

# James McAvoy is a marvel when it comes to

Crouch End star takes us back to beginnings of character created by Patrick Stewart in latest X-Men film

James McAvoy is one of Britain's most unpredictable actors. A reticent Hollywood star, he flips seamlessly between block-busting studio films like *Wanted*, estimated \$65million budget and with Angelina Jolie and lots of guns, to intellectually-moving independent dramas like *The Last Station*, about the Leo Tolstoy's final year in which he plays the Russian writer's idealistic aide. Now, his latest role is in the Marvel Comics' X-Men series.

In this new episode, *First Class*, McAvoy plays the lead Charles Xavier, a gifted young Oxford graduate in genetics who is the world's most powerful telepath – the role Patrick Stewart made his own in the previous films.

"As this is a prequel, there was no point in playing the same character in a differ-

ent suit," he says, in his soft Scottish accent. "The film is set in the 1960s, in the Cold War, when there is a looming war between the U.S. and the Soviet Union.

## Peaceful revolutionary

"Charles is a mutant and his mission and purpose in life is to find other mutants and help them. He's a peaceful revolutionary, leading a worldwide movement of mutants.

This time round, he's a bit more fun and less Zen-like. He hasn't grown into the wise old man Sir Patrick portrayed.

We wanted to go the opposite way with him but we couldn't make him a bad guy. So we've made him sort of amoral.

"I've been aware of the Marvel comic book story since I was about 12 because



■ Set in the 60s ... James McAvoy as Professor Charles Xavier, left, with Michael Fassbender as Erik Lehnsherr/Magneto

*I can't say I did three months of intense Ninja training like some of them did to get their power movements*

I used to watch it on *Live And Kicking*, the TV show for kids – and I've seen the two X-Men films," McAvoy tells me. "For this film, being a prequel, the most important thing for me was to tell a good story and be true to the spirit."

Which, with his power to control magnetism by pressing his fingers to his temples and concentrating hard, Charles does.

"This temple inspiration came after I'd seen what everybody else was doing to physicalise their power," he jokes. "I can't say I did three months of intense Ninja training like some of them did to get their power movements. I'm afraid mine is more Carphone Warehouse, less Ninja!" he laughs, putting his fingers to his forehead. (Michael Fassbender who plays Charles's friend and fellow mutant says he got his depiction of manifesting his power not via the Ninja route but by

imagining he was dreadfully constipated.)

Like many people, I first became aware of the refreshingly level-headed McAvoy in 2004 in Channel 4's *Shameless*. He co-starred as lovers with his (now) wife, one our leading actress Anne-Marie Duff, 40, who is currently on stage at the Old Vic in Terence Rattigan's *Cause Celebre*.

## Clutch of awards

Now 32, McAvoy went on to star in the most diverse of productions including *Atonement*, *The Last King Of Scotland* and *Chronicles Of Narnia* as the faun, Mr Tumnus.

His mantelpiece at their home in Crouch End must be groaning from all the awards he's won here and abroad.

Notoriously media-shy and apparently unaffected by fame, he somehow seems to have escaped the clutches of celebrity culture. He and his wife never talk about their

private life although he briefly forgets, saying that since they had their baby boy, he is rethinking his working life a bit.

"We are very private people and luckily 'fame' has never actually really worried me," he says. "Since I got 'put on the map', I've been recognised in the street about 10 times only! I don't think, frankly, I'll get to the point where people run across freeways to take a picture of me, as they have done for some of my female co-stars." He means Angelina Jolie from *Wanted* and Keira Knightley from *Atonement*. Blue-eyed and boyishly good-looking, he was born north of the border in Port Glasgow in 1979, the son of a psychiatric nurse and a builder.

His parents split when he was seven and he and his sister Joy, a singer and actress, went to live with their grandparents.

The acting started as part of youth theatre and then the Royal Scottish Academy of Music and Drama and the first big break was in 2000 in the Steven Spielberg-produced miniseries *Band Of Brothers*.

His career has spanned film, television and theatre, most recently in *Three Days Of Rain* in 2009 at the Apollo Shaftesbury Avenue playing a father and son double role.

McAvoy says he was attracted to being cast as an X-Man because it was a role about a man finding his purpose in a world full of prejudice – will the mutants be accepted by humanity?

"A key element of the film is about people (mutants) who feel like outsiders and want to be normal."

Directed by Briton Matthew Vaughn (*Layer Cake*/*Stardust*/*Kick-Ass*), the script was co-written by American producer Bryan Singer, who helmed the first two X-Men films, Vaughn and his screenwriting partner Jane Goldman, McAvoy's Hampstead Garden Suburb neighbour. She admits that, although she couldn't stick her oar in for McAvoy, she certainly was in on conversations about the casting.

