

Paired Electrosynthesis of H₂ and Acetic Acid at A/cm² Current Densities

Cong Tian,[‡] Xiao-Yan Li,[‡] Vivian E. Nelson,[‡] Pengfei Ou, Daojin Zhou, Yuanjun Chen, Jinqiang Zhang, Jianan Erick Huang, Ning Wang, Jiaqi Yu, Hengzhou Liu, Cheng Liu, Yi Yang, Tao Peng, Yong Zhao, Byoung-Hoon Lee, Sasa Wang, Erfan Shirzadi, Zhu Chen, Rui Kai Miao, David Sinton,^{*} and Edward H. Sargent^{*}



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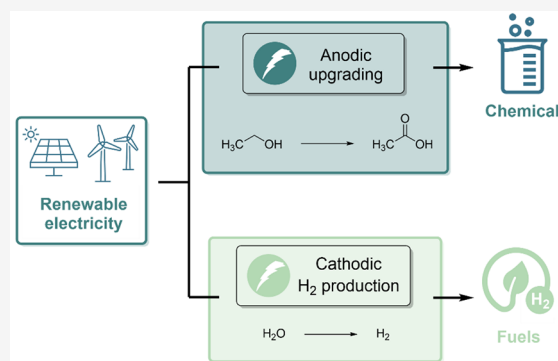


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Supporting Information

ABSTRACT: Industrial water splitting pairs cathodic hydrogen evolution with oxygen evolution at the anode, the latter generating low-value oxygen as the oxidative product. We reasoned that replacing the oxygen evolution reaction (OER) with anodic electro-synthesis of acetic acid from ethanol at industrial current densities could be a route to increase the economic efficiency of green hydrogen production. We partition the selective oxidation of ethanol to acetic acid into two mechanistically distinct transformations: first ethanol oxidation followed by the production of *OH. Density functional theory (DFT) studies show that the aldehyde-derived intermediate CH₃CO* from ethanol oxidation and the *OH radical from water dissociation are both needed in the electroproduction of acetic acid. *Operando* Fourier transform infrared (FTIR) spectroscopy identifies the corresponding aldehyde intermediates on the anode surface. Based on these mechanistic findings, we develop a vacancy-rich IrRuO_x catalyst and achieve selective electrotransformation of ethanol to acetic acid at a generation rate of 30 mmol/cm²/h and a partial current density of 3 A/cm², fully 10× higher than in the previous highest-activity reports.



Hydrogen (H₂) electroproduction is typically accompanied by the production of oxygen at the anode. The more limited economic value of the oxygen (O₂) emerging from the oxygen evolution reaction (OER) suggests opportunities to seek alternative anodic products that might help to widen the adoption of low-carbon-intensity hydrogen.¹

Alternative anodic reactions^{2–6} that generate higher-value anodic products are thus of interest (Figure 1A). To date, though, the productivity of these approaches has remained below the ~A/cm² level required for application (Figure 1B).

Ethanol, a biomass feedstock with an annual production rate of more than 77 million metric tons,⁷ has been researched in depth in direct ethanol fuel cells (DEFCs) as a high energy density material, in which 12 electron transfers occur per mole of ethanol and CO₂ is formed as the chemical product.^{8–11} We aim here instead at valorizing ethanol, targeting its selective electrooxidation, and minimizing undesired CO₂ production.

We investigate ethanol oxidation toward the commodity chemical acetic acid. At 15 million metric tons per year,¹² acetic acid is used to produce paints, adhesives, solvents, and plastics. Currently, acetic acid is manufactured via the Monsanto process,¹³ a homogeneous rhodium-catalyzed methanol carbonylation route which operates at high temper-

atures (150–200 °C) and pressures (3–10 MPa) (Figure S1) and generates 1 ton of CO₂ emissions per ton of acetic acid.¹²

Electrocatalytic approaches have been pursued in the production of acetic acid (Figure 1C), including via ethanol electrooxidation^{8,14,15} (Table S2), carbon dioxide reduction (CO₂R),^{16–18} and carbon monoxide reduction (COR)^{19–23} (Figure 1C). Most recently, pairing H₂ production and alcohol oxidation^{14,24,25} has been advanced as a valorization strategy. The anodic products improve electron utilization in a paired system and benefit overall atomic economy in green H₂ production (Figure 1C and Table S6).

