



**Myth, Music and Making Things Up**  
*The Theatre and Film of Jez Butterworth*  
By Jerry James

*“The thing about theatre is, there’s an enormous chance of having a terrible time. A terrible film is fun. A terrible play is just excruciatingly embarrassing.”*

– Jez Butterworth



*Jez Butterworth*

*(Apologies for the use of first names in this essay, but “Butterworth” takes up too much space!)*

About three years ago, playwright Jez Butterworth and his partner, actress Laura Donnelly, were being interviewed. Jez – burly, bearded, be-fedoraed – mentioned an earlier trip to California.

“We were walking down the beach at sunrise, singing some Irish song. And as we walked, these oranges began washing up on the shore – oranges from nowhere, a thousand oranges! And we were eating them, and the juice was running down our faces, and it was bounty from the sea –”

At this point Laura stepped in. “There were three oranges. And two were rotten. We ate one.”

This is the world of Jez Butterworth. There may be music. There will almost certainly be myth. But it’s dead certain he’s making something up. I mean, did he really punch Harvey Weinstein?

And how did the author of *Jerusalem*, widely considered the greatest English play of the century, find himself writing for James Bond and Indiana Jones? His mentor, Harold Pinter, never wrote a *Star Wars* movie! We’ll try to find the answers to some of these questions, but it may not be easy. It may not even matter...

## St. Albans & Cambridge



Young Jez

Jeremy “Jez” Butterworth (b. March 4, 1969) grew up in a housing development in St. Albans, north of London. He was the third of four brothers (and a sister). His father was a truck driver who attended Oxford on a trade union scholarship, later becoming a university lecturer in trade union law. His mother was an Irish dental nurse.

The boys went to an all-male comprehensive school, sort of an English equivalent of an American high school with no gifted program. Every year, perhaps one boy would go on to university. Such was the luck of Jez’s brother Tom, who went to Cambridge.

When Jez was 15, he saw Tom there in a Brian Friel play, *Translations*. “There was a party afterwards, and there were girls! I decided I was going to Cambridge.”

Did Jez really drop out of comprehensive school? Were there complications with O-levels and A-levels (whatever those are)? No matter. At Cambridge he wrote his first play, lifted entirely from a cookbook. *Cooking in a Bedsitter* had a sold-out run (he says) at the Edinburgh Fringe. He was 19.

### MOJO

Did Jez really pull strings to get a job at McCann Erickson after college? Did he then dramatically quit to write, or was he just fired? Jez and brother Tom *did* write a couple of TV plays together. But did they then hie

themselves to the village of Pewsey for a year with the £1,500 a producer advanced Jez for his new, unwritten play, or did they just go on the dole? No matter.

During that year, Jez wrote *Mojo*, set in the sleazy club world of London’s Soho, 1958. The play involves a homicidal backstage battle to see who will control Silver Johnny, who’s going to be the next big Rock & Roll star. It’s a myth – with music.

Deft, funny, frightening, *Mojo* opened at the Royal Court on July 14, 1995, the first debut play on its main stage since John Osborne’s *Look Back in Anger*. (The play’s director later said he made that up.) Jez was 26.

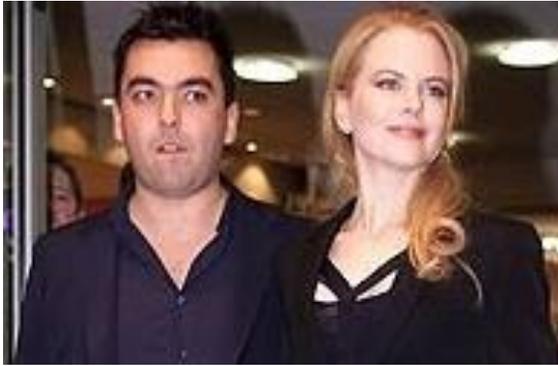
*Mojo* was a smash, bringing comparisons to David Mamet, Harold Pinter and Quentin Tarantino. How had Jez managed to write like this? “I made it up,” he said, drawing on a childhood filled with movies like *We Are the Lambeth Boys*, *Every Day Except Christmas* and especially, *Expresso Bongo*.



“*Mojo*” the film, with Harold Pinter, 1997

Inevitably, people wanted to know if Jez had any other plays. Because he didn’t, he pushed on into the film version of *Mojo*, produced by brother Steve with a script “devised” with brother Tom. Extensively rewritten, the film would feature Harold Pinter in a key role, in which he both stole the film and became a mentor to Jez.

