

Schemers:

by Gordon
Craigie



A love letter to Dundee!

Panoramic
view from
Dundee
Law

IN THE 1970s, Dave McLean, John Gibson and Scot Young were typical young lads growing up in the northern Dundee housing schemes of Whitfield and Fintry. They were constantly coming up with madcap plans to better themselves and, in time, each became successful in their chosen fields. But never would they have imagined back then that in 2020, nearly 50 years on, their youthful exploits would be featured in an award-winning film, *Schemers*. To say the film was made against the odds would be an understatement – this is not a big-budget film backed by major broadcasters or established filmmakers, *Schemers* has been independently funded and brought to the screen by those very same boys from those Dundee schemes.

iScot subscriber John, an accountant turned property developer, now lives in Broughty Ferry, an upmarket suburb of Dundee which is only around four miles east of his Fintry childhood home but a million miles away in many respects – at the turn of the nineteenth century *the Ferry*, as it's known locally, was reputedly home to more millionaires per square mile than anywhere else in Britain and is commonly quoted to have been "the richest square mile in Europe". He recalls how their business adventures only started because they needed football strips! "Dave was from Whitfield and I lived in Fintry, but we actually met at college. We wanted to start a football team, but we needed money to buy shirts so we decided to organise

a disco to raise the cash. It was incredibly successful, so we thought we should continue to do this kind of thing for ourselves. It just grew from there. We got into promoting bands and got into all sorts of trouble and chaos when we were trying to climb up the slippery pole of the music industry! This was in the late 1970s, and it culminated in us ridiculously booking Iron Maiden for the Caird Hall, and it worked!" *iScot* won't spoil readers' enjoyment of the film by elaborating on that story...

Dave went on to be a successful music promoter and manager and now lives in Bangkok – even further east of Whitfield! He remembers that first venture slightly differently... "When we organised the first disco, it was to help me "get off" with a girl! We used to go to Laing's Hotel, a really popular bar in Dundee at that time, and the girl was sitting with her pals. The place was always packed. I remember an Alex Harvey song, *Faith Healer*, was pounding away that night, and it was like I was on the prowl – I'd fancied her for ages, and we'd been playing eye games for weeks." John said, "Why don't you just go and talk to her?" "I cannae dae that, she's awesome, she'd no talk to me." John then reminded me that we needed strips for the college football team and I said, "Yes, but how's that relevant?" He says, "We'll get tickets printed for a disco and then you go across and sell her some tickets, that'll be your intro." Two or three days later, after getting tickets printed – we didn't have a venue or a disco or anything else yet – we're back in Laing's again and John says, "On you go." She's sitting with five or six of her pals and I go across and casually say, "Hi girls how's it going?" "Aye, no bad", "We've got this disco on, tickets are £3 if you fancy coming..." She says, "Can we no get them for nothing?", "Yeah, fine, how many are you wanting – six? – aye that's fine." So, I go back and John says, "There you go, see, that was easy, what's that, £18?" I went, "No it's f*** all, I just gave them away!" It worked, mind, I got off with her. In the film we called her Shona, but that wisnae her name..."

The official publicity blurb for the film claims, "*Schemers* is the first full length feature film to be made in Dundee, based on the true story surrounding David McLean's stream of ambitious gigs in the 1980s – these included

Simple Minds, XTC, Ultravox, The Skids and Iron Maiden, to name just a few! The film won the Audience Award at the Edinburgh Film Festival and was recently awarded Best Director and Best Actor at the New York Winter Film Awards." Although John has been involved in the project from the outset, he's keen to downplay his role. "*Schemers* is really all down to Dave – he wrote the film about me, himself and Scot. Scot died in mysterious circumstances in London in 2014 – there was a lot of press coverage about that as he was alleged to be the richest man in Britain at one time. The film revolves around the three of us when we were young and foolish. It's based on fact, everything in the film actually happened. The way we got involved with Dundee's underworld and the threats that were made to us and all sorts of crazy stuff, that was all

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true. It's done very well at a number of festivals, in Russia, England, Scotland, and the USA." Dave, however, is keen to credit his friend's contribution. "John led the way with investment, and that really helped to get the project started. He also got Ross Morrison, the Inverness Caledonian Thistle chairman, involved, so we had a big starter fund. My long-time business partner, Alex Weston, my doctor, Jonathon Botting, and my financial manager Virginia Lee also put money in – and me of course, that's my pension fund blown!"



Conor as Dave the DJ
© Kristi Louise Herd

Dave, who's worked with some of the biggest names in music, like Nirvana, Smashing Pumpkins, Pearl Jam and Green Day, explains the background to the film: "The film really came about because the band I manage, Placebo, were having a bit of down time and I was looking for something to do. Lots of people had told me I should write a book, but I thought that sounded too hard, so I decided to write a film instead! Once I had the script done I thought, well, if people don't like the script at least they'll like the soundtrack, and if they don't like the soundtrack then at least they'll like the scenery. I wrote it in 10 days, by hand, then loaded it onto my iPad – the number of times I pressed the wrong button and lost everything... jeezo!"



