

PROJECT HAIL MARY Production Notes



In Theaters Nationwide
on Friday, March 20

Release Date: 03-20-2026, Wide

Directed by: Phil Lord & Christopher Miller

Screenplay by: Drew Goddard

Based on the novel by: Andy Weir

Produced by: Amy Pascal, p.g.a., Ryan Gosling, p.g.a., Phil Lord, p.g.a.,
Christopher Miller, p.g.a., Aditya Sood, p.g.a., Rachel O'Connor, p.g.a., Andy Weir

Executive Producers: Patricia Whitcher, Lucy Winn Kitada, Nikki Baida, Ken Kao,
Drew Goddard, Sarah Esberg

Presentation: Amazon MGM Studios presents, a Pascal Pictures, Open Invite Films/Waypoint
Entertainment, Lord Miller production. A Film by Phil Lord & Christopher Miller.

Cast: Ryan Gosling, Sandra Hüller, James Ortiz, Lionel Boyce, Ken Leung, Milana Vayntrub,
Priya Kansara

Runtime: 2hrs 36mins

Rating: Rated PG-13 for some thematic material and suggestive references.

Social: [IG](#) | [X](#) | [FB](#)

Film Site: ProjectHailMary.com

Science teacher Ryland Grace (Ryan Gosling) wakes up on a spaceship light years from home with no recollection of who he is or how he got there. As his memory returns, he begins to uncover his mission: solve the riddle of the mysterious substance causing the sun to die out. He must call on his scientific knowledge and unorthodox ideas to save everything on Earth from extinction... but an unexpected friendship means he may not have to do it alone.

BELIEVE IN THE HAIL MARY

Embark on an epic and thrilling journey in which an ordinary science teacher, Grace, and an unexpected ally from another world, Rocky, unite on an extraordinary mission to save their worlds. Twelve light years from Earth, their unlikely bond becomes a source of hope, reminding us that in the darkest, most dangerous moments, we are not alone.

*Together, they find the courage to believe the impossible is possible...**to believe in the Hail Mary.***

Science teacher Ryland Grace wakes up on a spaceship, light years from home with no recollection of who he is or how he got there. As his memory returns, he begins to uncover his mission: solve the riddle of the mysterious substance causing the sun to die out. He must call on his scientific knowledge and unorthodox ideas to save everything on Earth from extinction, but an unexpected friendship means he may not have to do it alone.

Directed by Academy Award® winners Phil Lord and Christopher Miller (*Spider-Man: Into the Spider-Verse*, *The Lego Movie*), **PROJECT HAIL MARY** stars three-time Academy Award® nominee **Ryan Gosling** (*La La Land*, *Barbie*), Academy Award® nominee **Sandra Hüller** (*Anatomy of a Fall*, *The Zone of Interest*) and **James Ortiz** (*The Woodsman*).

With a screenplay by Academy Award® nominee **Drew Goddard** (*The Cabin in the Woods*, *The Martian*) based on the novel by **Andy Weir** (*The Martian*, *Artemis*), the film is produced by Gosling along with Academy Award® nominee **Amy Pascal** (*Little Women*, *Spider-Man: Into the Spider-Verse*), Lord and Miller, **Aditya Sood** (*The Martian*, *Cocaine Bear*) and **Rachel O'Connor** (*Challengers*, *Spider-Man: Brand New Day*), as well as Weir.

Nikki Baida (*Strays*), **Sara Esberg** (*Moonlight*), **Ken Kao** (*The Nice Guys*), **Lucy Kitada** (*Borderlands*), **Patricia Whitcher** (*Marvel's The Avengers*) and Goddard are executive producers.

Ken Leung (*Star Wars: The Force Awakens*), **Milana Vayntrub** (*Werewolves Within*), **Lionel Boyce** ('The Bear') and **Priya Kansara** ('Bridgerton') round out the cast.

Joining Lord and Miller behind the camera are Academy Award®-winning cinematographer **Greig Fraser** (*Dune*, *The Batman*), production designer **Charles Wood** (*Guardians of the Galaxy*, *Avengers: Endgame*), costume designers **David Crossman** and **Glyn Dillon** (*Rogue One: A Star Wars Story*, *Solo: A Star Wars Story*) and film editor **Joel Negron** (*Thor: Ragnarok*, *The Nice Guys*). Academy Award® nominee **Daniel Pemberton** (*Spider-Man: Into the Spider-Verse*, *The Trial of the Chicago 7*) is the film's composer.

