

EDGAR WRIGHT

The auteur behind *SCOTT PILGRIM* and *BABY DRIVER* talks diving headfirst into time travel horror with *LAST NIGHT IN SOHO*, and what unexpected genre detours he could take next.

BY DAVID CROW

Edgar Wright is trying to cure himself. That's how the writer-director describes his latest movie *Last Night in Soho*: a cure for the nostalgia that's followed him all his life, and which still causes him to daydream against his better judgment about 1960s London as if it were a golden age.

"I have this recurring time travel fantasy about the idea of going back," Wright says with the air of a confession. "But I think it's always that thing, this nagging fear that it's probably a really bad idea."

It's a surprising admission for a filmmaker who has spent his career often looking to the past in order to find something new and clever to say about our present. After all, Wright's breakthrough was directing the game-changing British sitcom *Spaced*, which featured so many references and nods to the movies he loved that the DVD introduced the "Homage-o-Meter" bonus feature. His early cinematic achievements in the "Cornetto Trilogy"—*Shaun of the Dead*, *Hot Fuzz*, and *The World's End*—are nothing if not love letters to the genres that inspired him and co-writer Simon Pegg.

That sense of always being aware of the history of things weighs on Wright, even as he appears happy and relaxed

his flat and in a London hotel room (in the Soho district, of course). Sitting 90 seconds from his home down the street, Wright is taken back to both better and stranger days in Soho, including when he decided to set his first psychological horror movie there.

In *Last Night in Soho*, audiences follow Eloise (Thomasin McKenzie), a young woman who has come to London with starry eyes for what the big city was like back in the day. Unfortunately, her reveries take a more insidious turn once she actually travels to the tumultuous '60s, shadowing a mysterious lounge singer (Anya Taylor-Joy) to dark places.

Looking back now, Wright is swept up in the excitement he found in shutting down whole streets and redressing them like their seedier past while Taylor-Joy and Matt Smith zip by in mod attire. He's also haunted by the evenings when he found the courage to return there during

when we meet on an August afternoon. He's at the tail-end of the UK rollout for his new music documentary *The Sparks Brothers*, and the filmmaker is relieved to just be out of



lockdown, becoming affected by the sudden silence of the neighborhood and memories of friends who were recently lost, like '60s luminary Dame Diana Rigg.

"It was completely and utterly deserted, which added an extra poignancy to it," Wright says. "And there's another separate part of it that's bittersweet and elegiac in a way. Soho is rapidly changing. Some of those buildings with ghosts in them, they're just disappearing, which is very sad." Clearly such spirits walk beside Wright, be it in his wistful comedies or serious ghost stories.

In *Last Night in Soho*, a character says, "This is London. Someone's died in every room and on every street corner." Is that something you think about when you walk around town?

Oh, my God! I mean that character says it because I believe it. This specifically is to say there are buildings in London that are hundreds of years old, of which most of Soho is like. That's the thing that inspired the movie, really. I've been in London for 25 years. I've spent most of that time working in Soho. I've probably spent more time in Soho than I have in some couches in flats that I've been in. Because I've written there, I've edited movies there. Nearly all of the movies I've done, even the American and Canadian ones, have been edited in Soho. I've just spent an enormous amount of time there. It's also an entertainment district, so there's restaurants, bars, and cinemas.