To date, though, these approaches have been limited to alkaline media, resulting in acetate salts that require an additional protonation step to produce acetic acid. In general, prior reports of the anodic oxidation of ethanol were operated

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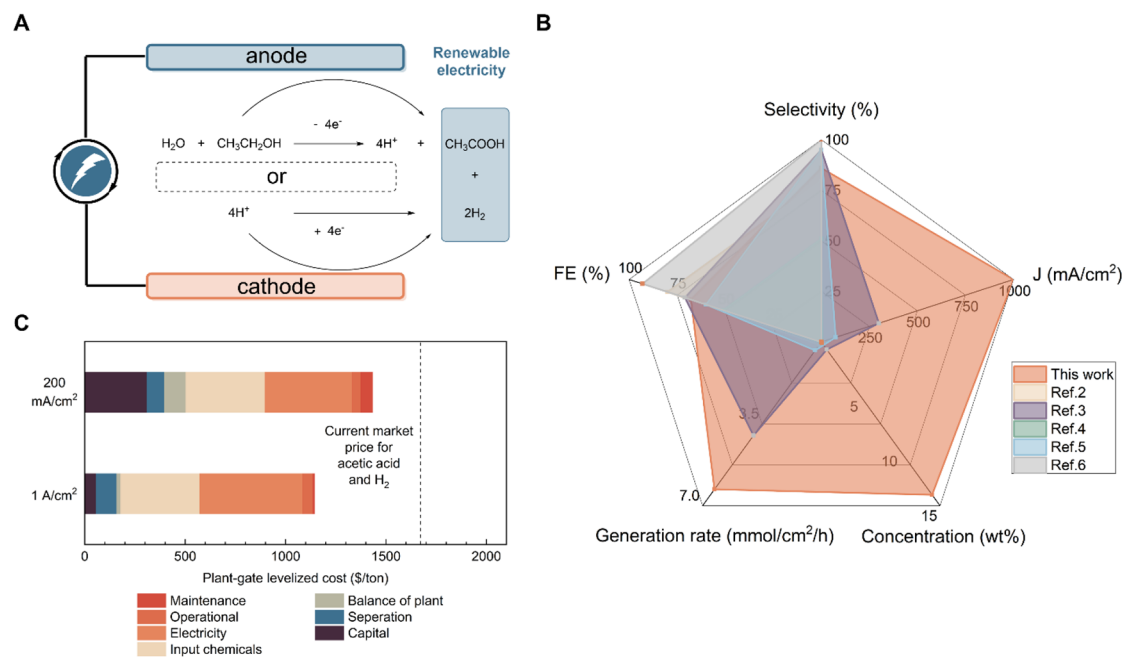


Figure 1. Anodic oxidation of ethanol to acetic acid. (A) Schematic showing coupled electrochemical H₂ and acetic acid production. (B) Comparison of product concentration, faradaic efficiency, generation rate, stability, and current density for state-of-the-art alternative anodic reactions.^{2–6} (C) Technoeconomic analysis (TEA) for electrosynthesis of acetic acid using anodic oxidation of ethanol in an acidic electrolyte. The input chemicals and electricity cost make up the major cost in the plant-gate-levelized cost for the paired system. The current market price represents the sum of the values of the market prices of 1 ton of acetic acid plus the H₂ cogenerated per 1 ton of acetic acid.

