

CANTONA

Directed & Produced by **David Tryhorn & Ben Nicholas**
Interviews with **Eric Cantona, Sir Alex Ferguson, Guy Roux & Sir David Beckham**



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LOGLINE

For Eric Cantona, football was self-expression; for Sir Alex Ferguson, discipline. *Cantona* reveals how their unlikely bond transformed a disgraced exile into an era-defining icon.

SYNOPSIS

The most gifted footballer of his generation was finished. Retired in disgrace at 25, he appeared destined for permanent exile from the sport he loved.

Incapable of blind obedience, Eric Cantona was a libertine who bridled against conformity whenever he felt its grip tighten. The French branded him unmanageable. But the fire that burned in Eric became the spark to ignite a dynasty at Manchester United.

At turns thoughtful and explosive, *Cantona* reveals how legendary manager Alex Ferguson channelled the brilliance of this most captivating and unpredictable of athletes. A tale of friendship and fatherhood, Cantona and Ferguson's testimonies reveal how a man misread as hostile and unknowable was finally understood, loved, and forgiven, by the strictest disciplinarian in football.

The film is directed and produced by David Tryhorn & Ben Nicholas (*Pelé, El Caso Figo, Untold: Vinnie Jones*); written and produced by Stevan Riley (*Fire in Babylon; Listen to Me Marlon*); and complemented by a pulsating original electronic score by dance music pioneer Paul Hartnoll of Orbital.

PRODUCTION NOTES – AN INTERVIEW WITH THE DIRECTORS

Eric Cantona's career presented a rare opportunity to us as filmmakers, not simply because his five years at Manchester United transformed English football, but because of how he lived out his beliefs in his career. At a time when sport, and public life in general, has less and less room for big, unorthodox personalities, the story of a player who refused to compromise who he wanted to be and how he wanted to play feels genuinely timely.

In general, a documentary-maker wants their main protagonist to go on some form of a journey – to overcome an obstacle that changes them and makes them stronger or wiser by journey's end. It's the common template to nearly all storytelling. What impressed us immediately, however, was that Eric was saying the same things at 20 as he does now at 60. Here is a man who has lived his life fiercely by a simple set of principles, refuses to change, admit weakness or have regrets. Generally, this would be a problem. In Eric's case, we had to make it a strength.

Eric is perhaps the most iconic and controversial figure in British football history. His story has featured, albeit never particularly satisfyingly, in previous films and series – he has always been only too happy to burnish his own myth, even in Ken Loach's masterful *Looking for Eric*. Our approach was always to make something more meaningful and cinematic, that veered less into cliché and more into understanding a figure who felt misunderstood for most of his career. Our opening scene emphasises the anger and frustration Eric felt at the misconceptions and judgements that frequently followed him, especially in his native France, even after six successful years in England.

A FLOWER OF EVIL

'Angel or demon? You decide' is a recurring refrain in both the film and throughout Eric's life.

His status as one of the Premier League's best-ever players is indisputable. But even though he was, at times, a perfect footballer, he is also a flawed human being. While he inspired some of the teams he played in to new heights, others he completely tore apart.

This duality of persona – good or evil; principled rebel or spoiled brat – underlines almost every moment in Eric's football's career. And yet it was also obvious that Eric enjoyed this persona too. By his own admission, he wants to be deemed crazy; he wants to be misunderstood; he wants to be flawed; he rejects the notion of being a role model; he is inspired by the artists on the edge of madness – 'everything that is smooth and mundane does not interest me at all'.

In the film, Eric refers to himself as a 'flower of evil', inspired by Charles Beaudelaire's collection of poetry from 1857, and symbolising the extraction of beauty from corruption, sin and melancholic despair. It seemed the perfect way of explaining Eric – he is both principled and hypocritical; capable of moments of beauty and acts of violence;

rejected and worshipped in equal measure; a man who craves freedom in a sport where a manager craves control.

For a life to be lived and felt, he must feel the fire inside him.

