

In Across the Line, Director X searches for substance behind the style



Stephan James plays a budding hockey in *Across the Line*.

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 COMMENTS

As an artist keen to create trends, music-video filmmaker Director X has time-stamped specific moments in recent pop history: Kanye West's video *New Workout Plan* and Usher's for *Yeah* scream the year 2004 just as much as the launch of Facebook, while Drake's *Hotline Bling* has practically written the cultural DNA of 2015.

In an interview at his Creative Soul Studio in downtown Toronto, X reflects on his contribution to popular music as part of a cycle. "Trends come and go. Once you start digging into the past, you can see that almost everything's been done," he says. "I have a very graphic style so perhaps I'm just the current reminder of a style that's always going to be around."

Formerly known as Little X, Director X (a.k.a. Julien Christian Lutz) was born and raised in Toronto. A MuchMusic intern turned protégé of visionary hip-hop film director Hype Williams (Beyoncé's *Drunk in Love*, Kanye West's *Stronger*), for the past two decades he has received universal acclaim for creating iconic short films out of chart-topping songs. Just a sampling of his recent projects – Rihanna's *Work*,

Kendrick Lamar's *King Kunta* – reveals a visionary at the top of both his game and the cultural zeitgeist.

As an elder statesman in the hip-hop genre, X has developed a knack of figuring out what will resonate and why. "I've seen a lot of things hit and they hit in their own way and all mean something different," he says. "They can mean something personally or mean something to the bigger culture."

And it's that razor-sharp vision that has led X to his new foray into the world of feature-length films. His debut effort, *Across the Line*, is a powerful retelling of a significant moment in Canada's history of race relations that may be unfamiliar to his younger audience. In 1989, Nova Scotia's Cole Harbour High School became the site of national attention after a 50-person brawl between black and white students. It was an episode that crystallized long-standing tensions in the community and prompted provincial educational reform supporting anti-racism initiatives, and in *Across the Line*, the director attempts to position the tension in the present day, through the eyes of a budding hockey star played by up-and-coming Toronto actor Stephan James (Race).

For X, whose aesthetic has become synonymous with pop, *Across the Line* required a reversal of his creative process. Typically, his music videos are designed to incite immediate visual appeal – think of the James Turrell-inspired lighting for *Hotline Bling* or the sun-drenched cars and girls of Justin Bieber's *Boyfriend*. It's all part of a technique designed to spotlight the musician, and only the musician. "If what people see is stylized, strong filmmaking, they're going to say that this artist is official, this video looks big, this is a *real* artist," the director says.

Because of the complexity of the *Across the Line*'s narrative, X had to shift his focus. "In a movie, the content comes first, the style is second, there is a story being told. In the case of *Across the Line*, the style had to come second to a story."

The weight of sharing such a decisive moment in Canadian history also necessitated a priority on the film's layered characters. "I was dealing in the misunderstanding of two communities that don't know each other," X says. "There is a level of racism that culturally we have – we're told we're supposed to be racist in *this* way, which is what is going on in this picture."

This level of cultural and racial awareness is not uncommon in X's music-video work, which has a pattern of positioning his on-screen figures in environments that fit neatly with the ultimate cultural goals of the artists. In Rihanna's *Work*, for example, Toronto's Caribbean community gets the authentic celebration it deserves by being set at the Real Jerk restaurant in the city's east end, and by featuring the owner in the video. Drake's shameless dancing in *Hotline Bling* illustrated the rapper's approach to vulnerability in an often hyper-masculine genre. In a similar way, then, the muted, tree-lined backdrop of the East Coast in *Across the Line* matches the harsh reality of racial tensions that linger in Canadian communities.

The release of X's new film is particularly timely as the past decade has still witnessed race-based violence in Nova Scotian schools, which suggest that anti-black racism is lingering as a national issue. Ultimately, though, he hopes his film assists in helping his audience navigate the racial dynamics of the world around them, wherever that may be. "There are all these forces pulling you – the world itself is chaotic, the people around you are chaotic and if you get comfortable, you can get sucked into one of those traps," he says.

Throughout his career, X has operated under the ethos that "storytelling is storytelling, and filmmaking is filmmaking – it doesn't really change." However, in the subtle and nuanced *Across the Line*, there is clear evidence that he is revising this rule, and expanding his work into a social commentary that is anything but black and white.
