

Hollywood end to lionheart deed

In 1969 John Rendall and Anthony Bourke bought a lion cub at Harrods, London, and raised him in their Chelsea flat. But it was their reunion a few years later — which ended up on YouTube — that sparked a Hollywood film, writes **Britt Collins**

The grainy film first appeared on YouTube four years ago. Since then it has melted millions of hearts: a fully grown male lion hugs two young men like an overenthusiastic kitten.

The moving reunion of the men with their pet took place a year after they had left him in the African bush.

"It was so humbling the way he ran towards us with such love and excitement in his eyes and we felt exactly the same way," says John Rendall of the lion he raised and delivered to Africa through a series of extraordinary coincidences. "We had such a beautiful relationship with him. Christian changed the path of our lives."

In 1969 Rendall and his friend Anthony "Ace" Bourke came across a lion cub in Harrods in London, which then traded in exotic animals. They fell in love with him and took him home to their Chelsea flat. They named the cub Christian, inspired by a biblical sense of irony. He lived with them in a Kings Road furniture shop, SophistoCat, where he had a giant tray of cat litter and rarely ruined the store's furniture. He played with local children in the walled garden of a churchyard. He was fed steak and taken to restaurants and glamorous parties in the back of their Mercedes cabriolet.

The scratchy home-made film, shot in Kenya 40 years ago, has been seen by more than 100-million people, landing Rendall and Burke on *Oprah* and triggering the reissue of their 1971 book and a new Hollywood film with Zac Efron as Rendall — not to mention a starring role in the South African Coronation Fund Managers' television advert released last year.

Today, sitting in his African-themed Chelsea flat, Rendall (65), who is still a laid-back dandy, shows me photographs and bits and pieces from his past.

"That's where we took him to run and play," he says, pointing out the window at the tree-lined churchyard down the road from SophistoCat.

"A lot of the memories of our time together faded over the years and it sometimes seemed like some sort of secret dream only Ace and I shared. But this sudden revival of interest in Christian has brought him back to us. I'm really enjoying reliving our experience, falling in love with him all over again and missing him.

Rendall laughs, remembering the first time he became aware of the footage surfacing on the internet.

"A friend who knew we had had a lion sent me the clip, saying: 'Have you seen these two idiots with long hair and the lion?' I wrote back and said: 'That was us.'"

"So many issues have arisen out of it," he says of the now famous footage. "The most obvious is that peo-



Everything seemed possible in 1960s London: Christian, the lion cub, accompanied Aussies Anthony Bourke and John Rendall everywhere

ple can appreciate the love that an animal can have for humans. It's completely honest. You absolutely couldn't fake that. Most people are surprised that this type of communication and deep relationship is possible with predators."

John admits that Christian taught him to focus on the essentials of life — "the sun, friends and family" — and inspired the "wildlife conservation" work that became the sustained passion of his life.

"Neither of us dreamed of owning an exotic animal, but I was pretty shocked to see this big cat, even if it was three months old, in this tiny cage." He remembers thinking: "This isn't right. We must get him out of here. Surely we can give him a better life. Suddenly our lives were incomplete without a lion cub. And right there, we decided to buy him."

The idea that anyone could buy a lion and move it into an urban environment seems shocking now. But, in London in the 1960s, says Rendall, anything was possible. "Christian wasn't the only wild cat in this world. His neighbour was a serval cat.

There was a chap in Battersea [south London] with a puma."

John Aspinall had his tigers in Eaton Square and there were cheetahs and cougars roaming around Regent Street.

"An exotic animal in London was just a part of exotic, experimental London. There were so many things going on. There was the fashion, the music. We would see the Stones and the Beatles driving up and down Kings Road. The Stones, who rehearsed around the corner, used to pop in and visit Christian frequently. In that milieu we were just a couple of Aussies with a lion."

Rendall and Bourke had known each other in their native Australia and were drawn together by their love of animals. Growing up on a

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farm, deep in the rugged red landscapes of the outback, Rendall rode horses and the family pets included cattle, dogs, cats, injured birds and orphaned baby kangaroos, who were hand-reared until they were old enough to be set free.