That underpinned how we wanted to depict Eric in our film – he carries a fire or even a madness within him that he recognises and embraces. It's something he is forced to control, but it never leaves him. And then, when he's at his happiest, in an environment he likes and with a manager he respects, he loses control. To repay the faith shown in him by Sir Alex Ferguson, he must hold back the madness within and completely quench the flame that guides him. It works until the inevitable restlessness and boredom sets in – ultimately, Eric can't be Eric without that fire.

Even the decision to have Eric speaking in both English and French (with specifically English and French backdrops) is to highlight this ever-present duality. His reputation in either country is entirely distinct. In France, he was respected as a footballer but mocked for his libertine tendencies and ultimately exiled for his transgressions; whereas the English oddly embraced the other-worldly French poet-philosopher with a red mist, before the tabloids inevitably crucified him. Yet he is still revered in England, much to the bemusement of the French. We wanted to show those two sides of Eric – the proud but misunderstood Frenchman; and the honorary Englishman.

But there is a repetitive nature to Eric's career that we had to be wary of as filmmakers. He tended to excel, transgress and move on at each of the clubs he played for – a rinse and repeat way of life that is fascinating in terms of character (especially in how consistent he was at rebelling at the moment he was most comfortable) but dull and repetitive in terms of storytelling. The transgression at Manchester United was by far his biggest, and his redemption the only point of difference to all the previous occasions – so it had to form the basis of the film. His previous incidents – whether acts of petulance or principled stances – had to inform that single moment at Selhurst Park.

This led to our decision to hang the film around his five seasons at Manchester United – this was, after all, the obvious arc of Eric's rise, fall and redemption story – while we flash back to his most instructive moments in France. We realised how important, not to mention dramatic, the film's lesser-known French prologue is. And we also realised that his relationship with Alex Ferguson is only meaningful in the context of all the very public punch-ups Eric had with authority figures in France at both club and international level.

ARCHIVE

As filmmakers, we always start our process with archive. Ultimately, documentaries are a visual medium and have to be approached in a completely different way to an essay, article or book. Archive determines where you can be scenic and sit in moments; archive shows character; archive ultimately dictates a film's structure, and it did here.

We soon realised that archive was strongest and most scenic from Eric's years at Manchester United, reinforcing our plan to focus on that period, and show his formative French career in more impressionistic moments (a prologue and three flashbacks).

Our other fortuitous find was reels of 8mm footage belonging to Eric's grandfather that Eric hadn't even seen. 'We inherit the history of our ancestors,' Eric says in the film. Here was a rare opportunity to show a side of Eric no one had seen before.

The final issue we had was securing the kung-fu kick at Selhurst Park. The Premier League have never licensed it to any previous productions, all of which had to rely on stills instead. After months of negotiations, we were granted permission to use the most infamous moment on a British football pitch.

ERIC AND ALEX

We interviewed many more people than appear on screen – team-mates, friends, managers across Eric's time in France and England – but ultimately decided the film suited a slim cast and cut most of them from the final edit. There were several reasons for this. It quickly became apparent that Eric's personality didn't suit an ensemble cast. A variety of talking heads would create a more conventional documentary, but only sought to explain the myth. And we ultimately wanted to build a film around Eric's philosophies – the benefit of prioritising his voice allowed the film to become a version of sorts of 'Cantona on Cantona'.

Yet so much of the film comes back to Eric's need for freedom and his managers' need for control. And it soon became apparent that the relationship between football's most revered disciplinarian and its greatest rebel was the emotional bedrock of the film. Eric needs Alex Ferguson to revive his career. Alex needs Eric to win the league and save his increasingly questioned job as manager of Manchester United. What starts as a relationship of mutual convenience, almost becomes a romance in dramatic terms.

