

The drink that changed the world

by Henry Mietkiewicz
Starweek Magazine

If you're a dewy-eyed individual who yearns to stand on a breezy hilltop and croon about how you'd "like to teach the world to sing in perfect harmony," you'd be well advised to spend three hours with CBC this week.

Whether you realize it or not, Coca-Cola has done its predictably precise job of tapping directly into your subconscious and convincing you that drinking dark, sweet fizzy water spiked with caffeine is a humanitarian act, second only to joining the Peace Corps.

Why you succumbed and how Coke became such a financial, psychological and even political powerhouse is explored with remarkable wit and unsettling insight in **'The Cola Conquest'**. One hour-long instalment airs nightly at 9, Mon. through Wed. on ch. 5.

To its credit, this Canadian- British co-production never resorts to the sneering tone or the finger-wagging that's common in documentaries that take potshots at big-business targets.

Nor does this mini-series suggest anything subversive or conspiratorial is being hatched to attract domestic consumers while making inroads into foreign markets.

After all, producer Abbey Neidik and director Irene Angelico are clearly aware the focus of their investigation is a company that simply wants us to reach for a Coke when we crave a refreshing soft drink. This isn't a question of hooking kids on tobacco or encouraging gamblers to pour their savings into video lottery terminals.

Rather, the intent here is to remind us there are certain steps a major corporation like Coca-Cola inevitably takes, often without malicious intent, in its relentless quest to thrive and expand.

But just as Coke is free to pump millions into its astoundingly shrewd and influential ad campaigns, we ultimately become better consumers if programs like **The Cola Conquest** make us realize exactly what's been done to subtly affect our behaviour.

Still, why put Coke in the crosshairs? Because, as a symbol for the rise of corporate America, it's a tidy and endlessly fascinating symbol that dates back more than a century to post-Civil War Atlanta.

As we learn in the opening overview instalment, the coca leaf (the source of cocaine) was combined with the cola nut by a morphine-addicted inventor who hoped the elixir would cure him of his habit and serve as an all-purpose tonic.

After the active cocaine chemicals were removed in 1903, a succession of company owners craftily positioned Coke as an intrinsic aspect of the American way of life.

That meant barraging the public with images of wholesome nostalgia (grinning, Norman Rockwellesque youngsters on billboards and in magazine ads), plastering the bright red logo everywhere from brick walls to matchbook covers to T-shirts, and even revamping old-fashioned St. Nick during the 1930s to become the jolly, red-clad pitchman we know today.

What's so breathtaking is not any individual piece of information, but the way *The Cola Conquest* piles fact upon fact to demonstrate how deeply entrenched Coca-Cola - and, by extension, the American sensibility - has become in the minds of international consumers and world leaders.

For example, in the second and third instalments, we discover how Coke managed to expand its base in pre-war Nazi Germany. Decades later, it was a private Coca-Cola jet that flew Coretta King back to Atlanta after the assassination of Martin Luther King. And as the Berlin Wall was being torn down, free cans of Coke were distributed on the sidelines.

That's not to say Coke has enjoyed unbroken success. As *The Cola Conquest* makes clear, the company stumbled in the '60s when its arch-rival portrayed itself as the ideal choice for the young, hip, Pepsi generation. Then there was the debacle over the widely scorned New Coke.

The company also sullied its reputation by taking no initial action during the '70s after the slaughter of union organizers at bottling plants in Guatemala.

Perhaps most compelling in Episode 3 is the way Coke is used as a metaphor for the homogenization of global culture through aggressive marketing. In France, a fierce, 50-year campaign has been waged to have Coke displace wine as the beverage of choice.

Similarly, the tea culture that's been an intimate part of Chinese life for centuries has begun to weaken in Coke's shadow. And in South America, Coke has replaced traditional home-brewed beverages in religious rituals conducted by Mayan villagers.

What's frightening, **The Cola Conquest** so cogently states, is that this unseemly rush to conform with American tastes and values will work to our detriment if the result is a single mass culture.

Ultimately, it will hardly matter that this loss of distinctiveness stemmed from the desire to sell a seemingly innocuous soft drink. A slide toward universal sameness is to be regarded with suspicion, even if it is championed by The Real Thing.