A WING AND A PRAYER

There are moments in history when survival depends not on strength, but on cooperation, when the problem is too large for one person, one nation or one discipline. At those moments, the only way forward is together.

Project Hail Mary begins with a crisis: Earth's sun is dimming and humanity is running out of time. But what unfolds is not a story about catastrophe. It's a story about ingenuity, humility and the radical act of working with someone with a completely different perspective.

At its center is unlikely hero Ryland Grace (Academy Award® nominee Ryan Gosling), a middle-school science teacher who never imagined he would have to carry the weight of the world on his shoulders. Eventually, an even more unlikely partnership forms between two beings from different stars, bound not by language or biology, but by shared purpose.

What makes *Project Hail Mary* resonate is not the scale of its crisis but the intimacy of its solution. It's a story that suggests that survival is not a solo act and that hope is not a passive endeavor. Above all, it's a story that contends that, even in the vastness of space, connection remains our greatest resource.

The making of the film reflected that idea at every stage – from the moment author Andy Weir sent his unpublished manuscript out into the world, to the collaboration between actor-producer Gosling, Academy Award®-winning directors Phil Lord and Christopher Miller and the creative producing minds who came together to achieve the impossible on screen, to the out-of-this-world contributions of hundreds of artists and engineers who worked from the ground up to bring a true Hail Mary to life.

This is the story of that journey.

ASSEMBLING THE PERFECT TEAM

Development

In early 2020 – before it had been published, before it had a release date and certainly before anyone knew what the coming year would bring – author **Andy Weir** sent a manuscript to actor **Ryan Gosling** (*La La Land*, *Barbie*). The ask from was humble but specific – he wanted Gosling to consider not only starring in a film adaptation as the story's lead character, but producing the project as well.

Weir had already developed a reputation for marrying rigorous science with emotional clarity in stories anchored in near futures. His 2011 best-seller *The Martian* had proven that audiences would follow complex problem-solving if they cared about the person doing the solving, and the resulting 2015 film adaptation confirmed that logic on a much larger scale.

But *Project Hail Mary* felt different, even on the page. It began with isolation – a man alone in deep space, his memories of what brought him there fleeting – and then gradually widened into something far more expansive. Gosling read it in one sitting.

“It's such an epic journey,” Gosling says. “And Ryland Grace is not stoic in any way. He's not brave in any traditional sense and he doesn't have any illusions about being a hero. But he keeps trying.”

The timing of Weir's outreach was not incidental. The manuscript arrived at the start of the COVID pandemic, as movie productions across the globe were shutting down and theaters were going dark. A business was fracturing and the future of large-scale filmmaking felt uncertain.

“Here I was getting this opportunity to make the most epic theatrical experience of my life, and theaters were closed,” Gosling says. But there was something strangely appropriate about receiving the material in the thick of such a trying time.

“Project Hail Mary is about the sun dying, but it’s also deeply hopeful. It supports the idea that we’re capable of solving impossible problems, that if we don’t give up, miracles are possible.”

Weir describes the premise with characteristic understatement. “My elevator pitch would be: it’s a buddy movie with world-shattering consequences,” he says.

But even that framing hints at what distinguishes *Project Hail Mary* from a traditional survival narrative. The story ultimately hinges not on endurance, but on collaboration, on the discovery that the solution cannot be reached alone.

Gosling knew instantly that he wanted to be a part of bringing that idea to the screen, and true to those themes, he knew it would take a village.

“My first thought was I needed to get a better producer than me involved, because this was seemingly impossible,” Gosling says. “I needed the best.”

Gosling’s first call was to **Amy Pascal**, the hard-charging former studio head turned Academy Award®-nominated producer of films as disparate as *The Post*, *Little Women* and *Spider-Man: Into the Spider-Verse*. Pascal had actually already read Weir’s manuscript herself and had responded to the same tension that captivated Gosling: the collision of intimacy and scale.

“Grace is a completely average person like any of us – not a superhero, not an astronaut, just a normal person,” Pascal says. “Over time, he becomes someone capable of extraordinary sacrifice. That emotional journey is the spine.”

For Pascal, the science was never the barrier. In true Weir fashion, the genre trappings were scaffolding upon which bigger and more universal concepts could elegantly hang.

