

**ARTS & THEATER**

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# Composer Jeff Walton has forged a music career without leaving home

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By **Steven Brown** | August 1, 2014

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Photo: James Nielsen, Staff

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**IMAGE 1 OF 10**

Composer Jeff Walton, a Pearland native, has built a career creating film scores and other works without leaving the Houston area for Los Angeles or New York.

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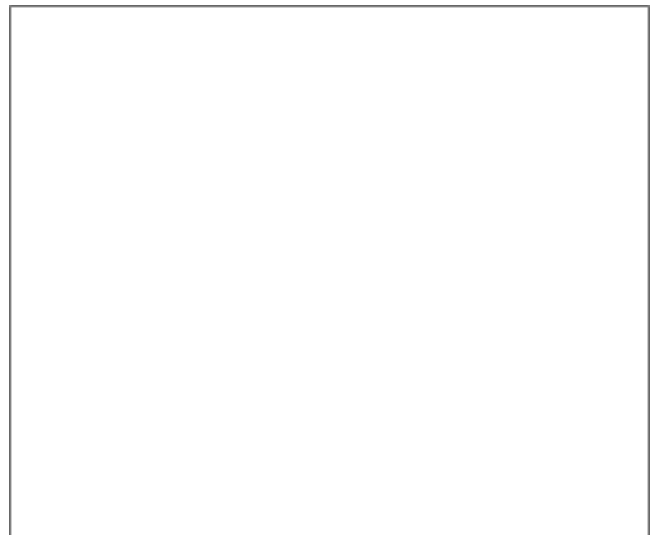
Composer Jeff Walton switches on his computer to illustrate a work in progress, the soundtrack for a spy thriller.

The screen lights up to show a waiting room in a Mideast airport. As a man stashes a bracelet in his briefcase, pensive music for strings and piano underlines his anxiety. The film cuts to a rifle being removed from its case; a stream of staccato percussion ratchets up the tension.

Walton stops the video.

"I keep changing my mind," he says. He has been studying the rough cut of "Osprey," an independent film starring Eric Roberts, for days, posing the questions any composer should ask:

"What does the tone of the score need to be? What do I need to say, emotionally? What's the core thing about the film?"



The soundtrack will be Walton's 30th film score. Movie-industry people have long urged him to move to Los Angeles or New York. But Walton, raised in Pearland - where he and three friends comprised the Judy's, a new-wave band that was a regional favorite in 1980s - resolved long ago to stay close to home. And despite being far from the entertainment capitals, Walton, 51, has forged a career.

During the past 20 years, he has composed music for local TV stations, a Chips Ahoy!

commercial, industrial films, shorts and a string of small-budget feature films. Every time a phone call yields a job offer, he tells himself: "I'm still in the game."

"I've been fortunate," he says. "It has been a crazy ride because it's always like this - you never know what the next job is going to be.

"But I kind of like that. I like the energy. Maybe it keeps me on my toes."

"Osprey" is Walton's third collaboration with Houston director Wayne Slaten. Walton has a gift for understanding what a director wants, Slaten says, as he learned during their first film together, "Backroad," a horror thriller set in rural Texas.

When Slaten gave Walton the movie's final cut, it included music Slaten had added to help suggest what he wanted. Walton produced a distinctly different score, yet he still captured what Slaten envisioned.

"It was even more enveloping with the characters," Slaten said. "It felt just right."

Walton works in the converted garage of his home on a shady street in north Houston's Oak Forest neighborhood. Though the studio takes up only one car's worth of space, it illustrates his entire story.

"There's so much of my life in this little room," he says with a laugh.

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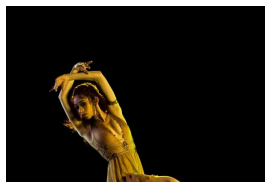
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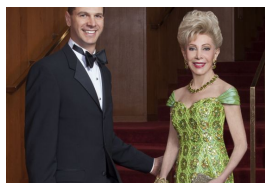
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The piano his parents bought when he was about 6 stands next to his computer. A container of LPs holds the soundtracks for "Planet of the Apes" and other scores that fascinated him as a boy. A poster for "Washarama," the Judy's first record, hangs on a wall.

Walton and his friends launched the band while students at Pearland High School, with Walton playing guitar, Dane Cessac on drums and David Bean playing keyboard and singing lead. Performing quirky original songs such as "Guyana Punch," a meditation on the 1978 Jonestown deaths, the Judy's became a mainstay on college campuses across Texas. The band recorded four LPs, toured with the B-52s and opened for the Talking Heads and the Go-Gos.

Though the group broke up in the early 1990s, its recordings still are available on its website, [wastedtalentrecords.com](http://wastedtalentrecords.com).

"I love the legacy of the band," Walton says. "The band is still talked about and thought of. The CDs still sell. We never would have dreamed that, 30 years later, people would remember."

Bean now is a Houston-area educator. Cessac, a culinary-school graduate, works in the prepared-foods division of Whole Foods Market in Austin.

During the band's last years, Walton says, he felt an internal tug-of-war because he wanted to compose soundtracks. Leaving the Judy's in 1987 freed him to launch his career.

"It has all been baby steps," Walton says. Though he studied music at the University of Houston and read books about film scoring, he learned mainly by doing.

He began with small projects - short films and TV-station themes - at times doing them for free to gain experience. Songs Walton had written outside the Judy's helped win over a Los Angeles B-movie producer who assigned him to a Dallas project over the director's objections.

The producer was pleased enough to give Walton more work, which led to other

opportunities. Though the films were low-budget, Walton says, they ended up on HBO and other cable networks, which in the 1990s produced little programming of their own.

An action film about CIA assassins enabled Walton to realize his dream of walking into a video store and seeing his name on a box.

"It was called 'Fatal Justice.' Not a good film," he says. "But I thought it was 'Gone With the Wind' at the time."

Industry insiders periodically advised Walton to move to Los Angeles or New York. He realized the advice was sound, but he refused to uproot his wife and two sons, even when a New York company offered a job composing for TV.

"I just couldn't imagine ... moving everybody and trying to find a place to live in New York," Walton says. "And what if it didn't work out?"

Walton acknowledges that staying in Houston has undoubtedly cost him work. But the Internet now enables him to easily exchange video and music with faraway directors.

A photo of Walton in Jones Hall with the Houston Symphony hangs above his computer. It's from a March recording session, when the orchestra performed Walton's score for a video depicting a day in Houston, commissioned by the Greater Houston Convention and Visitors Bureau. Walton - who usually plays his scores himself, electronically - got his first chance to compose for orchestra.

"It wasn't just an orchestra. It was the Houston Symphony, which was mind-blowing," he says.

Walton says the project was terrifying and exciting, but it enabled him to fulfill another longtime dream: to compose a score, work with a production staff and hear an orchestra perform his music, like a composer in Hollywood.

"To have that happen was really an honor. ... It probably won't happen again. But it was one of those experiences that I'll forever be grateful for."

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