

# TIME OFF



FILM LENNON'S EARLY YEARS  
TELEVISION TALENT 2010  
MUSIC YULETIDE YELPINGS  
ART DOWN MEXICO WAY  
BOOKS THE HAPPY GENE  
FOOD POTATO TALES

FILM

## MATERNAL FLAME

*John Lennon's youth is a complicated tale of the wrong kind of motherly love. It's powerful stuff, as Richard T Kelly discovers*



ONCE UPON A time in post-war England, four Liverpool lads formed a group and invented what we now know

as rock'n'roll. Such is the myth of The Beatles; and as much as John Lennon raged against it (even before he broke up "his" band), that myth — and, of course, the music — have proved just too good to resist. Nowhere Boy, a wondrous first feature by the artist Sam Taylor-Wood, manages to partake of the Beatles myth while also exploring its poetic truth. The movie's subject is the turbulent early life that forged the young Lennon — his genius, for sure, but also his anger, which swirled like a storm over his deeply fraught desire to be loved.

Screenwriter Matt Greenhalgh previously took us inside the twitching head of Ian Curtis in Control, and here, as there, he has taken care to ensure that the easy lure of rock legend never derails our experience of an emotional journey. Playing Lennon, the sturdily pretty, 19-year-old Aaron Johnson quickly makes us appreciate that this lad never lacked for bravado. (As



Lennon himself famously told Rolling Stone, "I came out of the fuckin' sticks to take over the world.") But however easily Lennon could strike the pose of rebel-rocker, the child inside him stayed pained and vulnerable; and Johnson adroitly plays the line between Lennon's external cocksureness and his raw inner wound.

Taylor-Wood's film serves a useful reminder that Lennon — always scathing about "working-class heroes" — came from a comfier suburban background than rock legend might desire. But trauma and neurosis found him nonetheless, for he was a boy with two mothers — free-spirited Julia (Anne-Marie Duff), who gave birth to him, and

LIFE'S A DRAG:  
AARON JOHNSON  
PLAYS TROUBLED,  
COCKY LENNON  
TO PERFECTION

ON THE RADIO

JARVIS COCKER ON  
BBC 6 MUSIC  
BRITAIN'S FAVOURITE  
BESPECTACLED  
BEANPOLE TAKES  
OVER THE SUNDAY  
AFTERNOON SLOT  
FROM BRITAIN'S  
SECOND FAVOURITE,  
STEPHEN MERCHANT

Julia's sister Mimi (Kristin Scott Thomas), a rigorous, childless woman who became John's guardian at a particularly distressful juncture when Julia appeared incapable. (Taylor-Wood smartly shows teenage John haunted by blurred childhood memories of Julia, clearly the harbinger of an unhappy secret.)

Still, though Mimi raised John in her nice semi with its aspirational name ("Mendips"), John figured out that his "real" mother's house was in fact within walking distance. Thus we watch as Julia and adolescent John enjoy a sort of first date by the pier at Blackpool, Julia glammed up and exulting in the jukebox at a waterfront café. "Do you →

know what it means, rock'n'roll?" she asks coquettishly of her son, who would in time have a few advanced thoughts of his own on the subject. But it's sex that Julia means: a phenomenon that becomes yet clearer to John when the two of them sit in a darkened cinema amid shrieking girls watching newsreel footage of Elvis. As Julia, too, succumbs to the hormonal frenzy, young John visibly forms a notion of what might be his vocation.

Nowhere Boy doesn't duck the issue of what, evidently, were incestuous pulls on John's part. But, mercifully, it's the music that becomes his true fixation, beautifully conveyed through a time-lapse sequence wherein John takes up Julia's banjo and, falteringly, becomes adept, his first tentative pickings gradually resolving into chords and confident strumming. By contrast, Aunt Mimi is seen as the pocket-book enabler of John's gift, reluctantly buying him his first guitar as if that might keep him quiet, but unable to purchase his steadfast affection.

We see why John is half in love with Julia, for Anne-Marie Duff loans her hugely expressive, quite unique facial and vocal register to make Julia very appealing. Yet the glorious Kristin Scott Thomas as Mimi — riveting in close-up, the fine bones of her face haunted by shadows of disquiet — lends weight to this "other" mother's chilly yet genuine feelings on the issue of who has John's best interests at heart.

This "family romance", then, is the core of a movie that also succeeds in giving a stirring account of how John found another soulmate in 15-year-old Paul McCartney (Thomas Sangster): a winsome lad who has a way with a guitar, and another little pal called George. The two narrative strands fuse as John forms his band and starts to see Julia as a drag — not a prospective lover, or even a muse, but simply a mother, and one who abandoned him: as such, a fit target for his other skills in verbal cruelty and drunken boorishness. And so the drama heads for a showdown.

Nowhere Boy is probably a softer edged piece than the facts of this case would suggest, for it offers

**"Do you know what it means, rock'n'roll?" Lennon's mother asks coquettishly of her son**

us a certain closure; whereas the real Lennon (who, aged 30, wept through primal therapy with Arthur Janov, then wrote the anguished "Mother") clearly took longer to find his peace. Movies, though, are more like myths than analyses, and they have a duty to get us to catharsis in a shorter time-span. Certainly I sobbed throughout the last reel of Nowhere Boy. Bouquets, then, to Taylor-Wood, her cast and crew (not least the brilliant cinematographer Seamus McGarvey) for a lovely, lyrical picture that flows — one should say "swings" — just as bittersweetly as the rock'n'roll that Lennon and friends invented. **E**

*Nowhere Boy is out on 25 December*

BELOW YOUNG LENNON LEARNS GUITAR. BOTTOM ANNE-MARIE DUFF AS JULIA AND KRISTIN SCOTT THOMAS AS MIMI



FILM

**THREE TO WATCH**

**1 | SHERLOCK HOLMES**  
*Out on 26 December*

Robert Downey Jr rocks in Guy Ritchie's bold reinvention of Conan Doyle's original superhero, as a troubled, chemically curious Holmes. The big surprise though is Jude Law — funny and tough as the long-suffering Watson.



**2 | ME AND OSRSON WELLES**  
*Out now*

Richard Linklater makes another typically unpredictable move, casting tween heart-throb Zac Efron as a chancer who lands himself a role in Orson Welles' Broadway show of Julius Caesar. Efron copes OK, but it's Christian McKay as Welles who has the most fun.

**3 | WHERE THE WILD THINGS ARE**  
*Out on 11 December*

Spike Jonze succeeds in reminding us how it feels to be young and innocent and confused with the world. His adaptation of Maurice Sendak's beloved children's book is beautiful to look at and — be warned — very likely to expose the secret of your tender heart.

