

Welcome to American Mosaic from VOA Learning English!

I'm Steve Ember.

On the show today, we play songs from artists who performed at last weekend's Pitchfork Music Festival.

We also visit an independent craft brewery in Washington DC to learn about the American beer industry.

But first, we hear about a group of military moms who are using music to help others...

A singing group that began as a way to help mothers of soldiers deal with the horrors of war is now bringing cheer to civilians and others. The Swingin' Blue Stars formed just after the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001. Almost 12 years later, the group is still performing. Christopher Cruise has more.

Cindy Shon started the Swingin' Blue Stars. She says the group was never meant to be a long-term project. It was supposed to help her stop worrying about her son. He was deployed to Afghanistan after the September 11th attacks against the United States.

Cindy Shon had joined the Blue Star Moms -- a support group for women with children in the armed forces. She organized some other women to sing Christmas carols at a nearby hospital for military veterans. Then, they started getting more calls to sing for other former armed forces members.

Francie Roberts sings with the Swingin' Blue Stars. She says the performances helped her overcome the fear of getting bad news about a loved one.

"It just took our mind off of it, learning the songs and knowing where we're going to perform because you just never know if he's going to be alive or if I'm going to lose him."

Soon the small group of women was performing again and again. They learned some songs from the 1940s and 50s. The shows were especially popular with veterans from World War II and the Korean War.

Francie Roberts' son Blake spent 16 months in Iraq with the United States Army. She says people hearing the Swingin' Blue Stars seemed to understand how the mothers felt.

"Afterwards, everybody would come up and shake our hands, and just give us that extra encouragement that they'll be back. Our kids will be back. So we needed to hear that."

The sons and daughters of the original members of the Swingin' Blue Stars came home safely. Now, Cindy Merino says the women perform songs with special meaning for older military veterans.

"Sometimes they'll be enjoying it and laughing and the next song they will be crying. And then they'll come up to us and say thank you so much for that, that was the last song I danced to with my husband. It just brings back so many memories for them. It really is amazing."

The Swingin' Blue Stars have performed all over the San Francisco area. They have also sung at the new Pearl Harbor visitors' center in Hawaii and the USS Midway in San Diego.

Sandy Lewis says that 20 years ago, she could not have imagined being a singer. But it is rewarding to see how her group makes people happy.

“It’s not about having a huge audience, it’s just get that one guy out there with that twinkle in his eye and bring that smile to his face, and we would sing forever.”

I’m Christopher Cruise.

Independent beer-making companies, called craft breweries, are growing fast in the United States. The industry started to develop in the late 1970s, when Americans who wanted more choices started making their own beer at home.

The Brewers Association, an industry group, says the country had only eight craft breweries in 1980. Last year, there were more than 2,300. The Brewers Association says more than 1,500 others are under development.

One of these new breweries is Atlas Brew Works, in Washington, DC. Will Durgin and Justin Cox are the creators of the company. They plan to begin selling their products in just a few weeks.

Will Durgin is the head brewer at Atlas Brew Works. He knows everything about the brewing process, where malted barley is fermented.

“This tall vessel right here is the mash tun, and if you think of brewing beer as like roughly analogous to making coffee in a basket coffee maker, this would be the basket of the basket coffee maker.”

From start to finish, the process lasts about two weeks. Then, the product is ready to be packaged, put in boxes, and shipped to buyers.

“And it goes into the kettle where we boil it for an hour, add hops there. Hops provide bitterness and aroma. They also have some preservative qualities. Hops added early in the boil provide more bitterness, hops added late in the boil provide more aroma.”

Historically, American craft beers were known for their strong and often bitter taste. Now, more new breweries are experimenting with other flavors.

Chris Van Orden writes for a website that specializes in craft breweries in the DC area. He says American craft brewers usually “go big” with bold flavors. But now, he says, there are more products to choose from.

“Beer just has a sort of unparalleled breadth of flavors. In one simple, elemental drink there’s a billion decisions that went into making a beer, and every single one of them changes the outcome.”

Colorado, Oregon, and California are already well-known for their craft breweries. But independent beer-makers are also expanding to other areas, like North Carolina and the District of Columbia. Many public drinking places are supporting this growth by offering local products. They are also selling craft beers from across the country. Chris Van Orden calls this an important development.

“You can’t open up a bar these days that serves beer and have it be an afterthought.”

Large businesses still largely control the American beer market. And many popular craft beers are still imported from Europe. But today, most Americans live within 10 miles of a brewery. With even more opening for business, there are more choices than ever.

The Pitchfork Music Festival took place last weekend at Union Park in Chicago. Crowds enjoyed three days of performances by musicians and groups from around the world.

Many of the performers became popular because of the Pitchfork music website. Madeline Smith plays songs from some of the artists who attended the festival.

For many people, Pitchfork is an expert on independent music. The website provides interviews with musicians and criticism of albums. It also offers new music from independent artists you might not otherwise hear. And its yearly music festival showcases many of these artists.

One of the performers this year was the pop group Belle and Sebastian, a band from Glasgow, Scotland. Belle and Sebastian are currently planning their ninth album. The band's 2008 album, "The Life Pursuit," was a success with critics, with songs like "Funny Little Frog."

Another performer at the Pitchfork Music Festival comes from a famous family. Solange Knowles is hoping to establish her own music career. But she is best known for being the younger sister of Beyonce Knowles. The older sister is known for her powerful voice and catchy pop songs. Solange Knowles has a more relaxed, easy style that includes R&B and electronic beats. But she also has some hits, like her song "Sandcastle Disco."

One of the biggest acts at the festival was the Icelandic singer Björk. She performed the final concert on the first night of the festival. Björk is known as an artist who experiments with her sound. Each one of her eight albums sounds somewhat different from the others -- but her voice is always distinctive. On her 2011 album, "Biophilia," she added electronic elements to her sound. One of her songs includes sounds from a Tesla coil, a device that makes electricity. We leave you with one of Björk's most famous songs, "Hyperballad," from her 1995 album "Post."

Our program was written by Madeline Smith, who was also the producer.

Do you have a question about American life, people or places? Send an e-mail to mosaic@voanews.com. We might answer your question in a future show. You can also visit our website at learningenglish.voanews.com to find transcripts and audio of our programs.

I'm Steve Ember, inviting you to join us again next week for music and more on American Mosaic from VOA Learning English.



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