



# PARDON MY FRENCH

AARON JOHNSON

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HE CONVEYED THE ANGER, GRIEF AND MIGHTY TALENT OF A TEENAGE JOHN LENNON IN THE ACCLAIMED *NOWHERE BOY*. HE'S STARRING AS THE NERDY, WANNABE SUPERHERO OF *KICK-ASS*. AND HE'S ENGAGED TO MARRY ARTIST AND *NOWHERE BOY* DIRECTOR SAM TAYLOR-WOOD. MEET AARON JOHNSON, THE TALENTED BRITISH ACTOR WHO'S ON THE VERGE OF STARDOM, FATHERHOOD AND TURNING 20...

By the time he hits 20, Aaron Johnson will have played John Lennon, starred as an American comic-book hero in bright green Spandex and become a father, to the third child of artist-filmmaker Sam Taylor-Wood. He may well be married to Taylor-Wood too, although a date hasn't been chosen ("It'll happen when Sam feels comfortable about getting in a dress again," he says in his soft-spoken estuary twang). He will have been acting professionally for three-quarters of his life, and has been making his own decisions for the past five years. His third decade begins on June 13 and already Aaron Johnson qualifies for his own episode of 'This Is Your Life,' (which would need heavy censoring for all the swearing Johnson does).

It may explain why he displays a degree of nonchalance, mashed up with shy vulnerability and assured swagger. Actors on the brink of bigtime can be a curious breed. You can practically taste their hunger for fame and adoration, their puppydog-ish excitement at reaching the top. Which is what makes Aaron Johnson refreshing in person. He's got a real puppy by his side – a five-month-old Newfoundland named Bear who he beckons to follow us up to the top floor of Taylor-Wood's studio, like a living comfort blanket, where he tickles, strokes and makes smoochie noises at her throughout our interview – but mostly Johnson dispenses with the traits of his kind, despite having more reason than most to feel that a magnificent career is his for the taking.

*Bleached denim jacket and silk/polyester T-shirt by Marc Jacobs.*



Because part of him, frankly, doesn't actually give a damn. "I love life, I love enjoyment and, you know, I ain't gotta think about fucking work or career anymore 'cos I've got what I want in the world..." Squeezing Bear by the jowls, he leans forward to nuzzle her face. "Haven't I?"

That may sound blunt, but he has his reasons for feeling so strongly. Much ink has been spilled on his relationship with Taylor-Wood, 23 years his senior, but far from wanting to deflect the glare, the pair have been squiring each other to exhibitions, openings and awards shows, and we're meeting today in the artist's backstreet studio in Shoreditch. As we sit at one end of a long white studio space in scratched-leather swivel chairs, one of Wood's famous 'Crying Men' portraits – Ed Harris – glares at us from the opposite wall. And Johnson's newfound focus doesn't mean he isn't still elated about his chosen profession. Listen to him rhapsodise about his favourite actor and it's obvious how much it means to him.

"I want to change it up and be different. Take Gary Oldman in *True Romance*: he's playing some rasta with a scar up his face and fucking dreads and speaking like a black man. He's the only actor I could watch in a film all the way through and go, 'Who was that? Fuck me, it's Gary Oldman!'" he marvels. "I wanna be able to do that – be versatile and chop and change and push those sort of barriers."

