

Lifestyle | Features

Asterix returns in chariot race series through Italy

Asterix is to ride again in the 37th book in the legendary comic series, its publishers said Monday. "Asterix and the Chariot Race" will hit the bookshelves on October 19 recounting the adventures of the shrewd Gallic hero and his rotund sidekick Obelix during a mad dash down the length of the Italian peninsula, it takes place in 50 BC with Julius Caesar trying to prove "that all of Italy is in thrall to Rome" even though "many regions are determined to maintain their independence."

To burnish Roman glory and showcase the "dazzling excellence of Roman roads" Caesar invites teams from all over the known world to compete in the race. There is only one catch—"the Roman competitor must absolutely cross the finishing first," the publishers said. Caesar's charioteer and the latest Asterix baddie is a masked villain called Coronavirus, named after the SARS virus which caused a worldwide health alert in 2002.

Writers Jean-Yves Ferri and Didier Conrad, who have penned the last three Asterix stories, said this time they wanted Obelix to take the limelight. "It's very much Obelix driving the chariot and the story," said Conrad as the book's publication date was announced in Paris. Although details of the story are still under wraps, it features Bretons, Picts (Scots), Goths and Phoenicians as well as the two Gauls.

Five million copies of "Asterix and the Chariot Race" have been printed for the first edition, with two million alone to go on sale in France. Albert Uderzo, now 90, who created the characters in 1959 with Rene Goscinny, told reporters in a video message that the "story really touched me because as well as cartoons I love cars." More than 370 million Asterix books have been sold since Goscinny and Uderzo first brought him to life in the Franco-Belgium comic Pilote.—AFP



French cartoonist Didier Conrad, left, and French writer and designer Jean-Yves Ferri pose with effigies of comic book characters Asterix and Obelix during a press conference for the release of the comic's new album 'Asterix et la transitalique' in Paris. — AFP

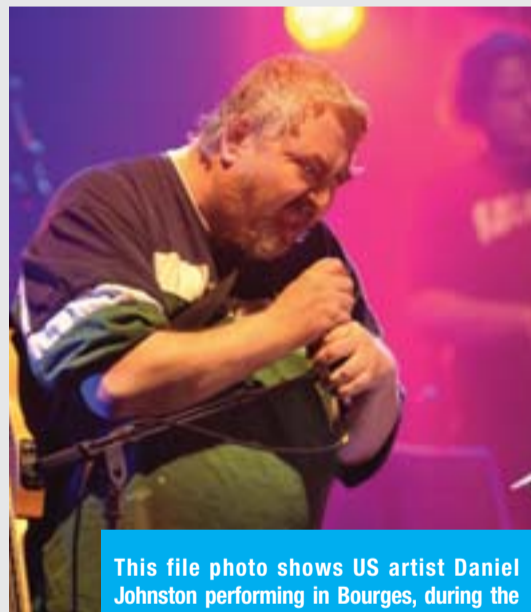
Rock loner Daniel Johnston closes out with friends

With his painfully raw lyrical delivery and battles with mental illness, Daniel Johnston is one of rock's ultimate loners. But for what may be his last concerts, he has found plenty of friends to celebrate his legacy. In between stints in psychiatric care for severe manic depression, Johnston has given a new meaning to lo-fi with decade's worth of homemade recordings in which he pours out stories of personal pain and unrequited love set to classic, Beatles-inspired pop.

The 56-year-old, who lives with care of his family in the small town of Waller in eastern Texas, has embarked on a tour that Dick Johnston, his brother and manager, describes as Daniel's last. The songwriter, who composes on piano and has traditionally performed on guitar, has put aside instruments for the tour and sings with bands that have taken inspiration from him and picked out setslists from Johnston's 121-song repertoire.

Johnston closes the tour next month in Seattle and Vancouver with members of Built to Spill, the guitar-swirling alternative rockers, and earlier in Washington performed with artists from Fugazi, who helped define the late hardcore US punk scene. In New York on Saturday night, Johnston was backed up by members of two art pop bands, Beirut and Cibo Matto, who brought a new texture to his songs with string interludes and thunderous drums.