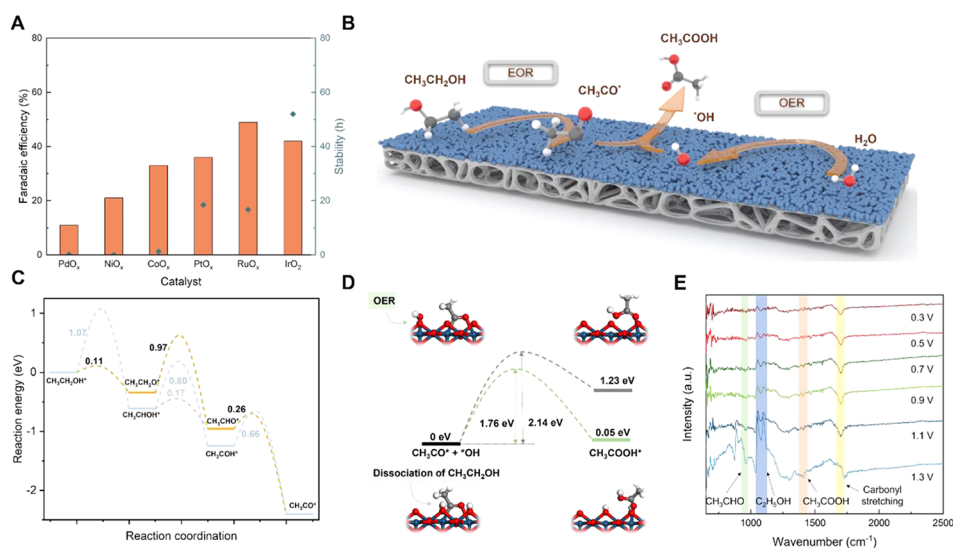
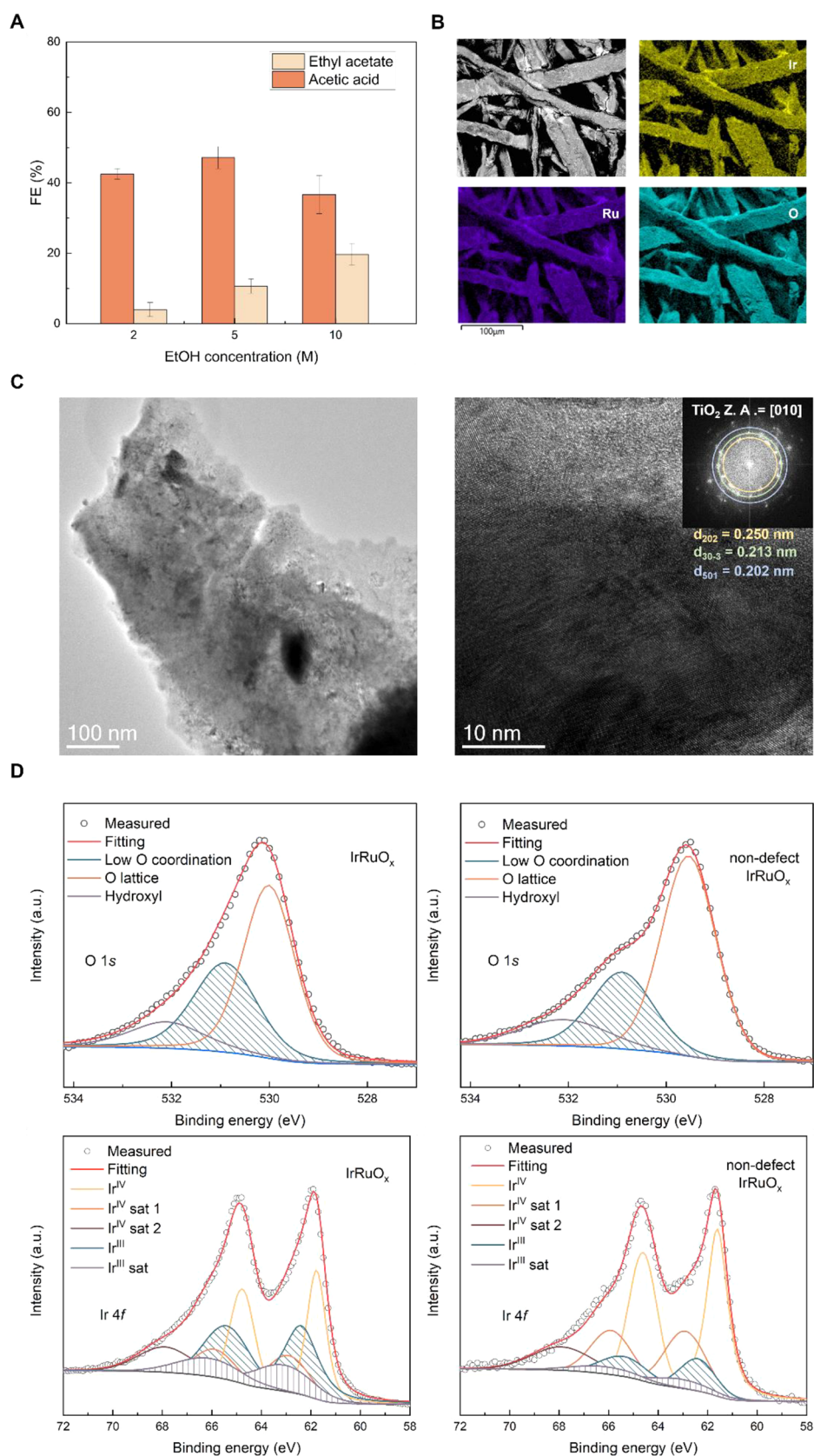