“It’s about science, yes,” Pascal says. “But it’s also about faith – faith in people, faith in collaboration. We’re living in a time where everyone is scared of each other. No one trusts each other. Nobody wants to listen to each other. Everybody’s in their silos just believing what they believe and reading different newspapers and not opening themselves up to other people. This movie is about having to listen. You have to learn someone else’s language. You have to understand where they’re coming from, or you can’t save the world.”

With Pascal formally aboard as producer alongside Gosling, the project began to take shape. The next step was identifying the filmmaker – or filmmakers – who could navigate a precise tonal balance of humor and peril, intimacy and scope, without losing the emotional core.

“There was really no contest about who would be the perfect people to take over this movie,” Pascal says. “It had to be **Phil Lord** and **Christopher Miller**.”

For the better part of two decades, directors Phil Lord and Christopher Miller have developed their own reputation for achieving the impossible. They breathed fresh cinematic life into

projects based on beloved children's book *Cloudy with a Chance of Meatballs* and the 1980s television series *21 Jump Street* (both during Pascal's tenure at Sony Pictures). They had silenced legions of doubters by not only making *The Lego Movie* work, but establishing a wildly successful baseline for the brand on the big screen and they made a comic-book come to life with *Spider-Man: Into the Spider-Verse*. They are artists attracted to big ideas and difficult tasks, making them perfect collaborators for something like *Project Hail Mary*.

When Lord and Miller received Weir's manuscript, they devoured it.

"We read it in 24 hours," Miller says. "I stayed up all night. I think I went to bed at 5am because I had to find out what happened."

What struck them was not simply the audacity of Weir's premise, but the pivot the story makes midway through, from isolation to partnership.

"It presents as a space adventure, a disaster movie, and then a third of the way through, it becomes an intimate character study between two individuals who have to learn how to communicate," Lord says. "That shift is what makes it special."

Adds Miller: "What's really interesting about this movie is that we don't think of it as sci-fi. We think of it as a human story, a story about a relationship, about a friendship."

That key insight into the narrative, and that specific framing of it, along with a singular vision and stamp of authorship across vastly different projects, is what made Pascal want to enlist her longtime colleagues. She knew they would make something special.

"Chris and Phil are very specific filmmakers," Pascal says. "They have a sensibility that is hard to describe because it's so poignant and emotional, and yet so funny at the same time. But also, they have great commercial instincts."

Adds Pascal's producing partner **Rachel O'Connor**: "Telling the story of an ordinary person in an extraordinary situation is one of Chris and Phil's gifts."

Lord and Miller also came aboard with their own invaluable asset in tow, producer **Aditya Sood** (*The Martian*, *Cocaine Bear*). Sood had discovered *The Martian* before it was published and ushered it successfully to the screen, so his history with Weir's work gave him immediate insight into the possibilities inherent in a *Project Hail Mary* adaptation. He was particularly struck by the moment the manuscript arrived.

"It was actually kind of amazing timing where the world was faced with an existential crisis and it was up to a bunch of really smart scientists to save us all," Sood says. "The book was chock full of brilliant science and comedy and humanity, and we just fell in love."

For Lord and Miller and Sood, the appeal was both intellectual and emotional.

“We are living through a time where things can seem impossible, and this movie is about what is possible when people come together with imagination and goodwill,” Lord says.

With producers, an actor and directors now formally attached, *Project Hail Mary* had assembled the creative core that would guide it from manuscript to production. Just like the mission at its center, the effort would depend on collaboration at every level.

FROM PAGE TO SCREEN Adapting the Novel

Academy Award®-nominated screenwriter **Drew Goddard** had already navigated Weir’s voice once before with *The Martian*. He understood both the appeal and the difficulty of the material – the pleasure of the science, the specificity of the problem-solving, the intimacy of a character thinking his way through catastrophe.

“This is the story of two disparate individuals from either ends of the galaxy, and through science, teaching, empathy and compassion, they work together to save the universe,” Goddard says.

On the page, much of *Project Hail Mary* unfolds inside Grace’s head. The reader experiences his memory as it returns in post-coma fragments. The book lives in that interior monologue as discoveries are narrated and his calculations are walked through step by step. As prose, it’s very effective, but cinema offers no such luxury. So, the challenge becomes, how do you dramatize thinking? How do you turn problem-solving into behavior?

You lean in on specificity and process.

“One of the things we learned on *The Martian* was that we don’t have to simplify the science,” Goddard says. “We were terrified we would have to simplify it for a general audience, but what we found was the opposite. The audience loved that the science was complicated and challenging.”