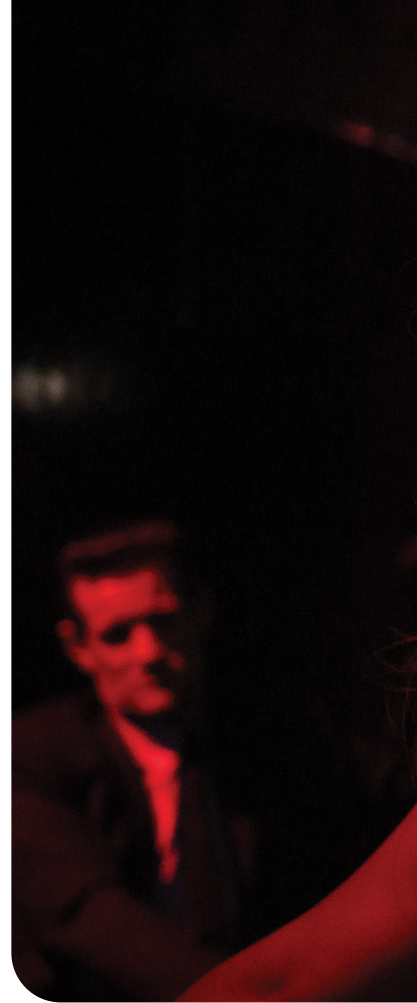
But it's also that thing where, even now, it is on the border of a darker side of the underworld, which is still there in contemporary Soho in plain sight. When I first moved to London [in the mid-'90s], that side of life was a lot more prevalent, and then if you go back to the '60s, even more so. Not necessarily always a great place to be, and I guess that's the point of the movie: that there is a danger of romanticizing the past. Obviously the '60s is a decade to get totally obsessed with, and I certainly am in terms of having grown up with my parents' record collection, which was predominantly '60s records. You can't help but think when you go to London, "Oh my God, the swinging '60s and Soho and film and fashion and music." But of course there was a darker side to the place. I guess that's what the movie ultimately is: a cautionary tale for time travelers. Like, if you could go back, should you?

Do you think about how Eloise's London in this is very different from the London Shaun moves through in *Shaun of the Dead*?

Well, not that there's much that you could join the dots between the two, but Shaun is in his late 20s, living in the suburbs, and at the point when you meet Shaun in the movie, he's clearly been around there for a long time. So he's quite comfortable, nigh complacent, in where he lives. I think the thing is, coming to London for the first time, like any big city, is a very lonely experience. Where are you?

New York. And I'm not from New York originally.

So I'm sure moving to New York is very similar to coming to London. When you first get there, it's really forbidding. It



was the same for me. I'm from the country. I'm from where *Hot Fuzz* was shot, in Somerset, and when I came to London, it's that thing where we even used the term in the movie, it's like "country mouse." One of the mean girls at fashion college calls Thomasin country mouse, and I remember reading that book, *The Town Mouse and the Country Mouse*, when I was a kid, and I remember when I was going to London I was like, "Ah, I'm the Country Mouse!" [Laughs] Because I do not belong here, or even if you don't belong, it's like with any big city, you have to find your own way in and you have to let the city open up to you. Some people never have that experience. I'm sure you have friends as well that come to the city and never get in sync with it and leave. So when you find your place in the city, sometimes it's really hard won. So I'm not Eloise, and I've never been an 18-year-old fashion student, but I certainly had a very similar experience to her coming to London and feeling totally out of place, totally outpaced by everybody.

Do you think that this experience is why you have made so many stories like *Spaced* or *Scott Pilgrim*, or even *Shaun*, where young people feel aimless in the world?

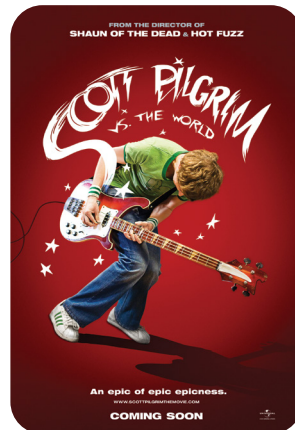
I guess so. You'll never not be the kid from the country. It's a powerful thing, and it's something that—I don't know. That's a good question.

Yet, unlike many of those characters, you knew what you wanted to do since you were 14.

Yeah, and whatever the quality level of my first film, *A Fistful*



Anya Taylor-Joy plays mysterious lounge singer Sandie in *Last Night in Soho*. In the background, Matt Smith's Jack looks on.



of *Fingers*, was.... I realized after the fact I'm really glad that I made it in Somerset and then came to London. Because then I always had this weird calling card in terms of, even if it was a slightly kitschy thing, it's like, "Hey, this kid, he made a Western in Somerset!" Now, it may not have been a great film. It got a good review in *Variety*. *Empire* gave it one star. So opinion on it is mixed. But the thing is that because I did it in my hometown and then came to London, I had sort of done something outside of London. I think if I had come to London without having made anything and tried to make it in the film business, now you're one of tens of thousands of people who want to be a film director. That can be really tough.

You've mentioned on social media being enamored as a child with posters for movies like *Alien* and *Friday the 13th*, and your parents would say "no," leaving those films to your imagination. Do you feel like that forbidden nature influenced your tastes?

