

Jay Wadley Is *Thinking of Scoring Things*

The composer tackles Charlie Kaufman's mind-bending Netflix feature.

By Sonya Alexander



Oklahoma native Jay Wadley has carved out a niche in the music world that affords him the ability to explore genres as a film composer/producer and multi-instrumentalist, and even occasionally exhibit his vocal skills, which he did in James Schamus' 2016 film *Indignation*. The Yale School of Music graduate has won two Charles Ives awards from the Academy of Arts and Letters and prides himself on finding that authentic aspect to a project that makes the act of artistic creation feel organic. He recently completed Charlie Kaufman's psychological horror film *I'm Thinking of Ending Things*, which premieres on Netflix on Sept. 4, 2020.

Sonya Alexander: How do you approach a temp score?

Jay Wadley: I don't absorb too much of the temp score, except for placement and general tone. And general approach. Then, I try to wipe it clean so that I can understand what I might bring to that, or whether or not I agree with a particular direction that the director wants to go in. It's a great conversation starter for something to react to or react against.

SA: What instrument do you think is the best storyteller?

JW: That's a hard one. I'd have to say piano just because if we're talking about a single instrument, there are limitations, particularly for one that is monophonic. If you're working with a clarinet, there's no ability to use harmony in conjunction with a melodic thing. With a piano or a harp, instruments that are polyphonic, where you can actually play multiple notes at the same time, you can have a melody, you can have an accompaniment. The piano makes itself one of the more diverse instruments in scoring. My primary instrument is voice, so I always think of melody in context with how I perceive melodies in my own body and voice.

SA: You used to produce punk bands. If you had one now, what would you name it to define these times?

JW: It's already taken: Rage Against the Machine! (*Laughs*)

SA: How important is working with a director on your projects, particularly in relation to *I'm Thinking of Ending Things*?

JW: It's absolutely necessary. Every collaboration with a director is necessary. They all come to it with a different way of understanding music and a different vocabulary entirely when it comes to processing and speaking about music. Getting to know the director and the language in which they speak about music is of extreme importance at the outset of a film. With Charlie in particular on *I'm Thinking of Ending Things*, with regard to what the score may be, specifically the ballet might be, we were talking mostly conceptually, which is probably one of the first times I've done that in a film—which was really cool.



SA: How'd you get attached to the project?

JW: Anthony Bregman from Likely Story reached out to me. He asked me if he could interest me in a Charlie Kaufman movie and my jaw dropped to the floor. Anthony and I had worked together on *Indignation*, James Schamus' directorial debut, which James brought me into the fold on. I was lucky enough to get the call on this, partially because all of the things that are needed in the film are specific to my life experience and the background I have as a composer—having to produce a couple [songs from Oklahoma](#), write a [classical ballet](#), write a [pastiche rom-com](#) score and do any other type of scoring they would need. I'm from Oklahoma; I've performed it millions of times and heard it over and over again. I thought I never wanted to hear it again until I heard it in a Charlie Kaufman movie and I'm like, "Let's do it!"



SA: What attracts you to a project like this, besides it just being Charlie Kaufman?

JW: I love very character-driven films and thoughtful, provocative films. Stories that can resonate with people on a deep level. Charlie's movies are surreal and have a conceptual element that are brilliant but can punch you in the stomach with real-life struggles. I tend to lean toward big concepts about the meaning of life and what's important and what's not important.

SA: What was the most challenging part of *I'm Thinking of Ending Things*?

JW: It had its own unique challenges. Part of the reason it was challenging was that I had to write this seven-minute ballet ahead of shooting, based purely on a scene description. I had to do it on a pretty condensed timeline. Each film has its own challenges and barriers.

SA: What book would you love to see adapted so that you can score it?

JW: *Antkind*. I would love to see it adapted into a series and would love to work with Charlie again on something like that.

SA: Who are your biggest musical influences?

JW: John Corigliano, who did *The Red Violin*, Steve Reich, Philip Glass, the Bang on a Can ensemble. In middle school, I listened to Screeching Weasel, Operation Ivy and NOFX.

SA: And what's your favorite work of your own?

JW: [The ballet](#) in *I'm Thinking of Ending Things*! It's really special to me. Also, getting to write a 1950s style love tune for James Schamus' *Indignation*. I love singing standards and was able to not only compose music but use my voice for that project. It was cool to dive into that.



SA: Awesome. What's next on your plate?

JW: I have another movie coming out hopefully later this year, Heidi Ewing's *I Carry You With Me*, which won the 2020 Sundance NEXT Audience and Innovation awards. It was picked up by Sony Pictures Classics. It's a beautiful love story that spans 20 years and two countries, based on a true story. I'm also working on a very interesting experimental documentary called *Light Darkness Light*, about a priest who's lost his sight. He goes through a procedure to see again and has to adjust to life while regaining his vision. It's a blend of religion and technology.

—FSMO