

EXCLUSIVE INTERVIEW

Don't Wait for Anybody

*Cooper Tomlinson on the \$523 million horror phenomenon **Obsession**, building an indie empire from scratch with Curry Barker, how Tobey Maguire's **Spider-Man** turned him toward the camera, and working with Bryce Dallas Howard on **Anything But Ghosts**.*

Interview by Paul Salfen · AMFM Magazine

In 2018, two aspiring actors named Cooper Tomlinson and Curry Barker met in a registration line on their very first day at the New York Film Academy in Los Angeles. Neither of them knew a soul in town. Neither had an industry connection or a development budget waiting on the other side of graduation. What they had was an immediate bond over movies, sketch comedy, and the shared realization that waiting around for Hollywood to hand them a script was a losing strategy. Before long, both dropped out of film school, moved in together, and started making their own work from waking hour to midnight under the banner of their sketch-comedy and short-film channel, *That's a Bad Idea*.

Eight years later, everybody in town knows their movie.

Written, directed, and edited by Barker, *Obsession*—in which Tomlinson stars as Ian alongside Michael Johnston, Inde Navarrette, Megan Lawless, and Andy Richter, while also serving on the producing team as an associate producer—has become the defining cinematic lightning bolt of 2026. Shot on an independent budget of roughly \$750,000, the supernatural horror thriller premiered at the Toronto International Film Festival in September 2025, ignited a historic \$15 million acquisition deal with Focus Features and executive producer Jason Blum's Blumhouse Productions, took home the People's Choice Award at Sitges, and played to packed houses at Fantastic Fest in Austin. When Focus released it nationwide on May 15, 2026, it opened to \$17.1 million, surged 39 percent in its second weekend, climbed another 14 percent in its third, and rode word-of-mouth and an "A" CinemaScore past \$523 million worldwide—making it Focus Features' highest-grossing film ever and the fifth highest-grossing horror movie in cinema history.

Now, as fall awards season heats up and Focus Features mounts a full-scale guild and Oscar campaign across Best Picture, Best Director, Best Original Screenplay, and the ensemble—including a Best Supporting Actor push for Tomlinson—Paul Salfen caught up with Tomlinson for AMFM Magazine to talk about the whirlwind, the trenches that built it, and what comes next.

"Oh, it's great," Tomlinson told Salfen when asked whether the phenomenon and the awards-season run feel like a dream come true. "It's been a wild ride."

IT ALL FELT LIKE ONE DAY

On paper, *Obsession* is a nightmare with a deceptively simple hook—one that Salfen warned listeners in his 97.5 KLAK *Movie Minute* review was no casual date flick, calling it an uncomfortable, edge-of-your-seat jolt that delivers where other genre films only promise. Shy, lovestruck music-store clerk Baron “Bear” Bailey (Michael Johnston) cannot summon the nerve to confess his feelings to his childhood friend and Cassell’s Music co-worker Nikki Freeman (Inde Navarrette, in a ferocious breakout performance). Instead of telling her the truth, Bear buys a vintage novelty trinket—the mysterious “One Wish Willow”—and snaps its branch while wishing that Nikki loved him more than anyone in the world. He gets exactly what he asked for. Overnight, Nikki’s autonomy is swallowed whole by an unblinking, violently devoted fixation that turns sweet infatuation into psychological terror and grisly extremes, while Tomlinson’s character, Bear and Nikki’s sharp-edged friend and co-worker Ian, begins poking at the seams of a romance that makes no sense to his bruised ego.

Yet for a film that puts its audience through a relentless wringer, Tomlinson’s memories of making it are defined by pure camaraderie. When Salfen asked whether a single moment on set stood out—a moment where he looked around and knew how glad he was that they had pulled it off—Tomlinson refused to separate one day from the rest.

“Just, I mean, the whole thing, man,” Tomlinson said. “Just working with my friends, you know, getting to be able to do that every day—there’s nothing like it. And so the whole production was just the best. It all felt like one day, you know.”

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That shorthand was earned long before Focus Features or Blumhouse entered the frame. Before *Obsession* was a half-billion-dollar juggernaut, Tomlinson and Barker were writing, shooting, and editing three sketches a week while self-producing their 2023 viral horror short *The Chair* and their 2024 micro-budget found-footage slasher feature *Milk & Serial*. Shot over four months on weekends with friends for just \$800—most of it spent on a camcorder—and released for free on YouTube when distributors passed, *Milk & Serial* proved that the pair could sustain feature-length dread on sheer inventiveness. Even when *Obsession* was first coming together, Tomlinson stepped in to play Bear in early proof-of-concept test footage at a friend’s house before Johnston was cast and Tomlinson locked into the pivotal supporting role of Ian.

Salfen noted how rare it is not merely to build that kind of creative rapport over years in the trenches, but to cross the finish line together and share the view when the whole industry turns its head.

“Oh, yeah,” Tomlinson said. “You know, I remember when we first met, we didn’t know anybody out here. And now everybody knows about our movie. It’s so cool. It’s just been great to come up with somebody, you know?”

