

He Tried to Cram Every Word In

After Pathetic Fallacy left Fantastic Fest speechless, Adam Egypt Mortimer told Paul Salfen why romance, axes, and a rock star's inner life had to share the same frame.

Interview by Paul Salfen • AMFM Magazine



Adam Egypt Mortimer, Natasha Lyonne, Jessica Rothe, and Scott Mescudi at the Fantastic Fest 2026 premiere of Pathetic Fallacy. Photo: Alison Narro / Fantastic Fest.

Austin does not do quiet premieres. Still, when Adam Egypt Mortimer's Pathetic Fallacy finished its Fantastic Fest 2026 world premiere, the room did the rare thing festival crowds almost never do: it went still. The film is only ninety-eight minutes. It contains original songs, talking creatures, a Faustian spider voiced by Natasha Lyonne, and people getting, as Mortimer put it to AMFM, "axed up." It also contains a love story he refuses to treat as garnish.

Managing Editor Paul Salfen caught Mortimer in that afterglow — the moment when a movie that took years to will into existence is suddenly a physical object in a room full of strangers. Salfen wanted a logline a civilian could carry home. Mortimer declined to make it easy.

"I say it's a psychedelic musical odyssey," he said. Then he kept stacking. "Maybe I'll say it's a dark, romantic, psychedelic musical odyssey. Or a psychedelic horror romantic. I try to cram all those words in every once. Those are the key words."

He was not joking about the axes. He was not joking about the romance either.

"I think it's a horror movie because people are getting axed up. But it's very romantic. The romance was like the really important part of it to me. And then, of course, the fact that it's melting reality and things are quite strange. What makes it psychedelic — and the insanity that we were able to pull off having all this incredible music."

That is the whole argument of the movie, delivered in the order he cares about: blood, love, unreality, song.

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— ADAM EGYPT MORTIMER

A STORYBOOK, THEN A BARGAIN

On paper the plot is almost classical. Scott Mescudi — Kid Cudi, in his first true starring role — plays Asher. Jessica Rothe, who brought three films to this year's festival, plays Iris. They meet, they fall, they build the kind of life movies usually protect. Then Iris is diagnosed with cancer. She dies. Asher does not recover. He follows a rumor of healing to the mystical Mount Samdi and walks into an alternate realm of homicidal maniacs, talking animals, and that Lyonne-voiced spider, who will return the dead if Asher will pay a price no one should agree to.

Andrew Barrer and Gabriel Ferrari wrote the script. Johnny Jewel scored it. Mescudi and Rothe sing original songs on camera. Mortimer shot the picture on 35mm, which gives the trip a tactile grain instead of a screensaver glow. Travis Fimmel is in the mix as the kind of stranger you should not accept a ride from. The festival logline stays polite: after the devastating loss of his wife, a man embarks on a surreal journey to bring her back. The movie itself is not polite.

Salfen called what he saw an incredible psychological thriller that sent people into the lobby speechless — the sort of date-night picture that mutates, mid-screening, into a conversation nobody planned to have. Mortimer did not flinch from that mutation. He built it.



A still from *Pathetic Fallacy*: Asher's path into the Mount Samdi woods. Image courtesy the filmmakers / festival materials.

THE ROEG PROBLEM, OR HOW TO CAST A ROCK STAR

Salfen asked the question hovering over every frame: is there a pattern here, turning iconic musicians who have already shaped a generation of albums into film roles that leave an audience arguing on the way to the car?

Mortimer reached backward, not sideways. He named Nicolas Roeg.

“There was a filmmaker, Nick Roeg, who made all these great movies in the ’60s and ’70s — The Man Who Fell to Earth, starring David Bowie, and Bad Timing, starring Art Garfunkel, and Performance with Mick Jagger. And I was always really inspired by those films where you take a rock star who — you know their public persona, and you know that they’re going to have this incredible inner soul that you want to find and tap into.”

That is the assignment he gave himself with Mescudi. Not a cameo. Not a wink at the discography. A widower whose grief is large enough to warp geography.

The other half of the bet was simpler, and Mortimer lit up talking about it: Cudi loves horror.

“When I met up with him, he was like, I love horror. And we just started talking about horror and how much he wanted to express his feelings in terms of this kind of genre.”

The public-facing Cudi is already a melancholic mythmaker. The private-facing one, at least in Mortimer’s telling, wanted the axe and the ache in the same register. Pathetic Fallacy is what happens when a director who already melted minds on Daniel Isn’t Real and Archenemy decides the next experiment is to put that inner soul on 35mm and let it sing.

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FOURTH MOVIE, EXTRA PRESSURE

Salfen told him the film is a big swing, the kind of picture younger filmmakers will watch and then try, unwisely, to photocopy. What advice does he have for the ones who will try?

Mortimer did not start with advice. He started with a self-inflicted dare.

