



About a boy

An intimate portrait of how John Lennon was shaped by childhood trauma rings true for Cosmo Landesman

Directed by the Brit Artist Sam Taylor-Wood, *Nowhere Boy* is the story of the 15-year-old John Lennon. Given Taylor-Wood's fascination with celebrity — she once made an hour-long film for the National Portrait Gallery of David Beckham sleeping — you would think she'd be more interested in the go-go glam years of the world-famous Beatle. But no, here is ordinary life in a drab suburb of Liverpool in 1955, with all its extraordinary drama seething beneath the surface.

The reason *Nowhere Boy* works so well is that it's not one of those "before they were famous" films; nor does it tackle the birth of pop music in Britain. It's more about a boy than a Beatle. Lennon (Aaron Johnson) is living with his Aunt Mimi (Kristin Scott Thomas) and Uncle George (David Threlfall). When his uncle suddenly dies, the grief-stricken teenager turns to his aunt for comfort, but she turns him away without the hug he craves — and that's really the story of his early life. Taylor-Wood shows us Lennon as a sensitive kid who hides his hurt and hunger for love behind a sneering sarcasm. We see his talent for the witty comeback, so central to the personal appeal of the Beatles. "Your sarcasm worries me," Mimi says. "Why?" Lennon asks. "Not up to your usual standards?"

Lennon is a typical schoolboy rebel: a fun-seeking truant who prefers smoking and "bus

surfing" with his mates to studying. His life changes when he discovers that his mother, Julia (Anne-Marie Duff), lives across the park with a man (David Morrissey) and their children. She welcomes him back into her life like a long-lost lover, and what follows is a kind of secret romance between mother and son that makes for uncomfortable viewing.

Unbeknown to Mimi, Lennon goes off to Blackpool with Julia and starts hanging around her house during his suspension from

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school. Eventually, Mimi finds out and warns him: "She will hurt you." Then again, he's not above hurting Julia. Referring to the absence of McCartney's mum, Lennon turns on her and says: "She 'ad cancer. What's your excuse?"

Nowhere Boy is really the study of an emotional *ménage à trois*. Both women are interesting in their own right, representing two

different Englands: Mimi is the sensible, stern England of the 1950s; the colourful hedonist Julia embodies the 1960s that are just around the corner. Taylor-Wood treats neither woman as wholly good or bad.

One flaw of the film is the way it deals with the role of music in Lennon's life. It's good that Taylor-Wood avoids any Beatles nostalgia. The life-changing meeting with Paul McCartney (Thomas Sangster) is neatly underplayed and seems quite natural. But you don't get the impression rock'n'roll actually meant much to Lennon. He seems to have gone for Elvis not because the music was so great, but because it excited his mother so much. And it's odd that he would need his mum to introduce him to rock'n'roll when the film is set in 1955, the year British teenagers were going wild at the cinema watching Bill Haley & His Comets in *Blackboard Jungle*.

Then there's the film's suggestion that the mother drama produced the demons that produced the great Lennon who produced the Beatles. It's a romantic notion of the artist making wonderful things from his wounds, and you could argue that it was only after the Beatles split, and Lennon wrote songs such as *Mother*, which is used in the end credits, that the Mimi v Mum drama really surfaced. Or are we to believe that when he sang *I Want to Hold Your Hand*, it had a very different meaning?

Introducing the Beatles: Lennon (Aaron Johnson) and McCartney (Thomas Sangster)

Although we see Lennon going from rebel to rocker, forming a band with his "little friend", as Mimi calls McCartney, the real drama is his search for the truth about his dad, his mum and how he came to be living with his aunt. Lennon is caught in a war of words between the two women. You stole my boy, says his mum. You abandoned your boy, says Mimi. He is haunted by fragments of childhood memory, and the tension builds as the five-year-old Lennon has to make a terrible choice, in a gut-wrenching scene that had this critic blubbing in the dark.

Taylor-Wood has opted for a natural realism, free of arty flourishes — a style as sensible and conservative as Aunt Mimi. She is happy to provide a canvas on which her talented cast can shine, and they do. Johnson, a newcomer, gives a confident portrayal of Lennon, but the screen is dominated by Scott Thomas's complex portrait of Mimi.

The film ends with Lennon and his band heading off to Hamburg. Rock'n'roll provides his ticket to ride out of the past and into a brighter future — little did he know that he would be taking these two women with him.

Nowhere Boy
15, 97 mins

★★★★