



SMALL AXE

The Making of Small Axe

We're delighted to welcome director Steve McQueen alongside his producers Tracey Scoffield and Mike Elliot, and Associate Producer Helen Bart for an insightful look at the making of Small Axe.

In this lively conversation, we'll explore the origins of the series, the creative process and approach to each of the five films, the challenges the team encountered when telling the different stories, and the key elements that shaped the anthology.

Small Axe – five luminous and astonishingly powerful films from Steve McQueen – would have been well received no matter when they had arrived. But the fact is that their moment of arrival is now: the dying months of 2020, with the embers of the political fires lit by Black Lives Matter still glowing. What that means is that these films themselves will, inevitably, become part of the historical moment we are all living through and trying to make sense of. That John Boyega was centre-stage at one of the most significant of the Black Lives Matter protests of the summer, in London's Hyde Park, and also plays the central role in *Red, White and Blue*, one of the *Small Axe* pentalogy, ties the two phenomena together even more firmly.

The five films – *Mangrove*; *Lovers Rock*; *Red, White and Blue*; *Alex Wheatle*; and *Education* – are all based on real events, ranging from the infamous Mangrove Nine trial of 1970 to McQueen's own memories of the tales of one of his relatives, a youth spent sneaking out to blues parties. Between them they span the years 1968 to 1984, and lovingly recreate lost epochs in the history of Black Britain.

Yet *Small Axe* is, in a way, just as much about 2020 – the year Britain suddenly and unexpectedly became able to properly hear the voices and the protests of its Black population. Through *Small Axe*, audiences will encounter not just Black voices but Black stories, and aspects of the Black British experience that many will be unfamiliar with. *Small Axe* is so clearly destined to be remembered as a product and emblem of 2020 that the fact that McQueen and his writers had begun work on the project long before the murder of George Floyd in Minneapolis may well be conveniently forgotten. Even knowing that fact, it is difficult not to experience these five very different films through the prism of recent events.

Small Axe is an epic – Black Britain's *Heimat*. It's at times a celebration and at others an act of remembrance. But just as thrilling as the histories it breathes life into is the abundance of Black talent and creativity it puts on display. There is McQueen himself, unseen but pulling the artistic and emotional levers, and there is the astonishing array of Black British acting talent he deploys; putting young Black actors into roles in which they are able to be their authentic selves.

Above all, these films are personal – personal to the director whose experiences of racialised low expectations and failed schools flowed into *Education*; personal to Alex Wheatle, a member of the *Small Axe* writers' room whose early life became the subject of one of the more hard-hitting of the five films. They will also be highly personal, particularly in the heightened

atmosphere of 2020, to many Black Britons, for whom these stories and characters will touch raw nerves and stir repressed memories – as they did for me.

But *Small Axe* raises difficult questions not just about the history of British racism. It also stands as an indictment of the UK film and television industry and its failure to value Black stories and harness Black talent. Watching Shaun Parkes play Frank Crichlow, the persecuted owner of the Mangrove restaurant, raises the question: why has Parkes not previously been given a lead role? Watching Malachi Kirby playing the young Darcus Howe, also in *Mangrove*, makes me wonder why it was that Kirby's big break came on an American production, the 2016 remake of *Roots*, in which he played the lead role of Kunta Kinte.

2020 has seen a shift in consciousness. The events of this summer might be remembered as the moment of transition between two phases in the history of Black Britain. McQueen's *Small Axe* can and should perform a similar function in the story of British film and television. After this there are no viable excuses for marginalising Black stories and Black voices.

David Olusoga, *Sight & Sound*, December 2020

Shabier Kirchner on shooting *Small Axe*

The day before cinematographer Shabier Kirchner and writer-director Steve McQueen were scheduled to prep *Lovers Rock*, one of five films in McQueen's *Small Axe* series, Kirchner was celebrating Carnival in Notting Hill for the first time outside the Caribbean. (The native Antiguan, known abroad for shooting films like *Skate Kitchen* and *Sollers Point* (both 2018), also shot and directed the short film *Dadli*, and is slated to direct an adaptation of Kei Miller's novel *Augustown* as his first feature.)

'I'm there wrapped in my Antiguan flag and completely entranced by the energy between West Indian people,' Kirchner remembers. He danced until the sun went down and persisted deep into the night. McQueen took one good look at him the next morning and knew what he had been up to.

'I brought all of that with me into the conversation,' Kirchner says of the day's festivities. The two related their experiences and the conversation became a 'stake in the ground' for the aesthetic they developed for *Lovers Rock*. Kirchner shot all five films in McQueen's *Small Axe* series, based on various true stories and experiences of London's West Indian community from the 70s and 80s. They approached each film individually and shot them all on entirely different film or digital formats. *Lovers Rock* takes place almost entirely on the dance floor of a house party, so Kirchner and McQueen 'tethered' themselves 'to how the nights would crescendo based on the tempo of the music and energy', riding off the adrenaline of Carnival.

'We knew very quickly that we wanted this to be a party that we were invited to,' Kirchner goes on. To keep up with the tempo, Kirchner shot digital on an Arri Alexa so he could record long takes and lit the environment from above so that the actors could move freely in the space, rather than restricting them with constant adjustments or posting lights at their sides. 'The same way an actor gets into character when they put on their wardrobe, I'm trying to provide a space that helps them embody their character.' This rhythmic, intuitive process was a rare through line in the making of the *Small Axe* films. 'The manifesto was: let's trust our heritage, our ancestry, our talent and each other to get us where we need to go,' Kirchner says.

He recalls a pivotal scene in *Mangrove*, about the Black activists taken to trial for protesting the police raids on the Mangrove restaurant in Notting Hill, where Altheia (Letitia Wright) tries to convince Frank (Shaun Parkes), the restaurant's owner, to keep fighting. McQueen needed the actors to lead this scene, so Kirchner again lit the environment for them and the camera to move freely. Because *Mangrove* was captured on 2-perf 35mm film that was 'pushed' and 'pulled' [over- and under-developed] in processing to feel more 'handmade' and 'community built', rather than on digital, Kirchner couldn't see the footage right away. So he worried the footage might come out too dark, or worse, completely underexposed: 'I might have just ruined one of the best performances I've ever seen,' he remembers worrying to himself. But the scene turned out. It was slightly dark but appropriately so, and the trust in intuition and the unknown, which McQueen encouraged, had paid off.

Intuition also led them to discoveries like the shot in *Red, White, and Blue* where Leroy Logan (John Boyega) sits alone in the police locker room with his face reflected on the lockers. It was a shot Kirchner accidentally discovered after the day had ended, which concisely portrayed Logan 'reflected back in the institution' that he had fought from the inside to reform. Kirchner and McQueen opted to shoot on cleaner 3-perf 35mm for *Red, White, and Blue*, for an 'unfussy' look that focused on Boyega's performance.

Alex Wheatle, a biopic of the novelist, fluctuated tones and covered the scope of Wheatle's life from his youth onwards, so Kirchner captured the film on the large-format Sony Venice camera, whose field of view allowed him to 'have Alex in a beautiful close up but see the entire world around him at the same time'.

Education, about a young boy named Kingsley (Kenyah Sandy) who's tossed around the educational system, was shot on 16mm like the BBC films of the 70s. The impetus was 'not rewriting history, but writing us into history,' Kirchner explains. 'When you ask Steve why he made *Small Axe* for television, he says it's because he wanted his mum to see it. He wants her to switch on the BBC and see our stories there on the screen in the living room. That is something that Black people got robbed of the chance of seeing.'

Aaron E. Hunt, *Sight & Sound*, 1 December 2020

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

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