“This was my fourth movie, and I put extra pressure on myself because I think you get to your fourth movie and you could be like, well, now I know what I’m doing. But instead I was like, I’m looking at all my favorite filmmakers, and a lot of them on their fourth movie, they really did something super special and insane.”

The example he reached for was not a horror title. It was Blue Velvet.

“I think of like Blue Velvet was David Lynch’s fourth movie, and it’s sort of a lot of the stuff that we associate with him didn’t happen until that movie — like the kind of music he was using, white picket fences, Laura Dern, just all of these iconic things. So I was like, okay, I’m going to — that’s a great way to put more pressure on myself.”

Count the features however you like. Some Kind of Hate in 2015. A Holidays segment. Daniel Isn't Real at SXSW in 2019. Archenemy in 2020. Then a long, expensive silence, and now this. Mortimer is treating Pathetic Fallacy as the picture where the private mythology finally shows. Funny, horrific, musical, romantic, funny again, heartbreaking. He is not sure he would have been allowed that stack earlier.

"The fact that I was trying to make this movie that had lots of different tones — it's funny, it's horrific, it's a musical, it's romantic, it's back to funny, it's back to heartbreaking — was something I don't know if I could have gotten away with before the fourth movie."

Then the advice, which is not advice so much as a dare thrown at the next person in line.

"If I'm giving advice to somebody — yes, a brand new filmmaker should definitely try to be as insane as this, because we don't want boring shit. We want sick shit."

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THE FIVE-YEAR HAIL MARY

Salfen writes a book called Going For It! — a collection of Hail Mary moments from the artists and athletes he has spent two decades putting on the record. He asked Mortimer for one of his: the hour when the career looked like it might not survive the next no.

Mortimer did not pick a single night. He picked the math.

"It's taken, on average, something like five years for me to make each one of my movies. It's so hard, and like so many times along the way I think, well, this is never going to happen. I'm terrible at this. I can't make this happen. But I just keep relentlessly trying. And then you wind up standing in a room like this, and the movie has somehow got made, and it's incredible."

Five years is not a flex. It is the hidden runtime of independent genre film: the years you cannot put in the credits. Between Archenemy and this premiere sits the exact interval he described. Standing in an Austin screening room after a world premiere is the part the industry photographs. The other part is the stretch when the only honest sentence is this is never going to happen.

Salfen told him he had made a work of art — a blend of musical, comedy, and the kind of picture you take on a date and then have to talk about. Mortimer thanked him the way people thank you when they still cannot quite believe the thing exists.

"Thank you so much. I really appreciate it."

He asked the title of Salfen's book, filed it, and moved back into the festival current. The movie, for the first time, did not need him to keep it alive. It was already doing that to other people.

WHAT THE ROOM WAS HOLDING

Pathetic Fallacy is easy to oversell as a stunt — Kid Cudi in a horror musical; Lyonne as a spider; Jewel on the score; Kodak in the gate. The stunt is not why the room went quiet. The quiet is what Mortimer kept circling back to: a romance he treated as the load-bearing wall, then set on fire.

Grief movies often pick a lane. They are either tasteful or they are feral. Mortimer wanted both, plus chorus, plus cartoon logic, plus the particular melancholy a musician carries when the public already thinks it knows his soul. Roeg taught him that the persona is a door, not the room. Lynch, on the fourth try, taught him that the white picket fence and the ear in the grass can belong to the same town. Cudi walked through the door because he already loved the genre Mortimer lives in.

None of that guarantees a distributor, a release date, or an audience ready to sit still for a love story that keeps changing keys. What it guarantees is the thing Salfen heard in the lobby: people leaving with more words than they can hold, the same problem Mortimer has when he tries to describe his own film.

A dark, romantic, psychedelic musical odyssey. A horror movie because people get axed up. A romance because that was the part that mattered. Melting reality. Incredible music. Fourth movie. Extra pressure. Five years. Relentlessly trying. Then a room like this.

We don't want boring shit. We want sick shit.

That is not a marketing line. That is the production bible.

FIND ADAM EGYPT MORTIMER

Film: Pathetic Fallacy (2026) — world premiere, Fantastic Fest 2026; West Coast premiere, Beyond Fest

Starring Scott “Kid Cudi” Mescudi, Jessica Rothe, Travis Fimmel, and Natasha Lyonne

Written by Andrew Barrer & Gabriel Ferrari · Score by Johnny Jewel · Original songs by the leads · Shot on 35mm

Also directed: Daniel Isn't Real (2019), Archenemy (2020), Some Kind of Hate (2015)

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Interview conducted by Paul Salfen for AMFM Magazine, September 2026.

Paul Salfen is Managing Editor of AMFM Magazine and a veteran interviewer of film, television, music, and sports figures. He is the author of Going For It!, a collection of Hail Mary moments from the artists and athletes he has spent two decades putting on the record.