"James came up with some wonderful ideas about his character because he had such a good handle on Charles," she comments with a knowing smile.

X-Men : *First Class* also stars Kevin Bacon, Mad Men's January Jones, Jennifer Lawrence (*Winter's Bone*), Oliver Platt (*Frost/Nixon*) and Rose Byrne (*Knowing*).

■ X-Men : *First Class* (12A) is in cinemas now. For the Ham&High's review by Michael Joyce, turn to page 7.



■ McAvoy's wife Anne-Marie Duff, with whom he has a baby son



■ Artist Ronnie Shahmoon

## The hard lessons learned through suffering from Parkinson's Disease are

Conceptual artist Ronnie Shahmoon links his prodigious creativity to the Parkinson's Disease he was diagnosed with aged 29.

The Hampstead-based 40-year-old recently appeared on BBC2 talent programme *Show Me The Monet*, vying for a coveted exhibition slot at the Royal College of Art.

Although he failed to make the final cut, he tells *Gabriella White* about the inspiration behind his large artworks featuring plugs and switches.

Ronnie Shahmoon claims

his illness has irrevocably shaped his character and "taught me many hard but vital lessons".

It has forced him to examine his perspectives on life, which he often expresses as artistic works.

## Engaging with life

His piece, *Connectivity*, made from household plugs and power sockets, "is fundamentally about power, connections and decision-making".

"The array of sockets in the background expresses

the base of opportunities from which to power up and connect from. It is a piece about engaging with life."

The foreground consists of the actual plugs and sockets which represent choices made, depending on whether they are switched on.

"Those switched on represent how we animate our lives." From an autobiographical perspective, Shahmoon's physical connections have been affected by his disease.

The artist, who started with pencil drawings a dec-

ade ago, is gaining popularity in London's art world and beyond.

"Art has the ability to stir emotions deep within us and bring them to the surface so that we may experience them," he says.

"Each art piece has a different impact on every observer because the art not only expresses itself but helps the observer to express his or her feelings towards it."

Shahmoon believes every individual can change their experience of life and that

taking responsibility is an essential component of happiness – reliant upon accepting our own illusions. His piece *Exit Strategy* addresses the need to keep in touch with reality by exiting a bubble of illusion.

## Strength

Would you describe your work as conceptual?

"Yes, I think so. My main strength is concepts and simplifying them, exposing the obvious flaws, which are so obvious we overlook them."

# Ray of light shines on centre stage for Davies and friends

## Kinks frontman talks about curating the 2011 Meltdown

Success has taken Ray Davies all over the world, yet he always ends up not far from Muswell Hill. "I always gravitate to where I grew up. I think it is because of the light. In Hampstead, Highgate and Muswell Hill the light is different because of the hills. As a painter it is a great place to be," says the musician. "Britain has always stuck with me. There's something special about this country that draws me back."

This gravitational pull back to the corner of the country where he was born in 1944, along with the label of 'ultimate Britishness' that many attribute to Davies, seems to be at the centre of his being.

It is also the reason that the organisers of the Meltdown festival selected him as this year's curator – to select a dream team line up of artists that he has collected as favourites, and set them to the timeline of the 60th anniversary of the Festival of Britain in the iconic Southbank location.

Although he doubts his assumed position as a British institution, Davies is happy to take up the role, drafting in neighbours and Monty Python actors Terry Jones and Michael Palin to appear on the programme alongside a myriad of other acts. "Both of them live in the area and as Pythons are very British too – I thought they'd be a good choice," Davies says.

"I called Terry and we had a lunch and I asked him if he wanted to do something and he agreed – the other side of the coin is that I asked the Preservation Hall Jazz Band from New Orleans to come and do something too, and they agreed."

Davies is notorious for keeping it local, not only through references to the area where he lives being laced into songs like Muswell Hillbilly, but also through his involvement with the Crouch End Festival Choir

*Both Terry Jones and Michael Palin live in the area and as Pythons are very British – I thought they'd be a good choice*