Johnston—a world away from Waller, Texas at a theater in bustling Times Square—took the stage to a standing ovation after a screening of "The Devil and Daniel Johnston," the award-winning 2005 documentary on his troubled but prodigiously creative life.



This file photo shows US artist Daniel Johnston performing in Bourges, during the 34th edition of Le Printemps De Bourges rock pop festival. — AFP

Nervous and rawly earnest

His typical unruly mop of hair now gray and cropped short, Johnston clenched the microphone with both hands and his arms shook incessantly out of apparent nervousness. He belted out 14 songs in a little under 45 minutes, his voice as ever clear and robust in the high ranges, but with little traditional sense of keeping in-tune.

Staring down at notes on his stand, Johnston offered only cursory greetings and did not make even a moment of eye contact with the audience—who nonetheless applauded enthusiastically and quickly recognized his tunes, including the muffled snippet of home-cassette noise that presages the organ on his early song "Walking the Cow." The back-up band helped the solitary songwriter build the moods around his music—"Speeding Motorcycle" took on an apt rock feel, while "Like a Monkey in the Zoo" brought in a touch of the blues.

High-profile guests are not new for Johnston, whose songs have been covered by an array of artists such as Pearl Jam, Tom Waits and Beck. His career enjoyed a major boost when the late Kurt Cobain appeared on MTV in one of Johnston's T-shirts, leading to a surge of interest in the outsider artist who at the height of Nirvana's fame was institutionalized. Before the announced retirement from touring, Johnston had appeared to be in improving health and in the 2000s traveled to play in Europe and Japan.

A prolific sketcher, he has also found growing interest in his paintings with the latest exhibition taking place this month in Tokyo. Johnston's supposedly final New York performance was significantly less eventful than his first major trip to the metropolis in 1988. Invited to record with alternative rockers Sonic Youth, Johnston punched the band's drummer Steve Shelley and was forced into a hospital-only to escape and show up as an opening act at famed underground club CBGB.—AFP

Lucasfilm debuted its highly anticipated second trailer for "Star Wars: The Last Jedi" on Monday, hinting at dark times ahead for the Resistance and possibly even the end of Leia. The footage from the eighth installment in the blockbuster space opera, due for release on December 15, dropped during ESPN's Monday Night Football halftime show. The 154-second clip follows a trailer released in April which teased Luke Skywalker (Mark Hamill) teaching Rey the ways of the Force.

This time around more plot was unveiled, with Luke telling Rey (Daisy Ridley) he'd only seen power like hers once before—and while it didn't scare him enough then, it does now. Fans speculated on social media that he could be talking about his nephew and Rey's nemesis Kylo Ren, who is seen in a TIE fighter with his mother General Leia Organa in his sights, his eyes welling up as he prepares to open fire. Carrie Fisher—who has played the character since she was known simply as Princess Leia in the original 1977-83 trilogy—died in December, having already wrapped her scenes for "The Last Jedi."

Lucasfilm chief Kathleen Kennedy has said Fisher will not appear in the as-yet untitled ninth episode, due for release in 2019 — leading some observers to conclude that the new trailer was showing her final moments. Elsewhere Poe Dameron and Finn are shown battling the evil First Order and then there is a glimpse of Rey, apparently a prisoner of Supreme Leader Snoke, asking Kylo to "show me my place in all this" as-shock, horror—he offers her his hand.

“Forget everything I said and watch it”

EVERYTHING I SAID AND WATCH IT WATCH IT.”

Blown away

It had almost half a million views and more than 21,000 comments on YouTube within two hours of being posted, with #TheLastJedi quickly becoming the top trending hashtag worldwide on Twitter. The reaction among critics was

effusive, with Ryan Parker, a film writer for the The Hollywood Reporter, enthusing that he was "blown away." "I don't think I have ever been so hyped for a 'Star Wars' film than I am right now. It was the perfect mix of everything I was hoping it would be," he said.

