

## This Time, It's Personal

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### Note by Note: Composer Commentary

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### The Gem of *Ruby Sparks*

Nick Urata gets indie.

### The Odd Life Of Geoff Zanelli

Disney family fare.

### Going Green: Frederik Wiedmann

The new animated *Green Lantern*.

### It Could Happen to You

A book of rejected scores.

### Music to Die For

Jesper Kyd's *Darksiders II*.

### To Score or Not to Score?

More musical adventures.



THE  
EXPENDABLES 2

## The Odd Life of Geoff Zanelli

The Emmy winner scores the new Disney family drama *The Odd Life of Timothy Green*.

By Kristen Romanelli



Emmy Award-winner Geoff Zanelli has been largely known for his action and thriller scores such as *Disturbia*, *Outlander* and *Hitman*. For his latest effort, however, the composer has taken a less familiar path. *The Odd Life of Timothy Green* is a family fantasy about a young, magical boy who appears on a couple's doorstep. The music is organic and down-to-earth, featuring a host of acoustic instruments and small ensembles.

Zanelli, who also played guitar for *Timothy Green*, discusses how he was drawn to such a different project and why he considers it to be one of his most important scores.

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**Kristen Romanelli:** *The Odd Life of Timothy Green* feels like a departure from your most recent projects. Is this a return to your roots?

**Geoff Zanelli:** Well, that's interesting. I suppose you could look at it that way. It definitely is a departure. I guess my bread-and-butter has been *Pirates [of the Caribbean]*, *The Pacific* and *Disturbia*. Not much that really relates to it.

I don't know if it's necessarily a "return to roots" or just a good kind of project for where I am right now in my life. It's a movie about parenting and I'm now a relatively new parent. When I got the job, I had a one-and-a-half-year old daughter, so it's kind of like a perfect storm, in a way. It's like all the stars aligned and it ended up in my lap, which is great. I see what you're saying though about roots, because I did come up as a guitar player. And when I came up, not really so much in bands or anything, I was always aiming at film music, but it's not so common that I get to be so "folky" with the instrumentation in the scores that I write. So, in that sense it is, I'm sure.

**KR:** Yeah, there's a lot of acoustic guitar in this.

**GZ:** Exactly. Almost everything, even if it's not a guitar, is acoustic, so we don't rely on any synthesized instruments except for a couple very specific spots. We recorded every note of the orchestra; we recorded every piano, every bell—every single note, actually—was live and acoustic, in a room. It's not all that common these days.

**KR:** How did your experiences with being a new father inspire this score?

**GZ:** Well, a lot, I have to say. It's one of those kinda intangible things, because I don't think I would have known how important fatherhood was gonna be to scoring this movie, you know. If I had been hired to do it 10 years ago, I would have thought, "Oh, sure, no problem." But, you know, having become a father has made it so much clearer how to write it.

The music isn't really childlike, though. It's not like it's inspired in the sense that I'm listening to my daughter's music and getting inspired from that, but it is such a genuine movie. From every aspect of it—the script, the direction, the actors, and, hopefully, the music—it's all coming from a place where.... It's just informed, I guess, by what it feels like to be a father and to engage in someone else's life in a way like that, to feel proud of somebody else's accomplishments, and all of those things are all kind of wrapped up in the story of the movie. That's something that I don't know if you can really write music about it if you haven't lived it. Everybody always says, "you write from what you know," so every author is somehow being autobiographical in almost everything they write, and I think that's true of composers as well.

**KR:** Did you bring any of this back into your home? Did you use any of it for lullabies?



**GZ:** Not necessarily lullabies, but yeah, I brought it home all the time and I played it all the time. My daughter's name is Scarlett, and I played it for her and it really is the first score of mine that she's kind of gone, "Oh, my Dad wrote that!" She's starting to really get the concept now. If I play three notes on the piano, she comes running over and she says, "Timothy Green! Timothy Green!" and she jumps on the piano bench. So, she's definitely aware of what it is, and, specifically, that this music belongs to that movie. Obviously, she hasn't seen the film, but I'm glad you asked that. She's definitely perked up to the idea that her dad wrote this music and she gets that that's what I do for a living.