Figure 2. Proposed mechanism of electrocatalytic acetic acid production. (A) Catalyst screening for ethanol oxidation. (B) Schematic of the proposed mechanism for high-rate acetic acid production on the anode. (C) DFT calculation for possible reaction pathways in ethanol oxidation to CH₃CO*. (D) Comparison of energy barriers for coupling of *OH from the OER and ethanol dissociation. (E) Operando IR spectroscopy for acetic acid production on the IrO₂ catalyst under different potentials versus Ag/AgCl in 5 M EtOH and 1 M H₂SO₄ electrolyte.

in alkaline media and exhibited low current densities (<200 mA/cm²).¹⁴

We focused instead on seeking an anodic valorization of ethanol that would couple readily to acidic PEM water electrolysis. A technoeconomic analysis (Figure 1D and Table S4) indicates the importance of striving for higher current densities.

We initiated our studies by screening catalysts (Figure 2A) in an approach that, to avoid the energy-intensive acetate protonation step, employed 1 M sulfuric acid (H₂SO₄) as the electrolyte. A set of transition metal and transition metal oxide catalysts reported to be active in alcohol oxidation^{10,8,25–27} were loaded on titanium (Ti) felt and used as the anode. Acetic acid was detected in the anolyte using ¹H nuclear magnetic resonance (NMR) spectroscopy (Figure S2).



Transition metal catalysts with demonstrated activity for alcohol oxidation at low current densities ($<50 \text{ mA/cm}^2$), such as cobalt oxide, nickel oxide, palladium oxide, and platinum oxide, were tested at 200 mA/cm^2 but lacked both faradaic efficiency and stability (Figure S3 and Table S3).

We observed encouraging acetic acid generation and good durability using iridium oxide and ruthenium oxide anodes with 42% and 49% FE, respectively, at 200 mA/cm^2 . In particular, the IrO_2 catalyst produced acetic acid continuously for more than 50 h.

We investigated the catalytic mechanism, building on previous studies²⁸ that suggested the coupling of surface-absorbed aldehydes and hydroxides is a key step in delivering carboxylic acids. However, we observed the limited presence of the required hydroxide, something we attributed to operating at high current densities in an acidic electrolyte.²⁹ We sought approaches that would catalyze, sequentially, these two steps (Figure 2B): alcohol oxidation to generate aldehyde and water-splitting to form hydroxide.³⁰ This, we posited, would ensure the selective ethanol oxidation to acetic acid and would suppress the OER simultaneously. We focused on a study of IrO_2 to test these ideas.

