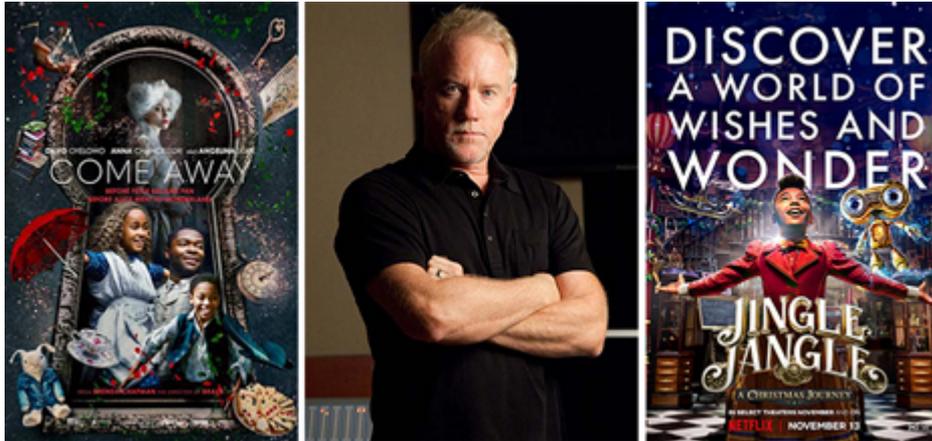


## Come Away With Debney

John Debney dishes on *Come Away* and the musical *Jingle Jangle: A Christmas Journey*.

By Samuel Chase



Although time has felt like it hasn't moved forward in six months, instead remaining in limbo like the lowest level of *Inception*, 2020 is slowly but surely coming to an end. And, in true Hollywood fashion, even a global pandemic can't stop the oncoming slew of family-friendly movies that bloom like perennials during this time of year. Two of those films this year are *Come Away*, directed by Brenda Chapman, and *Jingle Jangle: A Christmas Journey*, written and directed by David E. Talbert. The first is a reimagining of the Peter Pan and Alice and Wonderland origin stories that frames Peter and Alice as siblings, starring Angelina Jolie and David Oleyowo; the second is a Christmastime musical about a toymaker and his granddaughter and their quest to create the perfect Christmas toy, starring Forest Whitaker and Keegan-Michael Key.

Scoring both films is veteran composer John Debney, whose 200+ credits include being one of the go-to guys for family-friendly entertainment, writing the scores for wonderful and wondrous films such as *Elf*, *Iron Man 2*, *The Greatest Showman*, *Spy Kids*, and too many others to name. These two films—both out on Nov. 13 (*Come Away* in limited theaters and on-demand, *Jingle Jangle* on Netflix)—are simply the latest in an enduring Hollywood career.

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**Samuel Chase:** Hi John, thanks for taking the time to meet with me! How are you doing? And how has work been the past few months?

**John Debney:** Of course, it's no problem! I'm doing well, thanks—just really busy. I'm currently in my studio working away, finishing up an episode for the show *The Orville*, by Seth MacFarlane. I've had so much work that was in the pipeline, so it didn't really affect me work-wise, but our method of doing things now, of course, has changed. It's all Zoom and reviews by Evercast, which in some ways is good because the days of having a big room full of people all sitting in my studio reviewing my work are gone—at least for now—and that allows me to do more work and the flow isn't interrupted as much, which is great. That's a benefit, I guess.

**SC:** How did you come to score *Come Away* and *Jingle Jangle*?

**JD:** Well, I worked on *Come Away* first, and that was sort of a blind audition, as these things sometimes are. My agent called one day and talked about this wonderful fairy tale film. I read the script and fell in love with it. The

writer/director is a woman named Brenda Chapman—she’s amazing. I had a meeting with her early on where I saw bits of pieces of the film, and it’s a magical film. It was one of those I was really desperate to do because it’s a wonderful story with a unique premise. The imagery I saw from the first rough cut just blew me away—it’s one of those films that is just so beautiful to look at that it inspired me when it came to the score. Brenda and I had a lot of fun working together, and the music that came out was music straight from my soul. It’s certainly on my list of favorite things I’ve done.

*Jingle Jangle* was similar—I had known David E. Talbert, our wonderful writer/director, and had met him a few times. We bumped into each at a function maybe about a year ago, and he was telling me about this film he was working on, how it was a musical, etc., and it sounded amazing. Over time, he went off to London to film, and periodically I would get an email from the music supervisor saying, “Hey, David would love to hear more of your music.” So, I actually sent him my score for *Come Away*, and I think *Come Away* actually helped me get *Jingle Jangle* because he fell in love with that score. You know, work begets work and what not. (Laughs)



**SC:** And *Jingle Jangle* already had its songs written, correct? How was it working with the songwriters on those?

**JD:** Yeah, the songs had been written, and I’d heard a number of them. My job was not unlike when I did the film *The Greatest Showman*—I had to sort of tie it all together and put a nice ribbon on it, and arrange a number of the songs and make them more cinematic in a way. That was my job on it—and to come up with a couple of themes along the way, so that’s what I did.