**KR:** That's so cute.

**GZ:** It really is. She's really great.

**KR:** The music itself has this really light yet down-to-earth quality. How did you strike this balance between the elements of the acoustic guitar, the piano, and a 50-piece orchestra?

**GZ:** Actually, the 50-piece orchestra is only in about a third of the movie. The other two-thirds are an eight-piece chamber orchestra, and that's actually part of how I struck the balance. You can very quickly overwhelm solo instruments when you have a giant orchestra behind them, so I was using that pretty sparingly, and then I would use my eight-piece string group to blend better with the solo instruments.

There was a lot to it, though. It was a lot of experimentation and a lot of emphasis placed on.... You know, in one of the earliest meetings I had with Peter Hedges, who's the director, I was talking to him about instruments where you can actually hear the musician and not just the music. Like, specifically on the guitar, you hear the fingernail strike the string, and the same with certain types of percussion instruments where you hit the fingers on them. And I started to get really excited about the idea that you're hearing the actual musician—the person. Even the way a cellist will breathe in between the notes. There's a thing to it and it's very organic and that's—I'm glad you used the phrase—down to earth. That's actually what it's about. It's about finding rootsy music that feels genuine and human and organic.

It was a pervasive philosophy for the whole score. We were moving the microphones around a centimeter at a time to get the right balance of fingernail to string note on the guitars, and things like this. It was pretty involved. So, I guess that's the long answer.

The short answer is: I just made sure that I heard, specifically, the individual playing the specific instrument. Even in that eight-piece chamber orchestra—it was three violins, one viola, three celli, and one bass—I hand-picked every single player because I wanted them, specifically, almost to *not* blend, and I wanted to hear the individuals in the group the way you hear the string section for Arcade Fire. You hear the personalities come out, and when you start getting a bigger and bigger orchestra, it just necessarily kind of homogenizes. That was another part of the, I guess, the calculated thing—the way it’s built.



**More Cowbell!:** Cindy (Jennifer Garner), Timothy (CJ Adams) and Jim Green (Joel Edgerton) sing, dance and percuss.

**KR:** I’m really glad you said that, about hearing the musician and not just the music. It’s almost a romantic quality to connect, because so often you just listen to a CD and you don’t connect that there are individual musicians behind these instruments. But they all have different styles, and they feel the music differently, and they feel the instrument differently.

**GZ:** Absolutely! It’s an exciting thing to capture and it’s also an exciting thing to sit down with the musicians and tell them what you’re after. When you do sit down a string section, they really spend a lot of time to play as one. So, when you sit down and say, “No, I want you to play as 40,” it does something. They go, “Hang on, I get to wear a different color tie today!” You start to liberate the players, too. And I think you feel it in this score, also, just in the solo instruments.



A lot of the guitars I played, but there was also George Doering, Bryce Jacobs and Thom Rotella who were cast for very specific sonic qualities. George would play the dulcimers because I liked the way he held the hammer, the way it sounded. And Thom Rotella would play a very individual sounding finger-style technique that I just loved. These are all part of it. Every instrument, even the keyboards, which was Randy Kerber who played all the pianos, and celestes, and dulcitones. It really was about letting the hand of the artist come through, which is often something you try *not* to do. It was kind of fun.



**Green Lights:** *The Odd Life of Timothy Green* premieres at the El Capitan Theatre in Hollywood, CA.

**KR:** Tell me about the themes you developed. It's very joyful music; it's very hummable.

**GZ:** Good! Well, there's three main ones. There's *Timothy Green's theme*—I guess it sounds deceptively simple. His would be the most, kind of, innocent of all the music. The idea is that he's innocent but still very wise; he teaches his parents a great many things over the course of the movie. The thematic approach for him was to make sure it was all very pure music. So, the piano carries it often, sometimes the guitars have it, but it tends not to be the largest sounding group.