Using density functional theory (DFT), we studied the reaction mechanism on the O-terminated surface of $\text{IrO}_2(110)$ (Figures S9–S11). The overall reaction pathway can be divided into two stages: an ethanol dehydrogenation stage and an *OH coupling stage. In the dehydrogenation stage, the dehydrogenation of ethanol to generate CH_3CO^* has several possible routes that go through distinct intermediates (Figure 2C). O–H cleavage of the oxygen atom to form $\text{CH}_3\text{CH}_2\text{O}^*$ is the most energetically favored pathway, with an energy barrier of 0.11 eV. Thereafter, the second dehydrogenation intermediate CH_3CHO^* is obtained by breaking the C–H bond, overcoming an energy barrier of 0.97 eV, which is the rate-determining step in the dehydrogenation process. The acetaldehyde intermediate CH_3CHO^* is further dehydrogenated into CH_3CO^* with an energy barrier of 0.20 eV and concludes the first stage. In the second stage, the CH_3CO^* intermediate reacts with *OH and forms the target product, acetic acid (Figure 2D). We found that the CH_3CO^* species prefer to couple with *OH radicals generated from the dissociation of water with an energy barrier of 1.78 eV while reacting with the *OH generated from the dehydrogenation of ethanol presents a higher energy barrier of 2.14 eV. The DFT studies agree with the idea that the aldehyde-derived intermediate CH_3CO^* and the generation of *OH radicals from the dissociation of water together facilitate acetic acid electroproduction.

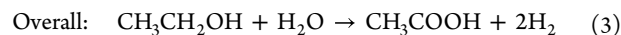
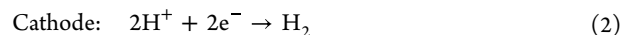
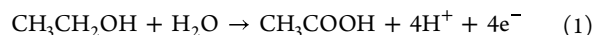
Experimentally, we first introduced the postulated intermediate CH_3CHO^* by conducting acetaldehyde oxidation on IrO_2/Ti . An acetic acid FE of 90% was achieved at an industrial water-splitting current density of 1 A/cm^2 (Figure S4). To check for experimental signals of aldehyde intermediates, we conducted *operando* IR spectroscopy measurements during ethanol oxidation (Figure 2E and Figure S5A). Electrochemical *in situ* IR spectroscopy was performed under positive potentials from 0.3 to 1.3 V versus Ag/AgCl . No band for CO_2 formation⁸ was detected at 2343 cm^{-1} . The absence of CO_2 evolution was further confirmed by gas-phase chromatography, indicating that reactant ethanol is selectively oxidized to the desired acetic acid. The characteristic bands found at 939 cm^{-1} are suggestive of the surface formation of acetaldehyde,^{9,31} an intermediate formed from ethanol oxidation, one whose signal

increased notably with increasing potential. This, as noted above, sets the stage for coupling to the generated *OH radicals. We conducted ^{18}O isotope-labeled experiments using H_2^{18}O to ascertain whether coupling implicated *OH species generated from the dissociation of water. We found evidence of $\text{CH}_3\text{CO}^{18}\text{OH}$ in direct analysis real-time mass spectrometry (DART-MS) (Figure S5B), in agreement with the mechanistic picture presented above.

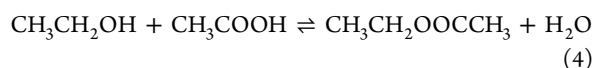
We conducted electrooxidation of ethanol at 1 A/cm^2 using different ethanol concentrations, and rather than observing a dependence on applied current or reaction potential, we found instead that ethyl acetate production increased with ethanol concentration (Figure 3A); this finding is consistent with the idea that ethyl acetate is formed by facile esterification between ethanol and the anodic oxidation product acetic acid (eqs 1–4).

Ethyl acetate formation can be reduced by lowering the ethanol concentration or by removing the acetic acid from the electrolyte. The ethyl acetate formed can serve as an azeotroping agent¹³ in the separation of acetic acid from the aqueous phase:

Anode:



Esterification:



Even at the optimal EtOH concentration, the electrochemical performance of IrO_2 displays low acetic acid FE and high full cell potential that hinder its economic feasibility (Figure S6).