In all our films, we try to view documentary as drama rather than a simple telling of facts. A documentary film should have the shape of a scripted film. When we made *Pelé*, he undertook the aforementioned traditional hero's journey of self-discovery against a turbulent political backdrop. When we produced a film on Luís Figo's controversial transfer from Barcelona to Real Madrid, we wanted Figo to be the shiny diamond at the heart of a heist movie or Hitchcockian thriller. And so *Cantona* plays out as a love story between Eric and Alex – they meet; they both give each other what they need (in Eric's case, respect and freedom; in Alex's case, success to build a dynasty); their relationship is tested and almost torn apart (Selhurst); before Alex forgives Eric and Eric repays him with his masterpiece season.

MUSIC

We've long believed that documentaries don't push music hard enough – it's rare to find a score that stands out or doesn't fall back into more obvious tropes – especially in sports documentaries. We've always enjoyed working with composers who are also artists in their own right. On our two previous projects we worked with the electronic artist Rival Consoles, who had done very little score work previously – and never for a documentary – and then more recently Toydrum, a Hove-based duo who had been in

previous incarnations of UNKLE. An artist is perhaps a little less chameleon-like and versatile and they can give a score a clearer and stronger identity.

We'd met Paul Hartnoll of Orbital before, who once made a very convincing argument that a rave or techno score was what a 1990s football documentary needed, given that was the sound of the terraces (and it's hard to argue with one of the godfathers of British dance music), and so when the Cantona film came our way, it seemed a very natural fit.

The score actually morphed into something quite different – what began as something more upbeat and rooted in early 90s dance/techno became more synth-heavy and brooding, in keeping with Eric's character but still with hints of Paul's signature sound. One of our first decisions was to have a recurring motif for the spectre of violence, which runs throughout the film – something that we referred to as a haunting submarine alarm and that Paul was able to give a more 'clubby' feel.

From a licensed music point of view, we wanted to avoid any obvious Manchester cliches (Stone Roses; Oasis) that feature heavily in nearly all Manchester United-related films and use something that cut against the electronic score. We landed on using three Mozart compositions – it seemed only right that the prodigy of classical music should complement the foundation blocks of the career of the misunderstood genius, Eric Cantona.

KEY CREW BIOGRAPHIES

DAVID TRYHORN – DIRECTOR

David is an award-winning documentary director and producer who has directed, produced and executive produced films and series for Netflix, Amazon, Universal Pictures and Sky Documentaries. His debut feature, *Crossing the Line*, on Olympian Danny Harris's struggles with drug addiction, won Best Documentary at the 2017 British Sports Journalism Awards. He went on to executive produce Amazon Prime's first original series in Brazil, *All or Nothing: Brazilian National Team*, before co-directing and producing the Grierson-shortlisted *Pelé* for Netflix in 2020, executive produced by Academy Award-winner Kevin Macdonald. David then co-directed *The Figo Affair*, which became the number one documentary in Spain on Netflix and was also shortlisted for a Grierson. The Independent called it 'brilliant and jaw-dropping ... this is what a football documentary should be'; the New York Times said it was 'unapologetically dripping in grubbiness'; while El Mundo declared the film 'an unexpected mix of Mariano Ozores and Martin Scorsese.' In 2023, he executive produced *Deadline Day* for Sky Documentaries and produced *Mark Cavendish: Never Enough* and *Race to the Summit*, both for Netflix. In 2026, David sees the release of two new directorial features on two football icons turned actors: *Cantona*, which will premiere at the Cannes Film Festival and *Untold: Vinnie Jones* for Netflix. He is currently executive producing a feature documentary for release later this year in co-production with Dogwoof and Elk Film.

BEN NICHOLAS – DIRECTOR

Ben began his career at DNA Films under the guidance of producer Andrew Macdonald, where he worked on films such as *28 Days Later*, *Sunshine* and *The Last King of Scotland* through every stage of the development and production process. Ben joined forces with David from 2016 onwards and has co-directed *Pelé*, *El Caso Figo* and most recently *Cantona* and *Untold: Vinnie Jones*. Outside of film, he has directed and produced commercial work for brands and federations such as Adidas, Mercedes-Benz, UEFA and the BBC and has been a producer on Box to Box's Netflix series *Break Point*.