And then there's another theme for *Jim and Cindy*, who are Timothy's parents. It's got a little bit more bittersweetness to it, and maybe a little bit of tragedy. In the beginning of the film, they learn that they can't bear children. And so there's a certain amount of trying to move on with their lives, and there's an element of "well, life goes on" and "we have to carry on" in that music.

And then there's a third theme, which.... I'm trying to say this in a way where I'm not spoiling any of the story points. Timothy does meet a young lady, so there's a third theme for [Joni](#), and that is really more to do with the wonders of what it feels like at a very young age to start connecting with someone. It's obviously not, you know, an adult romance story, but there's still very, very real, very powerful, lifelong emotional events for everyone. So, that would be the third of the main themes.

**KR:** I heard that Peter Hedges actually shot additional footage based on the strength of one of your themes.

**GZ:** That actually is one of the big scenes with Joni. Joni and Timothy have a scene where they come together, it's a very long.... I guess it's a montage of their relationship as it's getting stronger and more important and more impactful in their lives. What had originally happened was, we tried a few different things in that spot. We were thinking at one point, maybe we'll put in a song, maybe we'll get a song written and that would play great. And it would have played great, but I had actually written something using Joni's theme and Peter Hedges went, "Well, hang on. Now, this changes everything because you've got this piece of music that's perfect for this scene, and now the scene isn't living up to the score." And he went, "Well, we're actually gonna shoot some additional photography."

So, they just kind of went out and shot bigger, broader, just a little bit more impactful shots for just the size of what the music was doing, emotionally. And I don't mean the size, though, of the sound of the music because it really is not a large group. I just mean the impact of the music was something that inspired Peter to go, "Well, let me see if I can live up to that." That was a nice filmmaking moment.

**KR:** It's very complimentary!

**GZ:** Oh, very. This was probably the most collaborative film I can even think of ever working on. It was just...spectacular. It was such a good experience, hopefully for them, but certainly for me! Every composer, you go and you hope that you'll find the movie where when you finish it, you feel like you've left the movie in a better place than when before you were on it. But this was actually.... It worked the other way around. Like, I feel like I'm a better person because this movie was in my life. It was really nice.

**KR:** What was it like collaborating with Peter Hedges?

**GZ:** Well, fantastic, in a word. His approach, which I really respected, was to play the movie without any music in it. And this is not that common either, because they did have a temp score—he just didn't want me to know what it was. He just said, "Come look at the movie and now show me with your music what do you think it should be." So, that's actually just how the whole relationship started. I think he was considering a lot of different options for composers; he's got a strong movie so he can have his pick of the litter, really. So, he showed me the movie and hoped that I'd be inspired, and I certainly was, and I started writing the music. He started responding to certain themes and we just carried on as though we were already scoring the movie.

I think his decision to not play me the temp score probably was the best thing that he could have done for the music for his film because I *still* don't know what it was, and it makes the movie singular. You know, there's a danger with temp scores where people start to fall in love with certain elements and a composer can feel handcuffed. They also can be very helpful and answer some questions for you, but in this case I think that he just thought that the risks of the downside of having a temp were not worth the potential upside. That, I would say, was one of his key, important decisions.



**Explorer at the Helm:** Director Peter Hedges.



He'd come in once or twice a week during the whole process and I'd play him everything that I had been working on, and he was a huge advocate for exploration. He also had a very great imagination, so I could play him rough versions of cues, say, "This is the path I'm heading down. What do you think?" and then we'd start working together and start inspiring each other. The way I could inspire him to want to add some more footage, he could inspire me to go, "Oh, hang on. This, maybe it should be more intimate. Maybe I could go look at different instrumentation," or something like that. It was very, very.... I don't even like the word "hands on" because that's not the right word. It was just very collaborative. His hands weren't on it, but his heart sure was. It was just a red letter day for me. It's a beautiful way to work.

