 1516 – though the Bavarians, as one German tribe actually claims it to be, the "Bavarian Purity Law." But it clearly shows that there's this very old tradition of brewing beer and also this old tradition of claiming that this is something distinctive German. Though other countries also produced beer, and it goes back, I think, to the ancient times of the old Phoenicians. However, it's a pretty German thing, it's not only considered to be a German thing, but it's a German tradition. And with the mass immigration to America, brewing beer was also transferred there.

Shiner Speaker: The year was 1909, when German and Czech farmers longed for a beer with the Old World quality and taste they remembered back home. So, they put up a two-story tin shed at a site with access to a deep artesian well. And realizing that they needed a true brewing craftsman, they located a Bavarian brewmaster by the name of Kosmos Spoetzl.

Jimmy Mauric: Kosmos Spoetzl was a really interesting guy. I mean, he understood the location where he was at – the farmers, the agriculture, that was over here. He was always known for the beer. He would go out in his either horse and buggy or he had a little car at that time – a motorized car – and he would go out in the farms. And he'd always set a bottle of Shiner on the fence post, so when the farmers would come around to make that round of plowing, they'd pick that beer up. They knew Kosmos was there. So, he was a salesman there too. He knew how to get these guys to buy his beer. My name is Jimmy Mauric, I'm the brewmaster at Spoetzl Brewery in Shiner, Texas. I've been here, coming in June, it will be 44 years, so I've been working here since I was 17 years old. Only job I've ever had. You know, born and raised here in Shiner, Texas. My mother was Czech, and my father was German. The Mauric – M-a-u-r-i-c – is actually pronounced Mau-rick. The German and Czech farmers actually settled here in Shiner, Texas, because we had a railroad coming through. And this was a huge agricultural community. They were planting corn and cotton. Cotton was huge in Shiner. So, they settled in to plant their crops, but they had no beer. You know, Shiner, Texas, is between San Antonio and Houston. We're in the middle of nowhere. As I like to say, we're in the middle of a pasture 50 miles from nowhere. That being said, they wanted their beer. So, they actually started the Shiner Brewery Association. They dug a hand well right here on the banks of the Boggy Creek, right here where the brewery is located now because it was an artesian spring coming out of the ground. So, they dug it right there. So that, you know, it was a great water source. So, they dug their well, so they had their water for their beer. They start this in 1909. You know, we're 113 years old, so we've been here a long time. They started making beer, but they struggled making good beer. So, that's where they finally had to get somebody that actually was a brewmaster. They had a guy that – his uncle was actually a brewmaster, and his name was Kosmos Spoetzl. He was actually a brewmaster in Germany. He brewed in Cairo, Egypt, for a while. He came to the States up north and was brewing and up in Canada. And they invited him here to South Central Texas. Because his nephew was here, he decided to, you know, to move down here. The rest, I could say, is history. He moved down here, our brewery is still named Kosmos Spoetzl Brewery, kept the name all these years. And this was about 1915 when Kosmos came down here. He brewed for a while for these guys. And finally, he actually bought the brewery and owned it till 1950 until his death. That's when his daughter, Miss Ceelie, took over. She owned it for over ten years to 1960 before she sold it to a group of investors. During Prohibition, he kept the brewery open. We had refrigeration back then, so we produced ice. The old refrigerators, everything were wooden refrigerators, and you put ice in it, and that's what kept everything cold. So, we sold ice, but we also – at that time, Kosmos was known to make 'near beer.' And it was also known to be

nearer to beer than it was near beer. So, he always forgot to take a step out, was to take the alcohol out of it.

Shiner Speaker: Today's story's about bars, where not beer but time is served. The original brewmaster of Shiner Bock, Kosmos Spoetzl, went to jail for delivering beer to the good folks of Texas. Now, after nearly two years of serving time, why would this man go back to the same dark craft that got him locked away? 'Cause to not brew Bock would be the crime.

Jimmy Mauric: We had the Shiner Premium. Our flagship beer was at one time Shiner Beers, Shiner Texas Special, Shiner Blonde – it got rebranded as Shiner Premium. It was rebranded so many times through the years, but it was kind of one of the original recipes that Kosmos had. And the only thing that we actually changed from that too was to put a little corn in it to make it more of a premium lager. So, we get the same thing with the Bock, and we actually made a more drinkable, sessionable Bock out of it in the '70s.

Axel Scheele: Hang on, Jimmy. What does 'sessionable' mean?

Jimmy Mauric: Sessionable means that you could, you can drink a bunch of them. And you know, again, it was a little lower in alcohol, not heavy, not highly hopped, not very bitter, so it's – you can drink a bunch of these beers. You know, back to back.

