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## Nick Moran is a **Telstar** in the making

Can Nick Moran banish his tabloid notoriety with a new film about a forgotten pop genius?



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One night in 1995, as Nick Moran and his fellow “underemployed” actor James Hicks staggered drunkenly into a taxi on Holloway Road in North London, they noticed a blue plaque outside an old shop that read: “Joe Meek lived, worked and died here.”

Intrigued, they discovered that Meek had been one of the most visionary music producers of the Sixties. A poet of echo and reverb, he masterminded the Tornados’ three-million-selling hit **Telstar** in 1962, but died in dark circumstances five years later, killing himself after shooting his landlady. Moran and Hicks’s ears pricked up. A seed had been sown, but it would take a decade to grow.

In the intervening period, Moran found fame for starring in *Lock, Stock and Two Smoking Barrels*, for publicly putting his foot in it and . . . not much else. But then he and Hicks returned to the project and, in 2005, staged it as a West End play, which was nominated for a clutch of awards including an Olivier.

Now Moran has directed and co-written a film version. Sharing a pot of tea in a London club, he is as lean and dapper as he appeared when he was Guy Ritchie’s leading man in *Lock, Stock . . .* — but maybe a touch more circumspect. He had never directed a feature before, but he thought he had learnt enough, from both the good and the “not-so-good” films he had done. And he had become a “ridiculously anal expert” on the guitars and recording techniques of early Sixties British rock’n’roll, “an untapped goldmine, when Cliff Richard and Billy Fury were the biggest stars imaginable, before the whole world turned into Technicolor” and the Beatles arrived.

Meek rejected the Fab Four several times, blunders that were very much in keeping with the tragic arc of his life. A gay man who was doomed to be jilted by prettier, younger lovers, including his bleach-blond musical protégé Heinz, he died paranoid, bankrupt and facing a lawsuit for copyright infringement.

Did Meek’s struggles to match the success of **Telstar** strike a chord with Moran, who is still referred to as “the bloke from *Lock, Stock . . .*” ?

“Maybe,” he says cautiously. “But being a one-hit wonder is slightly different to being a guy who actually made it as a producer. And my highs and lows would be nowhere near Joe’s. I made my own bed; I decided not to do commercial stuff.”

Moran's recent output has included *Christie Malry's Own Double Entry*, a Bafta-nominated adaptation of B. S. Johnson's avant-garde novel, and a film in Nigeria's lawless "Nollywood" industry. "But if you're constantly striving for big commercial success like Joe was, that must be even more painful," Moran adds.

Meek was anything but meek, and Con O'Neill, reprising his role from the stage production, imbues him with a compelling mixture of genius and belligerence, plus a sideline in seances (Meek correctly predicted the day on which Buddy Holly would die). Moran has assembled an incongruous supporting cast: James Corden and Ralf Little portray members of the Tornados; Justin Hawkins of the Darkness plays another of Meek's charges, Screaming Lord Sutch; and Kevin Spacey makes his British film debut as Major Banks, Meek's stiff-upper-lipped business partner.

Spacey, Moran says, has been a friend since *American Beauty*, when, preparing to shoot his character's middle-aged rejuvenation, he consulted photographs of Moran, whom he saw, apparently, as the apogee of style and youth. When he agreed to play Banks, Moran sent him a copy of *The Dambusters* so he could perfect his "chocks-away" accent.

*Telstar* was produced by another old friend, Simon Jordan, the flamboyant chairman of Crystal Palace football club, whom Moran calls his "Harvey Weinstein figure". Even though its main character is gay, *Telstar*, with such Nuts-friendly figures as Jordan and Little around, has the air, like *Lock, Stock . . .*, of a lads' club. The only female character of note is Meek's landlady (Pam Ferris), who ends up on the wrong end of a shotgun.

Moran admits that he is more comfortable working with men: "It's much harder to upset blokes. My wit and candour can be misconstrued as deeply offensive to the fairer sex," he grins. "I've had drinks thrown at me in the past."

That's a result, he thinks, of growing up in "a very patriarchal set-up" on a council estate between Wembley and Watford. When he, his dad and his two brothers get together, it can be "quite a harsh environment for my mother, who always ends up crying every Christmas dinner".

She's not the only person he has upset: there was the photographer he punched at the *Lock, Stock . . .* premier, and his comments, later retracted, that West End theatre contained "the most crooked people I've ever met". Jordan is protective, saying that Moran has been "misunderstood and *Telstar* has given him the opportunity to set the record straight".

Moran shifts in his seat. "It's fair to say I've felt a bit misrepresented over the years. There are very few things more frustrating than being perceived as being stupid. I have made some mistakes and shot my gob off a bit. But when you've been in the tabloids as a drunken It boy, people automatically think you're thick. Often it's a surprise to people that I'm a playwright and director. You can't be thick and do that, you just can't."

He still says the odd daft thing. Responding to one reviewer's suggestion that, as "a vehement heterosexual", he couldn't understand gay content, he says: "Shut up! I can be as homophobic as I want — I've written an award-winning gay play!"

But he has shown new mettle on *Telstar*, winning over a sceptical crew. He embellished the film with loving details, playing guitar himself on some of the live scenes and gradually bleaching the colour palette to reflect Meek's downward spiral: "We start off with *Only Fools and Horses* and end up with *Nil by Mouth*; a journey into desolation and depression and suicide, but it starts out as a comedy." He smiles: "That's life isn't it?"