"We got more Luke, but not too much, some looks at Leia that really hurt my heart and some more insight into where this all is going." For Rolling Stone's Sean Collins, the "hints at a heel turn from Rey with those grim fourth-wall-breaking shots of Carrie Fisher's warrior princess on the verge of death, at the hands of her own son no less" pre-announced a movie strong in the dark side of the Force. "The Last Jedi"—filmed on the west coast of Ireland and at Pinewood Studios near London—sees the return of the characters introduced in 2015's seventh installment.

Introducing the cast at a fan event earlier this year Johnson unveiled a new star, Kelly Marie Tran, who plays Rose, a maintenance worker who is part of the Resistance. The actress revealed that she had told her family she was doing "an indie movie in Canada"—such has been the secrecy surrounding the film. Hamill tweeted on Monday that he was racing home to watch the trailer but told fans he was "not sure if I'll make the Kessel Run in 12 parsecs!!!"—a reference to a famous line from the original "Star Wars."—AFP

Joon Moon, finding a vintage soul in rock

Composing songs initially just for voice and piano, the veteran musicians behind Joon Moon quickly knew they could create a richer sound—something more vintage from the earlier days of rock and soul. The French-American trio, whose members hail from different musical backgrounds, has pulled together their influences in an album that is at once open in approach, tight in production and smoky in texture.



While crafted as pop songs, Joon Moon's debut album, "Moonshine Corner," takes an unusual instrumental approach with songs that are guided by double-bass, feature no keyboards manufactured after the 1970s, and bring in occasional Latin percussion and Middle Eastern lutes. Songwriter Julien

Decoret—who has performed in classical orchestras, produced house music and played string bass in globe-trotting French bossa nova cover band Nouvelle Vague—said Joon Moon became a laboratory for studio experimentation.

"It isn't just a detail, it was like a dogma we had—steering our influences and merging them together in a way that felt personal," Decoret told AFP before a recent show in New York to launch "Moonshine Corner." "People all have automatic reflexes. But for this, we just tried to respond to whatever pleased us," he said.

Joon Moon—the name, which could be mistaken for Korean, comes from a typographical error in original moniker "June Moon" which the band decided to keep—brings Decoret together with his sometime collaborator Raphael Chassin, best known as the drummer for French pop star Vanessa Paradis. Chassin built rhythms around Decoret's compositions on piano, an experience he found exciting after working in more electronic-driven music. "This was completely the reverse. There were songs and we figured out how to dress them up," he said.

Getting right 'I Might Be Wrong'

Defining the sound of Joon Moon is singer Krystle Warren, whose deep, rich voice brings to the songs a soulful, lounge feel. The Kansas City native, who has notably sung with the neo-disco duo Hercules and Love Affair, grew up both with African American church music and loving The Beatles. To the surprise of Chassin and Decoret, she also had a love of French pop which she would find on import. She voiced regret that music nowadays is more global.

"I quite like that golden period where this was the song in this territory and this was the song in that territory, so we all had our own experiences with the same artist," she said. The most striking musical interpretation on the album is a cover of Radiohead's "I Might Be Wrong" which keeps the dreaminess of the original but with a sharply different approach. While "I Might Be Wrong" was one of the most guitar-driven tracks on the British experimental rockers' 2001 album "Amnesiac," Joon Moon recreates the song on piano, turning down the tempo for a jazz feel.