The one-two punch of *Nowhere Boy* and *Kick-Ass* isn't a bad place to start, as was his decision to dismiss producers who – after he played a teen heartthrob in *Angus, Thongs & Perfect Snogging* – wanted to market him as a British Zac Efron. Forcing his hand in a way, they indirectly lead him to Matthew Vaughn's dork-squad superhero movie *Kick-Ass*, a self-funded adaptation of Mark Millar's ultra-violent comic-book about a high school nobody who becomes an unlikely costumed crime fighter. Cast at the 11<sup>th</sup> hour after Vaughn had had his fill of seeing fame-hungry but talent-light American teens, Johnson tapped into his inner geek to play *Kick-Ass*'s wannabe – growing his hair long and bushy, donning glasses, and quitting the gym to acquire the requisite scrawniness. "The more stupid I looked, the more up for it I felt," he says. "The only thing I couldn't pull off was I wanted to be blonde. I said to Matthew, 'The kid in the comic book is blonde, I wanna be that kid.' He was like, 'Did you ever see Colin Farrell in *Alexander*? We're not doing it.'" Johnson is generally superb as the gawky vigilante, although he's not convinced he nailed the character's peculiarly American humour, that brand of hesitant, awkward-funny, all-the-rage banter practiced by the likes of Michael Cera, Jonah Hill and Jesse Eisenberg: "I felt awkward sometimes," he admits, "and, you know, I wasn't 100 percent on some of it." Self-criticism aside, *Kick-Ass* arrives only months after



*Faux texte, faux texte, crédit faux texte Crédit faux texte.*

*Nowhere Boy* and the two films have thrust Johnson to the front ranks of bankable British talent. How good was he in *Nowhere Boy*, in which he played Lennon between the ages of 15 and 19? He's callow, cocky, seething, soulful and musical – everything the real boy Lennon was, in other words. *Nowhere Boy*'s producers originally wanted to dub Johnson's singing and instrument-strumming; he was having none of it. "I would have felt like such a fucking cunt," he grimaces. "It meant almost more to me nailing the music as it did the drama scenes, the emotional stuff, as much as the accent that I worked to perfect every day. If you're going to play Lennon, you have to play the music. And luckily, Sam being a fucking artist and having a creative mind, thinks similar to me. That's why I'm so proud of *Nowhere Boy*, because we put our fucking all into it." I first met Johnson in January 2009, right after he'd wrapped *Kick-Ass* and was plunging into Lennon-land (he proudly showed off his banjo-lesson blisters). At the time, he was bubbly, keen, gabbing away about "this amazing artist and lovely woman" he was about to work with, and dressed in the standard London-teen uniform of trainers, skinny jeans and T-shirt. A year on, and Johnson is a bit more reserved to start. That slowly melts away, however, and he's mostly forthright and engaged, although occasionally he looks like he's being interrogated at school for setting fire to the science lab, lanky limbs dangling over the chair with

mutinous insouciance. His hair has been styled back into a '50s quiff for the *Man About Town* cover shoot ("It was almost down to my shoulders two days ago"), the indie-kid garb replaced by smart, natty attire: raw denim jeans, well-worn, ankle-high brogues, crisp navy shirt with pinpoint white dots and grey cardigan – the sharply-dressed man with responsibilities, stepchildren (Taylor-Wood's two daughters with art dealer Jay Jopling) and a public image to worry about. Johnson stresses that he doesn't give a fig what anyone thinks he should do or how he should appear; he has a streak of stubborn independence that's been serving him well for years. At 15, he left school – and the Buckinghamshire village he grew up in, Holmer Green – for good; at 16, he was going from job to job, living on his own. "Every job I had, I said, 'Give me accommodation.'" When I ask how he celebrated his newfound autonomy, he breaks into a wide grin. "I went out on a bender," he laughs. "Got it all out of my system though, thank God. Experimental – that's what it's all about, you know, experimenting and then drawing on those past experiences. I'd use stuff creatively... but I've not got an addictive personality so I wouldn't get too attached to anything." Johnson won't spill what or with whom he indulged in this teen tearaway phase, but he arguably paid a price for his early independence. When I suggest that winning roles so young (he landed his first professional

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*Pardon my french*  
Aaron Johnson

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*Leather jacket by Marc Jacobs.  
White cotton poplin shirt by Dior Homme.*





gig at six, starred opposite Owen Wilson in *Shanghai Knights* at 11 and played the young Edward Norton in *The Illusionist* at 15) must have boosted his self-esteem, he has a different take, telling a story about crying every day for a week after his first film job came to an end. Aged 10, he and his mother had decamped to Amsterdam for six months, living near the red-light district while he played twins in *Tom & Thomas*, opposite Sean Bean.