STEVAN RILEY – WRITER & PRODUCER

Stevan is a BAFTA and Emmy nominated director and winner of the Peabody Award. Stevan's first film *Rave Against the Machine* uncovered the story of musical youth in war-torn Sarajevo. It aired on Channel 4, was showcased internationally by the British Council, and was awarded at nine international film festivals. Stevan's debut feature documentary *Blue Blood* was released in UK cinemas by Warner Bros to widespread critical acclaim, earning him a nomination for Best Film at the Evening Standard Awards as well as Best British Newcomer at the London Critics' Circle Awards. Stevan then went on to shoot *Fire in Babylon* which earned him nominations at the BIFA's and Evening Standard Awards; *Everything or Nothing*, which was the official feature documentary commemorating the 50th anniversary of Bond; and *Listen to Me Marlon*, which was shortlisted for an Academy Award, BAFTA nominated and won a Peabody Award. Stevan has since worked variously as a producer/executive producer on several sports documentaries, including *Horsepower*, *Rooney* and *Cantona*. He is currently directing a feature documentary *Monolith* on Stanley Kubrick's *2001: A Space Odyssey*.

SEAN RICHARD – PRODUCER

Sean Richard is a Grierson-nominated documentary filmmaker and co-founder of Object Studios. He was a Producer (PGA) on *The Last First: Winter K2* (2026), directed by Emmy Award-winner Amir Bar-Lev, which premiered at Sundance, was acquired by Apple Originals, and hailed by RogerEbert.com as "a harrowing blend of *Free Solo* and the Titan submersible disaster." His credits include *Cantona* – screening at Cannes Film Festival 2026 – *Pistorius* (Amazon worldwide exclusive), and *Intelligence Rising*, an AI war game documentary featuring Yuval Noah Harari, which *The Hollywood Reporter* described as pitting "the world's brightest minds" against "how artificial intelligence might reshape power itself," premiering at CPH:DOX and acquired by ARTE. He is currently in production on *Monolith*, about the making of *2001: A Space Odyssey* alongside Leonardo DiCaprio, a new global sports series with BAFTA and Emmy winning director Ian Bonhôte, and a documentary on the Louvre Heist. His work has screened at Sundance, Tribeca, Venice, and the Berlinale.

PAUL HARTNOLL – COMPOSER

Paul Hartnoll is a British composer, producer, and musician best known as one half of the world-renowned and influential electronic duo Orbital, alongside his brother Phil. Hartnoll rose to prominence in the late 1980s and 90s as part of the UK's burgeoning rave and electronic music scene, helping to shape the sound of techno and ambient music with Orbital's innovative, melodic approach. Along the way, Orbital's epic live shows created a new unmissable moment for events from Glastonbury to Coachella: the purely electronic headliner, with the energies of house, techno, electro and audience all driving one another to new heights. Across Orbital's critically acclaimed body of work, Hartnoll developed a reputation for blending intricate rhythms with cinematic atmospheres – an approach that naturally led him into composing for film and television. Orbital tracks like the blissful early morning epiphany 'Belfast' or 'The Box', have become sync staples over the years. But Hartnoll also draws together compelling themes from a lifetime spent at the intersection of alternative music, film culture and avant garde composition.

MAIN CREDITS

DIRECTED AND PRODUCED BY
DAVID TRYHORN & BEN NICHOLAS

WRITTEN & PRODUCED BY
STEVAN RILEY

PRODUCED BY
SEAN RICHARD

EXECUTIVE PRODUCERS
JONATHAN ROGERS
JON OWEN
OLI SLIPPER
MAX DOBBYN

EDITOR
ANDREW HEWITT

DIRECTOR OF PHOTOGRAPHY
CARL BURKE

MUSIC BY
PAUL HARTNOLL

SOUND
NAS PARKASH

PRODUCTION EXECUTIVE
MARIE-DENISE DORMIS

ARCHIVE PRODUCER
ANDRES ARISTIZABAL

EDIT PRODUCER
DEAN WALSH

ASSOCIATE PRODUCER
OLIVE FAURE

PRODUCTION MANAGER
LISA KWOK