



LOVERS ROCK

PRODUCTION NOTES

A Note from the Director

The seed of *Small Axe* was sowed 11 years ago, soon after my first film, *Hunger*. Initially, I had conceived of it as a TV series, but as it developed, I realized these stories had to stand alone as original films yet at the same time be part of a collective. After all, *Small Axe* refers to an African proverb that means together we are strong. The anthology, anchored in the West Indian experience in London, is a celebration of all that that community has succeeded in achieving against the odds. To me, it is a love letter to Black resilience, triumph, hope, music, joy and love as well as to friendship and family. Oh and let's not forget about food too!

I recall each of these stories being told to me either by my parents, my aunt, and by experiencing racial discrimination myself growing up in the 70s and 80s. These are all our stories. I feel personally touched by each and every one of them. All my five senses were awoken writing with Courttia Newland and Alastair Siddons. Images, smells, textures and old customs came flooding back.

All five films take place between the late 60s and mid 80s. They are just as much a comment on the present moment as they were then. Although they are about the past, they are very much concerned with the present. A commentary on where we were, where we are and where we want to go.

Steve McQueen

PRODUCTION INFORMATION

Lovers Rock is part of the *Small Axe* anthology, which comprises five original films by Academy Award, BAFTA, and Golden Globe-winning filmmaker Steve M^cQueen (*Hunger, Shame, 12 Years A Slave, Widows*). Set from the late 1960s to the mid-1980s, the films each tell a different story involving London's West Indian community, whose lives have been shaped by their own force of will, despite rampant racism and discrimination. Even though this collection of films is set some decades ago, the stories are as vital and timely today as they were for the West Indian community in London at the time. *Small Axe* is a celebration of Black joy, beauty, love, friendship, family, music and even food; each one, in its own unique way, conveys hard-won successes, bringing hope and optimism for 2020.

An ode to the romantic reggae genre called “Lovers Rock” and to the youth who found freedom and love in its sound, *Lovers Rock* tells a fictional story of young love and music at a house party in 1980. Amarah-Jae St. Aubyn makes her screen debut opposite the BAFTA 2020 Rising Star award recipient Micheal Ward (*Top Boy*). Shaniqua Okwok (*Boys*), Kedar Williams-Stirling (*Sex Education*), Ellis George (*Doctor Who*), Alexander James-Blake (*Top Boy*), Kadeem Ramsay (*Blue Story*) also star, as well as Francis Lovehall and Daniel Francis-Swaby, who make their screen debuts.

Steve M^cQueen for his Lammas Park Productions and Tracey Scoffield and David Tanner of Turbine Studios executive produce for BBC One with Amazon Studios co-producing in the US. The production team includes director of photography Shabier Kirchner (*Bull, Skate Kitchen*), production designer Helen Scott (*A Very English Scandal, Fish Tank*), Academy Award winning costume designer Jacqueline Durran (*Little Women, 1917, Darkest Hour*) and edited by Academy Award winning editor Chris Dickens (*Slumdog Millionaire, Les Miserables*) and writer-director Steve M^cQueen.

Lovers Rock was co-written by novelist, playwright and screenwriter, Courttia Newland (*The Gospel According to Cane, Family Room*), and Steve M^cQueen.

ABOUT THE PRODUCTION

Although *Lovers Rock* is the only fictional story among the five feature films that make up *Small Axe*, the message of self-reliance and Black ingenuity binds it to the other four. A movie of tactile sensuality and levitating joy *Lovers Rock* mostly takes place over one night at a London house party in 1980. While M^cQueen and co-screenwriter Courttia Newland have constructed their narrative around the growing attraction between Martha (Amarah-Jae St. Aubyn) and a brooding stranger (Micheal Ward), the film is equally about the rapture of music, specifically the reggae genre of the title—typified in the film’s swooning centerpiece set to Janet Kay’s euphoric 1979 single “Silly Games”—and the intoxicating choreography (Coral Messam) and Kirchner’s intimate cinematography of the actors performance on the dancefloor.