Before I forget, I wanna make sure that I clarify a little bit about how I ended up on the project, because before I even met up with Peter, it was actually one of the execs at Disney's music department that had sort of helped me out. My kind of bread-and-butter has been the *Pirates*, well now it's a quadrilogy, it used to be a trilogy. And I was always, like, the number two guy next to Hans [Zimmer] on all four of those. So, we finished the fourth one, and right as we finished, Hans had a conversation with Mitchell Leib, who's the head of music at Disney, and he says, "Look, you gotta take a look at this guy because he's been your stand-out guy on all four of these *Pirates* movies. They wouldn't be the same without him, and he's not just an arranger, so let me send you his music."

And I sat down with Mitchell and we just sort of hit it off and he said, "Look, I'm looking at this movie, *Timothy Green*. It's wide open, there's a lot of composers that want it. If you want it, too, here's a script and you can start writing some music." So, I played a little bit to him—to Mitchell—and he says, "Great, let me send this to Peter Hedges," and then Peter said, "Why don't you come in and watch the movie." So, if you look at it from that angle, it was very much like a team effort, where Hans recommending me to Mitchell, and Mitchell was recommending me to Peter, Peter was saying, "Sure, I'll meet with him. Put him on the list." And it went kinda the way it sort of ought to go. It was an audition process, I guess you could say.

**KR:** Would you say Hans Zimmer has been a mentor to you?

**GZ:** Oh, absolutely. I've had a few, but when I was a student [at Berklee], I used to come out in the summers back to L.A.—that's where I live—and I got an internship with Hans. This would have been 1994; I hadn't even finished college. I've been friends with him and at his studio really since then—18 years now. Absolutely a mentor. And not just in the movies that I've gone and worked on with him. I mean that in every sense of the word.

Also, for a long stretch, I was John Powell's assistant, so I think that.... A lot of people don't know that, actually. I think it's been one of the specific things about my musical upbringing was that I first came up as John's assistant, but this was while he was here at Hans' studio. So, I was involved with the way this whole place worked. And then, right around the time when John started—let's see, I think he was doing *Shrek*—right when he was about to start *Shrek*, Hans offered me a room, and so I took that. And so that would have been about 1999. And I've just had my writing room here ever since.

**KR:** So you're really part of the Remote Control legacy.

**GZ:** Yeah, you know, the only person who's been here longer than me is Hans, at this point. So, yeah, I guess you could say that, for sure. But, more and more these days, I'm starting to realize just how much John Powell's influence was, because I was literally sitting in the room with him when he wrote every single note of *Face/Off*, which was his first score. So, that's one heck of an upbringing. And then, when I started doing movies with Hans, it was side-by-side as well. So, I guess, yeah, you could say that. I've had a really nice training ground.

Also, by the way, it was deliberate that I did it that way. You know, when I was comin' up—Ah, the old days (*laughs*)—I had plenty of friends who were approaching it from different angles and they would say, "Well, I would rather go and find a little indie movie or student film, even, or some advertising work, or any other kind of work to be writing music." And I was saying, "I would rather be in the room when Jeffery Katzenberg tells Hans what he wants out of the music in his movie, because I wanna hear what Hans says. I wanna hear how does Ridley Scott give a fix note, and how does Jerry Bruckheimer talk about music." Because these are all great filmmakers. So, I'm thinking, like, "That's a great place to learn."

I remember bringing in a cup of coffee during—it must have been *The Lion King*; one of the early, early, early days of my time as an intern here—and walking out of the room as slowly as possible so I could listen to anything, any little tidbit of a meeting. I just wanted to hear “how do these guys talk to each other?” And you can learn so much from a guy like Gore Verbinski just saying, “Here’s what I think the music ought to do here,” or listening to how Hans articulates what his ideas are, too. Those are important things to me and I would have missed out on them if I was chasing after student films. Because you never know. You never know if you’re working with the next brilliant director or maybe not. But I *do* know I’m working with a brilliant director when I’m sitting in a room with Ron Howard.

Anyway, there are a million ways to go about trying to break into the industry, but that was mine. I did it, and it was calculated.



**KR:** It sounds like a very smart method.



**GZ:** Yeah, I think so. I hope so. It seems to have paid off. The opportunities that I do get, they go really smoothly. The typical 37-year old composer doesn't normally have this type of, I guess, credit list or friendships in the business. And I've been in the room with—and in the trenches, really—with some really amazing directors, producers, editors, you know, all the way around the board, and that's been the core thing to who I am with composing.

