

Arts&Ideas

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Jedis were once a seasoning, like salt. Now Disney is serving bowls of it

The first Star Wars film was about a galaxy a long time ago and far, far away in which Jedis (violent space priests) were a scarce resource. Obi-Wan Kenobi was a Jedi, Darth Vader was a kind of Jedi, and then there was Luke, who was barely a Jedi. The working title was Star Wars: Two and a Half Jedis.

In recent years they've been going all out on Jedi characters. That's because once a franchise goes beyond one sequel it becomes a *franchise* dominated by the expectations of people who have made Star Wars far too important in their lives. And what those fans want, predictably enough, are lots of Boba Fets (hence all the Boba Fett-related spin-offs) and lots of Jedis.

The best Star Wars property is Tony Gilroy's Andor, which is a social-realist take on the Empire that deals with the material reality of autocracy, the banality of evil, the prison industrial complex and postcolonial theory and has no Jedis whatsoever. The second-best Star Wars spin-off is The Mandalorian, a space western dominated by a Boba Fett-looking buckethead man (more Boba Fets!) and a future Jedi, the best actor of his generation, a charismatic muppet infant called Baby Yoda. He is an earth-bound angel, and I will hear nothing bad said about him.

By the time they made Ahsoka they'd rustled up another bunch of Jedis, at which point I started to think, You know, there sure are a lot of Jedis in this galaxy. Jedis were once a seasoning, like salt. We liked the salt, and now the Disney corporation is serving us big bowls of salt that we stuff into our dehydrated faces. Yum.

The new show *The Acolyte* (Disney+) is set in the Star Wars era before the Jedis were purged from the earth by the

populist man of the people Emperor "Honest Joe" Palpatine. Consequently, The Acolyte is an everything-must-go Jedi clearance sale that might as well be called Loads a Jedis. "You want Jedis? We got Jedis! Big Jedis! Small Jedis! Hunky Jedis! Old Jedis! Baby Jedis! Alien Jedis! Levitating Jesus-lookalike Jedis! Hairy Jedis! Jedis who are in the nude!" The hairy Jedi and the nude Jedi are actually the same Jedi, and that Jedi is a Wookiee Jedi. This is definitely *somebody's* dream Star Wars character. Now all we need is a Wookiee Jedi who is also a Mandalorian and maybe has R2D2 legs and a periscope.

The Acolyte revolves around two twins who have been separated, much like the two Lindsay Lohans in *The Parent Trap*, except in this instance one has been raised by cuddly Jedis and the other has been raised by a metallically voiced baddie with a burning sword. It's alliterative

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monkey-torturer and behavioural psychologist Harry Harlow's cloth-mother and wire-mother experiment all over again but in the Star Wars universe.

The story opens with one of the space Lindsay Lohans, Mae (Amandla Stenberg), murdering a Jedi played by Carrie-Anne Moss. Later, elsewhere in the galaxy, Jedi-school dropout Osha (also Amandla Stenberg) is arrested by Hunk Jedi for this crime, until her former mentor Sad Jedi deduces her innocence. (I'm using Smurf naming rules here.) Then Sad Jedi, Dropout Jedi, Hunk Jedi and Alien Head Jedi follow Mae's trail to a planet where Mae is trying to kill Levitating Jesus Jedi in a big building that's filled to bursting with generic Jedis just Jediing about the place. (According to Smurf grammar rules, I'm also using Jedi as a verb.)

I'm increasingly unsure of the Jedis as a concept. They take children from their families to train them to be soldiers. Enough of them "go evil" to necessitate at least some sort of investigative report. On this show they are a religious police who are allowed to enter places without warrants, force people to talk with their coercive mind powers, ignore extradition treaties and imprison people on inhumane transportation barges run by easily damaged robots.

Furthermore, their effortlessly broken-into temples appear to be situated in areas of high poverty, and when they arrest young street urchins they interrogate them and manhandle them without a lawyer or guardian present. For a few glorious moments the show looks to be going in a yes-the-empire-was-arguably-bad-but-the-Jedis-were-weird-self-appointed-zealots-actually direction.



And I am, as the kids say, here for that. It was about time someone both-sideded the Star Wars universe.

But they're not really going in that direction. Star Wars largely lets us know the goodies from the baddies, not by their actions or the strength of their character but by the colour of their clothes and the scariness of their voices. The Acolyte is no exception. Andor's strength was that it brought human frailty and physical depth back to the Star Wars universe. I have no idea how Gilroy managed to do that. I'm sure a showrunner as good as Leslye Headland (who is also one of the creators of the excellent Netflix series *Russian Doll*) probably had something equally subversive in mind at the outset of *The Acolyte*. But somehow, like other recent instalments in the franchise, *The Acolyte* ends up feeling emotionally and visually flat and weightless.