Yes, absolutely. There's something where you start to imagine what those films might be like, and sometimes they live up to your imagination and sometimes what's in your imagination is more powerful. That particularly became the case with the VHS mania, when there were video libraries everywhere. My parents didn't have a VCR. They sort of refused to buy a VCR. I didn't actually have one in the house until I was in my late teens when I could pay for it myself. Prior to that though, I remember very distinctly when I was maybe 10 years old going into a video store that was around the

corner from my house. And I'd usually go in the afternoon when it was empty, and just look at the covers and the back covers of 18-rated videos. What's funny is that some of those movies—like I'd be looking at the cover of Brian De Palma's *Body Double*, and just trying to imagine what the film was like from the poster image and the little stills on the back, and maybe what the synopsis said.

Then occasionally there are movies from that period where I've never seen the movie, and I realize it would be better not to see the movie, because I'm not sure it could ever live up to the cover art. Like, I remember specifically being quite obsessed, aged 10, with a film called *Zone Troopers*, which is, I discover now, directed by Rachel Bilson's dad, Danny Bilson. But I just remember seeing that poster, and it's got an alien pointing, saying, "Your universe needs you!" and "Zone Troopers." I never saw the movie and it's probably not a good time to start.

What did your parents think of your genre interests, particularly as they continued into your adult professional life?

They knew that my brother and I were both very interested in genre movies, and I think we had tried to convince them on a number of levels [on why they're great]. I mean, long before I knew that I wanted to be a director, I definitely knew I wanted to do something in film, and there was definitely, like with a lot of kids, an early obsession with makeup. There are films where those things are more acceptable as a kid, where *Star Wars* has the cantina

sequence or *Raiders of the Lost Ark* has the whole ending with Nazis melting. Then other things are more illicit. My mum and dad were well aware that me and my brother would really like to see *Alien*, really like to see *The Thing*, really like to see *An American Werewolf in London*, but can't.

Then I think it was when I was 10 years old that *An American Werewolf in London* was shown on network TV for the first time. I managed to convince my parents to let me stay up and watch it, and they acquiesced, and they let me and my brother watch it until midway through that dream sequence with the Nazi monsters. When they slit David Naughton's throat, my mum was like, "Okay, that's it. Bed." So I didn't see the rest of the film for another three years after that! I had terrible nightmares because I never saw the story resolve. I really did, I'm not kidding around! I really had terrible nightmares because I never saw the resolution of the story.

The resolution wouldn't have prevented the nightmares.
That's true! [Laughs]

You've been described in the press as the ultimate film nerd fanboy. Do you like that title?

I mean, it depends how it's used. If it's used as an insult then, sure, I'd rather not. But in terms of, am I a fan of cinema? Of course. You could use the word enthusiast. It doesn't really annoy me. I guess it only is a thing where people assume that means I only like a certain type of movie, which is not true. I like all types of movies. And certainly in recent years, I've gravitated away from what people might think is more like the comic book nerd kind of movie, just because a lot of it tires me out to be honest. I mean, weirdly enough, I just saw James Gunn's *The Suicide Squad* this weekend and I thought, "Oh, that's the first comic book movie in quite a long time that I actually enjoyed."

But there's a certain type of movie that I feel like I've grown out of for the most part, in terms of the things that I watch. I try to watch a bit of everything. In fact for the start of the pandemic, I decided to make a dent into my long list of films that I'd never seen, which had an enormous breadth to it in terms of the types of movies I was watching.

In *Baby Driver*, you wrote into the script all the songs you planned to shoot and edit the scenes to. Is that something you're continuing?

Last Night in Soho was similar to *Baby Driver* in the sense



that I had specific songs worked out for specific scenes. And in a lot of cases in the way that I write, especially with *Baby Driver* and *Last Night in Soho*, the song in some ways inspires the scene. Maybe not in terms of what's happening in it story wise, but the rhythm of it or even the length of it.

So there's one song in the movie in the first dream sequence, the Graham Bond Organisation version of "Wade in the Water," and sometimes it's like this movie, which I've had in my head for 10 years. Sometimes I've had those songs connected with the movie for that long. So if they come up again, like maybe you're working on something else and you hear that song and you're like, "Ah, I've got to make *Last Night in Soho!*" So I know what this scene is.