Lovers Rock perfectly captures the ritual of young love at Blues parties. If a man wanted to dance with a woman, he would touch her elbow and let his hand slide down to her hand. If the woman wanted to dance, she would let the man lead her to the floor. If she didn't, she would pull away. This is just one of the intricate details that plays out in *Lovers Rock*. Such parties took place in homes and were born out of necessity when Black Londoners were un-welcome to revel in white nightclubs. Amid the West Indian community's can-do attitude, blossomed a Blues party culture. A sanctuary of sorts where sweethearts could dress up, pay a small admission fee, dance to romantic Reggae songs, buy beers, eat goat curry and rice and joyously celebrate life without apologies or restrictions.

"I love it because that is what *Small Axe* is about," McQueen says. "It is about doing it yourself. Don't worry if people won't let you in. You make your own."

Executive producer Tracey Scoffield goes on to explain, "*Lovers Rock* sits apart from its *Small Axe* siblings in that it does not tell a true story of a person or group of individuals taking on the system, but is rather a collective reimagining of a time and place very precious to West Indian Londoners. These house parties where the house owners would clear their rooms of furniture and bring in a sound system; large, often home-made speakers together with the crew who would play the music - the DJ, who spoke to the crowd, and the Selector, the one who chose the music. Word would get around the neighborhood and partygoers would pay an entrance fee. For the older West Indian community *Lovers Rock* will bring back many happy memories; and I hope it inspires a new incarnation of Blues from younger audiences."

McQueen and Newland both grew up around Blues parties and their experiences impacted the way the story was told. "Courtia's mother used to have parties at his house, so he remembered a lot of that stuff as a child. I came to it through my aunt," McQueen says. "I remember stories my aunt would tell, she wasn't allowed to go to these parties, but my uncle would leave the backdoor open for her so she could go to the Blues. They lived in Shepherd's Bush, which is next door to Ladbrooke Grove. She'd sneak off to Ladbrooke Grove which is where the dance was, and then come back in the morning and have to go to church. It was like Cinderella!"

Cinematographer, Shabier Kircher explains. "What was on the page and in Steve's head felt incredibly sensory and we wanted to explore that. It's funny because the day we met up to properly talk about how we wanted *Lovers Rock* to feel was the day after I had attended Notting Hill Carnival and all that energy and singing, dancing and just being West Indian in a mass of other West Indians was something that very much was still present and it stayed with me throughout the filming."

Relative newcomer Amarah-Jae St. Aubyn plays Martha, a rebellious and romantic teenager, who sneaks out of her house to go to one of the home-brewed parties. While there, Martha meets Franklyn (Micheal Ward), a flirtatious stranger who seduces her into dancing with him all night even after her friend Patty (Shaniqua Okwok) decides to go home early.

“*Lovers Rock* is all about celebrating Black culture,” St. Aubyn says. “And, a lot of the time, we weren’t welcome in the everyday parties and everyday lifestyle. So, this is us coming together and celebrating our life and celebrating our culture. The film is a lot about music, as well, and the different music. It’s going to be so relatable to people of that time, which is really exciting. My dad was a Reggae artist back in the day. And so, it’s especially relatable to both my parents as it’s stuff they have experienced. It was really exciting to be able to tell their story.”

St. Aubyn continues, “For me, a lot of my preparation for the role came from my Mum's experience and I did lots of research into the music and fashion of that time. From there, I started to develop Martha and discover her favorite music, interests and what she would like to wear.” She continues, “Once we started filming and I worked with Steve on set, I began to learn what triggered my character and discovered how she may have felt, so I developed her even further from being on set.”

Micheal Ward adds, “When I discovered Amarah got confirmed for the role, we didn’t hold back. We did our own rehearsals where I went to her house and worked on the scenes. We got to know each other more. I met her family as well who were very much in touch with the themes, music and dancing that is in *Lovers Rock* and that really helped with understanding the nostalgic element of this story.”

One of the most powerful scenes in *Lovers Rock* fittingly involves music. Swaying rhythmically to the sweet sounds of Janet Kay’s 1979 hit “Silly Games,” a packed room of dewy revelers faithfully sing along and when it ends, continue the tune a cappella for five uninterrupted minutes. The strength and jubilation of the voices in the crowd transports the audience back in time 40 years while also striking a timeless need for fellowship, closeness, likeness and love.