■ **Top: in *The Acolyte*, there are only so many gravity-defying glow-stick dances you can take. Above: *Buying London's* Lauren, Olivia, Oli, Reme, Daniel Daggers, Rosi, Rasa, Juliana.**

PHOTOGRAPHS: LUCASFILM/DISNEY; NETFLIX

And at risk of Jedi-bashing, Jedis create big storytelling problems. They boringly oscillate from good to evil, rarely visiting more relatable emotions, such as tetchy or hungry. And their power isn't consistent or well defined, so Mae can take out a whole bar of hoodlums with mind powers and knives in one episode and in another be taken off guard by one floppy-haired arms dealer. And please stop with all the confusing lightsabre fights. There are only so many gravity-defying glow-stick dances a man can take. If I wanted to go to Cirque de Soleil, I would go to Cirque de Soleil.

Stop making me go to Cirque de Soleil, George Lucas.

Buying London (Netflix) focuses on the real-estate operation of a man called Danny Daggers. (Harry Habitat would be better nominative determinism – unless he does something unexpected before the series ends.) It's based in poky London and not expansive Los Angeles or the midlands, where houses are the size of fields. So at the outset Daggers assures viewers that though the luxury homes sold by his phalanx of hunks and glamazons aren't as big as those on *Selling Sunset*, they are, nonetheless, massively expensive.

Over in Dublin we can relate. In *Buying Dublin* I picture Daggers driving some high-net-worth individual to a bedsit in Fairview and saying, "It's got a great view of the dump, the asbestos has almost killed the mould, and the landlord only watches you sleep when he feels sad. And it's the most expensive apartment in Europe!"

As with all the other iterations of this franchise, I start out taking notes about where I will situate my dacha after the revolution, but soon I'm rooting for turbocapitalism, singing along to the you-go-girl pop songs and mimicking the hunks when they say things like, "My job is to make properties look as glamorous as I am". (This is, sadly, also my approach to home decorating.) My favourite bit of every show is when the real-estate hunks say things like, "I'm here to work. I'm not here for drama" (said in this programme by Lauren). For these are the words that open the gateway to hell on this franchise. So before you know it, I am happily watching rich, beautiful people bicker, without a lightsabre in sight.

New Releases Music



A revolutionary statement of intent



KNEECAP
Fine Art ★★★★★
Heavenly Recordings

We've had the hype, the film trailer, the murals, the endlessly entertaining interviews. Now it's time for the album. Kneecap's relatively thin back catalogue has been often DIY in its sonic ambition. Fine Art needs to be decent. It isn't. It's an intimidatingly brilliant, novelistic tribute to hedonism, creativity, language, identity and the pure joy of living fast.

The first time we hear the Irish-language punk-rap group –

Móglái Bap, Mo Chara and DJ Provai – actually rap on the album comes after its opener, 3CAG, featuring Radie Peat of Lankum. Mo Chara then takes charge of the title track: "Eist liom: ná tar chugam le do chuid smaointí, ná déan anailís ar mo chuid líntí." It's not so much a pronouncement as a gauntlet: "Listen to me: don't come to me with your thoughts, don't analyse my lines." A thorough analysis would take an age.

Fine Art is fractal. Each bar, beat and flourish expands to reveal seemingly endless constellations within Kneecap's universe. This is sedimentary art, coded from the get-go: 3CAG stands for tri chosan agus guta, as in three consonants and a vowel, as in MDMA.

Welcome to the Rutz, a fantasy pub and anchor to the mind-bending yet cohesive journey this

record takes. There's the confrontation of Ibh Fiacha Linne, with Kneecap adopting violent personas, threatening to "stick your mouth down on to the pavement"; there's Beastie Boys-level raucousness on the cocaine-fuelled I'm Flush; there's a moving ode to the unifying force of raving, Parful, sampling the documentary *Dancing on Narrow Ground*; there's the hilarious keramine anthem Rhino Ket – "bally up and let's rob a ver". There's softness; the pop of Love Making, the uplifting Way Too Much. There's even Manchán Magan.

The stars throughout are, of course, Kneecap. This is their story, their identity, their talent and their shockingly intelligent lyrical dexterity, swerving deliriously and delightfully between languages with renegade liberty.