After graduating from university, they made their separate way to London and met by chance. They eventually got a flat together, finding work and lodging over the trendy Chelsea furniture shop, where they "persuaded the owners they needed a lion on the premises", after spending days looking for a flat with an outside space "for our dog".

"The all-consuming commitment of looking after Christian was like having a child and the perfect preparation for being a parent," says Rendall. "I was 23 and never had that much responsibility and suddenly, here was this animal that demanded our constant attention. He was so irresistible, you couldn't refuse him anything. If one of us was reading, he would clamber into our lap. SophistoCat was a jungle of furniture and he was constantly stalking us through it.

"He was beautifully behaved and though he never bit or hurt anyone, you underestimated his strength at your peril. I remember taking him to a party once and he jumped on a friend he hadn't seen in a while and when he put his paws on her shoulders, one of them slipped, his claw got caught in the straps of her dress and the whole thing was on the floor."

But they never showed fear around Christian or tried to impose their will. Instead, they took a horse-whisperer approach to raising him by disciplining him using tone of voice. "It's the only way to train a lion, or any living creature, because if you go down the physical route, you're going to end up in serious trouble as it grows," Rendall says.

The two men wrote a bestseller, *A Lion Called Christian*, in 1971, recounting their life while he grew from cub to young adult and their decision to return him to the African wilderness.

Through a chance meeting with

actors Virginia McKenna and Bill Travers, the stars of the 1966 film *Born Free*, Christian was flown to Kenya and placed in the care of the lion conservationist George Adamson to introduce him to the wild at the Kora National Park.

"I think George got quite a shock when he met us," he says, laughing. "Straight from Kings Road, in all our gear — flares and with hair everywhere. We stood out from everyone else in Nairobi. But then, so did Christian. He wasn't dressed for the heat after coming from winter in England, so he had a thick coat. For the first few days, he behaved like the worst kind of tourist, avoiding the sun and lolling on our camp beds.

"Suddenly, instead of being 'exotic' he just fit in, blending into the landscape. Even so, it was wrenching to leave him behind, knowing all the inevitable dangers and hardships facing an animal in the wild, particularly a pampered one."

In 1972, a year after the heart-stopping hug that made international news and inspired two documentaries, Rendall and Bourke returned to Kenya to see Christian for what turned out to be the last time. Adamson told them he hadn't seen Christian for three months and, incredibly, he reappeared soon after the men arrived. There was another tearful reunion.

"On the third day, during dinner, Christian ambled into the camp and rushed over to us, grunting with excitement. He knocked George over, jumped on the table and interrupted dinner. He tried to sit on our laps, even though he was now a 226kg cat. We spent nine amazing days with him. He was much bigger and more independent, with a pride of lionesses and a batch of cubs and we were nearly superfluous to his life. But that was the whole point of it, to return to the wild."

The whole experience moved Rendall to devote his life to conservation and he is a trustee of the George Adamson Wildlife Preservation Trust. Would he ever consider having a wild animal again? Never, he says.

"We realised pretty quickly that buying a lion only encouraged the trafficking of exotic animals," he says.

"Christian made his own luck because he was so charming. It got him from Harrods to Kings Road and back to take his chances in the wild. Aside from his freedom, many wonderful things came out of it. If we hadn't made that snap decision to buy him and take him to George [to get him] successfully rehabilitated, the trust would not really have existed. Now there's a national park [Kora] because of Christian's life."

Glancing at the photographs of the lion he knew and loved, he says hopefully: "It's like his magic is still here. Christian has become the perfect ambassador for conservation.

"I think the movie, too, will be a wonderful opportunity to promote the trust and the Elsa Conservation Trust and to make a whole new generation aware of the contribution George and Joy Adamson made to conservation.

"If we can get people watching the clip and the movie aware of the cause, then it has all been worthwhile." —© Guardian News & Media 2011

A Lion Called Christian is published by Bantam Press in a revised edition of the book by Anthony Bourke and John Rendall