

Disney

CLOUDS

Based on an incredible true story, *Clouds* is a vibrant ode to the life of singer/songwriter Zach Sobiech.

Zach is a fun-loving 17-year-old with raw musical talent. But weeks into his senior year — just as his dream girl finally reciprocates his crush — Zach’s world gets turned upside down when he learns that his cancer has spread. With months to live, Zach and his writing partner, Sammy, decide to follow their dreams and finally make an album. Little do they know that the world will soon catch on, turning the duo of *A Firm Handshake* into a viral phenomenon.

As his health worsens, Zach realizes that no matter how he spends his last days, he is going to hurt the people he’s closest to, including the love of his life, Amy. Ultimately, he discovers the best way to say goodbye is through song. A raw, beautiful look at the duality of life, “*Clouds*” reveals the unforgettable journey that brought Zach’s music into the homes and hearts of millions. Adapted from “*Fly a Little Higher*,” the 2014 memoir by Laura Sobiech, Zach’s mom (and just re-released as “*Clouds: A Memoir*”).

The movie stars Fin Argus as Zach Sobiech; Neve Campbell as Laura Sobiech; Sabrina Carpenter as Sammy Brown; Madison Iseman as Adam Adamle; Tom Everett Scott as Zach’s dad, Rob Sobiech; Lil Rel Howery as Zach’s teacher, Mr. Weaver; Summer H. Howell and Vivian Endicott-Douglas as Zach’s sisters, Grace and Alli; and Dylan Everett as Zach’s brother, Sam. Jason Mraz also has a cameo.

Directed by Justin Baldoni (“*Five Feet Apart*”), “*Clouds*” is produced by Oscar nominee Andrew Lazar (“*American Sniper*”), Baldoni and Casey La Scala (“*A Walk to Remember*”). Steve Sarowitz (“*Maya Angelou: And I Still Rise*”), Wendy S. Williams (“*Brockmire*”) and Cate Adams serve as executive producers. The movie is



a production of Wayfarer Studios, Warner Bros. Pictures and Mad Chance/La Scala Films.

Filmmakers assembled a talented collection of artists for the project, including twice Emmy-nominated director of photography Ben Kutchins (“Ozark”), production designer Michèle Laliberté (who served as the art director on “The Curious Case of Benjamin Button”), editor Brett M. Reed (who was part of the editorial department on “Argo”) and costume designers Rachel Sage Kunin (“Jane the Virgin”) and Simonetta Mariano (“Pet Sematary,” 2019). The score is produced by Brian Tyler (“Crazy Rich Asians”), who also produced the film’s original songs with Nick Baxter (a music mixer/sound recordist on “La La Land”).

“Clouds” debuts exclusively on Disney+ on October 16, 2020.

♪ A DIRECTOR FINDS HIS MUSE ♪

When making “Clouds,” director and producer Justin Baldoni happily strayed from the standard Hollywood approach. He has been close with the Sobiech family for more than seven years, and he kept them “intimately involved in every aspect of the movie,” says the actor-turned-filmmaker. Zach Sobiech is not a character or an Internet search term to Baldoni — “He became my little brother” during the week they spent together, three months before Zach died.

“I wanted to create an immersive experience for every person who touched the film,” Baldoni says. “We’re retelling a story of somebody who deeply affected millions of people, and has the chance to affect millions more.”

Baldoni and the Sobiechs bonded prior to his onscreen breakout, a five-season run on “Jane the Virgin.” In 2012, he created the documentary series “My Last Days” for SoulPancake, the digital entertainment company co-founded by Rainn Wilson (“The Office”). Each episode followed someone nearing the end of their life, and encouraged young audiences not to “otherize people with an illness.”

Around that time, Baldoni’s house went into foreclosure. “I was as broke as I could be,” he says. Yet through telling such impactful stories, “I gained a new perspective. I was happier than I’d ever been.”

