

EXCLUSIVE INTERVIEW

## A Lot of People Talk to Animals. Not Many Listen.

*Animal coordinator Andrew Simpson tells Paul Salfen why Heart of the Beast — Brad Pitt, a combat dog named Odin, and New Zealand standing in for Alaska — was a no-brainer, and why he is not sure a real animal will still have a place in cinema five years from now.*

Interview by Paul Salfen · AMFM Magazine



James Belmont (Brad Pitt) and Odin in Heart of the Beast from Paramount Pictures. © 2026 Paramount Pictures.

Andrew Simpson has the job other people invent when they are ten and then spend adulthood being told is not a real living. Scripts arrive every week. Some become pictures. Some disappear. Then a David Ayer survival film lands with Brad Pitt on one side of the frame and a combat German Shepherd named Odin on the other, the locations are the Southern Alps standing in for Alaska, and Simpson does not have to think very long.

*“This is one of these once-in-a-lifetime opportunities,” he told AMFM Managing Editor Paul Salfen. “You get a movie like this with a dog as a star alongside Brad Pitt. And it’s the locations, the way it was shot, the story was told, the message it has. It was just a no-brainer.”*

Paramount Pictures’ Heart of the Beast opens in U.S. theaters today, September 25, 2026, after a Franklin, Tennessee premiere. Pitt stars as retired Special Forces veteran James Belmont, stranded after a seaplane goes down in the Alaskan wilderness with the traumatized military working dog who has already been through the war with him. J.K. Simmons and Anna Lambe co-

star. Cameron Alexander wrote the script — a 2017 Black List title that waited almost a decade for this particular pack. Ayer directs and produces; Pitt produces. Simpson, the Scottish-born, Alberta-based trainer behind *Instinct Animals for Film*, is the man who had to make the dog half of that bond look like life and death without ever becoming either.

## HOLY CRAP, THERE'S BRAD PITT

Salfen opened the way AMFM interviews often do — by telling the guest he has the coolest job in the world. Simpson did not argue.

*"It's a very cool job. We get to do cool things, and I wouldn't trade it for anything."*

When Salfen asked whether there is a particular moment on set when Simpson looks around and thinks, *I get paid to do this, I win*, Simpson did not pick a single setup. He stacked the bonuses.

*"First of all, they told me they're shooting in New Zealand and it's a dream to work way down there. So that was the first bonus. And then they tell you, okay, now you're going to work with Brad Pitt. That's another bonus. And sometimes you're shooting the movie and you just take a step back and you go, Holy crap, there's Brad Pitt, there's a dog. We're in New Zealand. They're making a movie, telling this beautiful story. So yeah — a lot of surreal moments."*

*Holy crap, there's Brad Pitt, there's a dog. We're in New Zealand. They're making a movie, telling this beautiful story.*

— ANDREW SIMPSON

On Pitt himself, Simpson did not reach for industry politeness. He reached for delayed disbelief.

*"He is an absolute gem of a guy to work with. He's a cinematic icon. And I can't believe it's taking this long for me to bump into him. He's a super busy guy. And he dived into this role and it was great."*

That dive is the part of *Heart of the Beast* the press tour keeps circling. Ayer put Odin number one on the call sheet. Pitt has said he spent the shoot learning to be actor slash dog trainer, breaking an emotional take to call a wandering shepherd back with a treat and then falling straight into the scene again. Simpson's job was to build the trust that made those interruptions look like a marriage instead of a mishap. The production used four New Zealand German Shepherds to play Odin — Uber, a former search-and-rescue dog, and three of his sons, Seeka, Ryker, and Hondo — each with a specialty the camera could steal. Simpson does not unpack the roster on this call. He talks about the feeling of being there while it worked.



Brad Pitt plays James Belmont and Uber plays Odin in *Heart of the Beast* from Paramount Pictures. © 2026 Paramount Pictures. All Rights Reserved.

## THE LISTENING JOB

Salfen asked when Simpson first realized he had a connection with animals that other people do not. Simpson declined the mystique and kept the sentence that will travel.

*“A lot of people talk to animals, but not many people listen.”*

*A lot of people talk to animals, but not many people listen.*

— ANDREW SIMPSON

He does not know if that is a gift. He knows he likes cinema, he loves working with animals, and he did not discover until his twenties that those two hungers could be the same paycheck.

*“It’s a career that I love. It has its ups and downs, like anything. There’s feast and famine sometimes. But yeah, I love the job. And we get to do opportunities like this.”*

The résumé behind that shrug is not small. Simpson runs Instinct Animals for Film with his partner, trainer Sally Jo Sousa, from a ranch outside Calgary. He has put animals on more than 150 productions: wolves for Jean-Jacques Annaud’s *Wolf Totem* after years in Inner Mongolia; wolves in Siberia for the French picture *Loup*; Ghost the direwolf on *Game of Thrones*; wolf work on *The Revenant*; dogs, birds, bears, leopards, and the rest of the call sheet that never gets a trailer line. *Heart of the Beast* is the one that put a search-and-rescue shepherd across from Brad Pitt and asked the audience to believe the mountain could kill them both.

