

On Screen

Films & DVDs



Emmanuel 'Jagari' Chanda in Kitwe, Zambia, January 2017

WITCH: We Intend To Cause Havoc Gio Arlotta (Director)

Clam Jam Productions/Pantheon Pictures 2019, 88 mins

It would be too easy to brush off Gio Arlotta's first feature-length documentary *We Intend To Cause Havoc* as the next sensationalist hunt for another exotic psych rock recluse. The Italian director's role does veer towards the formulaic in the post-*Searching For Sugar Man* music documentary landscape: that of the pseudo-anthropologist fan becoming the saviour of older forgotten musicians and the hero of his own record collector circle.

There's the obligatory search for lost material, the familiar animated sequences illustrating eyewitness accounts and the inevitable international tour with a reformed band featuring younger Western players. The main subject of the documentary, Zambian rocker Emmanuel

'Jagari' Chanda, is initially presented as a curiosity; hailed by his fans in the 1970s as "the African Mick Jagger" because of his unmistakable Jaggerish vocal delivery, the singer took on his stage name as a Stonesy spin on the English word jaggery, meaning dark brown sugar.

Jagari has enough tragic stories under his belt, as the sole survivor of the original line-up of Zambian rock phenomenon WITCH (an acronym for We Intend To Cause Havoc) whose other members died during the AIDS crisis. However, from the first encounter with the director, Jagari dodges the martyr role, creating a good-natured vibe throughout the film. Towards Dutch musicians Jacco Gardner and Nic Mauskovic, the rhythm section bolstering the reformed WITCH, he positions himself as a tutor, an aspiration he has to this day, were he not dependent on his day job mining gemstones.

Despite taking the upper hand in the relationship, Jagari does open up to his collaborators and dares to question the strict dismissive view on rock he has had since he became a born again Baptist. Eventually, during the new WITCH's European club tour, he accepts his status within the global psych rock continuum, coming to terms with his past.

And what a wild past that is: although WITCH remained unknown outside the region, they became the biggest band of the land in the 70s. After Zambia declared independence from UK rule in 1964, British rock remained as popular with the nation's youth as anywhere else. Followed by other bands in a shortlived wave named Zamrock, WITCH filled a void when the first Zambian president Kenneth Kaunda decreed that 95 per cent of music on the radio should be of national origin.

After a charmingly rowdy start with

British Invasion-inspired songs, captured on their debut album *Introduction*, WITCH developed an incredible range of material in a mere five years before Jagari left in 1977. The album *Lazy Bones*, full of Black Sabbath-like heaviness, is regarded as a highlight, but the following Afrobeat and disco albums hold up in their own right.

As WITCH's main songwriter, Jagari was forced to deliver quickly and in order to stay fresh he found inspiration in unexpected corners. As he reveals in the documentary, he regularly took his beats from the unintentional locked grooves of broken records, often changing their speed. As a past miner for beats and a present miner for gems, he still aims for a brighter future, teaching music to the Zambian youth. The documentary reflects his hope in a way that should convince even the most cynical viewer.

Marinus de Ruiter

It Couldn't Happen Here Jack Bond (Director)

BFI Blu-Ray/DVD 1987, 86 mins

Newly restored by the BFI, Pet Shop Boys' 1987 film *It Couldn't Happen Here* is a full-length visual expansion of the group's complex relationship with idealised Englishness, which doubles as a reminder of the changing meaning of patriotism. Written and directed by Jack Bond, who also made the videos for "Heart" and "Always On My Mind", the film begins in a seaside town and morphs into a Little England road movie, soundtracked by PSB songs largely from their second album *Actually*.

Neil Tennant first appears in black tie riding a bicycle beside the beach, joining Chris Lowe after he has run away from the B&B where he lives. The duo then journey through a series of tableaux, including a fantastical secondhand car dealership, a greasy spoon cafe patronised by fighter pilots and ventriloquists, and "suburban hell", where identikit white-collar workers

file down the streets on fire.

Somewhat unconcerned with narrative, the film is more like a collage of quintessential symbols – spitfires, saucy nuns, regency gentlemen, Barbara Windsor – which span centuries but belong on the same novelty postcard. The use of PSB's music is innovative throughout: "Suburbia" is heard playing from the radio at a seaside stall, and lyrics to one song are frequently spoken by Tennant in voiceover while another plays in the background. For "What Have I Done To Deserve This?" Windsor assumes the part of Dusty Springfield, duetting with Tennant over the phone. There are allusions to autobiography, including one sequence to "It's A Sin" where two Catholic schoolboys addressed as "Tennant and Lowe" crash a pervy Victorian stagemusical.

The film is enigmatic, sometimes slipping into listlessness. Taking in its symbolic surroundings, it shares an intellectual distance with the band's

music. The Union Flag adorns the faces of neo-Nazi skinheads, but the camera also fetishises red post boxes and telephone boxes. Watching this film in 2020, when flags, statues and 'British values' are anything but ambiguous, and are instead entirely co-opted as symbols of insidious nationalism, must be distinctly different to watching in the late 1980s, when even transgressive artists such as PSB collaborator Derek Jarman still saw national identity as something worth saving.

In the film's final scene, set to the track "One More Chance" ("The city is quiet/Too cold to walk alone/Strangers in overcoats/Hurry on home") the band's car drives through streets desecrated by fire, at once the scene of a riot or a Second World War raid. Lowe and Tennant descend into an empty underground disco which soon fills up with bedazzled competitive ballroom dancers.

The disco is an untouched sanctuary, but it's also a place where the odd rituals

of English life can continue. The film concludes here on an ambiguous note – is this the place they have been searching for, where queer life and Englishness can coexist, and share camp strangeness? Or is Englishness a parasite invading their safe space?

Just before this final performance, a man dressed in regency costume, who had been bumming a lift in their car, addresses the camera with a snippet of a John Milton poem: "*The hungry sheep look up, and are not fed/But swol'n with wind, and the rank mist they draw/Rot inwardly, and foul contagion spread*". The poem, *Lycidas*, is an English pastoral, but, like much of the work of both Milton and Pet Shop Boys, it hints at the rotting foundations beneath its aesthetically pleasing surface. In 1987, Milton's "*contagion*" could have been a number of threats to English life – Thatcherism, racism, the AIDS epidemic. In 2020, the most foul contagion is arguably Englishness itself.

Claire Biddles