

Lifestyle

Imagination's Lee John: Shining a light on UK black music

Young people of colour in the UK don't know enough about the history of British black music, according to Lee John, the former lead singer of 1980s soul funk group Imagination.

The band struck it big in the early 1980s with hits such as "Body Talk" and "Just an Illusion", going on to sell 30 million albums worldwide.

Now, three decades after Imagination was part of a wave of new black artists, John says he is on a journey to "uplift and bring a positive message" to young black people beset by negative headlines about everything from the economy to stabbings and gangs.

The singer, now 65, has spent the past 10 years working on a history of British black music which he describes as his "life's passion" and believes can offer young people knowledge to help unlock their potential.

"I think the issue with black music is that a lot of the kids don't even know who, how, what or where things came from," he told AFP. "They feel like things may have started from the 90s and that's it!" John's soon-to-be completed Flashback documentary project includes 400 hours of film edited into chapters going right back through the decades to the turn of last century.

It features over 100 interviews with a "kaleidoscope" of musicians, artists and



British musician Lee John practises in a music studio in north west London.—AFP photos

others who have shaped black music in the UK. They include Jaki Graham, Labi Siffre, Billy Ocean and Patti Boulaye as well as Pauline Black of The Selecter, Neville Staple of The Specials and Maizie Williams of Boney M.

'Our time'

John, who grew up in London and briefly in New York during the 1960s and 70s in a family of St Lucian descent, says he was struck by the number of black British artists coming up after he returned from the United States.

"I thought, 'Wow this is really interest-

ing. So we can do it here too'," he said. Signed by a record company at the age of 15, he failed to score the hit record he wanted -- something he describes as a painful experience that eventually made him "stronger".

"That taught me a great deal and I had to learn my trade. I had to learn the industry and doing that made me stronger, wiser and more educated in the music scene and in how to survive," he said.

John's initial focus for the Flashback project was the late 1970s and 1980s, when he says there were many changes

that "really changed the pathway for British black music on a global level".

"I felt there was an organic-ness that we all had but what we didn't have is support in distribution and marketing."

As the new wave of black artists such as Sade, Trevor Walters, Maxi Priest and The Cool Notes started to make an impact, he says, record companies started to take note of the international interest they were generating and finally decided to invest in them.

"I think basically we found that we could do our own thing. We emulated the Americans but I felt that we found our voice. "We'd studied, we'd learned and it was our time to create our own," he said.

'Positive message'

Imagination, a three-piece that also included Ashley Ingram and Errol Kennedy, had hits in 28 countries garnering them four platinum discs and nine gold discs. Ingram and Kennedy left the band in 1987 and John and a new line-up continued until 1992 when they split.

John, also an ambassador for the SOS Children Village charity, has continued to perform both internationally and in the UK. As some of those he interviewed for the project have since died, he said he was pleased to be able to help ensure their legacies.



British musician Lee John practises in a music studio in north west London.

"I think it's taken for granted (but) you wouldn't have half the artists doing what they do now if it wasn't for these other artists," he said. "I think music is a universal language. That's why they (young people) need to learn a little about Flashback and about the history of British black music."

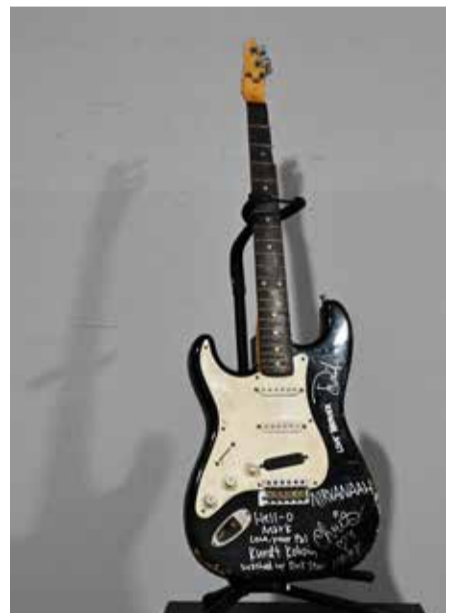
"I think the more they learn about that, it will give them the incentive to understand what was, what is and what can still be," he said. "That's my journey in life right now -- to uplift and bring a positive message to the youth."—AFP



File photos show US musician Kurt Cobain's smashed Fender Stratocaster is displayed at Julien's Auctions in Gardena, California on May 2, 2023, ahead of Julien's "Music Icons" auction of over 1,200 items from Rock And Roll history and exclusive artist collections.—AFP photos

Guitar smashed by Nirvana's Kurt Cobain sells for nearly \$600,000

A guitar smashed on stage by Nirvana front man Kurt Cobain sold for nearly \$600,000, several times its original estimate, an auction house said Saturday. The busted black Fender Stratocaster has been put back together, but is no longer playable, Kody Frederick of Julien's Auctions told AFP earlier this month.



