

Artist Sam imagines stunning vision of young Lennon

FIRST NIGHT

NOWHERE BOY

Cert tbc, 95 mins
London Film Festival

★★★★☆

NICK CURTIS



WHAT a pleasure, and what a fitting end to an excellent 53rd London Film Festival. Sam Taylor-Wood's film about John Lennon's teenage years is a moving and accomplished debut.

The visual artist's first feature is the festival's closing gala film tonight, and it's worthy of the honour. *Nowhere Boy* has striking emotional depth, a spot-on sense of period, and a central performance of remarkable texture and nuance from newcomer Aaron Johnson.

The film's emotional core is the young Lennon's relationship with Julia (Anne-Marie Duff), the mother who abandoned him, and Mimi (Kristen Scott Thomas), the aunt who brought him up.

It's 1959 in Liverpool, and cocky schoolboy John learns that the mum he hasn't seen since he was five is living just round the corner. Long separation breeds an intense affection, especially as Julia's flighty, flirty nature is attractive compared with Mimi's strict brand of post-war love.

What's more, Julia appreciates rock 'n' roll – or “sex” as she defines it – and teaches him to play the banjo. Music becomes his outlet.

Taylor-Wood fosters a potent sense of place and period that goes beyond the immaculate set-dressing and blossoming teddy-boy hairstyles. She has a real feeling for



Swaggering boy: Aaron Johnson shines as the young John Lennon, left, in *Nowhere Boy*, the first feature film directed by artist Sam Taylor-Wood, pictured with Johnson below

the new sense of freedom emerging from old values of austerity.

The film's most electrifying moment comes when Lennon hears the young Paul McCartney (Thomas Brodie Sangster) play for the first time. The script by Matt Greenhalgh (who wrote the similarly subtle *Control*) is based on a book by Lennon's half sister,

and slyly references future touchstones of the Beatles myth without laying it on too thick. “I'd love a tea!” says Paul when John offers him a beer. “It's my f***ing band,” Lennon mutters later.

The real strength of the film, though, is the performances. Johnson exudes Lennon's smart-aleck swagger, but also shows us the boy beneath. Duff gives

Julia just the right sense of brittle gaiety, and Scott Thomas manages to be ruthlessly contained while never losing sympathy for Mimi. *Nowhere Boy* is a stunning debut. Most impressively, given our familiarity with the story, it feels like a fresh and original work.

■ *Nowhere Boy* is being shown tonight at 7pm, Odeon Leicester Square.