“For me, that was an essential part of that party,” M^cQueen says. “It was about that sort of liberation, that freedom, that spiritual nakedness. That’s what I wanted to see. You don’t see that very much in cinema – of Black people having that total, absolute lack of inhibition. Honestly, I know that it was only made possible because of my crew,” M^cQueen adds of the “Silly Games” scene. “A lot of our crew, which I was very adamant about, were Black. And that’s who was on set and without that, that wouldn’t have happened. I don’t think people would’ve felt free enough to let go.”

Choreographer Coral Messam explains, “It was extremely important to get to the heart and soul of *Lovers Rock* because it requires a particular feeling and a sense of style in the way the body moves and responds to the music. The music itself aided this process magnificently. I would tell the actors to go home, learn the songs, the melodies and encourage them to gain an understanding of what this music demands. It has to soak in your mind, skin, muscle so every part of your being is affected to such a degree, the way you walk and talk, and of course the way your hips move has to be transformed.” She continued, “We did a lot of partner work. The dance forms were broken down into different terms like ‘wine and guh down’ or wall crubbing. This requires skill and attention from both parties because it’s about tuning in, listening; it’s an exchange of energy, done with style and attention to detail.”

St. Aubyn adds, “Working with Coral on the choreography was amazing, especially because dance now is so different. She helped us understand where energy was felt during that time, back then it was held in your feet and we learned to move through the figure of eight with our hips which represents unity. These parties were where love was created and where marriages often came from, so understanding that energy was hugely helpful.”

M^cQueen says the a cappella performance wasn’t scripted. But the actors kept right on singing, as if experiencing a spiritual awakening. “The a cappella performance wasn’t planned. It just happened. It came out and I whispered to Shabier, ‘Just keep shooting,’” M^cQueen says. “All that stuff with the voice variations, that was completely organic. I was merely a witness with a camera. But guess what? They knew the time – 1979/1980. They were in character for that time and knew there were certain things they couldn’t do, wouldn’t do, because of the period, of course. But they sort of channeled that,” he adds. “It was just beautiful. I can’t even describe it. It was just as you saw it in the film. As an artist, you have to know when to do something and know when to step back. I think this was one such occasion. It was just so vibrant. It was all about life and possibilities.”

“For me, this is my musical.” M^cQueen says. “This is the musical I’ve always wanted to do. And with Courttia’s history and my history, it was a great collaboration.”

Establishing the setting

Part of telling this story for M^cQueen was giving the audience a sense of time and place based on the setting and the props, right down to the plastic-covered couches. That all came through the very capable hands of production designer Helen Scott (*A Very English Scandal*).

“Helen Scott was absolutely fantastic,” M^cQueen says. “I loved how she recreated a Blues party, the humongous speakers in someone’s living room. These living rooms, where people watched TV or hung out with family, that would all of a sudden be transformed into nightclubs. And Helen designed the set with incredible authenticity and precision.”

St. Aubyn loved the old-fashioned bus she and co-star Shaniqua Okwok (Patty) got to sit on as a mode of public transportation to the party. “It was definitely exciting filming on the old-school bus,” she says. “It was very fun being on there with Shaniqua because it immediately brought you to that time and gave you that kind of feel.”

Production designer, Helen Scott says, “*Lovers Rock* was less about a place and more about creating a frisson between people and the detail of what they were feeling and doing. Creating atmosphere was much more important than the party house and its walls, the accuracy of which felt less important as what we were creating was the bubble of a world, a fairytale story. The breath and sensuality of that along with the smoke and dancing established the space more than anything. My own memories of blues parties during that time along with Steve's experience and that of our researcher added invaluable detail. We also had access to ample

research and archive material and the music of the time is rich in cultural references. The most challenging part of the film was creating an accurate journey between Ealing and the party in Notting Hill, their movement from suburbia to the hotbed of the party, and the journey Martha and Franklyn take on his bike afterwards. Steve had visual anchors along the way which had to be effectively described, but ultimately, he has the ability to simplify the journey and draw our focus making it just about them and their story.

For Okwok, having to maneuver on a roundabout swing popular in the 1970s, in a scene where she and St. Aubyn rendezvous prior to the party, proved to be more of a challenge than she had anticipated.