Unlocking all of this is the album's head magician, the producer Toddla T.

Fine Art is a revolutionary statement of intent lyrically, thematically, musically. Toddla T demonstrates a thrilling skill for depth and subtext within his own sonic storytelling. To weave so intricate a tapestry that holds both light and darkness equally, to marry trad, rave, grime, hip hop, garage, punk and all the overlapping sounds and references of dance music across genres so intoxicatingly, to take hold of Kneecap's brimming creativity and emerge with such a potent distillation isn't just something to listen to and enjoy. It becomes something to study.

United, the artists involved have birthed a radical symphony. **UNA MULLALLY**



CHARLI XCX
Brat ★★★★★
Atlantic

She is not quite the enfant terrible of modern pop, although there's no discounting the impact she has had on it.

Charlotte Aitchison's knowledge of what makes a great pop song is undeniable, given her many writing credits, but on her sixth album the 31-year-old is treading a slightly different path.

Brat was supposedly influenced by her teenage incursions into London's illegal rave scene and, in her own words, is her "most aggressive and confrontational record" to date.

That claim is borne out by the songs that bookend it. The album's opening track, 360, sees her venomously spit: "If you love it, if you hate it / I don't f**king care

what you think." Its closing track, 365, paints an unapologetically hedonistic portrait: "When I'm in the club, I'm that 365 party girl / Shall we do a little key? Should we have a little line?"

It wouldn't be a Charli XCX album, however, without some banging tunes sandwiched between the snarl and snark. Her tendency to write lyrics without hiding behind subterfuge or metaphor is often fascinating, if occasionally jarring. I Might Say Something Stupid and Rewind both contemplate her standing on the pop scene, the latter reflecting on her ambition and success and looking back to a "simpler time". Girl, So Confusing is an open letter to a fellow pop star "with the same hair" whom she is often compared to. The reflective So I is a touching tribute to the Scottish pop star Sophie, who died in 2021. I Think About It All the Time documents the conflict between her career and her desire to have children.

Stream-of-consciousness lyrics aside, this is as musically adventurous as anything Aitchison has done. The clubby rave element is front and centre on the Hudson Mohawke-produced Talk Talk and



the deliciously squalid Von Dutch. Everything Is Romantic's sweep of strings ushers in a jittery dance-hall-influenced beat, while parts of the disconcerting Club Classics sound as if they are influenced by Aphex Twin.

On paper it sounds chaotic and disjointed, but somehow it works; amid an arguably sanitised pop landscape, Charli XCX's brattish innovation has never been so essential.

LAUREN MURPHY



PHILIP CHEVRON
The Tuner ★★★★★
JR Turner

What a find of previously unreleased treasures.

Almost 30 years ago, the Dublin songwriter Philip Chevron, of The Pogues, asked the journalist Declan Lynch to help him realise a creative project he had been working on, a musical based on the fictional Irish-American boxer Jack Rooney, a character partly inspired by a scene from Frank Loesser's 1950 musical *Guys and Dolls*.

Chevron had the background for

such an undertaking: in his pre-Pogues days he had collaborated with theatre royalty such as Agnes Bernelle, and had been an integral component of The Radiators' classic album *Ghostown*, which is as much Brecht 'n' Weill as rock 'n' roll.

The Tuner is a self-contained musical, albeit one written in the knowledge that it might never see the inside of a theatre.

That it didn't isn't a surprise (all of the songs were works in progress, and West End impresarios such as Cameron Mackintosh weren't exactly taken with the concept of a musical about a boxer), but neither is their innate quality.

The songs – show tunes referencing Broadway greats such as Loesser; Stephen Sondheim; and the team of John Kander and Fred Ebb, the writers of, among many other works, *Cabaret* and *Chicago*

– were recorded with numerous guests, including Kirsty MacColl, Ronnie Drew and Chevron's bandmates Spider Stacey and Andrew Ranken.

There's a lot to tap a toe and sing along to. Songs such as The Great Silence (with Drew singing "A nice girl like you, a place like this, would it be detrimental to me if I were to sit beside you, miss?").

The Likes of Me ("Come all you ladies, true and fair, I've a philosophy to share") and Manhattan Moon (Chevron and MacColl sharing lines such as "The night was darker than my scared and lonely eyes, and then that old Manhattan moon began to rise") evoke a time and place when guys and dolls did their thing, and the world was in tune with the magic and madness of romance and optimism.

TONY CLAYTON-LEA