**KR:** Would you say that the process of working on this particular score was different than your past projects? And how have those past projects influenced your work on *Timothy Green*?

**GZ:** Well, it is, actually, quite a bit different for a few reasons. One is that when I was writing the demos for this, I wanted to get away from anything synthetic. You know, typically, when you write a score—let's say it's *Pirates*—I have a synthetic orchestra and percussion and choirs and everything, and then we do a big mock-up and it sounds really great, and then you go and re-record it with the live musicians and it sounds fantastic.

Now, I just was having a hard time getting this score to sort of feel right in the note because then it was a synthetic guitar, it wasn't a real dulcimer or anything like that. So, that's actually why it ended up that I started playing a lot of the music myself. And that is a little bit different, because it started to become so crucial that the notes were performed right, and not just that they were the right notes. So, it's me hunched over at two o'clock in the morning and my poor assistant going, "All right, let's get one more. You sneezed," or whatever. So, we did a lot of that. A lot of just really searching for the angle to play the note; you know, just the right performance, the right spirit of it. And then when we get to instruments that I don't play or where I knew I needed real professionals—I was trying to record them a little bit earlier than usual as well. So, it became a little bit more, I guess you could say, fluid, in the sense that it was less like, "First I demo, then I record, then I mix." It all became like, I'll record a little bit and then some of it stays synth, and we'd start replacing instruments. It became a lot more like each cue would evolve over time as opposed to get it set in stone then wait three weeks for a scoring session.

You did ask, and I don't think I answered, how my old projects would have influenced this score, and it's hard to think of a specific one where you would go, "It overlaps stylistically." They don't, really; that's what was so exciting about this movie. It is different for me, and I feel very in my own skin here. So, it was challenging in that I had to start inventing the tools that I needed to write the score, as opposed to pulling from a toolbox that I already had. It's not that I've never written anything intimate or emotional before—you hear it in *House of D*, which is my first movie—but *Timothy Green* became very, very unique for the sort of necessitating some invention.

**KR:** Would you say that *The Odd Life of Timothy Green* is a statement for you, as an artist as you are today?

**GZ:** Yes. Absolutely! Yes, totally it is. Partly because it is a new look for me, you know. It's something people will not expect to hear from Geoff Zanelli. They're not gonna go, "That's the guy who wrote *Disturbia*." You know what I mean? It's so different and it's very much in line with, as I was saying before, who I am and where I am in my life. I don't think I could have written this three years ago. So, yes, I think it's a very good time capsule. I think I'll look back on this as.... Well, I already do look back on this as one of my most important scores, but I feel like it's gonna feel like that, too, ten years from now. I don't wanna say "turning point," because of course I'm gonna pursue all those other lines of my career, with the Americana miniseries. I'm talking about *The Pacific* and *Into the West*. And then I have a thrillers series where I did *Secret Window* and *Disturbia* and *Beneath the Darkness*. But now I have this thing, which is very.... It's a family-friendly fantasy-drama. (*Laughs*) I don't know what the genre is for that. But it's a wonderful type of filmmaking. The closest thing I can think of, if you remember that Tom Hanks movie *Big* or if you remember *Edward Scissorhands*, which is slightly more down-to-earth. Those types of movies. It's just a nice type of filmmaking that you're not really seeing that much of in the cinemas either. So, it's exciting from that angle.

**KR:** Do you feel like this is going to steer your path for future projects?

**GZ:** I sort of hope it does. I've always written good action music, and so I still get calls about that; I've always written good thriller music. But now, people are gonna go, "Hang on, he can go into this whole other world. We just didn't even know that about him." If you're looking at examples of nearly all of the composers that I look up to and admire—I mean Hans, I mean John Powell, I mean James Newton Howard—they have a wide variety of types of projects they can do, and I think this is a pretty big and loud statement that I have some variety, too. Something to say in a lot of different genres.

—FSMO