



SMALL AXE

Lovers Rock

+ Q&A with director *Steve McQueen* and actor *Dennis Bovell*

Lovers Rock, which premiered at the London Film Festival before heading to BBC Two and HBO, is a 70-minute-long hypnotic immersion into a West Indian house party in Notting Hill, where we follow Martha (Amarah-Jae St Aubyn) and her friend Patty (Shaniqua Okwok).

In a directorial tour de force, for most of the film Steve McQueen holds us in the single central room where the party takes place, without making us feel cramped or claustrophobic. To the contrary, as bodies gyrate to the softened reggae sounds played by DJ Samson (Kadeem Ramsay), the room seems imbued with a kind of infinite spatial and temporal expansiveness. The revellers' refusal to let Janet Kay's 1979 hit 'Silly Games' end, instead starting to sing it a cappella, is one such instance of musical rapture and outstretched time. Cinematographer Shabier Kirchner's drifting, lingering and wandering camerawork captures fleeting encounters and the thrill of the night as people move on and off the dance floor.

There isn't much of a narrative. Events emerge like sudden eruptions on the baseline that is the intoxicating atmosphere of the house party, in a beautiful homage to the vibrant Black subculture of the London of the 1980s.

The house party feels like a world of its own, but we are also reminded of the fragility of this cosmos. Indeed the rest of the world seems tethered to the edges of the party, as the hallways and the bathrooms of the house, as well as the street outside, bring back stark reminders of a structurally racist context, as well as the vulnerability of Black women to sexual assault. If *Lovers Rock* is both electrifying and tender, it also includes more ominous tones – as in the furtive image of a Black modern Sisyphus dragging an enormous cross, seen from the window of the bus taking the girls to the party. The energy of the party soon catches us again, as night crawlers display their best movies to the tune of Jamaican vocalist Carl Douglas's 'Kung Fu Fighting' (1974).

Lovers Rock is part of the BBC-commissioned Small Axe series of five films documenting the lives, struggles and hopes of London's West Indian community from the 1960s to the 1980s. As the only fiction-based instalment, *Lovers Rock*'s contagious joy and lack of narrative contrasts with the other episodes, addressing more directly historical instances of racial brutality and Black resistance. It comes after *Mangrove*, which told the true story of how a Notting Hill Trinidadian restaurant of the same name was targeted by the racist Metropolitan police, and how an entire community mobilised to defend it.

While *Mangrove* and *Lovers Rock* have contrasting tones, from resistance to police brutality on one side to the exhilaration of nightlife on the other, they both offer a deep interrogation of paradigmatic sites of Black life and survival. Indeed the two settings – a restaurant which also serves as a nightclub and an improvised house party which compensates for the lack of Black nightclubs – give a sense of the sites and temporalities of Black life in the city. In a context of global calls for abolition, both films affirm the extent to which the edge of the 'small axe' Bob Marley sang about is sharpened by these Black sites of refuge where otherwise worlds are imagined.

Chrystel Oloukoï, bfi.org.uk, 26 October 2020

Steve McQueen's *Lovers Rock* – one of five films in his *Small Axe* anthology – is an undeniable triumph, in which the milieu of a 1980s house party in West London is beautifully rendered with a realism that affirms the significance of Black lives. A study in Black joy, it submerges the audience in an alcohol- and weed-fuelled, sweat-soaked snapshot, against the backdrop of Thatcher's London, of a Black Britain where love, music, and dance reign. The heart of the story is the meeting of two young lovers, Martha (Amarah-Jae St Aubyn) and Franklyn (Micheal Ward), as they attend an incredible all-nighter on Ladbroke Road. Bursts of tension interweave the riotous party when Martha's cousin, Clifton (Kedar Williams-Stirling), crashes the event, and a young woman Cynthia (Ellis George) is assaulted by Bammy (Daniel Francis-Swaby), who is searching for a sexual partner.

McQueen is expert at immersing audiences in his characters' experiences; as the camera follows bodies moving across the dancefloor, men and women holding each other close, hips swaying to the rhythm of reggae, he creates a sense of blissful communion. The film is a celebration of Blackness; each and every detail is perfectly pitched – the kitsch wallpaper in hues of green, the simple ritual of Cynthia straightening her afro hair with a hot iron, the cooking of curried goat – and made me feel as though the house itself were welcoming me to join the dance. The intimacy with which the camera lingers on a couple's embrace, the energetic writhing of men dancing, or the minutiae of silent communication through dance and body language is reminiscent of certain sequences in *Shame* (2011) and *12 Years a Slave* (2013). In *Lovers Rock*, however, the focus is not on trauma; instead, McQueen gazes on in wonder, and marvels at the ordinary, everyday Black experience.

One scene of particular brilliance involves a long take of a heaving dancefloor, the DJ playing Janet Kay's 1979 hit 'Silly Games'. The crowd knows the song word for word, and after it ends, there is a communal a capella. The shuffling of feet and swinging of arms become graceful, balletic, and the camera's close attention pulls the viewer into this world, to experience it through the Black gaze. As Kay's honeyed tones are replaced by those of the dancing crowd – eyes closed and smiles beaming – it feels as though one is in the room. The immense house, where most of the drama occurs, is a haven: as the party develops, it is clear that beyond its walls the threat of violence is never far off. However, McQueen is not afraid to critique Black patriarchy here, as sexual assault creeps into the frame. Both joyful and at times sinister, the raucous and adrenaline-fuelled celebration in *Lovers Rock* depicts a microcosm of different Black lives in Britain's past.