For Lord and Miller, the answer was embodiment over simplification. They didn’t want to reduce the science, they wanted to stage it. That meant restructuring certain passages from the novel so that ideas emerged through action rather than explanation. It would really become an exercise in cinema’s purest and most singular function: visual storytelling. If Grace is figuring something out, the audience would have to watch him figure it out. They would watch him fail, watch him test. Discovery had to be active.

“The book jumps back and forth,” Lord says. “What I loved is that it presents as a standard flashback structure at first. You think we’re watching how we got here. Then you realize there’s more method to it.”

Goddard also expanded the presence of the Hail Mary's operating system – Mary – as an early conversational partner. The addition gave Grace someone to push against, someone to argue with, even before the central relationship of the film takes shape.

“But we had to be careful,” Goddard says. “We knew we could give the ship a voice, but there’s a tendency in movies like this to jump too far ahead into the future. We wanted it to feel like now.”

The most significant adaptation question centered on Rocky, an alien from another world who has, just like Grace, journeyed far from his home to solve a riddle of solar infestation plaguing countless stars in the galaxy.

On the page, Rocky's entrance is a shock visually, from his gargantuan spaceship to his rock-like, spider-like appearance. As he strikes up a partnership with Grace, their communication unfolds gradually through shared mathematics and sound. Beyond the mission at hand, much of the joy comes from the process of deciphering one another and the sheer magic of understanding.

It's a unique friendship, one explicitly built on problem-solving. Grace and Rocky don't start with emotional vulnerability. They start with math.

“It becomes a story about how to communicate, how to have empathy and compassion for something that is nothing like you,” Miller says.

In translating the novel to the screen, Goddard focused less on spectacle and more on the arc inherent in this friendship. *Project Hail Mary* is a transformation story, after all. Grace begins as someone who avoids responsibility, and then, over time and through connection with Rocky, he becomes someone capable of sacrifice.

“The point is he has to learn what it means to be selfless,” Goddard says. “We wanted to show that process.”

As Lord mentioned, the story unfolds in a flashback structure that doubles as a slow dawning on Grace. With every new reveal he uncovers a little more about his mission and the events that led to his predicament, and that includes the woman who enlisted his efforts to begin with: the mysterious, and mysteriously powerful, Eva Stratton. The team ultimately landed on Academy Award-nominated actress **Sandra Hüller** (*Anatomy of a Fall*, *The Zone of Interest*) for the role.

"I couldn't imagine anyone else other than Sandra," says Gosling, who first met Hüller on the awards circuit in 2023. "I kept seeing her and thought it would be a dream to work with her. She had this warmth, even when playing the strong silent type."

Hüller says she wanted to tackle the role of Stratton, who seemingly has limited funds and immunity at her disposal, because she wasn't familiar with playing people in power.

"That was completely new for me, somebody who is doing her job very well, who has the respect of everybody and is leading the way in a lot of things, who has patience and courage and humor and heart," Hüller says. "I wanted to try to create this sort of energy. And, of course, I wanted to play with Ryan. That's the greatest thing to do."

BUILDING THE HAIL MARY

Production Design

Before cameras rolled, lenses were chosen or visual effects simulations began, *Project Hail Mary* had to answer a fundamental question: If humanity truly built a ship to save itself, what would it look like?

Production designer **Charles Wood** (*Guardians of the Galaxy*, *Avengers: Endgame*) began that exploration with viability. If the filmmakers would be asking the audience to believe that this is humanity's last, best effort to save the planet, the Hail Mary itself had to feel engineered as if very intelligent people built it under extraordinary pressure.

"We spoke a great deal about authenticity and really wanting to make sure that whatever we created for the film made you feel as though you were very much on the ship with Grace and with Rocky," Wood says.

Lord and Miller were explicit about avoiding the familiar visual shorthand of space cinema. Within the story, the Hail Mary is constructed by multiple nations. So, they wanted something that looked like it had been assembled by a global coalition of scientists and engineers who were running out of time. Wood embraced that narrative detail as a guiding visual principle rather than background lore.

"Each capsule you move through feels very different because each capsule has been built by a different nation in our story," Wood says. "That allowed color and material to become expressive without becoming decorative."

Speaking of color, that was an early and deliberate conversation as well. The default of space-movie environments is steel-and-gray hues with sometimes bland or unarticulated spaces. But Lord and Miller wanted to experiment with the palette and create something fresh.