Based on the above mechanistic findings, we turned to improved working electrode designs. With the goal of further increasing surface-generated aldehyde and hydroxy species, we developed a vacancy-rich³² IrRuO_x on Ti felt anode, a catalyst formed with the aid of Zn doping and ensuing chemical etching.³³ We looked at the catalyst structure, finding with TEM (Figure 3C) that IrRuO_x nanoparticles were homogeneously dispersed on the Ti felt after the thermal decomposition process.³⁴ A uniform distribution of Ir, Ru, and O on the Ti support is seen in energy dispersive spectroscopy (EDS) (Figure 3B). To investigate whether vacancies were generated after chemical etching, we prepared a control catalyst, IrRuO_x , using a method the same in all respects except that we added no Zn and did not complete any further etching. X-ray photoelectron spectroscopy (XPS) characterization (Figure 3D and Figure S7) was applied to IrO_2 , IrRuO_x , and nondefect IrRuO_x . Deconvolution of O 1s XPS profiles shows peaks for lattice oxygen, surface hydroxyl, and defect sites with a low oxygen coordination at 530.1, 532.2, and 530.9 eV, respectively.^{32,35,36} The low oxygen coordination peak area in IrRuO_x is 34.7%, which is higher than that of nondefective IrRuO_x (27.6%), indicating an increase in oxygen vacancy.³² The deconvolved peaks of Ir 4f spectra with Ir^{III} and Ir^{IV} states are also shown in Figure 3D. The defective IrRuO_x has the higher Ir^{III} species compared with nondefective IrRuO_x , which is consistent with the generation of more vacancies on the defective RuIrO_x .^{37,38} Linear sweep voltammetry (LSV) (Figure 4A) revealed that the potential