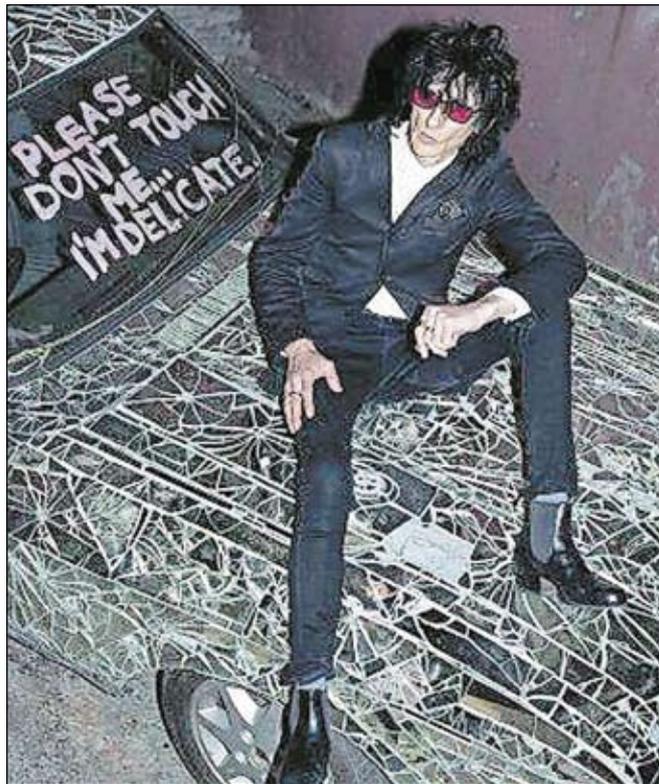
who, last year, he performed with at Glastonbury Festival.

"The choir are quite big stars themselves," protests Davies at the suggestion of locality based favouritism. "But that community spirit is something I'm really interested in. Most of the people that sing in the choir are from the area and singing is a good way to bring people together."

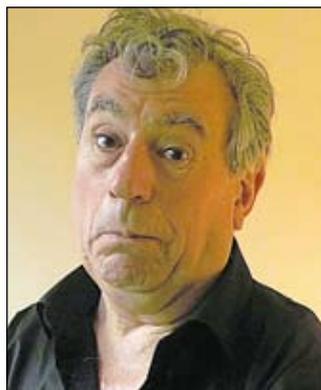
### Community

The Kinks man is so inspired that he is planning to start a community radio station for the area. "I think local newspapers are great and they serve the community but we also really need a radio station. We have so many wonderful people and musicians and great events happening. I'm working on setting one up in the future," says the 66-year-old.

The radio station, which Davies expects will be set up in his studios in Hornsey, will have to be put on the back burner as he finishes a book that he started last year, before illness forced him to cancel a US tour. That, along with the festival, which will



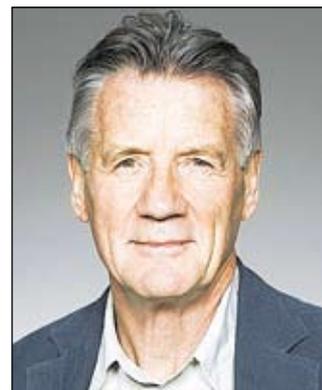
■ John Cooper Clarke



■ Terry Jones

culminate in him performing the Village Green album in its entirety and recording four new tracks with band The Leisure Society, is on the ever expanding Ray Davies to-do list.

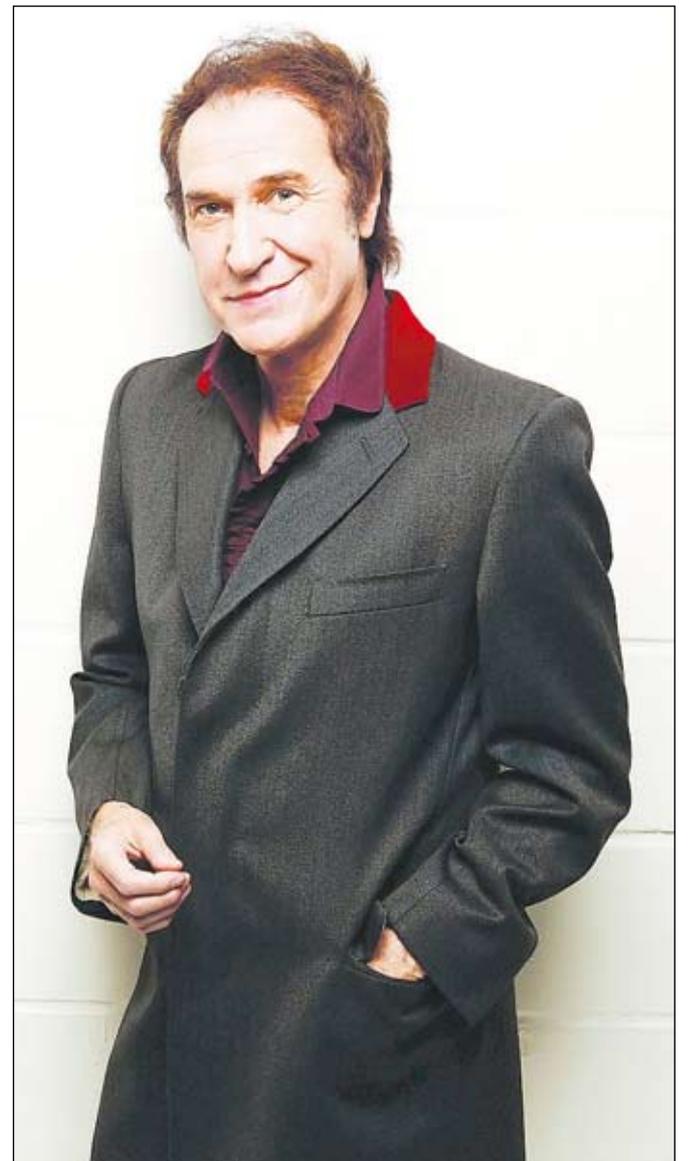
The list is, of course, a product of the sum of his prolificacy and a "feet on the ground" mentality that a few spurn and a few more adore.