One day, Baldoni randomly clicked on an article about a teen who recorded a popular single while battling terminal osteosarcoma, a rare bone cancer. “I listened to 30 seconds of the song and I got the chills,” Baldoni says. “I didn’t even know

Zach's story yet, but I just knew that it was going to be a massive part of my life for the foreseeable future."

He got in touch with Laura Sobiech and started video chatting with Zach. "He was such a unique man in that he was goofy, masculine and feminine, sweet and gentle, and profound, but he wasn't a saint," Baldoni says. Soon, the director and seven "My Last Days" crewmembers descended on Stillwater, Minnesota to shadow Zach, his family and friends.

Zach learned he had the disease when he was 14. At age 17, he began dating Amy Adamle. The level of maturity the high schoolers brought to their relationship stunned Baldoni. Plus he was invigorated to see how they embraced their present joy instead of living in fear. "A conversation that I had with Zach and Amy actually made realize I needed to propose to my wife," he says.

"My Last Days: Meet Zach Sobiech" debuted on Zach's 18th birthday, and has since garnered in excess of 15 million YouTube views. In the comments section, Baldoni and his Wayfarer Studios co-founder, Steve Sarowitz, found an entry from someone claiming they were suicidal until hearing Zach's story. "We realized the latent power in what we can do, and how television and films can save lives," Baldoni says.

Zach died on May 20, 2013. "Clouds" reached the top of the iTunes on the day of his funeral, and charted on both sides of the Atlantic. Laura channeled her grief into her book *Fly a Little Higher*, which features memories of Baldoni's "My Last Days" visit. Baldoni returned to the Sobiech home to film a follow-up installment of the series.

"I made Zach a promise that I would do everything in my power to make sure that his story was told, and people all over the world got to hear his song," Baldoni says. "And we would raise money to combat osteosarcoma." Hopefully, "Clouds" will spark Disney+ viewers to add to the nearly \$2.2 million already raised by the Zach Sobiech Osteosarcoma Research Fund.

♪ ORIGINS OF THE FILM ♪

Wayfarer Studios optioned "Fly a Little Higher" as its first original film. "I wanted people to be transported into Zach's world and feel like they are with him," Baldoni says. The producing team added Casey La Scala — who helped shepherd thematically-similar material to filmgoers with "A Walk to Remember" — and Academy Award nominee Andrew Lazar ("American Sniper").

Baldoni's vision remains faithful to Laura's book while shifting the central focus to Zach, Amy, and their schoolmate Samantha "Sammy" Brown. Best friends from infancy, Zach and Sammy eventually wrote songs together as the folk duo A Firm Handshake. "These three defy the odds and make positive choices you don't normally see kids make onscreen," he says.

Early in the film's development, Baldoni often spoke with the women as well as Zach's parents and siblings, searching for details that belonged in the script. During the "My Last Days" shoot, the entire crew gleaned that Sammy secretly had a crush on Zach. "We were like, 'She loves him, right?'" Baldoni laughs. "I asked her point-blank. She said, 'You're right, I did have feelings for Zach,' and told me about how awkward it was when Zach found out."

He continues, "It was a very confusing time for Sammy. On one hand, she wanted Zach to be happy, and being happy meant being with Amy, who was also her friend. Sammy didn't know if she loved him because he was dying, or because they'd grown up together."

While considering writers, Baldoni knew he needed a perceptive collaborator with a generous spirit. To combat a cinematic stereotype, he wished to bypass the moment Zach received his diagnosis. To reflect reality, "Clouds" also would not pit Amy and Sammy against each other. "I met some fantastic writers who could've done a good job, but I was looking for somebody who would be willing to open up, because Zach was going to tell them how he wanted the movie made," Baldoni says.

Divine inspiration arrived shortly thereafter. "I was sitting in my car and I felt like somebody whispered a name in my ear, 'Ryan,'" he says. Baldoni thought of his friend Ryan Devlin, an actor who guest-starred on a quartet of "Jane the Virgin" episodes. "He had told me that his wife was writing inspirational movies. That's all I knew about her. I texted him and said, 'I know this is really weird, but can I talk to Kara about the movie I'm making?'" Devlin introduced Baldoni and his wife, actor-turned-screenwriter Kara Holden.