“I missed the people I was working with and I wasn’t getting that work buzz, that fix,” says Johnson, his speech picking up in pace and pitch, “and I had to fucking come back to boredom, go back to a village where it’s all shit, man. So I was accustomed to feeling like you were going to have something and then have it taken away from you – you work on a film set surrounded by a family and then you’re dropped by your family, and pushed out in the fuckin’ cold again. I was used to being in and out of fucking relationships – you had to build up your social skills and your confidence fucking quick.”

It wasn’t all tears, though – there were plenty of laughs too. Johnson credits his mother, who chaperoned him on his early jobs, for keeping him sane on the endless round of auditions, mocking the pushy boastfulness of other young actors’ parents. Johnson launches into a wicked, high-voiced impression of the ghastly stage mums they would encounter. “My Harry did this and fucking that and ‘e’ll be in Mary Poppins soon and, of course, cor, ‘e gotta lotta money for that Audi commercial...’ My mum would just take the piss out of those people, we would just crack up. That’s why we always got along. We felt sorry for them.” Johnson’s experiences forced him to grow up fast. He says he learned to “hold that shit in, to build up the barriers, to put a front on.” But one gets the feeling it still hits him at the end of each job (“I really, really miss it,” he told me last January about *Kick-Ass*). Which is another reason why *Nowhere Boy* has been such a phenomenal, life-changing event – the intensity of collaborating with Taylor-Wood on her first feature didn’t end on the last day of shooting. Johnson felt himself falling for Taylor-Wood during the shoot, but

stopped himself from telling her in case the feelings weren’t mutual – until near the end when “I came out and said something – slipped... And then she slipped too. The first time was a bit of a shock so we sort of let it go. But, you know, we were working hard and close with each other and we protected each other and supported each other and love each other...” The couple have lived together for nearly a year now in Taylor-Wood’s Primrose Hill mansion. Trying to find the deep, dark psychological clues to unlock their relationship is a pointless task, because they’re not obvious. You might try pointing to Johnson growing up fast and preferring the company of adults from a young age (“I was working like an adult, so I didn’t have to think like a kid anymore”), but that won’t get you very far. When I ask if Taylor-Wood is his longest relationship, he responds in the way that any besotted lover would. “Of course it will be. We’re going to get married.” He laughs, then awkwardly clears his throat. “We’re having a baby. Yeah, it’s for life. Forever... Before Sam, I didn’t trust anyone. I didn’t feel about anyone the way I do about Sam. I’ve found my soulmate. When I’m not with her I feel like I’ve lost a fucking arm and leg. She gives me fucking energy and life... I had many girlfriends before but none that I’ve had true feelings for or even felt on the same level or same age as. It’s funny people want to talk about age but we feel the same age. There isn’t a gap. A gap’s a hole but...” – Johnson slaps his hand against his hip – “we’re attached...”

Johnson leans over, starts ruffling Bear’s black fur. “Aw, you got a smelly bottom... Up you come,” he coos to his suddenly alert pet. Bear obliges, standing up and sneezing. “People can say what they want obviously but I don’t need to listen. They’re the ones that are kidding themselves. I know so many fucking bad relationships, and, you know, I’ve found who I want to be with. We’re like a rock, we are a family...”

Bottom line is we should all accept what Johnson tells us: he’s in love and that’s all that counts. And with that, Johnson calls it a day, disappearing down the stairs with Bear in hot pursuit. ♦

*Silk/polyester T-shirt by Marc Jacobs. Trousers and shoes by Dolce & Gabbana. Hair by Luke Hersheson. Grooming by Sally Branka. Fashion assistance: Tony Irvine.*