It was really great working with the songwriters—Davy Nathan, Philip Lawrence, Harvey Mason, and the whole team, really. It helped me get under the hood of these songs. We sat together, [Davy] would play through some of the songs, and we would all talk a bit about what the orchestration might be for some of them. David [Talbert] knows every inch and every frame of his movie, and so he would very carefully guide me through what he felt was working, what wasn’t working, and always with a humble spirit and a great sense of humor—it was very collaborative.

Interestingly, I was gonna have not much to do with the songs, and as it ended up, David wanted me to do a lot on the songs. They were pretty much kinda done and

produced, but David would want certain songs to have a more cinematic approach, so I'd have to blow them out a little bit with orchestra and fill up the screen. And boy, some of the songs ended up with an amazing multitude of tracks, so it was a group effort, there's no question.



**SC:** And when did they both finish? Was it quite recent?

**JD:** We wrapped on *Jingle Jangle* very recently—we finished the dub about two or three weeks ago. *Come Away* I actually did many months ago, but because of Covid it didn't come out when it was supposed to. Actually, I think they both come out on the same day [Nov. 13]—I hope they don't cancel each other out! (*Laughs*)

**SC:** It must have been a remote production process, then. How was that?

**JD:** It was for *Jingle Jangle*, yeah. Because of Covid, we did a remote session in London—actually, we did about 20 sessions! We were able to record live, which is great, but I think you're allowed like 38 people or so in the room in London. So, we'd do all strings first, and then the next day we'd do woodwinds, and the next day we'd do brass—those things that used to take us one day now take us about three or four days. With the amount of music in *Jingle Jangle*, it seemed like we were recording for the whole month of August, or even into September.

**SC:** As I was looking through your filmography, it seems like you're the go-to guy for these kinds of scores—for children's and family-friendly films.

**JD:** Yeah, to be honest, it's sort of where I live. I think a lot of what we do as artists is influenced by our upbringing and our own journey and paths in life, and I really had this idyllic childhood. I had two great parents, and my dad worked at Disney for years—he was there with Walt, and started as a clapper boy on *Snow White*. So, I've kind of grown up in Hollywood, and certainly grown up with the Disney family and brand. I guess I sort of gravitate toward the fantasy and the magic of it all. Maybe that's the Disney part of me. For whatever reason, I get to do all of these kinds of scores—I've been very lucky to have been called to do some cool, iconic, magical films, and I do love them. Maybe that's why I'm so passionate about them.

**SC:** Do you ever reuse material by accident? After over 200 composing projects, they must all blend together.

**JD:** That's a great question, and the weird part is I never have—at least not intentionally! There is a funny story there, though—there was a theme I wrote for a movie that nobody saw called *Lost & Found* with David Spade, and that specific

theme never got used. Then, a few years later, I was working on a Gary Marshall movie called *Raising Helen* with Kate Hudson, and I pulled that other theme out and it just worked. So, that's literally the only time I can remember having reused material. It's probably because I always like to approach things in a fresh way—it's just the way my brain works, I want to try something new all the time.

**SC:** Do you think you've developed a style over the years?

**JD:** I think anybody like me, who's been doing this for a while—and I certainly have been, I'm very fortunate to have been able to do this for a long time—I guess you develop a style, in a sense. Somebody asked me many years ago, "What's your style?" And I've always found myself wanting to be more like a chameleon, and hopefully that's a good term. I'd love the challenge of somebody saying, "Yeah, I want this to sound like John Williams, or I want this to sound like Jerry Goldsmith, or James Newton Howard, or Danny Elfman," and I love that, because I'm kind of a student of music.

I got my degree at Cal Arts in composition many years ago, and the way I started was as an orchestrator for other people. I did that for a number of years, and then I graduated into my own things like TV shows, and then that led to films. I try to work every day at the craft, and I just hope it's good to listen to. I guess I would crystalize it in that way—that I'm hard on myself and I want to make sure that the music that I write and put out will perhaps stand the test of time and be of interest to students or journalists 20 years from now, that'll listen to a score and go, "Wow, how did he do that?"



**SC:** What were the writing processes like for *Come Away* and *Jingle Jangle*? Were they similar?

**JD:** My initial process is pretty similar for every movie I do—I usually will get a scene or two, or maybe a section of the film, and start watching it and then pray that I can come up with an idea or two! (*Laughs*) So, I'll sit at the keyboard or piano and just start banging out notes or ideas. For *Come Away*, I came up with a theme pretty quickly. I remember doing some demos for Brenda, and she's so lovely and sweet—I think she loved every demo I did, which doesn't happen all the time, if

ever. I compartmentalized the theme writing into thinking, “I need to write a theme for Peter and a theme for Alice,” and I also came up with a theme for the Lost Boys.

For the Lost Boys theme, I knew through my discussions with Brenda, we wanted to make something kind of Irish and kind of drummy, so I said, “What about African drums with an Irish pennywhistle?” And she said “Yeah, that’s great!” Alice’s theme is a part of Peter’s theme, which was interesting to write. Like, the B-section for Peter’s theme is Alice’s theme. We start the movie with more of a focus on Peter, but as we go through the movie it becomes more focused on Alice, so in the latter part of the movie Alice’s theme sort of takes over. It wasn’t planned that way, it just happened organically. For me, that’s the best film score—where you’re not planning too much, and the film kind of leads you and dictates what it should be.