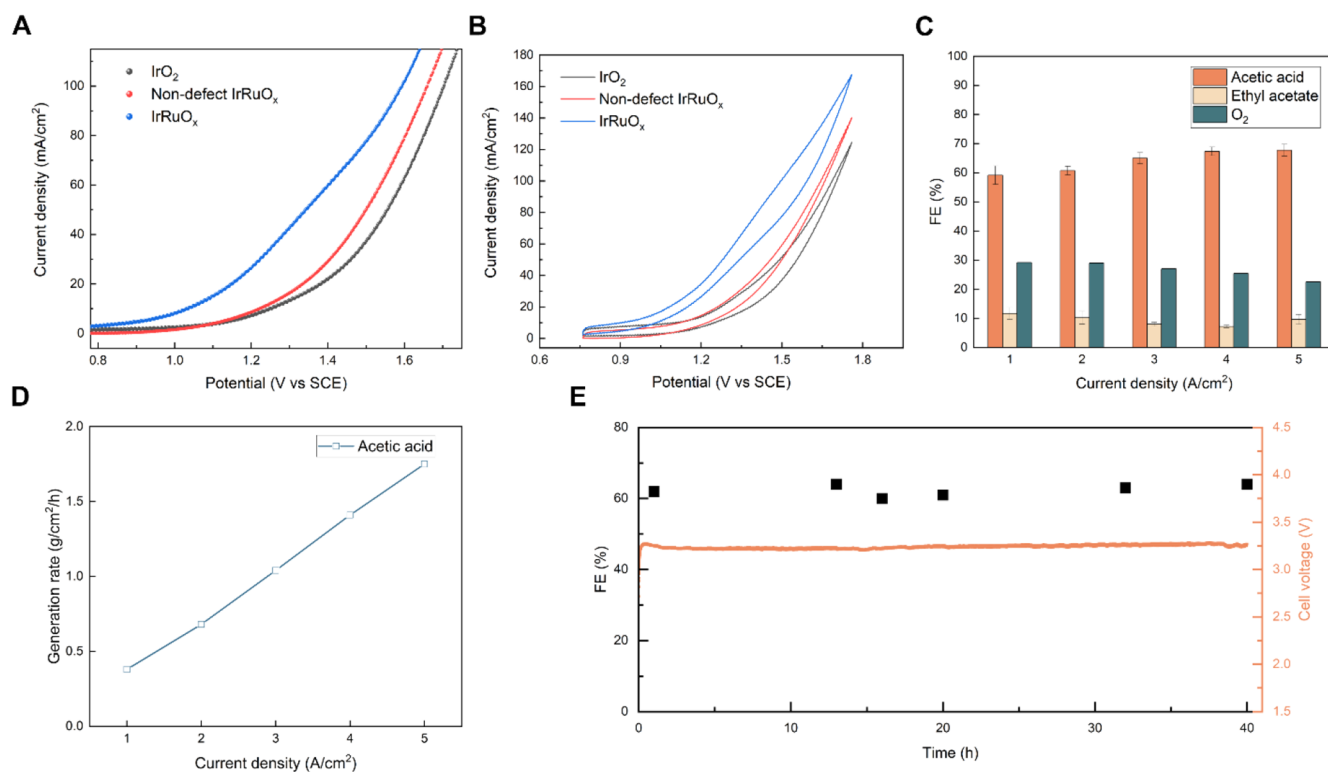


Figure 4. Evaluation of acetic acid production. (A) Linear sweep voltammetry spectra and (B) cyclic voltammetry spectra recorded at 50 mV/s in 0.5 M H₂SO₄ and 5 M EtOH without *iR* correction. (C) Acetic acid production at ampere-level current densities. (D) Electroproduction of acetic acid generation rate at different current densities. (E) Acetate FE and cell voltage during 40 h of acetic acid production at 1 A/cm² using the IrRuO_x/Ti catalyst.

of IrRuO_x at 20 mA/cm² was ~230 mV lower than IrO₂ and ~180 mV lower than nondefective IrRuO_x. Cyclic voltammetry (CV) experiments (Figure 4B) showed a broad oxidation curve of acetic acid at around 1.5 V versus SCE in 0.5 M H₂SO₄ and 5 M ethanol solution.

We then explored strategies to operate the acetic acid production at high current densities that can be readily coupled with an industrial hydrogen generation reaction (Figure 4C). We achieved 5 A/cm² anodic acetic acid synthesis, a 13× higher generation rate than in the prior highest-productivity reports.²³ At 1 A/cm² over 12 h, we obtained a 14 wt % concentration of acetic acid (Figure S8). At 5 A/cm² (Table S5) and using 1 cm² electrolyzer surface area, we achieved gram-scale (1.75 g/cm²/h) electroproduction of acetic acid in under 1 h (Figure 4D).

Gas-phase chromatography indicates that the remaining charge can be accounted for via the conversion of the OER to O₂. No other oxidation products were found. No CO₂ was detected within the limits of detection in gas-phase analysis, in agreement with our *in situ* IR finding that ethanol oxidation is selective toward acetic acid production.

We probed the stability of the IrRuO_x/Ti anode during the oxidative production of acetic acid at 1 A/cm². It maintained an average acetate (acetic acid and ethyl acetate) FE of 62% over the course of 40 h of continuous electroproduction in the MEA (Figure 4E) at no more than 3.25 V full cell potential, which is decreased by over 450 mV compared to the IrO₂/Ti anode. A portion of the electrolyte was periodically removed to analyze the composition and replaced with fresh electrolyte during the stability test.

This work reports the electroproduction of acetic acid at current densities of interest in H₂ coproduction. Instead of suppressing the O₂ evolution side reaction, this approach relies on both ethanol oxidation and water splitting from the OER. An acetic acid FE of 59–68% along with 8–11% FE toward ethyl acetate at ampere-level current densities was achieved using this strategy. With mechanistic insights provided by DFT and *in situ* spectroscopies, a direct anodic upgrading strategy at record production rates was developed. This method of acetic acid electroproduction operates continuously with a full cell voltage of less than 3.25 V at 1 A/cm² with an average acetate FE of 62%. This work provides a strategy for designing other electrooxidation reactions with a high current efficiency and indicates a route to decarbonization in the H₂ production industry. Further advances can be achieved through new catalyst and system design to achieve increased energy efficiency, as well as the search for durable, cost-effective, and PGM-free metal catalysts. Additionally, coelectrolysis^{39,40} of CO₂ reduction at the cathode and ethanol oxidation at the anode produces acetic acid on both sides of the electrolyzer and holds potential to further increase the energy efficiency and carbon utilization in electrochemical acetic acid production.

■ ASSOCIATED CONTENT

Supporting Information

The Supporting Information is available free of charge at <https://pubs.acs.org/doi/10.1021/acsenerylett.3c01327>.