■ Michael Palin

It is unclear whether Davies is aware of the scope of his influence but he certainly enjoys collaborating, having made 'Me and My Friends' last year, which included work with other musical big hitters like Bruce Springsteen as well as smaller acts.

"I was surprised when I worked with Mumford and Sons and Bruce Springsteen



■ Ray Davies

Picture by Ian Brodie

that they picked tracks out that had not seen the light of day since they appeared as album tracks. Now after recording them again I include them in my show," he says.

Davies' bill is full of friends and he seems quietly content with the acts he has drafted in to play, but admits the festival is a down to earth version of a somewhat unrealistic bill in his imagination.

### Appreciation

"I wanted Charlie Buckowski, the beat poet, to play alongside John Cooper Clarke. I also wanted a showing of the Napoleon film by Abel Gance, accompanied by an orchestra doing Carmine Coppola's composition for the remake of the film. Some of these things are just too big to organise," he says with a deep breath.

In curating, Davies has

shown an appreciation for things that many would see as beyond his immediate interests. He disagrees: "I think if I had a business card it would say Ray Davies: creative person," he says. "Of course I am a musician but I am a writer and an artist too."

In quite a British way, he also feels that he is only as good (or bad – as he adds) as the last song he has written. "The best song I wrote is the last song I wrote," he says.

"Of course I'm very grateful for the attention that my older songs receive and I like my old songs, but if you ask me what I'm most excited about it has to be the song I'm writing right now."

■ Ray Davies is curating the Meltdown Festival at The Southbank Centre [www.southbankcentre.co.uk](http://www.southbankcentre.co.uk). Booking on 0844 875 0073.

## expressed in the work of Hampstead conceptual artist

Explain your website [www.statementofheart.com](http://www.statementofheart.com).

"I think that 'we' artists need to realise our power. We are much smarter than the people that wield power in this world because we don't accept the status quo. In searching to become an artist, you can fall out of many accepted norms and this is where the problem comes. You can't fight big brother but, if you are smart enough, you can use it to shed light on itself.

In the piece Eyes, you

create moving pixels unveiling a face. This innovative technique is known as "video-impressionism".

Eyes is a static image that is unveiled by the movement of particles across it, which animates it and brings it to life. The particles are a bit like the brushstrokes of an Impressionist painter, except they move.

### Art as progression

Which artists or art movement inspire you? I love Pop Art, but I prefer

to think of art as a progression. When you see where it came from and where it's going it is really interesting.

"I feel a lot of art nowadays is about trying to be different. The problem is that you get a lot of artists 'trying to do something different' while lacking any real substance in the actual work.

In iPod trap, you show yourself trapped in an iPod trying to escape.

Yes, we are all stuck in technology. The work is also a reflection of how I feel

about my illness and being trapped and inanimate. The other thing I said was that the beauty is on the inside."

### Metaphors with needles

Tell me about your composition for September 11.

"September 11 is a conceptual piece again. There are metaphors with injections and needles which feel very uncomfortable but, then again, medicine helps. September 11 is a kind of wake-up call or truth serum injection. It is easy to use politics, sex and religion to make



■ Fresh Perspective by Ronnie Shahmoon

striking art but, to do it without that, to do it with household items, that is where I want to go. I actually try to abstract my ideas into easily identifiable objects." He adds: "Great art always

conflicts you on the inside while being deceptively simple on the outside."

n Further details at [www.ronnieshahmoon.com](http://www.ronnieshahmoon.com), [www.statementofheart.com](http://www.statementofheart.com), [www.u-art.org](http://www.u-art.org).