"They wanted it not to feel acrid or too monochromatic," Wood says. "They wanted to find the color in space."

In addition, instead of sleek metallic minimalism, Wood introduced fabric and insulation as structural elements. Soft materials were woven into walls and padded surfaces were shaped and layered.

“Strangely, insulation is a very big part of space architecture,” Wood says. “So, we pulled that insulation onto the inner surfaces of our ship. By doing that, you could take fabrics and weave them into shapes and create extraordinary wall surfaces. It also helped because we were doing a lot of Zero-G work and stunt work. That allowed us to collaborate with those departments and make surfaces work for those scenes.”

Speaking of which, gravity itself became part of the design language. Different areas of the Hail Mary operate under different gravitational states – acceleration gravity, centrifugal gravity, zero gravity – requiring sets that could rotate or reorient.

“Each set behaves like a chameleon,” Wood says. “For example, the cockpit. In acceleration gravity, you climb up into it. In centrifugal gravity, you climb down. This creates strange architectural consequences – chairs on walls, ladders on walls. It makes the spaces abstract and unusual. That’s exciting.”

Lord and Miller saw that fluidity as emotional as much as mechanical. In Zero-G, you’re constantly recalibrating. It’s not as graceful as the pantheon of space movies might suggest. That’s interesting because it mirrors Grace’s experience. The environment isn’t stable, and nor is he. Everything is shifting.

One of the most resonant design spaces emerged from a thematic idea. A corridor containing the sum of human knowledge – data, archives, history – became what Lord referred to as “the Library of Alexandria.” That was important as well. The Hail Mary doesn’t just carry astronauts – it carries memory and culture as well. Wood embraced that symbolism without abandoning practicality.

“Phil and Chris always want to understand what something is and how it works,” he says. “That explanation creates authenticity and interest.”

In the end, the Hail Mary is neither utopian nor dystopian. It is assembled, purpose-built and slightly imperfect. It could not have been a more appropriate container for the story’s themes. It’s our best attempt. It’s not sleek. It’s not glamorous.

It’s human.

PAINTING WITH LIGHT AND COLOR

Cinematography and Visual Effects

From the beginning, Lord and Miller knew that *Project Hail Mary* needed to feel grounded, even as it ventured 12 light years from Earth. That mandate shaped the earliest conversations with Academy Award®-winning cinematographer **Greig Fraser** (*Dune*, *The Batman*) and four-time Academy Award®-winning visual effects supervisor **Paul Lambert** (*Blade Runner 2049*, *Dune*). However fantastical the premise, the approach had to feel emotionally and physically real.

“We started broad,” Fraser recalls. “The film needed to be light-hearted but also deep and emotional. We talked about keeping the characters central and making sure their interaction was intimate.”

Space films, Fraser notes, often default to a certain visual temperature. They tend to be cool and emotionally distant. But this needed to be warmer and more humanistic. That warmth extended to performance as well. Much of the film unfolds in tight quarters aboard the Hail Mary, where Grace spends long stretches alone. Fraser felt that proximity to the actor was essential.

“The camera really enjoys being close on Grace,” Fraser says. “It’s important to show him in his space, but also in close-up, because much of the film plays in his head and eyes. An actor like Ryan has incredible eyes for close-ups.”

The production was primarily a handheld, single-camera shoot – an unusual choice for a large-scale space film, but one that reinforced the intimacy. Fraser’s consistent aim was to keep the audience emotionally aligned with Grace rather than distanced by spectacle.

Lighting was central to that philosophy. Fraser has long advocated for in-camera solutions rather than deferring to post-production fixes.

“I’m a firm believer that images are very much influenced by the light affecting the characters,” Fraser says. “If you shoot on green screen, you’re effectively making up the light. You’re pretending the light is correct, and then when you create an image in the background, it doesn’t look real and feels false. Using LED backgrounds instead of green screen means, instantly, the images become more honest and more real.”

That commitment to truthful light bonded Fraser and Lambert early in preproduction. Both had recently collaborated on the *Dune* films and shared a similar philosophy about preserving what was captured on set.

“We have a good shorthand,” Lambert says. “Our goal is to make the best visual we can.”

Because *Project Hail Mary* ventures into unknown regions of space, Lambert and his team consulted scientists and image specialists to anchor the film’s cosmic environments in plausible astrophysics.