Materials and methods, catalyst preparation, catalyst characterization, TEA calculation, comparison with

literature results, product analysis, faradaic efficiencies, FTIR spectroscopies, XPS, and DFT calculations (PDF)

AUTHOR INFORMATION

Corresponding Authors

David Sinton – Department of Mechanical and Industrial Engineering, University of Toronto, Toronto, Ontario M5S 3G8, Canada; orcid.org/0000-0003-2714-6408; Email: sinton@mie.utoronto.ca

Edward H. Sargent – Department of Electrical and Computer Engineering, University of Toronto, Toronto, Ontario M5S 3G4, Canada; Department of Chemistry and Department of Electrical and Computer Engineering, Northwestern University, Evanston, Illinois 60208, United States; orcid.org/0000-0003-0396-6495; Email: ted.sargent@utoronto.ca

Authors

Cong Tian – Department of Electrical and Computer Engineering, University of Toronto, Toronto, Ontario M5S 3G4, Canada; Department of Chemistry, Northwestern University, Evanston, Illinois 60208, United States; orcid.org/0000-0002-1260-3402

Xiao-Yan Li – Department of Electrical and Computer Engineering, University of Toronto, Toronto, Ontario M5S 3G4, Canada; Department of Chemistry, Northwestern University, Evanston, Illinois 60208, United States; orcid.org/0009-0003-2325-7538

Vivian E. Nelson – Department of Mechanical and Industrial Engineering, University of Toronto, Toronto, Ontario M5S 3G8, Canada

Pengfei Ou – Department of Electrical and Computer Engineering, University of Toronto, Toronto, Ontario M5S 3G4, Canada; Department of Chemistry, Northwestern University, Evanston, Illinois 60208, United States

Daojin Zhou – Department of Electrical and Computer Engineering, University of Toronto, Toronto, Ontario M5S 3G4, Canada; Department of Chemistry, Northwestern University, Evanston, Illinois 60208, United States

Yuanjun Chen – Department of Electrical and Computer Engineering, University of Toronto, Toronto, Ontario M5S 3G4, Canada; Department of Chemistry, Northwestern University, Evanston, Illinois 60208, United States

Jinqiang Zhang – Department of Electrical and Computer Engineering, University of Toronto, Toronto, Ontario M5S 3G4, Canada; orcid.org/0000-0001-5476-0134

Jianan Erick Huang – Department of Electrical and Computer Engineering, University of Toronto, Toronto, Ontario M5S 3G4, Canada

Ning Wang – Department of Electrical and Computer Engineering, University of Toronto, Toronto, Ontario M5S 3G4, Canada; orcid.org/0000-0002-2589-6881

Jiaqi Yu – Department of Chemistry, Northwestern University, Evanston, Illinois 60208, United States

Hengzhou Liu – Department of Chemistry, Northwestern University, Evanston, Illinois 60208, United States

Cheng Liu – Department of Chemistry, Northwestern University, Evanston, Illinois 60208, United States

Yi Yang – Department of Chemistry, Northwestern University, Evanston, Illinois 60208, United States; orcid.org/0000-0002-7775-6856

Tao Peng – Department of Electrical and Computer Engineering, University of Toronto, Toronto, Ontario M5S 3G4, Canada; orcid.org/0000-0001-8517-5368

Yong Zhao – Department of Mechanical and Industrial Engineering, University of Toronto, Toronto, Ontario M5S 3G8, Canada

Byoung-Hoon Lee – Department of Electrical and Computer Engineering, University of Toronto, Toronto, Ontario M5S 3G4, Canada

Sasa Wang – Department of Electrical and Computer Engineering, University of Toronto, Toronto, Ontario M5S 3G4, Canada

Erfan Shirzadi – Department of Electrical and Computer Engineering, University of Toronto, Toronto, Ontario M5S 3G4, Canada

Zhu Chen – Department of Electrical and Computer Engineering, University of Toronto, Toronto, Ontario M5S 3G4, Canada

Rui Kai Miao – Department of Mechanical and Industrial Engineering, University of Toronto, Toronto, Ontario M5S 3G8, Canada

Complete contact information is available at:

<https://pubs.acs.org/10.1021/acseenergylett.3c01327>

Author Contributions

[‡]C.T., X.-Y.L., and V.E.N. contributed equally.

Notes

The authors declare no competing financial interest.

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