## GET IN QUICK

Salfen asked what Simpson would tell someone who wants the same career. The answer was not a conservatory list. It was a clock.

*“Firstly I’d say get into it quick, because the way AI’s progressing these days — every day I turn on my phone, there’s a dog driving a car, a dog doing military workouts. It’s just insane. I mean, it’s very cool to look at. But the other side of it is, in five years, maybe not even five years, I don’t know if there’ll be a real animal left in cinema, which is pretty sad to think about.”*

That is the conscience note in the tape, and AMFM is not going to sand it off. Simpson is not making a policy speech. He is looking at a feed full of synthetic shepherds and doing the math on his own trade. Heart of the Beast is an argument, whether Ayer intended it that way or not, for the thing a generated dog still cannot do: stand on a ridge in weather, get tired, get cold, take a break, and then offer a face the camera can live inside.

## MAKE-BELIEVE WITH TEETH

The first question civilians ask, Simpson said, is always whether the animals get hurt. He treats the question as a good sign.

*“When you watch this movie, it’s a question that comes to your head straight away — oh my God, what are they doing with that dog? Because it is a survival story. It’s a thriller, and there’s a lot of crazy set pieces happening here. But I’m happy to say that no animals were harmed in the making of this movie. It’s make-believe. And if we do our job correctly, which I believe we have watching the movie, that’s the illusion we give: that there’s just danger around every single corner.”*

*No animals were harmed in the making of this movie. It’s make-believe. If we do our job correctly, that’s the illusion we give — that there’s danger around every single corner.*

— ANDREW SIMPSON

Salfen added the obvious: much like in life. The movie is built on that rhyme. Belmont and Odin are not tourists. They are two veterans whose war did not end when the plane came down. The wilderness is the set piece. The bond is the plot. Simpson’s craft is what keeps the second from requiring the first to be real.



Odin played by "Uber" in Heart of the Beast from Paramount Pictures. © 2026 Paramount Pictures. All Rights Reserved.

## THE HAIL MARY WAS MINUS SIXTY

Salfen has a signature beat. He invokes Drew Pearson — the Dallas Cowboy who caught the Hail Mary, went into the Hall of Fame — and asks the guest for the moment in a life or a career when they just had to go for it and it worked. Simpson did not reach for a Hollywood room. He reached for Siberia.

*"I did a movie in Siberia, and I took 13 wolves over to Siberia from Canada, and it was minus 60 Celsius for a lot of the time. And it was one of these moments that you take on the job and doing the job you're like, why did I do this job? And then when you finish it, it set me on a path with wolves. It set me on a path for doing these projects around the world. And it was a hell of an experience, but I wouldn't trade it, and it got me where I am today."*

That picture was Loup. The footage Simpson shot while he was freezing became the documentary Wolves Unleashed. The China years that followed, raising Mongolian wolves for Wolf Totem, became the sequel. Heart of the Beast is a different animal and a different temperature, but it sits on the same bet: take the hard location, take the real creature, and accept that the day will include a stretch where you ask yourself why you said yes.

## IT'S JUST A MOVIE

Salfen asked what Simpson keeps in mind that keeps him on the path. The answer is a motto with a second sentence attached so it cannot become cynicism.

*“It’s just a movie. We’re not saving lives. We’re not doing brain surgery. We’re not curing cancer. It’s just a movie. It’s entertainment. And don’t take it too seriously. But at the same time, do your best to put the product on screen that you can be proud of.”*

Salfen noted the mottos at the end of Simpson’s bio. Simpson did not recite a poster. He landed on the one that matches the work.

*“We kind of all living things — karma is real, and it’ll come back on you.”*

That is not a studio talking point. It is a trainer who has moved wolves across continents and shepherds across ridgelines talking about what the job costs if you get the ethics wrong. Salfen closed by thanking him for keeping the animals safe. Simpson said anytime. Give him a call.

Heart of the Beast is in theaters now. The dog on the poster has a face. Somewhere behind that face is a man who still thinks listening is the rare half of the conversation.

#### FIND ANDREW SIMPSON

Heart of the Beast — in U.S. theaters now from Paramount Pictures. Directed by David Ayer. Written by Cameron Alexander. Starring Brad Pitt, J.K. Simmons, Anna Lambe, and Odin (Uber, Seeka, Ryker, and Hondo).

Official film site: [heartofthebeastmovie.com](http://heartofthebeastmovie.com). Paramount press catalog: [webmaster.paramountpictures.com](http://webmaster.paramountpictures.com). Featurettes: Training Your Co-Star; Brad Pitt and Odin Behind-the-Scenes.

Instinct Animals for Film — [instinctforfilm.com](http://instinctforfilm.com). Also: Wolves Unleashed; Game of Thrones (Ghost); The Revenant; Wolf Totem; Loup.

*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.*