Another difference: The cover is in French. Decoret wanted to record the entire album in English but blessed the idea by Warren, who speaks little French herself but rewrote the lyrics with the help of her wife, a French teacher. Decoret felt that the song, much like Joon Moon, was about musical open-mindedness. "I think the version of Radiohead is on the North Pole and we are on the South Pole," he said.—AFP

UK actress felt 'violated' after Weinstein encounter

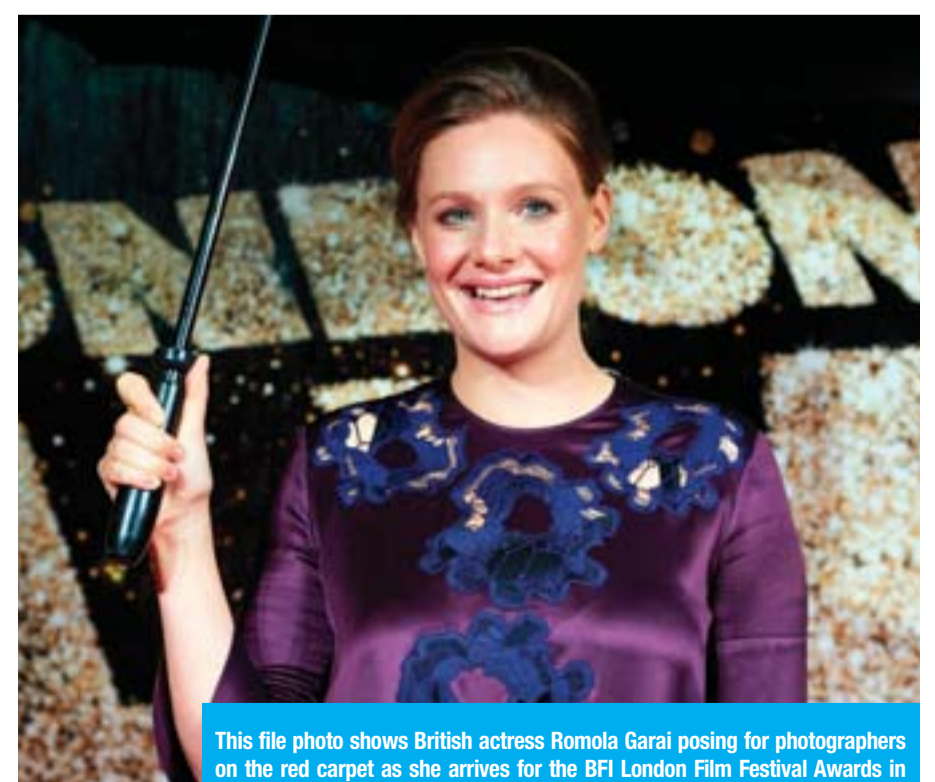
British actress Romola Garai said she felt "violated" following a meeting with Harvey Weinstein in his London hotel room when she was 18 in which he was in a bathrobe, the Guardian newspaper reported yesterday. Garai, best known for her role in "Atonement", said she had already been hired for a part but was told to audition privately with the Hollywood mogul because "you had to be personally approved by him." "Like every other woman in the industry, I've had an 'audition' with Harvey Weinstein," she told the paper.

"So I had to go to his hotel room in the Savoy and he answered the door in his bathrobe. I was only 18. I felt violated by it," the 35-year-old actress added. Garai said that once she was in the room the two had a brief discussion about film but she felt "belittled" by his "abuse of power." "The point was that he could get a young woman to do that, that I didn't have a choice, that it was humiliating for me and that he had the power."

She said she had not previously raised the incident because film business insiders

would be "shocked I even thought it was an issue." Weinstein was fired on Sunday from his own film studio, three days after a bombshell New York Times report alleged that the Oscar-winning executive producer behind such hits as "The King's Speech" and "The Artist" had preyed on young women hoping to break into the industry.

Weinstein's accusers—who reportedly include celebrities such as Rose McGowan and Ashley Judd—say the 65-year-old tycoon had promised to help advance their careers in exchange for sexual favours, pressuring them to massage him and watch him naked. Weinstein has expressed regret for his behaviour towards women, saying: "I own my mistakes." Movie legends Meryl Streep and Judi Dench led a chorus of outrage including from actors Seth Rogan, Lena Dunham and Patricia Arquette, director James Gunn and fellow producer Judd Apatow.—AFP



This file photo shows British actress Romola Garai posing for photographers on the red carpet as she arrives for the BFI London Film Festival Awards in central London. — AFP