

Nowhere Boy: No surprises in John Lennon biopic

By Richard Phillips
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In the almost three decades since John Lennon was tragically murdered in New York City on December 8, 1980, the multi-talented musician remains a popular figure whose influence—as a member of the Beatles and a solo singer/songwriter during the 1970s—endures.

Most of Lennon's life has already been documented and there are several films, including two dramatic features—*The Hours and Times* (1991) and *Backbeat* (1994)—and the documentary *The U.S. vs. John Lennon* (2006). The latter work deals with Lennon's radicalisation in the mid-1960s and the efforts of the Nixon administration and the FBI to have him deported from the US (see: "John Lennon vs. his celebrators").

The latest movie about Lennon is *Nowhere Boy*, a 98-minute British production about his teenage years and directed by artist/photographer Sam Taylor-Wood. The film is from a script by Matt Greenhalgh and based on a memoir of Julia Baird, Lennon's half-sister.

Thankfully Taylor-Wood's movie does not attempt to present a rose-coloured version of the rebellious youth. The young Lennon (Aaron Johnson) is talented and witty but also arrogant and obnoxious—a teenager in the process of physically and emotionally maturing.

Nowhere Boy provides a competent overview of the early musical influences on Lennon. In fact, it features some of the best rock 'n' roll and rhythm and blues of the period, including Jerry Lee Lewis, Screamin' Jay Hawkins, Fats Domino, Eddie Cochran, Gene Vincent, Elvis Presley, Bill Haley, Lloyd Price, Little Richard, the Bobby Fuller Four, Big Mama Thornton and others. It also explores various well-known incidents: Lennon's clashes with school authorities, his quirky sense of humour and visual talents, some rough-and-ready performances by the Quarrymen, his first skiffle group, and his first meeting with Paul McCartney.

But the real core of *Nowhere Boy* is the complex emotional relationship between Lennon and his mother, Julia (Anne-Marie Duff), and her sister, Mimi Smith (Kristin Scott-Thomas). Born on October 9, 1940 during a German air raid on Liverpool in WWII, Lennon was raised from the age of five by his rather dour Aunt Mimi.

Lennon's mother Julia was a vivacious but emotionally unstable woman, and his father, Alf, was a merchant seaman who had all but abandoned Julia and their son during the war. Mimi insisted under these circumstances that she and her husband, who had no children, care for John. Mimi discouraged contact between the boy and his mother during his pre-teenage years.

Nowhere Boy opens with the first powerful guitar chord from the Beatles' "A Hard Days Night" and pictures the young Lennon running in front of St George's Hall in Lime Street, Liverpool. After this somewhat "electric" beginning the movie plods along, failing to develop any dramatic tension until Lennon discovers that his mother lives not far from his Aunt Mimi's home and begins visiting her.

Julia, who has remarried and has two other children, adores John. She welcomes him into her family, takes him on trips to the seaside resort town of Blackpool, teaches him the banjo and encourages his interest in skiffle and rock 'n' roll. This is resented by the reserved Mimi, who harbours various concerns about Julia's "life-style" and her often erratic behaviour. Mimi, however, reluctantly accepts Lennon's determination to become a musician and establish a band and buys him his first guitar.

There is a reconciliation of sorts between Julia and Mimi, but then tragedy strikes. The movie concludes just before Lennon and the Beatles left Liverpool in

1960 to begin their real musical apprenticeship in the rough and tumble clubs in Hamburg, Germany.

For those who know little about Lennon's early years, *Nowhere Boy* helps explain something of the singer/songwriter's persona and certainly gives added richness to any repeat listening of his songs "Julia" and the deeply emotional "Mother", recorded in 1968 and 1970, respectively.

While Taylor-Wood has assembled most of the basic ingredients for a worthwhile film, including excellent performances by Scott-Thomas and Duff, who provide the movie's real moments of emotional intensity, *Nowhere Boy* fails to shed much new light. The 1950s costumes and Liverpool street scenes are all there. Lennon cycles past the Strawberry Field orphanage and there is a Penny Lane bus and other obvious references, but the broader social context that formed the Liverpool working-class teenager's persona is absent.

Lennon was not just a product of his complex family relations but the economic and cultural conditions of his time—the beginning of the post-war boom and the increasing combativity and sense of optimism in the working class—and its reflection in Liverpool, one of Britain's major industrial centres. This was manifested in his attraction, along with millions of others, to the defiant, rebellious and self-confident spirit of rock 'n' roll, and no doubt a factor in his later political radicalisation and antiwar activism. Lennon's public stand against the Vietnam War, the British military occupation of Northern Ireland and other issues marked him out from many other high-profile pop stars during the late 1960s and early 70s.

Nowhere Boy is not a cynical work or one that simply attempts to opportunistically latch onto Lennon's continued popularity. But those looking for deeper insights into the personal make-up and early artistic development of the Liverpool teenager will be disappointed.

Lennon's best work is deeply personal, brutally honest and on occasions underpinned by smouldering anger about class oppression and the existing social order. Unfortunately, not enough of this artistic spirit is manifest in Taylor-Wood's approach.

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