“I thought it was going to be a contemporary swing, you know, back and forth, but it was a swing called The Witch’s Hat,” Okwok says. “You have to have a good few people swinging you around. And that was quite difficult, so Steve said, “Do something. Be in the moment.” And then, out of nowhere, I just started singing. That’s when they got that shot of me singing randomly to myself.”

The right threads

What the characters wear in *Lovers Rock* is just as important as the way they speak, sing, dance and interact. The clothes help transport audiences and actors alike.

“For me, the most important part of the costume is actually the shoes,” says Ward, who is best known for his role as Jamie on Netflix’s *Top Boy*. “As soon as you put the shoes on, you feel a certain weight in your feet, and that is just important for the walk and the way you carry yourself. But definitely the shirt, the trousers, everything. You actually feel like you’re from that era.”

The clothes were also a part of the tactile experience M^cQueen wanted audiences to have. “Jacqueline Durran, the costume designer, she’s an artist,” M^cQueen says. “We had so much fun going back and doing research about the clothes because it was a very particular style. Don’t forget, in London, we’re known for our style. It can go from rockers, punks, Goths, Rastas, Ska. It’s all about the style and the details in London.”

Costume designer Jacqueline Durran explains, “*Lovers Rock* gave me the opportunity to recreate a part of the 70s/80s music scene I had never seen represented in a drama - most of the familiar photographs and any films have shown the wider world of the reggae sound system, so when I read the script and spoke to Steve, we saw an opportunity to do something new. It was a female centric scene and for costume it was the women's style that made it so interesting. It was a modest but dressy, aspirational look - it’s not a look that has been re-appropriated over time - going back to it and recreating it was like a discovery.”

“What’s so beautiful about what Jacqueline did is a lot of these dresses were handmade,” M^cQueen says. “I remember my mother had a Singer sewing machine. Everybody would be

getting patterns and making their dresses and such, and blouses. And lot of those dresses you see in *Lovers Rock* were handmade just as many of the dresses that women wore to these Blues Parties were handmade. Everyone wanted to be unique. No one wanted to have the same dresses as everyone else. And the guys wore their double-breasted blazers and the gold buttons, and you know, you had to come sharp to the dance!”

Point of view

Much like the costuming, Shabier Kirchner’s cinematography gives a sense of place. Shots of steam-drenched walls, piping hot pots of Callaloo and curried goat and the vantage point of a floor rug being picked up and moved, are just some of the ways Kirchner brings audiences into this Blues Party on a muggy Saturday night.

“The cinematographer, Shabier Kirchner, he is absolutely amazing,” M^cQueen says. “He’s from Antigua. He’s a skater and of course he’s a sailor, as an island man. He has a wonderful sense of balance as a DP. He’s one of the most talented DPs I’ve ever seen. You see, he’s in there with the people. He’s in there. It doesn’t matter how he goes within these characters, but he goes and right into this party. You are there with him. It’s beautiful. And there’s no way we would’ve gotten those images without him. Absolutely not.”

Kirchner explains, “Steve and I would break down the script and play out certain sequences as if the camera was a person at that Blues party, experiencing it with us. We wanted it to feel slightly surreal and more contemporary even though it was set in 1980.”

Kirchner’s work complemented M^cQueen and Newland’s sensory script in a way that helped both men relive their youth.

“*Lovers Rock* for me was about every single sense,” M^cQueen says. “The taste, the smell, the sound, the feel. It was about the aesthetic. A certain kind of Black aesthetic. A joy. A release. It was a certain kind of, I don’t know, love. It was an explosion of joy and all the elements that come into that.”

Courtia adds, “Steve always requires your A game, but also gives his. He was encouraging and clear on the things he wanted to say, but also allowed me free rein to add in details I remembered.” He continues, “One of the biggest draws for me was being able to dive into such a rich time period. I did a lot of research - I wasn’t even 8 when this film is set, and so a lot of my recollections were those of a child. I went back and forth over many drafts with Steve, refining the finer points, and it was always great to discuss music, dress sense, the jokes. We had a lot of fun.”