It was signed by all three members of the Seattle grunge outfit as they rocketed to global fame. The auction house said it had expected the instrument to sell for \$60,000 at the event

in front of a live audience at the Hard Rock Cafe in New York City.

Instead, it went for \$595,000, Julien's said in a statement, calling the total "astounding." "You can see here the break that took place as he slammed down the guitar, where the neck here kind of connects, as well as down here on the bottom where he slammed the guitar down," Frederick told AFP earlier in May.

"Kurt Cobain, when he was on stage, when he played, he was a machine. The man was angry, and you could feel that on stage. And you would feel that by the way he would treat his instruments. "This broken element, in a strange way, from this broken musician, that really defined this rough and tumble era of music."

Nirvana's hits, many of which were penned by Cobain, included "Come As You Are," "Lithium" and the 1991 breakout "Smells Like Teen Spirit" -- a track that became anthemic for a generation of alienated teenagers. Cobain struggled with substance addiction and depression, and had a tumultuous relationship with his wife, Courtney Love. He took his own life in April 1994.

The three-day auction, which concludes Sunday, also includes memorabilia from the careers of Eddie Van Halen, Elvis Presley, Freddie Mercury, Bill Wyman and Janet Jackson.—AFP

British writer Martin Amis dies aged 73

Renowned and influential British writer Martin Amis has died aged 73 at his home in Lake Worth, Florida, the Booker Prizes said Saturday. Amis was "one of the most acclaimed and discussed writers of the past 50 years and the author of 14 novels," said the website of Booker Prizes, the leading literary awards for fiction in the United Kingdom.

His wife, Isabel Fonseca, told media that the author of searing and insightful works such as "Money: A Suicide Note," "London Fields" and "Time's Arrow" died on Friday after a bout with esophageal cancer. His death was announced on the same day as the Cannes festival showing of a film based on his 2014 book "The Zone of Interest".

Set in Auschwitz, the novel tells the story of a Nazi officer who fell in love with the wife of the extermination camp commander. Amis, the son of renowned comic novelist Kingsley Amis, equaled and even surpassed his father in fame with novels filled with savage humor.

"The novel is an incredibly intimate portrait of a writer," the younger Amis once told the BBC, reflecting on his career. "Although I don't write autobiography, I am everywhere in my books."



Martin Amis

In 2008, the Times of London named him one of the 50 greatest British writers since 1945. Born in 1949 in Wales, Amis rose to literary celebrity amid the hip 1980s British fiction boom that included fellow novelists Salman Rushdie, Julian Barnes, Kazuo Ishiguro and Ian McEwan.

Amis graduated from Oxford University in 1971 with a degree in English and worked as an editor before publishing his first novel, "The Rachel Papers," in 1973. It was with "Money," published in 1984 with a comic take on consumerism, that Amis burst more broadly onto the literary scene.—AFP

Martin Amis, a second-generation literary lion

One of the burdens of having a famous father is trying to measure up to him in the same field. British writer Martin Amis, who has died at the age of 73, not only matched his illustrious father, Kingsley, but for a while rose beyond him.

The influential author's 1984 novel "Money" became one of the books that summed up a generation. "Money doesn't mind if we say it's evil, it goes from strength to strength. It's a fiction, an addiction, and a tacit conspiracy," he said, in the "Novelists in Interview" publication, a year after his book came out.

Depicting self-serving greed in Thatcherite Britain and the US under Ronald Reagan, "Money: A Suicide Note", to give it its full title, is regarded as one of the most searing, insightful and bitingly funny English-language novels of the 20th century.

It follows "a semi-literate alcoholic", John Self, an advertising executive with an appetite for pornography, drugs and fast food, as he dices between London and New York in a bid to make a movie. The characters border on cartoonish but the language is sharp and vivid and the comedy is as darkly acerbic as anything his father wrote.

Arguably, it is the tour de force in the Amis canon, although some might argue for his 1989 novel "London Fields" or for 1991's "Time's Arrow" which has a backwards narrative -- including dialogue in reverse -- as it purports to be the autobiography of a Nazi concentration camp doctor.

"Time's Arrow" was short-listed for the Booker Prize, an award which eluded Amis throughout his career.

British director Jonathan Glazer's adaption of his novel "The Zone of Interest", set in a Nazi death camp, is currently receiving plaudits at the Cannes Film Festival. "The novel is an incredibly intimate portrait of a writer," Amis once told the BBC, looking back at his career.