## Back to the Theatre



*Jez and Nicole Kidman, 2001*

Jez had also directed *Mojo* (another debut). Now dedicated to the movies, he and Tom co-wrote *Birthday Girl* (2001), the tale of a meek bank clerk in St. Alban's and his Russian mail-order bride. Harvey Weinstein produced, with Jez directing. Did he really get Nicole Kidman to play the bride just by flying to New York and asking her? Did he really punch Harvey, after Harvey punched one of the film's producers? No matter.

The film's box-office failure made one thing certain: Jez was going back to the theatre. "I got very lost, actually. Very, very lost indeed." Later, he would figure things out, but for now, he wrote *The Night Heron* (2002) and *Winterling* (2006). And around the turn of the century, he began to fish.

In 2005, Jez got married and moved to the country. He would father two daughters and find that raising a family required money. Tom came to the rescue with *The Last Legion* (2007). Together, they wrote a film that begins in Rome and ends in Scotland, an origin story for the myth of King Arthur.

When Jez and Tom were living in Pusey, their evenings were brightened by Micky Lay, a regular at the pub. A few years later, Micky died, sitting on the bench outside the pub, waiting for it to open.

Thus was born Johnny "Rooster" Byron,

avatar of the mythic Puck, mixed with Jez's Holy Trinity of Sex, Drugs and Rock & Roll. Rooster bore the last name of the mythic English poet; he also shared his creator's initials. The play's title recalled a musical setting of William Blake's poem.

In 2009, *Jerusalem* blew the doors off the English theatre, winning every award going; 17 years later, it is still considered the greatest English play of the century. But it confronted Jez with the great dilemma of the successful playwright: how do I follow *that*?



*Joseph McGrath as Johnny "Rooster" Byron; Rogue Theatre (2014)*

## The Next Three Years

Jez's answer was to write more movies, spreading out the three plays that followed *Jerusalem* at intervals of three, five and seven years.

He joined younger brother John-Henry in writing the screenplay for *Fair Game* (2010), a film about the George W. Bush Administration's vengeful destruction of CIA agent Valerie Plame's career. It won the brothers the 2011 Paul Selvin Award, given to the film script that "best embodies the spirit of the... civil rights and liberties which are indispensable to the survival of free writers everywhere." But it wasn't what was expected after *Jerusalem*. No myth. No music. No making things up.

After a quick, uncredited polish of the James Bond film, *Skyfall* (2012), Jez proved the

value of his fishing experience with his next play, *The River* (2012). He cast Irish actress Laura Donnelly as The Other Woman, a role she soon assumed in real life.

All seems to have been resolved with Jez's first family via an amicable divorce, and he went on to father two more girls with Laura, although they never married. But did Jez's old pal Nicole Kidman really introduce him to Hugh Jackman, who would do the play with Laura in New York? No matter.

### **The Next Five Years**

*The Ferryman*, the play inspired by the tale of Laura's uncle, who was disappeared by the IRA, would have to wait. Providing for two families meant working again with John-Henry. They wrote the James Brown biopic, *Get On Up* (2014), as Jez polished *Spectre* (2015), another Bond film. Some myth. Half music. A lot of making things up.



*Laura Donnelly*

*The Ferryman* (2017) had it all – the myth of Charon, who ferried souls across the River Styx; music, because it was Irish (of course); and making a lot of things up. Plus a cast of 23, including 4 children, a goose, a rabbit and a live baby. With Laura in the lead, it won four Tony Awards on Broadway, including Best Play (2019).



*The Ferryman*

### **The Next Seven Years**

Back with John-Henry, Jez wrote the scripts for *Ford v Ferrari* (2019) and *Indiana Jones and the Dial of Destiny* (2023). He broke up this series of paydays by writing the TV series *Brittania* (2017-21) with Tom.

Set in 43 AD during the Roman return invasion, *Brittania* featured warrior women and powerful druids, who confounded Roman legions with psychedelic mushrooms to the tune of Donovan's "Hurdy-Gurdy Man." Myth, music and making things up.

For Netflix, Jez wrote *Mammals*, with a Gallic soundtrack sampling Edith Piaf and Django Reinhardt. It showcased a French version of "The House of the Rising Sun."

Jez's last play, *The Hills of California* (2024) was also inspired by Laura's childhood, when she and her sisters were pushed into performing. It was nominated for seven Tony Awards (2025).

### **The Next Nine Years**

If form holds, we may expect Jez's next play in 2033, starring Laura. Until then, he'll be busy on a four-biopic cycle about The Beatles. A great deal of myth. Lots of music. And a grand opportunity to make things up.

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*Jerry James has been working in the theatre for more than sixty years. During forty of those years, he lived in New York City, where he was an award-winning writer and director.*