"She's brilliant, and she fell in love with the story," Baldoni says. "She began to open her heart up for inspiration. Whenever we were stuck, she would talk to Zach."

♪ CONVENING THE CAST ♪

For Baldoni, the project's toughest challenge was finding the actor who could capture Zach's tenacity and clumsy charm. "I loved Zach so much, and I wanted to get it right," the director says. The dynamic presence of Chicagoan Steffan "Fin"

Argus immediately grabbed his attention. Even so, after four or five auditions, Baldoni hesitated to stop looking for his lead.

"I remember calling Laura and telling her to watch his tape, and she said, 'Justin, it is him,'" Baldoni says. "Everybody saw it before I did. Luckily, after I talked to Zach and prayed about it, it became very clear that the role was always meant for Fin. He dove in soul-first. I think that this is going to be the beginning of a massive career for him." Argus began the year as a relative unknown; he's since appeared in a pair of "Agents of S.H.I.E.L.D" episodes, and "Clouds" is his debut film.

Holden's script resonated with Argus for several reasons. "Fin followed Zach's story when it came out," Baldoni says. "He was 14, and he learned 'Clouds' on his guitar. Zach meant a lot to him. Because of how intimately involved I was with the family and the story, Fin wanted me to guide him, and really trusted that process. He was also going through a parallel experience where his aunt, who was kind of his artistic muse, was dying from cancer."

Sharing the mic with Argus onscreen is Sabrina Carpenter ("Tall Girl," "Work It"), a veteran of the Disney Channel series "Girl Meets World." As Carpenter released four studio albums and toured the globe, she amassed more than 22 million Instagram followers. But until "Clouds," she had not played a character inspired by a real person.

"I was really excited to see, 'Who is the young woman underneath that fame?'" Baldoni says. When Carpenter first auditioned, he didn't even recognize her. "She came in not wearing any makeup, just so confident and sure of who she was, cracking jokes. I was like, 'That's Sammy. Put a wig on her.'"

Madison Iseman ("Jumanji: Welcome to the Jungle," "Annabelle Comes Home") completes the core trio as Amy, Zach's self-assured sweetheart. "Whenever Amy comes on the screen, I want the audience to feel how Zach felt about her," Baldoni says. Thus he tasked himself with hiring an actor "with such a genuine smile that when they smile, you smile."

Moreover, Baldoni sought "a balance between having somebody be stereotypically beautiful, but also down-to-earth, approachable and deeply kind. Madison has that," he says, noting how he was won over by the hint of shyness in her auditions.

"Clouds" unfolds over Zach's last year of high school, and chronicles his courtship with Amy. But as they embark on romance, Laura and Rob Sobiech feel the marital strain of their son's grim prognosis, grief-stricken for the child they have yet to lose.

"In Laura's book, she details how they isolate themselves in their mourning," Baldoni says. "They don't necessarily know how to give what the other person needs, because both of them are feeling such extreme pain."

Again, Baldoni desired actors who were more than merely skilled. "I was looking for people that embodied the essence of these characters in their regular life," he says. Case in point: actor and comedian Lil Rel Howery ("Get Out") hails from a family of teachers, and is determined to leave the world better than he found it. He was an ideal match for tender-hearted Mr. Weaver, Zach's English teacher who facilitates important introductions in the music industry.

The name Neve Campbell ("Party of Five," "Hose of Cards") came up as the filmmakers brainstormed potential Lauras. "I'd only really known her from her 'Scream' days, as a young fan — everybody was in love with Neve Campbell," Baldoni says. He watched one of her interviews, and heard Laura Sobiech's same cadence. "They speak with this softness, yet you don't want to mess with either of them, because they can almost see through you and see your intentions. Not only that, they kind of look like each other. Neve really wanted to tell the story and challenge herself. She gives such a powerful performance, heartwarming and heartbreaking."