Shiner Speaker: Let's talk about funerals. Of the happy variety. See back in the '70s, there were folks in Austin who liked music and Shiner Bock. Trouble was, there wasn't always a delivery truck for Shiner Bock. But there was a hippie man with a funeral car. Wisdom would say, don't put the fate of your beer in the hands of delivery hippies with hearses. Then again, wisdom does not drink.

Jimmy Mauric: Austin, Texas, is right down the road. Huge college, you know, city. And when we had this seasonal beer called Shiner Bock, and we put it out there, it was very dark. It was out on the tables in pitchers. And yeah, if you hear the word, the term, for Austin is: Keep Austin weird. Well, they like stuff like that, it was unique. It was different. But this is what happened with the Shiner Bock: It was very drinkable. It's very sessionable. It looked very dark and intimidating on the table and in the pitchers, but when they drank it, it was really sessionable, and they could drink a lot of it, so they thought they were really badass. They could drink this big dark beer, but it was very sessionable beer, and that's what made Shiner Bock very appealing to these guys. And again, they graduated from this college, they moved on, and they took their Shiner Bock with them. And then, it was a Texas thing, you know. It was Texas Barbecue and Shiner Bock.

Shiner Speaker: In Texas, there's only one way to say: Shiner. Just say it with Shiner.

Jimmy Mauric: It kind of grew through the years that way because when you thought about Texas, you thought about Shiner Bock. In the '70s and '80s, there was only six breweries in Texas. You know, we talked a bit about the craft side. You know, there was Pearl, Lone Star, Stroh's, Miller, there was Anheuser-Busch, and there was Shiner. There was only six breweries in Texas. And then all of a sudden in the '90s, all these craft, these small breweries started opening up, and they called them craft breweries. And after all these years – after 100 years of brewing – we finally figured out what we were. We were a craft brewery! That's what we are! That was the name. We weren't a big regional brewery. We weren't the major kind. We were a craft brewery. And the Shiner Bock, again, was our, you know, our flagship beer. It took over the Shiner Premium. And again today, it's 75% of our total volume. You know, we're doing a lot of different beers, ales. We're doing fruit-type beers, you know, light beers, premium beers, seltzers. But Shiner Bock is still 75% of our total volume. It continues. You know, it's not just a Texas following now. It's in 50 states. And really, people associate Texas, well, you know, with Shiner Bock.

Shiner Speaker: Here in Shiner, we make beer because beer makes the world a better place. So, we're on a mission to put a Shiner in the hands of people who deserve it. Which if you think about it, is everybody. Prosit forward!

Sally McGrane: Back in Berlin, we visited a beer garden on a sunny Monday afternoon. Eric was reading a book, while he waits for his work permit to go through.

Eric: *Ein Helles*, it's a big Bavarian-style lager and don't know a ton else about it, but I had gotten a Pils originally. And so, I was trying something different. I moved from the West Coast, and so, I feel like stuff here is definitely a lot less hoppy. The West Coast is very IPA-centric, and so, I'm enjoying the difference.

[SOUND OF POURING BEER]

Torsten: [IN GERMAN] Also wir kommen aus Ost-Westfalen, also Richtung Teutoburger Wald.

Axel Scheele: Torsten and Steffi are from the Teutoburger Wald. They're drinking Alster, which is beer with lemonade.

Steffi: [IN GERMAN] Alster, also Bier mit Limonade, ne?

Axel Scheele: But more important for them, is to sit outside on a sunny day.

Steffi: [IN GERMAN] Wir sitzen jetzt nicht wegen dem Bier. Wir sitzen einfach weil die Sonne scheint und es ist schön warm und einfach eine kleine Pause.

[SOUND OF POURING BEER]

Sally McGrane: Lars has been coming to this beer garden since the GDR [EDITOR'S NOTE: EAST GERMANY, OFFICIALLY THE GERMAN DEMOCRATIC REPUBLIC] days when he says it was a lot more proletarian.

Lars: I drink Hefeweizen. Normally, I'm a Pils drinker, but the Pils is very bad, so I have to take this one. You can't drink Berlin beer, you have all the big industries, the big breweries. It's not from here anymore.

Sally McGrane: Hanno tells us that Berlin actually used to be a wine city.

Hanno: Until the 18th century, for example, it was more common here to produce and to drink wine, even in Berlin, than beer. But then, in the 18th century, there were some like horrible winters, where most of the vineyards got frozen, and this was one of the reasons why it changed from wine to the consumption and production of beer. There were *Weinberge*, vineyards, everywhere in Berlin. For example, the famous Kreuzberg, and there used to be even the official vineyards of the city of Berlin until the 18th century, when it was basically replaced by the largest brewery of Berlin – that was the Schultheiss brewery. The Schultheiss brewery, however, is no longer producing. And nowadays, we can find vineyards again at the Kreuzberg. So as always in history, you have something like going back and forth and constant change.

Sally McGrane: Berlin's beer brewing industry has undergone a lot of change, explains Hanno.

