

COL - Adam Dawtrey
Corbijn takes 'Control' of his destiny; Ian Curtis biopic was labor of love for director

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Don't invest your own money, and don't shoot in black-and-white. Good advice for any first-time director, which Anton Corbijn chose to ignore.

The result was "Control," the standout movie of a desperately thin year for British indie cinema.

This biopic of doomed Joy Division singer Ian Curtis, featuring a star-making performance by another newcomer Sam Riley, has won prizes at Cannes, Chicago, Hamburg, Melbourne and Edinburgh, and leads the nominations at the British Independent Film Awards, which take place Nov. 28.

The 52-year-old Corbijn, a Dutch photographer and resident of London for the past 28 years, put up almost half the \$5.5 million budget himself. He's still waiting for two-thirds of his money back.

"I did everything you're not supposed to do," he admits. "You shouldn't put your own money into a film, you shouldn't use black-and-white, you shouldn't cast an unknown in the lead, you shouldn't use an unknown director of photography (Martin Ruhe). But if everyone knew how to make successful films, they would all be doing it."

"Control" looks and sounds gorgeous, but commercially it hasn't done as well as it deserves. In the U.K., rave reviews pushed the pic to a \$2.3 million gross -- good enough, but hardly spectacular.

In the U.S., it's still flying below the radar. The Weinstein Co. released it in October on just one screen, and has quietly rolled it out to 27 sites for a gross of \$633,000. Despite its laurels elsewhere, the movie remains unnoticed by Oscar tipsters.

Perhaps it's just too miserable, a downbeat tale of a particularly unglamorous rock 'n' roll suicide; or too English, with its precise evocation of bleak '70s Manchester, courtesy of a note-perfect script by rookie screenwriter Matt Greenhalgh. Yet not only is the director a Dutchman, but producer Orian Williams hails from Texas by way of Los Angeles, and the movie was patched together with little support from the U.K. film biz.

Corbijn spent three decades working with rock bands such as U2, Depeche Mode and, of course, Joy Division, as a photographer, musicvid helmer and graphic designer. When Williams approached him to direct the movie based on the memoir by Deborah Curtis about her husband, who killed himself in 1980, Corbijn was initially reluctant.

"I wanted to be taken seriously as a director, not just to make a rock movie. But it's really a love story," he explains.

As a complete outsider, Corbijn knew nothing about how movies were supposed to be financed. Iain Canning of Aussie sales house Becker Intl. came aboard as exec producer. Bits of money came from regional screen agency EM Media, Warner Music, Japanese equity and the U.K. deal with Momentum.

But the U.K. Film Council backed away from a project it saw as simply too rickety to trust with public coin.

Amid all this, Corbijn found himself cast and ready to shoot. "We had got the actors, the locations, the studios in Nottingham. We were told the deal was going to close, and it didn't, so either we had to abandon everything, or I had to pay for it."

So he plugged the gap, along with two friends -- one of whom, the German actor and chart-topping singer **Herbert Groenemeyer**, has a cameo in the movie as a doctor.

"My philosophy is that as an artist, you either put money into your own art or you don't make it. Of course, it's not usually this much," Corbijn notes drily. "But it was pure intuition for me, the sort of intuition that first brought me to the U.K. because I loved Joy Division."

The bonus was the freedom to make the movie as he wanted. "In hindsight, it was a beautiful thing," he admits. "I'm not very much a compromise sort of guy. One reason it was hard to get financing was because I stuck to my guns."

It shouldn't cost him so much next time. Corbijn is moving back to Holland to focus more clearly on his new movie career, away from the manic distractions of London, but he's not quitting British filmmaking. "The one thing 'Control' did for me was to put me in a very different place in the film industry, he says. "Lots of people want to make my next film now. It will be contemporary, fictional, in color -- quite different from 'Control.' But it will be English, because I love the actors."

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