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mixed case: opinion and advice

Can't Hear the Music, Part 2

Most wine companies fail to make a natural match with the music world, but one small importer may have unlocked the secret

Posted: Dec 18, 2013 11:45am ET

By Ben O'Donnell

The youngest generation of wine drinkers wears an iPod like an appendage. Yet the wine industry fails again and again to gain traction with the music world, largely because celebrity brand allegiances look—and usually are—forced and phony, as I wrote yesterday. I became skeptical that wine companies could create cred out of nothing. One small import company, however, is topping all the charts and hitting high notes in sales.

In 2006, Jay Z publicly boycotted Cristal Champagne over a clumsy remark by Roederer's managing director. The same year, Jay rapped about "gold bottles of that Ace of Spades," and the Champagne's shiny fuselage made a cameo in his video for "Show Me What You Got." Ace of Spades, in its shimmery metallic gold casing, is perhaps the most slickly packaged wine since, well, Cristal. The brand was officially called Armand de Brignac; it had no pedigree in Champagne—it seemingly materialized out of nowhere—but bottles cost \$300.

Rumors swirled, and author Zack Greenburg later described in his unauthorized biography of Jay Z, *Empire State of Mind*, an arrangement detailed by anonymous sources: A small but respected house called Champagne Cattier made the wine, but the product was essentially created by importer Sovereign Brands, with Jay Z, Cattier and Sovereign each taking a cut of sales and the rapper possibly receiving \$50 million in Sovereign's equity. Jay batted this away: "All this Ace of Spades, I drink just to piss it out." But go to any of his 40/40 clubs today: 30-foot-high towers of the gold bottles are stacked to the ceilings.

Doth Jay Z protest too much? Holding up a bottle for a photo and collecting a paycheck is one thing, but singing about a bottle, and appearing all over social media with a bottle and stocking your club with a bottle—well, to all appearances you certainly seem to like the stuff. And that kind of investment means you're risking *your* brand as a celebrity on the wine's image.

Consider Sovereign's latest, launched last year and already distributed in more than 30 countries, according to Brett Berish, the company's CEO. Luc Belaire is a sparkling Provençal rosé packaged in a sleek black bottle. The "partnership"—unconfirmed—here is a natural one: Florida rapper Rick Ross, alias Ricky Rozay, and his Maybach Music Group.



WireImage/Getty Images

"Belaire sippin' / Foreign car dippin'"

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Ross and his crew have been all over Instagram sporting varsity-style jackets emblazoned with "Black Bottle Boys" across the back; there is also a Black Bottle Boys Twitter account (and a Black Bottle Girls one!) in addition to the official Belaire feed, and two Black Bottle Boys mixtapes. Ross, with his MMG confreres, released the album *Self Made Vol. 3* in September. By my count, there are at least three references to drinking Luc Belaire, and it pops up in the videos too. Earlier, MMG put out a promotional video for the wine ("This is trash ..." Ross holds up a blurred-out bottle to the camera before tossing it. "... and this is class": a Belaire bottle), with the hashtag #ChampagneShowers, which no doubt thrilled the Champenois—famously zealous in insisting that if a wine's not from their region, it ain't Champagne.

When I wrote Berish asking if Ross or MMG had a financial arrangement with Sovereign, he replied, "Rick Ross is a big fan of rosé wine in general, and when we launched Belaire last year, he fell in love with the bottles and taste. Rick has been a great (and very visible) 'ambassador' for the brand—but is just one of many entertainers and sports personalities that have become fans of the brand." That is a different answer than "no."

But would it matter? I doubt it. Rick Ross took his name from a notorious cocaine trafficker, but in his former life he went by Corrections Officer William Roberts. He wasn't gangster after all, and when it came to light, fans simply shrugged.

In Ross' lyrics, videos and pictures, Luc Belaire is posed alongside a rotation of luxury goodies—Lamborghini, Versace, literal piles of money—good-life stuff most fans could only salivate over. But wouldn't you know, Belaire is only 30 bucks a pop? It's bubbly, it's rosé, it's close enough to Champagne and it's a little slice of the Maybach dream. Other companies have been rubbing sticks together for years with their "pop" affiliations; Sovereign showed up with a lit torch.

The lesson here is perhaps counterintuitive: Ace of Spades and Belaire are flogged so much by Jay and Ross that they *must* be getting a cut, and wouldn't drinkers see through such arrangements? Maybe, but these aren't celebrities posing in wine adverts and taking a check. They're guzzling the stuff on camera with their friends, spraying it into crowds at concerts, fully identifying their personas with Sovereign's wines. Even if it is actually just money passing hands, what it looks like is Rick Ross going all in, living that #belairelife. The endorsement feels real.

Self Made Vol. 3, by the way, debuted at No. 1 on the Billboard Top R&B/Hip-Hop Chart.

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