But I love making films that become music-centric. Both with *Baby Driver* and *Last Night in Soho*, working with a choreographer on a day-to-day basis, and not just the dance sequences. It's kind of everything involved in movement and

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GIMME FIVE

Fun facts and trivia about the auteur director

1 Edgar Wright got his first Video-8 camcorder after winning a Comic Relief filmmaking competition on BBC's Saturday morning kids' series, *Going Live!*, in 1991. Wright won for making an animated short about the lack of disabled access in cinemas. He was 16.

2 Wright was offered the chance to direct "Rose," the first episode of the revived *Doctor Who* which starred Christopher Eccleston and Billie Piper. He turned it down because he was still working on *Shaun of the Dead*. Years later he told a fan, "My mother has never forgiven me."



Edgar Wright with his cast on set of *Scott Pilgrim vs the World*. (L-R) Mark Webber, Johnny Simmons, Alison Pill, Michael Cera and, Mary Elizabeth Winstead.

how that relates to the music that might be in the scene. It was a great experience. Some director friends of mine have said outright, “When are you just going to make a musical?”

That’s my next question.

Alfonso Cuarón said it to me after he watched *Last Night in Soho!* He really liked the movie and he said, “But honestly, when are you just going to make a musical?” [Laughs]

Has it been in the back of your head? You flirted with it in *Scott Pilgrim*, and the first reference in *Spaced* is for *The King and I*.

I can’t claim credit for *The King and I* reference in *Spaced*. That was definitely a Jessica Hynes reference. But yeah, listen, if I found the right subject matter or something that I felt could be a really great movie that I could make, then yeah, for sure. It would be amazing. They’re always a genre

that I absolutely adore, right back to some of the early sound musicals, especially all of the Busby Berkeley films of the early ’30s. I just find them mind-boggling. I mean the thing about those movies made in the early ’30s at Warner Bros. is that it would be difficult to better them now. Like that’s what’s crazy. Also nobody would make them with that many dancers now. The studio would be like, “Um, do you really need 60 dancers? Can you, like, CGI them?”

You mention filmmaker friends, but do you have long conversations with filmmakers who you’ve heavily homaged? Has Michael Bay ever come up to you and been like, “We’re going to talk *Hot Fuzz*?”

I’m not sure that Michael Bay has ever seen *Hot Fuzz*. I once met him at a birthday and I introduced myself to him, and I think this was just after *Hot Fuzz* came out. So I introduced myself and said, “Oh, I don’t know if you know, I’m Edgar Wright, I made the film *Hot Fuzz*.” And he went, “That’s the film with the guy from *Mission: Impossible III*?” I said, “Yeah.” And that was the end of the conversation. So I have a feeling he’s never seen it. [Laughs]

And George Romero?

Well, George was probably the first director who was a big hero of mine that I got to meet or talk to before meeting. Specifically because when we made *Shaun of the Dead*, we wanted to reach out to George to watch it, because we felt that it was such a valentine to him that we’d feel bad if he didn’t like it. It was obviously a nerve-racking thing to do because what if we show it to him and he fucking hated it? Me and Simon would be devastated.

But we reached out to him through Universal, and he watched the film when he was on holiday in Florida in 2004, and he called us that night. I always remember that moment. It was before the days of group Zoom calls. He called Simon first and then he called me, and I remember I was standing when I got the call, and talking to George Romero about *Shaun of the Dead* and hearing this voice that I knew from documentaries and DVD commentaries.

Now George Romero knew who we were and liked our film, and liked it enough to give it a poster quote. So he was really the first director who I really admired that I met. But I also remember that as the moment that the world started getting smaller. ●

Last Night in Soho opens in cinemas on Oct. 29.

3 The Cornetto gag in *Shaun of the Dead*, which unintentionally led to the name of the trilogy, came from Wright’s own memories of a personal hangover cure while in university: Cornetto ice cream.



4 Wright considers his first movie, *A Fistful of Fingers*, his slightest effort. When asked to name his favorite film, he likes to say, “I can’t pick between my children. That would be bad. I really couldn’t pick which was my favorite movie. But I could tell you my least favorite.”

5 Wright recorded himself as having watched at least 394 movies during lockdown in 2020. One he was happy to get around to was Andrei Tarkovsky’s *Stalker* (1979). He tells us, “As I was watching it at home, I was thinking, ‘Man, I wish I’d seen this at the cinema first.’”