“We’re going deep into space to places where nobody’s been,” Lambert says. “We spoke to NASA and to the people who take star images and put them all together to make those beautiful nebulae, because we were trying to keep things as physically plausible as possible. We don’t truly know what should be out there but the goal was to keep the science as believable as we could.”

Even so, Lambert emphasizes that the film's visual effects were designed to extend reality rather than replace it.

"We took a very practical approach to everything in the movie, but most everything had to be touched in some way," he says. "There are digital versions of Rocky and ship extensions. I augmented the amazing sets and visuals that Charles and Greig created. But I did it without using a single blue or green screen."

That practical approach included building substantial exterior ship elements on a dark stage so Gosling could physically interact with his environment.

"That was very complicated, technically, to shoot, but it led to the most credible looking photography in the movie," Miller says. "We did as much practically as possible, and Paul and his team made sure every shot was going to be incredibly believable while we were shooting it."

The collaboration between the departments was constant, and the result is imagery that balances spectacle with subjectivity, a film that travels extraordinary distances without ever losing sight of the human at its center.

That having been said, the spectacle of the film is "off the charts," Miller says. They opted to film in the IMAX format to properly juxtapose the intimate with the epic.

"What's wonderful about seeing a film in a large format like IMAX is it exceeds your field of vision," Lord says. "You're following the characters around and you can't see the edge of the screen, so you feel like it's all around you."

Adds Miller: "The hugeness of it, the vastness of it in IMAX, is breathtaking."

BRINGING ROCKY TO LIFE

Practical Wizardry

Rocky arrives midway through the story like a rupture – an alien presence that transforms a survival narrative into something relational. The challenge was not simply how to visualize him, but how to preserve the strangeness that made him compelling in the first place.

"What's so great about Rocky in the book is the way he's described as a character that looks like he's made of rocks, has no face, has five leg-arms that he can use for various different purposes," Miller says.

Rather than streamline those complications, the filmmakers leaned into them. "A lot of people would change some of those things to make their lives easier, but not us," Lord quips.

Academy Award®-winning creature effects supervisor **Neil Scanlan** (*Babe*, *Star Wars: The Force Awakens*) understood immediately that this was not a supporting creature build – it was half of a partnership. With that in mind, he approached Rocky’s design from a behavioral standpoint rather than an anatomical one.

“One of the great attractions of this film is that Rocky is the second player,” Scanlan says. “It’s a buddy movie, so the idea of building and bringing to screen the second player in the movie was really exciting.”

The design began broadly: silhouette, weight, proportion, the relationship between limbs and carapace. Small alterations produced wildly different emotional readings.

“It was amazing how subtle changes in the size of his carapace, the thickness of his arms, the proportions between upper and lower arms, could shift his personality dramatically,” Scanlan says.

The production explored both puppetry and advanced animatronics, building multiple versions that could be deployed depending on the scene or use case. The animatronic system, in particular, pushed the limits of what the team had previously attempted.

“The result is something I don’t think we’ve ever built before, something this sophisticated and capable of delivering a performance that matches puppeteers’ inputs,” Scanlan says.

But the central decision around Rocky was philosophical, not technical. The tangible element would not be a placeholder for later invention. He would fully exist on set. To that end, puppeteer and performer James Ortiz became Rocky’s on-set presence in addition to his voice (which is eventually computer-modulated by Grace to be audible in the film).

“We definitely had those who invited us to reconsider, because it’s very complicated to shoot this way,” Lord says. “But our argument, and I think it proved to be true, is that Ryan needed a scene partner. What was wonderful about what James and his team were able to provide was not just the mechanics of having something physical for Greig to photograph, but a person and a personality with which Ryan could act.”

Adds Gosling: “I was alone on camera for many months, so once we got to the Rocky portion, I was very relieved to have company. Like everything with this film, it mirrored the story.”

Ortiz approached the role as performance first, mechanics second. His analysis of the character allowed for a wide and imminently playable spectrum.

“Rocky has a genius-level intellect,” he says. “He is an inventor and an engineer, but I think on the inside, he’s this genetic splice of a miserly old man, a peppy Labrador and a deeply anxious 14-year-old boy.”

On the repeating notion of collaboration, operating Rocky required choreography and trust among multiple performers. Ortiz was grateful that he could assemble his usual team for the project, because it's not possible for a single puppeteer to operate a character like this. The presence of that team, meanwhile, altered the energy of the set such that what might have been a solitary performance from Gosling became something reactive.