"Although I am not an autobiographical writer, I am all over my books."

Literary roots

Martin Louis Amis was born in Oxford on August 25, 1949, the second of three children that Kingsley Amis had with his first wife, Hilary Bardwell.

Kingsley was a huge figure in the literary world when Martin was growing up, riding high on the success of his 1954 novel "Lucky Jim". That took the family to Princeton in the US where he taught, where he lived up to the image of the acerbic curmudgeon that he carefully nurtured.

After graduating from Oxford University, Martin Amis published his first novel, "The Rachel Papers", in 1973. He followed up with "Dead Babies" two years later, which marked his first dalliance with morbid humour. In the years that followed, he enjoyed some success with "Success" and "Other People", before hitting the big time with "Money", "London Fields" and "Time's Arrow".

It was the third of his "London" novels, "The Information", published in 1995, which launched him into the gossip columns. The reason was money.

Amis was handed a £500,000 advance, which coincided with him leaving his agent, Pat Kavanagh, the wife of one of his best friends, fellow novelist Julian Barnes. It caused a rift between the two writers.

By that stage Amis had already left his first wife Antonia Phillips, an American academic, with whom he had two sons, to begin a relationship with Isabel Fonseca, an heiress who had interviewed him for a British literary review. They married in 1996.

Divided opinions

The 1990s were the peak of Amis' literary powers, even when he was being accused of misogyny and, later, Islamophobia -- claims he firmly rejected.

"I not only think of myself as a feminist but as a gynocrat," he said in 2018. "I look forward to a utopia where women are in charge."

His 2003 novel "Yellow Dog" made the Booker Prize longlist but was largely derided, memorably by another British novelist Tibor Fischer, who said in a newspaper review that it was so bad it was "like your favourite uncle being caught in a school playground".—AFP

DiCaprio-Scorsese epic scores rave reviews at Cannes

The Hollywood cavalcade descended on Cannes Saturday for the premiere of Leonardo DiCaprio and Martin Scorsese's Native American crime epic, "Killers of the Flower Moon" which received rave reviews.

The three-and-a-half-hour movie sees DiCaprio play alongside Scorsese's other long-time muse Robert De Niro, and charts a wave of murders among oil-rich Osage Indians in the 1920s and the birth of the FBI. After hours of waiting in the rain that has drenched the French Riviera town all week, fans went wild as the trio arrived for the premiere alongside several native Americans in traditional outfits.

Co-star Jesse Plemons arrived with his wife Kirsten Dunst, while Salma Hayek, Cate Blanchett, and Tobey Maguire were also present.

Based on a nonfiction bestseller, the film sees DiCaprio play a weak-willed man who marries a wealthy Osage Indian and is drawn into the deadly

schemes of his kingpin uncle (De Niro). Words like "searing", "triumph" and "masterpiece" were bandied about by critics who managed to get their hands on a ticket. IndieWire said DiCaprio gives "his best-ever performance", while The Guardian awarded five stars for a "remarkable epic about the bloody birth of America".

There were some dissenting notes, with The Times calling it "a damp squib" and Little White Lies saying Scorsese "guts the story of anything that might sully the high seriousness of the subject matter".

Frontrunners

"Killers of the Flower Moon", funded by Apple, was screening out-of-competition in Cannes. It is the first time the 80-year-old Scorsese, who won the Palme in 1976 for "Taxi Driver", has presented a film here since 1985's lesser-known "After Hours", though he served as jury president in 1998.

Elsewhere, the race for the festival's top prize Palme d'Or was heating up.

More Hollywood royalty walked the red carpet for Natalie Portman and Julianne Moore's new film "May De-

ember," which looks at the relationship between an older woman and a schoolboy, still married years after their relationship became a tabloid scandal.

An early front-runner is British direc-

tor Jonathan Glazer's "The Zone of Interest", a unique and horrifying look at the private life of a Nazi officer working at the Auschwitz concentration camp.

Critics were near-unanimous in their praise, Variety calling it "chilling and profound, meditative and immersive, a movie that holds human darkness up to the light and examines it as if under a microscope". It was partly inspired by a book of the same name by British novelist Martin Amis, who died on Saturday at 73.

Also well received was "Four Daughters", a heartbreaking documentary about radicalisation within a Tunisian family that is both inventive and engaging. That may go down well with jury president Ruben Ostlund, last year's winner for "Triangle of Sadness", who likes his arthouse films with some lighter touches.—AFP



(From left) US actor Leonardo DiCaprio, US director Martin Scorsese and US actor Robert De Niro arrive for the screening of the film "Killers of the Flower Moon" during the 76th edition of the Cannes Film Festival in Cannes, southern France.—AFP photos