

# Music is the food of love in Begin Again

 By [Daniel Dercksen](#) 17 Sep 2014

The soul-stirring romantic comedy *Begin Again* shows what happens when lost souls meet and make beautiful music together.

"If music be the food of love, play on," wrote William Shakespeare over 400 years ago, reminding us of the way that music can inspire and speak to our emotions and connections in a deeper and more profound way than simple words. It's no wonder, then, that the cinema has embraced the power of music to capture and enhance the screen's powerful connection to the human spirit.

No one knows that better than filmmaker John Carney, whose 2006 film *Once* went from being the find of the Sundance Film Festival to winning the Independent Spirit Award for Best Foreign Film, earning a Grammy nomination for its soundtrack, and winning the Best Original Song Academy Award for the romantic ballad *Falling Slowly* (composed and performed by the film's stars, Glen Hansard and Marketa Irglova.) The stage play based on the film then went on to win the Tony Award for Best Musical.



## The power of music

Carney has brought his unique perspective to New York City with another film that documents the power of music as it changes the lives and fortunes of two struggling souls. In *Begin Again*, past-his-prime record executive Dan Mulligan (played by Mark Ruffalo) is facing a failing marriage, a career he can't keep up with and a daughter he can't connect to. But at his most desperate moment, he hears a powerful song by Gretta (Keira Knightley), an unknown musician on the brink of giving up her musical dreams after unexpected heartbreak and frustration.

An unlikely pair who are brought together by equal parts of inspiration and desperation, the film follows the way as their musical partnership develops into a deep friendship, and their lives take unexpected turns. For Carney, the idea for the film originated in the relationship between Gretta and her musician boyfriend Dave (played by Adam Levine of *The Voice* and Maroon 5).

"I wanted to do something with the idea of a couple who work together in the same area of the arts, and what happens to the relationship when the playing field stops being level and one of them takes off. What happens to intimacy and trust and loyalty when fame comes along?" At the same time, Carney drew upon

own past as a professional musician to flesh out the story's possible complications.



### **Where are those A&R guys now?**

"I got to see that whole world of A&R and publishing at first-hand, before I left that world and got into film and TV," he explains. "So I started to think - where are those A&R guys now? The ones in Ireland in the 1990s who were looking for the next U2 - where are they now that the industry has changed so much? Let's find one of those guys and see where he is now, what happens when the jaded music executive of the 90s meets the young optimistic girl from now who can record and mix her album on her computer."

With a strong and uniquely powerful script, Carney was able to attract a compelling mixture of newcomers and seasoned veterans from many walks of the entertainment industry. Indeed, the challenge of casting actors like Knightley, not known for their singing talents, and singers (like Levine and Green) who have very little experience acting, might have been daunting to many filmmakers. But cast and crew alike agree that that combination and collaboration has proved productive, if not magical.

"I've never done anything like this," admits Knightley. "A lot of the music wasn't finished until I got to New York. I had been working with a vocal coach to find a sound that would work for the character, but two or three of Gretta's songs were just handed to me on the day we recorded them, so there was been a bit of flying by the seat of our pants and hoping for the best. There's an old stage saying: 'It'll be all right on the night.' So far, it all seems to have gone all right."

Although he's no stranger to the camera, having been a coach on the NBC show *The Voice* for several seasons, music star Levine had never tried dramatic acting until he was approached by Carney about playing the part of David. "I was honoured just to be asked, and right off the bat I fell in love with the script. To have John believe in me is really exciting," he says today. "John saw something in me that was this character - whether that is flattering or not, I can't tell, but I would not have considered doing a film unless I was really connected to the material. I love John's tone - he is a musician and I think his sensibilities are those of a musician, so we get along famously."

## Quite a challenge

"The music was easy," admits Levine after shooting. "That's kind of my wheelhouse, I guess, but the acting has been quite a challenge in a really great way. The only thing people said to me was 'know your lines' and 'don't act, just listen and react,' and that was great advice. I've also found that being comfortable and receptive to direction makes it a lot easier. It was daunting going into this new world, but everyone was so sweet and made me feel comfortable and at home, so I felt like I was doing my best even though I had relatively little experience."

With two soulful films featuring a creative and innovative use of music behind him, Carney reflects on the genre that he seems to be reinventing. "I loved musicals when I was young. I loved the joy of those movie he remembers. "That is harder to achieve in cinema these days. The industry leans towards making big event movies, which tend to be universal and non-specific - all very well and good, but at the expense of a huge audience who want something else, who don't only want to see Batman or Transformers. The music is right in-between. You can have a more romantic feeling as a crowd, and the story doesn't matter in the same way. It can be more about interesting and specific things. Music is the universal element that connects and brings in the audience. You want that crowd experience without totally compromising your own aesthetic."

Perhaps it is Levine, no stranger to the power of music, who captures the spirit of the film when he observes "Everybody - if they have a soul - has music that they connect to. For me, it was a Pearl Jam song called Elderly Woman Behind The Counter In A Small Town - that song always made me cry when I was a kid. Being young sucks and it helped me get through a tough period."

"It might sound heavy to say," concludes Levine, "but the film asks the question: Can a song save your life? I do believe that the energy you feel when you hear a song that you respond to emotionally - it can change your life, and maybe save it in a way. Music saved my life, because I love it so much that I don't know what I would do without it."

*Read more about [Begin again](http://www.writingstudio.co.za) and other films now showing at [www.writingstudio.co.za](http://www.writingstudio.co.za).*

## ABOUT DANIEL DERCKSEN

Daniel Dercksen has been a contributor for Lifestyle since 2012. As the driving force behind the successful independent training initiative The Writing Studio and a published film and the journalist of 40 years, teaching workshops in creative writing, playwriting and screenwriting throughout South Africa and internationally the past 22 years. Visit [www.writingstudio.co.za](http://www.writingstudio.co.za) to view my profile and articles...