"You capture these moments that never would've happened if Ryan was talking to a tennis ball," Miller says. "There's really a thing there, and when it does something unusual, Ryan reacts honestly and viscerally."

There is not a single Rocky scene in the movie where Rocky wasn't actually there. "I'm proud of that," Ortiz says. "It's a testament to puppetry. It works. There's value in it and you can create special magic."

MUSIC IN THE KEY OF HOPE

Original Score

For Academy Award®-nominated composer **Daniel Pemberton** (*Spider-Man: Into the Spider-Verse*, *The Trial of the Chicago 7*), *Project Hail Mary* presented a tonal paradox. The story spans light years, the stakes are planetary, and yet, at its center, it is a two-character relationship unfolding inside a confined space.

"The tone of the score is slightly unusual," Pemberton says. "Chris had this note, a phrase where he called it 'Hope Core,' which I really liked. This film is about hope."

That phrase became a compass. The score would have to contain scale and wonder, but also vulnerability. It was a very complicated tightrope to walk, and early conversations with the directors set that direction in motion.

"Early on, Phil played me some Steve Reich music," Pemberton recalls. "There's a piece that Steve Reich did for three wood blocks. Phil was like, 'I want the whole score on a woodblock,' and I was like, 'I don't think I'm going to be able to do the whole score on a woodblock! But let's start from that.'"

What sounded like a joke was actually a philosophical instruction. In the film, Grace represents hope for humanity. But he's left that humanity behind. To make the connection sing, so to speak, Pemberton, Lord and Miller decided on attempting an original score that was organic and had natural human elements.

"We talked a lot about wood, metal, steel drums," Pemberton says. "Then we had this idea that if the score was representative, as much as it could be, of humanity – through voices, clapping, stomping and percussion where you could feel the touch of the players – then that would connect this world of Earth, which is distant and gone, to where we are in the film."

Pemberton began writing while production was underway, testing textures and building a sonic vocabulary from tactile sources. There was plenty of experimentation going, altering steel-drum registers, recording woodblocks by the dozen, pushing voices into unfamiliar shapes. He even accidentally invented a new instrument along the way.

“One of the craziest sounds in the film, which is a big part of the film, is actually my friend’s squeaky water taps,” Pemberton explains. “When you turn the tap on, you’ve got this tone, and then you hear the water coming out underneath it. It’s such an interesting tone because it’s so pure. So, I sampled that and built an instrument out of a lot of recordings of this tap.”

The fascinating thing is that particular fragile sound became Pemberton’s way into the film. It had a slightly unstable quality, and yet it was still very musical. From those minimal beginnings, the score gradually expanded.

“While at the end of the movie we’ve got choirs, orchestras, steel drums, percussion, people clapping and stamping – we’ve got everything on it – at the very beginning, it started with just the sound of water coming out of a tap,” Pemberton says.

That expansion mirrors Grace’s journey as well. The score does not begin in grandeur. It begins in uncertainty, in a body waking up in a room it doesn’t recognize, in a mind trying to locate itself. The music enters almost immediately, but it doesn’t announce itself with scale. It hovers.

“You first encounter the score within about three seconds of the movie,” Pemberton says. “I wanted to capture a kind of optimism but also confusion about where he is. Optimism is a very important part of this score.”

That duality – hope braided with disorientation – becomes foundational. Even in isolation, the music resists emptiness. Instead, it suggests presence through texture. Familiar sounds are bent slightly out of alignment, recognizable but strange, as though humanity itself is echoing from a distance.

“We’ve got voices that feel off-kilter,” Pemberton explains. “We’ve got this kind of pulse heartbeat that is actually a bunch of people stomping the ground very softly and then being doubled with people playing their knees.”

The effect feels more handmade than operatic. It’s a corporeal rhythm. As Grace’s understanding grows and his world widens, the music widens with it – not abruptly, but organically.

Meanwhile, as the relationship between Grace and Rocky deepens, communication itself becomes musical architecture. The film is, once again, about two beings learning to understand one another. The score does not sit outside that process – it actively participates in it. To achieve that, Pemberton pushed vocal experimentation into unfamiliar territory, manipulating performance and triangulating something appropriately otherworldly.

“I wanted to use the voice a lot, but I wanted to make it unusual,” Pemberton explains. “I did a lot of experiments with singers, vocalists, choirs, and then manipulated them electronically, because I wanted to get a sound that felt not human, but sort of felt human.”