Tom Everett Scott ("13 Reasons Why") also felt like seamless fit for Zach's dad, Rob. "He's dad joke central, and he's got a teenage kid, and really, really just loved the story," Baldoni says. "And in 'That Thing You Do!,' Tom looks exactly like Fin does in *Clouds*. They could be twins!"

♪ SET LIFE & SOUNDTRACK ♪

The actors soon became honorary relatives in the Sobiech clan. "I brought Fin and Madison to Minnesota to meet the entire family because I wanted Fin to go into Zach's room alone and spend time with him," Baldoni says. "Zach's room is identical to the way it was when he passed away." Ahead of principal photography, half the bedroom's contents was shipped to the Montreal set. Baldoni estimates that 60 percent Argus's "Clouds" wardrobe came directly from Zach's closet.

Costume designer Rachel Sage Kunin and composer Brian Tyler knew to expect such commitment to authenticity from their experience on Baldoni's prior film, "Five Feet Apart" (2019). The runaway YA hit was inspired by the life of activist Claire Wineland, who was born with cystic fibrosis. Wineland was a "Five Feet Apart" consultant, and a cystic fibrosis nurse was on set to ensure accurate portrayal of her character's medical treatment.

“Clouds” filming lasted from October 16, 2019 until late November. The production brought 70 of Zach’s friends and family members to Canada so they could be in the audience during the climactic concert scene. “Everything onscreen was influenced and inspired by what really happened, and the real people,” Baldoni says. “It’s very important to me that they feel represented and heard.”

The movie’s soundtrack is no exception. “We wanted the music to inform Zach’s journey from, in many ways, a boy to a man,” Baldoni says. “The music evolves as he evolves. That’s why we start with him singing somebody else’s lyrics in ‘Sexy and I Know It.’ He’s disarming people with comedy versus at the end, where he’s using music to tell people how he feels.” In between, he and Sammy release an EP, which earns them representation and a trip to New York City.

Seven of A Firm Handshake’s songs are heard in the film — “Blueberries,” “Coffee Cup,” “Fix Me Up,” “Star Hopping,” “Ames,” “How to Go to Confession” and “Sandcastles.” “I wanted their music to be as imperfectly perfect as it was when they made it,” Baldoni says. “The beauty of Sammy and Zach’s story is that they weren’t professional musicians. These were two kids who didn’t have any money and were throwing this stuff together with some friends. So every song you hear in the movie was recorded on set, live.”

The scene where Zach and Sammy harmonize before dawn was shot at the end of a 14-hour day, since the characters are supposed to be sleep-deprived from an all-night writing session. “Fin and Sabrina’s voices were drained and exhausted, and that’s exactly how I wanted it,” Baldoni says. “When you listen to the soundtrack, I want you to replay the movie in your head.” In a couple instances, Baldoni asked Tyler to elevate the instrumentals to match the aspirations, like when Sammy explained that they would have loved to incorporate cello into “How to Go to Confession.”

Two additional songs on the soundtrack, “Find the Words” and “Purple Pink,” were Sammy’s solo compositions. “Sammy only knew writing with Zach, so when he passed away, she stopped,” Baldoni says. “The first time she picked up a pen to write again was when I asked her to write for the movie.” “Purple Pink” — which plays during the closing credits — “is her goodbye to Zach.”

Then, of course, there’s the namesake number. “‘Clouds’ reminds me that joy and pain are not mutually exclusive,” the director says. “The words are heartbreaking, yet the music is an optimistic chord progression. Because that’s life. We’re always pulled in two directions at once. All of the movie’s best scenes are converging trains of emotion.”

♪ LIFTING PEOPLE UP, UP, UP ♪

The filmmakers intended for “Clouds” to be a cathartic viewing experience that united theater-goers from all walks of life. But COVID-19 has rendered it impossible to hug fellow ticketholders in 2020.