Hanno: In Berlin, the whole production and consumption of beer changed significantly during the last 150 years. Back in the 19th century, the production and the consumption of beer was actually one of the largest businesses. Around 1900, we had, I don't know, up to 100 major industrial-scale breweries. Nowadays, there's only one large-scale brewery left in Berlin – it's in Hohenschönhausen on Weißenseer Weg. And as a matter of fact, the last remaining brands of Berlin's popular beers – that is Schultheiss, that is Berliner Pilsner, and Berliner Kindl – they are all brewed now in the very same brewery. And they also belong to the same brewing company, and this brewing company also belongs to one of these major brewing companies in Germany. And so, we have this process of merging and of big monopolies basically. And when it comes to brewing beer, and people are not very satisfied with this situation that these beers, they're coming all from the same brewery, and you have basically also the same beers everywhere nationwide in Germany, especially Beck's for example, that you can basically get everywhere. And so, when we think about sustainability, it's just not very sustainable anymore because the most of the beer that we drink nowadays is not coming from Berlin, but it has to be carried from elsewhere in Germany throughout the whole country to drink it in Berlin. But Berlin is also a very green city, not only in terms of all the trees that we have but also in political terms. So, the idea of sustainability and also the criticism regarding big monopolies and so on is also very strong here, so that's why there's lots of sympathy when it comes to the idea of having small beers, craftsmanship, producing

your own beer but not transporting it throughout Germany. So, that's one of the reasons. And the second reason are the expats

Sally McGrane: Namely, Americans who move to Berlin and miss the beer they know from home.

Hanno: Many Germans, maybe also other beer drinkers, would probably argue that there was some decay or decline connected with American beer industry. When we talk about large-scale brewing in America. At least beers like Budweiser are not considered to be the best beers in the world. And usually, people distinguish quite a lot between the original Budweiser from Czech Republic and the American Budweiser that many people consider to be something between beer and water. But the industrial large-scale brewing in America changed significantly in the last, I'd say, ten or 20 years with the craft beer industry, which is actually not really an industry, but it's claimed to be craftsmanship, so on a lower scale. And as a matter of fact, this is the transfer now from America back to Germany, also back to other parts in Europe, that now we have these American-style craft beer in many places in Germany. Above all in Berlin.

Vagabund Speaker: In the mid-1700s, there were over 300 breweries in Berlin. However, most of these old breweries have been torn down or have fallen into disrepair. Today, there are only a handful of major producers left, mostly brewing the same almost completely uniform style of beer. For us, beer is more than a cheap, mass-produced commodity. Beer is a fundamental part of our culture. It's linked to the core of our society, back when nomads decided to build a home so they could ferment their beer and build a wagon so they could move it.

Matt Walthall: We are Vagabund Brauerei, based here in Berlin. I am Matt Walthall. I'm an American from, originally, Maryland. Studied at the Goethe-Institut in Washington, D.C., for a year, and I came to Berlin in 2005, May 2005. Basically for a summer vacation and that extended out a number of years after I met my then-girlfriend, now-wife. And in 2011, I started a brewery here. I basically started out of my kitchen, and now, we're standing in front of our 3,000-liter brew system. So, we went from 20 liters to 3,000 over the last couple years.

Axel Scheele: So, was it always your plan to stay in Berlin and brew beer?

Matt Walthall: No, no, absolutely not. No, no, I was planning to go to law school. I thought I would just have a summer in Europe. I knew Berlin well at that point and thought that it would be a good like home base to start. Then, I got a TOEFL certificate to teach English as a foreign language. And so, I thought, yeah, I could teach a couple students, make some like money on the side, and then just travel around for the summer – and then come back before going to law school. And then, I learned that I could delay my LSAT scores and my law school applications. I could put them on hold. And that was sort of the death knell there. Because then I could extend like to one year, and then I think the LSATs, at that point, I could pause them

for three. And by the time I got the third year, I'm like, nah, I don't want to do that anymore. And I really just sort of got sucked into the Berlin culture. I was in a band, I was acting in the theater here, in the English theater. I had lots of friends that were artists. And so, that whole like, you know, artistic subculture of Berlin, I did not want to leave. [LAUGHTER] And it was randomly through that, it was like from our band, that we started talking about the beers that we missed during practice. Because I was drinking beer while playing music. And at that point – I mean, it still is very much the case that like 90% of all the beer that's sold in Germany is Pilsner. Certainly back then, this would have been around 2009, we were talking about, where can I find a porter? Where can I find a pale ale or an IPA and all of those things? And then, we really went on a long search trying to find them, and we couldn't. At least, we did – we found like I remember a really dusty six-pack that had expired a year before, and I think we paid maybe 20 euros for it just 'cause we were so excited to find it. And then, it really became a means to an end – if we wanted to drink those beers, we started to brew them at home. Yeah, that's what we did. And then, we would brew the beer and then sell it at friends' – well, for donations – at friends' like art gallery exhibitions and then at our own music performances like in between, where we'd be selling merch and then our beer on the side. And then, yeah, it was around 2011, where we decided, okay, let's go professional with this. But then, it became a very weird thing because certainly at that time craft beer was not known here, and we spent a lot of time just thinking about the vocabulary for it. Because like [IN GERMAN] Kraft, es hat eine andere Bedeutung auf Deutsch. You know it's like it's a *Kraft*, power. And then, we thought like, well, are they going to think we're selling like, you know, a Red Bull beer if we call it craft beer? But I mean, it's crazy to think ... Now, it's all over the place like people know what it is. In 2009, not a single soul aside from us really knew what we were talking about except people that had actually traveled to the U.S. or the U.K. So yeah, in a lot of ways, we were very much at the very forefront of craft beer here.