Conor and Tara as Dave and Shona © Kristi Louise Herd



Conor as Dave playing pool © Kristi Louise Herd



Conor and Grant, as Dave and John, arranging another ambitious scheme © Stephen Grant

Once I had the script done I thought, well, if people don't like the script at least they'll like the soundtrack, and if they don't like the soundtrack then at least they'll like the scenery

"The message of the film is that you should always follow your dreams – no matter how ridiculous they may seem you can always make things happen. It's hard for me to pick out special bits, but I love the conversations with my mum. There's one scene where I'm talking about going to work in Cambodia and she says, "But you get sunstroke at the berries!" Just mad conversations like that, that people have. Some cracking lines. Sadly, Mum died during the shoot – she would've loved to see the finished film. I really wanted to represent Dundee positively and show it in a good light and I've definitely done that. It looks great, well shot, the camera work is great. I was really proud when somebody described the film as a love letter to Dundee, I thought, that'll do me!" John adds, "A lot of the actors are from Dundee and we've got local music too, from The View and Saint Andrew. The entire soundtrack is electric – including the Proclaimers, Sensational Alex Harvey Band, Simple Minds, Iron Maiden, and Placebo doing Boney M! – the reviews have been fantastic."

The film was initially shot in Dundee over April/May/June 2017 but when Dave saw the final cut he was disappointed. "It just wasn't the film I had in my head and I wasn't happy with how it had turned out. One of the team suggested we contact an editor, Khaled Spiwak, to see what we could do. After he'd sat through the entire 52 hours of footage he said, "There's definitely a film here", which was really encouraging. We agreed on the need to change a few people and shoot some additional scenes, so Khaled came out to Bangkok and together we wrote 15 new scenes, then came back to Dundee and started shooting again in January 2018. It was really sunny, but it was about -10°C and, because the original shoot had been in baking hot temperatures, the actors had to pretend it was warm for continuity! Once that was done Khaled quickly dragged the whole thing together in the edit and, when I saw the end result, I just thought, bingo!"

Dundee's twa bridges! (film scene)



Davie Narey scores against Brazil!

John agrees about the end result: "The first time I actually saw the film was at the Edinburgh International Film Festival. It won an award there, then another at the Raindance Film Festival in London, then Buffalo in New York, Sochi and Saint Petersburg. I got a message from a Dundee United supporter in Moscow who'd gone to see it and said, "Are you by any chance an Arab?" There's a scene where Dave breaks his leg – it's about Dave thinking he's going to be a great footballer and the injury finishes his career – and he's got the old 1960's black-and-white Dundee United jersey on, the Finn Dossing strip. This guy had just thought, "Well, it's obviously United boys that've done this!", and he somehow found me and sent a message. He said he loved it." Dave picks up on the Dundee United theme: "When we first showed at the festival, I had the famous Davie Narey goal for Scotland against Brazil in the film, but I had to cut it out because it was going to cost us £15k – I also wanted the epic clip of Shergar winning the Epsom Derby, but that was going to cost £20k – for 12 seconds! £35k for 30 seconds was just ridiculous, but it's a shame though. I've met stars like Kurt Cobain, David Bowie,

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Davie Narey, Dundee United and Scotland

Bono, all these people, but one time when Davie Narey phoned me looking for tickets for a concert I was lost for words! A fantastic footballer and such a nice guy.

"It's quite an unknown cast, which is completely different from the early plans, but it's worked out really well, couldn't have been better actually. The guy who plays me, Conor Berry, is amazing. He's been tipped as the next big thing by the critics. Sean Connor (Scot) is in River City now, he's a great actor. Grant Keelan (John) is doing well too, and Tara Lee has been in loads of things. It was me who cast her actually. I was stuck in a mad traffic jam in Bangkok for hours one day, so I started watching *The Fall* on the iPad. I spotted this blonde girl and just went, "That's her, she's the one!" I had to wait for the closing credits to get her name but when I got home I was straight onto the Internet to find her agent. The next day I jumped on a flight to London, as you do, to meet her and we got on great. Tara was so enthusiastic and loved all the music of the time so, that



Sean Connor, Dave McLean, Alex Weston, Conor Berry, Grant Keelan and Tara Lee © Kristi Louise Herd



was that – all because of a Bangkok traffic jam!

“I’ve had discussions with BBC Scotland about a spin-off TV series, but they wanted to see the film first then send it on to this department and that department to see how it fitted with their plans... That may still come about, but since then the film’s been number one in the new release box office and top ten box office in the UK, so our stock is high and we could go anywhere with it – Amazon, Netflix, Sky, wherever. We’ve got eight episodes written but we don’t need to chase anybody just now. I want the series to consist of loads of stories that just didn’t make it into the film. Still based in Dundee, it builds on the characters from the film and lets people see the characters more.”

Schemers was originally set for release in April but, like most of 2020’s best-laid plans, that was well and truly scuppered by Covid. The pandemic also knocked out the scheduled Placebo tour, and both of these non-events left Dave with some free time on his hands. So, in addition to working on his autobiography, tentatively titled *Standing in the Shadows* (because I don’t push myself forward and prefer to stay in the background!), he’s also written another film. “The sequel to *Schemers* is called

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The Hamster Wheel, and it’s about me constantly chasing my tail in the music business, and Scot doing the same in his property business. The soundtrack will be things like Nirvana, Pearl Jam and Green Day. It’s quite dark as Scot does his property thing and I’m doing my music thing, but it’s a nice mixture. Very funny, very fast-paced. Once *Schemers* is established it won’t be hard to get *The Hamster Wheel* going, we’re just really waiting on the government to allow filming to start again after Covid. Hopefully we’ll get going around February/March next year, and we’ll have the same people as far as we can – we manage both Conor and Tara anyway, so that’s handy! The technical team too, they’re all brilliant and we were like a family on *Schemers* so we’ll definitely keep that team together.

***Schemers* is showing in selected cinemas now, with its digital release scheduled for January/February 2021.**

Dave, and his daughter Billie, with John, and his grandson Zack, at the Palais Tea Rooms in Dundee © Stephen Grant