That balance, recognizable but altered, mirrors Rocky himself. Even the percussive backbone of the score reinforces the film’s central thesis, that humanity is not abstract. It is physical. It breathes. It stomps. It touches.

“One of my favorite things is Wells Cathedral School,” Pemberton says. “I wanted something that captured a sense of humanity and wonder, so we got these kids into Abbey Road Studio 2 and had them play their bodies – clapping, knees, stomping.”

Again, the score is constructed from contact. From friction. From the sound of something making impact. Across all of it, Pemberton’s goal was not simply scale but feeling, a reaction that bypasses analysis.

“I was very conscious about trying to make the audience cry,” he admits. “I want them to feel wonder. I want them to feel beauty. I want them to laugh. I want them to feel uncomfortable and weird. I want them to not know what this music is but feel something from it.”

For Lord and Miller, that emotional ambition aligns directly with how they view the film itself – not as a genre exercise, but as something fundamentally relational.

“There’s a moment at the end of the movie when Grace has to decide, ‘Do I go home or do I save my best friend?’” Lord says. “It was the hardest scene to land because he has to make a really big decision without the benefit of a big interior monologue. It had to be pulled off with the perfect timing and synchronicity between image and sound and music.”

Adds Miller: “And I think the parts leading up to that are what make it work, because you fall in love with Rocky. By that time, you, the audience member, are like, ‘I would do anything. I would die for him.’”

In that sense, the score is not ornamental. It is structural. It accrues trust the way the friendship does, quietly at first, then unmistakably. What begins in uncertainty and texture grows into something choral, communal and shared. Hope is not merely a theme layered on top. It is something constructed, voice by voice, body by body, note by note.

FORWARD, TOGETHER

When Weir looks back at how *Project Hail Mary* came together, he doesn’t describe a single lightning-bolt idea. He describes accumulation – fragments, questions, pieces that didn’t initially belong together.

“The original idea for the book is actually five or six unrelated ideas that I had for books that were in my kind of ‘mental ideas’ file,” he says. “Then, over time, I kind of glued them together and sanded off the edges, and it turned into *Project Hail Mary*.”

That instinct – to assemble, refine and build something stronger out of disparate parts – runs through the story itself and through the making of the film. What begins as a lone man waking up in deep space becomes a narrative about partnership. What appears to be a survival thriller reveals itself to be a relationship story. And what could have been a showcase for spectacle becomes, instead, a testament to shared intelligence.

Lord believes that alchemy is what distinguishes Weir’s work in the first place.

“The thing that I think sets him apart is not just his focus on engineering and engineers and scientists, but really his ability to bring forth the emotionality and heart of those characters,” Lord says. “Ultimately, the reason this book is a sensation is because of the relationship. It's because of how it makes you feel.”

That emotional current carries through the adaptation. Pascal sees it crystallize most clearly in the bond between Grace and Rocky, a connection that transforms both characters.

“Rocky opens Grace's heart, just like in any good love story,” she says.

“I think the themes of the book are very much reflected in the production of this movie,” Sood says. “Across the board, we're attempting something that is phenomenally difficult. Obviously, the stakes are different than saving Earth, but so many people are pushing themselves far beyond what they've done in their careers up to this point.”

O'Connor concurs, adding, “The level of expertise and art and achievement on this movie is unlike anything I've ever worked on. I've never seen so many people at the top of their game all working together to make one film.”

That quality of teamwork, on and off the screen, is precisely what keeps the sense of possibility at the story’s core from becoming rooted in fantasy. It’s rooted in effort, in problem-solving, in the willingness to keep asking questions until something yields.

“Anytime there was a problem, anytime there was confusion, Andy always had an answer and he always was excited to solve the problem,” Miller says. “I think that's where he gets his kicks, is finding problems and solving them.”

In the film, Grace cannot solve the crisis alone. In production, no one department could, either. Designers, puppeteers, visual effects artists, composers, actors – each brought their expertise to bear on a common objective. Each adjustment required another conversation. Each solution required another perspective.

And so, what *Project Hail Mary* ultimately proposes is simple but radical: survival is not an act of dominance. It is an act of cooperation. It is curiosity over certainty. It is listening when you don't understand. It is, to echo Pascal, choosing to trust. In that choice – across light years, across languages, across disciplines – the story finds its quiet conviction:

We do not endure alone.