“The world is filled with despair and darkness right now, everybody is hurting,” Baldoni says. “I didn't want anybody to have to risk their health to see this film, especially when Zach represents so many immunocompromised people and people with underlying health conditions. We wanted to bring his story to people where they are today, and that's their living rooms.”

Warner Bros. gave Baldoni and his colleagues the opportunity to find alternative distribution — at every turn, Zach’s story has “inspired people to be the best versions of themselves,” he says.

A new partnership was forged when “Clouds” became Disney’s first narrative acquisition for its global streaming platform, Disney+. “Disney immediately got the heart of the movie and Zach's message, and was on-board to bring hope to audiences,” Baldoni says. “Zach would want this movie to be seen now by families and kids. We need hope, and we need light.”

TRIVIA

- Fin Argus and Madison Iseman share an easy chemistry because they have been friends for years. Iseman co-starred in Argus’s 2016 music video, “Make Me Cry.” In the past, they have helped each other prepare for auditions, but neither knew the other was vying for a part in “Clouds.”
- A multi-instrumentalist, Argus plays piano, ukulele, cello, French horn, jazz guitar, some percussion and Zach’s beloved acoustic guitar.
- In the homage to Zach’s “Clouds” recording session, Argus wears the red flannel shirt Zach wore on the actual day.
- “My Little Dancer” a song Zach started writing, was completed by Argus and incorporated into the film.
- Justin Baldoni played a character named Diego in a final-season episode of “The Suite Life of Zack and Cody.” Zach Sobiech grew up watching the Disney Channel series. “The entire time I was at his house, Zach called me Diego, quoted my lines from that show and made fun of me,” Baldoni says.

Early in “Clouds,” when Zach and Amy flirt over Facebook Messenger, said episode can be seen playing on a nearby television.

- During the “My Last Days” shoot, Baldoni surprised Zach with a clip of celebrities lip-synching “Clouds,” among them Bryan Cranston, Passenger, The Lumineers, Jenna Elfman, Rainn Wilson and Jason Mraz. Mraz sings “I’m Yours” in this film.
- Sam Baldoni, Justin’s dad, is an associate producer on “Clouds.”
- Tom Everett Scott’s “Clouds” son is obviously played by an actor named Fin. His actual son’s name? Finn.
- Zach and Amy Adamle had their first date on April 3, 2012.
- Zach’s actual promposal occurred over the radio, not on a concert marquee.
- Zach wrote a song for Amy called “Our Souls.”
- The first song Zach and Sammy wrote together was “Blueberries.”
- Sammy suggested “Sexy and I Know It” as the song Argus should perform in the talent show scene. “She said Zach would have thought it was hilarious,” Baldoni says.
- The memorable dinging sound that begins “Clouds” comes courtesy of a glockenspiel.
- Disney+ is releasing “Clouds” exactly one year after filming began.

CREDITS

Wayfarer Studios

Clouds

Inspired by a true story

Directed by
Justin Baldoni

Screenplay by
Kara Holden

Story by
Casey La Scala & Patrick Kopka and
Kara Holden

Produced by
Andrew Lazar, p.g.a.

Produced by
Casey La Scala
Justin Baldoni, p.g.a.

Executive Producers
Steve Sarowitz
Wendy S. Williams
Cate Adams

Based on the Book "Fly a Little Higher" by
Laura Sobiech

Director of Photography
Ben Kutchins

Production Designer
Michèle Laliberté

Film Editor
Brett M. Reed

Music by
Brian Tyler

Music Supervisor
Jordan Carroll

Costumes Designed by
Rachel Sage Kunin
Simonetta Mariano

Casting by
Rich Delia, CSA

Fin Argus
Sabrina Carpenter
Madison Iseman
Lil Rel Howery
with Tom Everett Scott
and Neve Campbell

A Disney+ Original

A Warner Bros. Pictures Presentation

In association with Wayfarer Studios

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