The Playlist

M^cQueen chose to use “Silly Games” in *Lovers Rock* but had no idea it would resonate with the cast the way it did in terms of the impromptu a cappella it inspired. Other tunes of note include

“He’s the Greatest Dancer” from Sister Sledge, Carl Douglas’ “Kung Fu Fighting” and “Kunta Kinte” by the Revolutionaries. While a chorus of women’s voices gave “Silly Games” its second life, “Kunta Kinte” served as a cathartic anthem for many of the men at the party as they danced and released their frustrations and excitement by yelling and chanting.

“When you get those young Black people in there, and they’re seeing each other, and they’re in an environment that acknowledges them, it just creates an atmosphere of fun,” McQueen says. “It creates an atmosphere of people talking and being understood. Then it creates an atmosphere where all bets are off. Once you get people who are of the same age, same generation, who acknowledge one another and find themselves in an environment where they’ve been given this platform – a platform they’ve never sort of been in before, a platform where they can shine – they go for it. You know what was interesting about this whole thing? The cameras didn’t have to be there. That party would’ve been created by itself without the cameras.”

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ADDITIONAL SYNOPSES FOR THE SMALL AXE ANTHOLOGY COLLECTION

Mangrove centers on Frank Crichlow (Shaun Parkes), the owner of Notting Hill’s Caribbean restaurant, Mangrove, a lively community base for locals, intellectuals and activists. In a reign of racist terror, the local police raid Mangrove time after time, making Frank and the local community take to the streets in peaceful protest in 1970. When nine men and women, including Frank and leader of the British Black Panther Movement Altheia Jones-LeCointe (Letitia Wright), and activist Darcus Howe (Malachi Kirby), are wrongly arrested and charged with incitement to riot, a highly publicized trial ensues, leading to hard-fought win for those fighting against discrimination. Letitia Wright (*Black Panther*), Shaun Parkes (*Lost in Space*), and Malachi Kirby (*Curfew*) star alongside Rochenda Sandall (*Line of Duty*), Jack Lowden (*The Long Song*), Sam Spruell (*Snow White and the Huntsmen*), Gershwyn Eustache (*The Gentleman*), Nathaniel Martello-White (*Collateral*), Richie Campbell (*Liar*), Jumayn Hunter (*Les Misérables*), and Gary Beadle (*Summer of Rockets*). *Mangrove* was co-written by Alastair Siddons and Steve McQueen.

Red, White and Blue tells the true story of Leroy Logan, a young forensic scientist with a yearning to do more than his solitary laboratory work. When he sees his father assaulted by two policemen, he finds himself driven to revisiting a childhood ambition to become a police officer; an ambition borne from the naïve hope of wanting to change racist attitudes from within. First, Leroy has to face the consequences of his father’s disapproval, never mind the blatant racism he finds in his new role as a despised yet exemplary Constable in the Metropolitan Police Force. John Boyega (*Star Wars: The Force Awakens*) and Steve Toussaint (*Prince of Persia*) star with talented newcomers Tyrone Huntley, Nathan Vidal and Jaden Oshenye. *Red, White and Blue* was co-written by Courttia Newland and Steve McQueen.

Alex Wheatle follows the true story of award-winning writer, Alex Wheatle (Sheyi Cole), from a young boy through his early adult years. Having spent his childhood in a mostly white institutional care home with no love or family, he finally finds not only a sense of community for the first time in Brixton, but his identity and ability to grow his passion for music and DJ'ing. When he is thrown in prison during the Brixton Uprising of 1981, he confronts his past and sees a path to healing. Sheyi Cole stars opposite Jonathan Jules. *Alex Wheatle* was co-written by Alastair Siddons and Steve M^cQueen.

Education is the coming of age story of 12-year-old Kingsley (Kenyah Sandy) with a fascination for astronauts and rockets. When Kingsley is pulled to the Headmaster's office for being disruptive in class, he discovers he's being sent to school for those with "special needs". Distracted by working two jobs his parents (Sharlene Smith, Daniel Francis) are unaware of was the unofficial segregation policy at play, preventing many Black children from having the education they deserve until a group of West Indian women take matters into their own hands. *Education* was co-written by Alastair Siddons and Steve M^cQueen.