Axel Scheele: The first beer you brewed – how was it?

Matt Walthall: Here, not that great. It was alcohol. The first thing we did, the big mistake is that we made a Pilsner, which is a lager. It's an industrial beer, a Pilsner. You need refrigeration, you need a whole lot of industrial equipment – the kinds of things you don't have in your apartment – and we didn't have a proper refrigeration setup for it. We didn't have proper temperature controls, all of that. So, it was a bad beer to start with. And then, the big thing that we did not take note of was evaporation rate. Because so much water had evaporated, it went from what was supposed to be a 5% beer to a 9% beer. So, it got us drunk, but it was not a good beer. It was not something that I really wanted to hand out. And some of the people that we shared that beer with, yeah, they were always very surprised, oh, really, you now have like one of the like the third-largest craft breweries in Berlin, and that was your beer? I remember that one. It was really bad. But yeah, I mean from that we quickly learned, I think. Yeah, the whole evaporation rate thing. We figured that out very quickly, that mistake. And yeah, it was always just process improvement after process improvement.

Axel Scheele: So now, you're at a good quality.

Matt Walthall: Yeah, yeah, yeah. Definitely, definitely, definitely, like yeah. And we have a very nice modern beautiful brew system here from Casper Schultz out of Bamberg, which in my opinion, is like one of the Porsches or Mercedes of the brewing industry. Since the 1600s, they've been making brew systems. For the listeners out there, I highly recommend to someone in the brewing industry, like don't go to Oktoberfest, it's such like a cliché thing to do at this point. If you really want to experience some really cool unique German beer culture, go to Bamberg. It has the most breweries per person than any city in Germany, and there's these nice, beautiful, small, little breweries that brew all kinds of you know, beautiful Pilsners, Helles, smoked beers, dark beers – all out of there. The American brewing industry is all based off of German immigrants, to a great deal. When I'm trying to push American craft beer on the German market, often I bring that fact up because they look at us as if, oh, America, you just drink like cheap industrial beer – which a great deal is true. But we also have this long tradition of brewing. A lot of that came from the German immigrants. We had Bocks and Hefeweizens and all these different styles that were being brewed in the U.S., and a lot of that culture was sort of lost somewhat through Prohibition and then anti-German sentiment during the First World War and Second World War. But then, when the craft beer industry started back up again, a lot of those craft breweries then were seeking out German brewers. It's always been this mix of a sort of American experimentation and then German traditions and technology.

Shiner Speaker: That tradition of craftsmanship and pride made Kosmos Spoetzl a legend. And it continues today at our little brewery in Shiner.

Jimmy Mauric: In a small town, we have great work ethic here. You know, we have nepotism at its best here. It's a family community. We have husbands, wives, brothers, sisters, mothers, daughters working here. You know, it's just a huge family-oriented town. So again, these people make great employees because they want good beer too, and they know that their parents or their mother or whatever will be on their butt for not making good beer. It's rewarding here to see all the young people coming up now, and you know, trying to mentor and teach them the arts of brewing and all the different ways to history. You know, a lot of it's telling the stories. You know, we have a lot of stories, and a lot of young people had aunts, uncles, grandparents, parents here working, you know, through the years. So I mean, our local bar owner – you know, that we go get a beer at – his grandparents both retired from here. So, I worked with both of them. So again, it's those kinds of stories. You've always got something to talk about. And it's usually about beer.

Shiner Speaker: Next time you're in town, stop by the Shiner Hospitality Room. Our hospitality is delicious. Enjoy your Shiner. From our town to yours, Prosit!

Axel Scheele: For THE BIG PONDER, this was ...

Sally McGrane: Sally McGrane.

Axel Scheele: And Axel Scheele.

[MUSIC]

THE BIG PONDER is a transatlantic podcast by the Goethe-Institut that explores abstract concepts and phenomena through personal radio essays. Every other week, one of our producers transforms a broad topic into a captivating story told from a U.S.-German perspective.

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