The focal point though, is Martha and Franklyn's instant magnetism, which develops into an all-night romance as they dance and converse. Through their storyline, McQueen shows us a life-like, yet magical, relationship between two young people. It is uncommon to see such an accurate depiction of conversations in patois, which highlight the sense of significance and community in finding one's kindred. In one striking scene, when the two lovers are interrupted as they retreat to his workplace, Franklyn's speech slips from his usual musical, almost Shakespearean patois into a cockneyfied accent to appease his white boss. This may sound mundane – in a way it is – but it emphasises how exceptional this film is, making my heart swell with joy, recognition, and sadness. It arrives at a high point, the vivacity of the house party giving way to an oasis of calm. One sequence in particular endures, a morning bike ride that becomes an emblem of bliss and sanctuary in a divided city. In this lovely film, Steve McQueen proudly declares that Black love rocks.

Nadine Deller, *Sight & Sound*, December 2020

LOVERS ROCK

Directed by: Steve McQueen
©: Small Axe Productions Ltd
A Turbine Studios production
A Lammas Park production
In association with: Amazon Studios, Emu Films, BBC Studios Distribution, Six Temple Productions
Presented by: BBC Films
Executive Producers: Tracey Scoffield, David Tanner, Steve McQueen, Lucy Richer
Executive Producer: Rose Garnett
Produced by: Anita Overland, Michael Elliott
Line Producer: Robyn Forsythe
Associate Producer: Helen Bart
Associate Producer for Turbine Studios: Charlotte Andrews
Associate Producer for Lammas Park: Susan Dolan
Production Co-ordinator: Liane Escorza
Supervising Location Manager: Elliott Meddings
Location Manager: Graeme MacKenzie
Post-production Supervisor: Emma Zee
1st Assistant Director: Richard T. Harris
2nd Assistant Director: Antonia Carter
Script Supervisor: Phoebe Billington
Casting: Gary Davy
Screenplay by: Courttia Newland, Steve McQueen
Story by: Steve McQueen
Director of Photography: Shabier Kirchner
Gaffer: Ian Glennister
VFX Supervisor: Marc Hutchings
VFX Producer: Bonita Nichols
Special Effects Supervisor: Steve Bowman
Supervising Editor: Chris Dickens
Editors: Chris Dickens, Steve McQueen

On-line Editor: Ben North
Production Designer: Helen Scott
Supervising Art Director: Adam Marshall
Art Director: Louise Lannen
Set Decorator: Hannah Spice
Production Buyer: Aoife Flynn
Costume Designer: Jacqueline Durran
Costume Supervisor: Hannah Warren
Hair and Make-up Supervisor: Sally Tynan
Hair and Make-up Designer: Jojo Williams
Original Score by: Mica Levi
Sound Mixer: Ronald Bailey

Cast

Amarah-Jae St Aubyn (*Martha*)
Micheal Ward (*Franklyn*)
Dennis Bovell (*Milton*)
Saffron Coomber (*Grace*)
Frankie Fox (*Eddie Marks*)
Daniel Francis-Swabey (*Bammy*)
Marcus Fraser (*Jabba*)
Jermaine Freeman (*Skinner*)
Ellis George (*Cynthia*)
Alexander James-Blake (*Parker B*)
Francis Lovehall (*Reggie*)
Shaniqua Okwok (*Patty*)
Kadeem Ramsay (*Samson*)
Kedar Williams-Stirling (*Clifton*)
Romario Simpson (*Lizard*)

UK 2020
70 mins

SMALL AXE

A COLLECTION OF FIVE FILMS

Mangrove + Q&A with director Steve McQueen and Small Axe Consultant Paul Gilroy

Fri 22 Oct 17:30

Lovers Rock + Q&A with director Steve McQueen and actor Dennis Bovell

Fri 22 Oct 20:50

Sonic Cinema Presents: Lovers Rock After Party

Fri 22 Oct (Spiritland in Royal Festival Hall) 22:00-02:00

Talk: The Making of Small Axe with Steve McQueen, Tracey Scoffield, David Tanner and guests

Sat 23 Oct 16:00

Red, White and Blue

Sat 23 Oct 18:30

Alex Wheatle

Sat 23 Oct 20:45

Education

Sun 24 Oct 18:10

REGULAR PROGRAMME

Relaxed Screening: Summer of Soul (... Or, When the Revolution Could Not Be Televised) Tue 26 Oct 18:00

BFI Blu-ray Launch: Short Sharp Shocks II + intro Wed 27 Oct 18:10

Art in the Making: The Black Arts Movement on Film + discussion Wed 27 Oct 20:40

Woman with a Movie Camera Preview: Anatomy of Wings + pre-recorded Q&A Thu 28 Oct 18:15

Silent Cinema: Body and Soul + intro Sun 31 Oct 14:20

20-22 Omega Sun 31 Oct 14:30; Thu 4 Nov 18:10

Member Picks: Moonlight Fri 5 Nov 18:10

African Odysseys: Black History Walks Presents: Cause for Concern: Equal Before the Law Fri 5 Nov 18:30-21:30

African Odysseys: A Date with the Devil: Darcus Howe's Journey from Black Power to Broadcasting Sat 6 Nov 12:00-18:00

African Odysseys: Travels with my Camera: Is This My Country? + White Tribe Tue 9 Nov 18:10

African Odysseys: Trouble in Paradise + Darcus Howe: Son of Mine Sun 14 Nov 15:30

Terror Vision: Tales from the Hood Thu 25 Nov 20:40

Missing Believed Wiped Session 1: The London Palladium Show Sat 27 Nov 13:00

Missing Believed Wiped Session 2: Introducing 'The Precious Things': Holiday Startime Sat 27 Nov 15:50

Seniors' Free Matinee, in partnership with African Odysseys: Once Upon a Time... When We Were Colored + intro Mon 29 Nov 14:00

Relaxed Screening: Petite Maman Tue 30 Nov 18:15

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