The process was the same for *Jingle Jangle*, sitting down at the keyboard, doing demo after demo. There are a few main themes in the score that aren’t song related, and one of them is what I call the “Adventure” theme. We knew we needed a grand theme for a scene where our characters fly, which is really cool—and I knew I had to develop a great overarching theme for the flying, and for the whole film, which became the Adventure theme. I also had to come up with some different thematic motifs for each of the main characters.

**SC:** So, you’re writing on the piano to start—do you know at that point what you want the instrumentation to be like?

**JD:** Yeah, I sort of do. There are some really interesting instruments in both films. For *Come Away*, I knew I wanted to use this instrument called the glass harmonica, it’s about this big (*holds up hands*), and it’s a device with a series of circular glass tubes, and you turn this thing to play notes. My friend Nate [Barr] graciously let me get some samples of his instrument, and I used them throughout *Come Away*. I wanted a very ethereal, magical, haunting sound, so I used the glass harmonica with a solo boy vocal. I envisioned the child’s vocal would be kind of a spirit sound throughout the film.

In *Jingle Jangle*, we used a little of everything—there were accordions, there’s a mariachi trumpet for the little Don Juan character, there’s gospel choir, there’s African drumming as well, mainly in the opening musical number. There’s also a bit of bluesy piano for the postmistress character, and she has a bluesy, cool sound to her. So, both films had a lot of influences that were unique to them.

**SC:** When you’re writing your motifs, do they start with melody or are they harmonically driven?

**JD:** Both, I would say. In *Come Away*, everything was melodically driven, and the melody drove some of the instrumentation choices for sure. In *Jingle Jangle*, it was more vibey, so like when there’s a certain character, we would go into that vibe. Journey, the main character, has her own little unique vibe, so we would always have her music stay very grounded. It was energetic but it also had a warmth to her. One of the most important things David wanted to imbue in the film through the score was for there to be a soulfulness to it. So, at the end of our process, we started to put Gospel choir and Gospel soloists in the film in key spots.



That's the way I would describe it. Sometimes you have to let the melody dictate what the instrumentation will be, and other times if you know you want to use a certain ensemble of instruments—and I guess that comes from my background in orchestration—then you can kind of plan that out a little bit. And I do have my bag of tricks—in other words, where you know certain instruments just evoke certain emotions, like the cello, or the clarinet or the oboe, for example.

**SC:** Do you have a favorite cue from each film?

**JD:** For *Come Away*, I think it's that very first cue, because the first piece of music in *Come Away* has to transport you, doesn't it? There's a beautiful voice-over to bring the viewer into the film, and the visuals are so gorgeous—we're sweeping over this lush landscape in England—and I really wanted to state the Peter theme. It's a wonderful section of movie because we get introduced to this world and who the characters are. Then, toward the last part of this piece of music, we go into another theme in the movie, a pirate theme. So, in that one piece you get a little of the Peter theme, the Alice theme, and then you get the setup with the pirate theme. That first piece of music was crucial for me. Once I got that, everything else kinda flowed from it, and it made it much easier once I got that for Brenda.



For *Jingle Jangle*, I have to say my favorite is the longest piece of music in the film. It's a long cue, about seven minutes long, and this particular scene is so magical—our two main kid characters make a discovery up in the old, dusty, dark attic of this

toy factory, and they find this magical Buddy character. There's a bunch of skulking around, and there's mystery and wonder in there, so this piece of music had to go through a lot of different gear shifts, culminating with the great surprise that they bring this character to life. Then all the characters fly and it becomes this wondrous flight of fancy, using the Adventure theme I mentioned earlier.

That long piece of music was sort of the hardest thing to get in the whole movie. Yet, once I got it, it was really cathartic for me, because I knew that piece had to be something very special. And once I got that it was really helpful, because then I took the Adventure theme from that and we used it in the end, and another time or two toward the beginning. That was a crucial area for me—I remember writing the first couple reels and rewriting them, and then skipping to this long cue because I knew it was going to be one of the harder pieces to come up with.

**SC:** Lastly, what projects do you have coming up? You mentioned *The Orville*, are there any others?

**JD:** Yeah, I'm currently working on that, as well as a reboot of *The Mighty Ducks* for Disney+. The *Mighty Ducks* project is cool, because that's one my kids used to watch when they were young, and Disney+ has done a wonderful job getting some of the original writers involved, so I'm having a ball with that. Another one that I'm really excited about—this is a bucket list item for me—is that I'm gonna do the reboot of *Home Alone*! The filmmakers had heard some of my work, and the new director has hired me to score it. I even get a chill when I tell you about it, because that's one of my absolute favorite John Williams scores, and I love it in particular because, to me, John really made the music a character in that film. So, that one I'm really excited about—we'll probably get deeply into it by the end of this year or early next year. But that was a big bucket list item for me. Now, all I need to do is a *Star Wars* spinoff, and I'll be all set! (*Laughs*)

—FSMO