PUT STUFF OUT THERE

Because the *That's a Bad Idea* trajectory—from zero-connection film-school dropouts to an \$800 YouTube feature to a \$523 million theatrical phenomenon—has become a blueprint for a new generation of independent filmmakers, Salfen pointed out how many emerging writers, actors, and directors are looking at Tomlinson and Barker right now and saying, *That's what I want to do*. Telling great stories on your own terms is easy to talk about and brutally hard to execute. After years in the trenches, what advice does Tomlinson give to someone trying to follow in their footsteps?

Tomlinson didn't dress it up in industry jargon. He gave the exact rule he and Barker lived by when nobody was returning their calls.

"Be consistent and do what you love," he said. "But put stuff out there. Don't wait for anybody."

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That refusal to wait is the connective tissue between their earliest internet sketches and a major studio awards campaign. They didn't wait for an agent to package a short; they uploaded *The Chair*. They didn't wait for a sales agent to rescue *Milk & Serial*; they put it on YouTube themselves and let the work find its audience. By the time producers James Harris of Tea Shop Productions, Haley Nicole Johnson of Under the Shell, Christian Mercuri, and Roman Viaris came aboard to help mount *Obsession*, Tomlinson and Barker had already spent years training the muscle of finishing what they started.

THE \$750,000 HAIL MARY

Every artist who sits down with Salfen eventually meets the signature question from the show he co-hosts with Dallas Cowboys legend and Pro Football Hall of Famer Drew Pearson, the man who caught the original Hail Mary: what was the Hail Mary moment in your life or career when you simply had to throw it deep, go for it, and trust that it would work out?

Salfen suggested that *Obsession* itself might be that throw. Tomlinson agreed without hesitation.

"Oh, yeah. Definitely," Tomlinson said. "Yeah, I mean, there's been so many moments, but yeah, making this—and just like, we didn't have a lot of time, a lot of money. And we made it happen. We did what we could, and now we're here."

In an era when studio horror budgets routinely balloon into the tens of millions, shooting a contained, performance-driven supernatural thriller in October 2024 on \$750,000 meant every setup carried real stakes. There was no financial safety net to fix mistakes in luxury reshoots, and no margin for wasted hours on set. Yet that constraint is precisely what gives *Obsession* its nerves-on-glass intimacy—from the cramped aisles of Cassell's Music to the claustrophobic domestic dread inside Bear's house once the One Wish Willow takes hold.

When a gamble of that scale pays off nearly seven hundred times over at the global box office, the noise around a young actor and producer can get deafening fast. Salfen asked Tomlinson what he keeps in mind to stay on the right path—his personal success mindset when everything around him is accelerating.

“I try to remind myself where I came from every day,” Tomlinson said. “And, you know, I’m lucky to have the people around me. I’ve got a really good support system and friend group who really just, I don’t know, they just push me forward every day. And then to have this cast and crew—like, it’s just been great.”

TOBEY MAGUIRE, BRYCE DALLAS HOWARD, AND FULL CIRCLE

Tracing where Tomlinson came from meant going all the way back to the first time he looked at a screen in his native Washington State and realized he wanted to be inside the frame. When Salfen asked for the first movie, television show, or piece of video that made him think, *I want to do this*, Tomlinson didn’t name an obscure art-house horror flick. He named Sam Raimi’s *Spider-Man*.

“Spider-Man. Tobey. Yeah,” Tomlinson said immediately. “Oh, yeah. I mean, that whole trilogy, you know—like, I remember where I was when I saw the third one, and I just got to work with Bryce Dallas Howard on my next movie, and she’s fantastic. But like seeing, you know, Tobey Maguire up there as Spider-Man, I always wanted to be a hero. And I was like, you could be in front of the camera. You could do this and make an extraordinary story in a movie. So that’s the one that just got me into all this.”

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The full-circle symmetry of that memory is almost too cinematic to script. Nearly two decades after a young Cooper Tomlinson sat in a theater watching Tobey Maguire and Bryce Dallas Howard in 2007’s *Spider-Man 3*—deciding right then that a life in front of the camera was possible—he found himself sharing a set with Howard on his and Barker’s next feature film.

That film, as Salfen noted, is already in the can, and Focus Features and Blumhouse-Atomic Monster have slated it for theatrical release on May 7, 2027. Titled *Anything But Ghosts*, the feature is directed by Barker and co-written by Barker and Tomlinson, with Tomlinson also serving as an executive producer alongside producers Roy Lee, Steven Schneider, Jason Blum, Adam Hendricks, and Greg Gilreath. Even better for fans who have followed the pair since their *That’s a Bad Idea* days, Tomlinson and Barker co-star at the center of the story as wannabe “ghosthunters” who find themselves wildly and terrifyingly in over their heads—joined by Howard, Aaron Paul, Violet McGraw, and Chris Reinacher in a film set within the same universe as *Obsession*.

When Salfen asked whether Tomlinson had a new movie already in the can for May 7—and what he could tease about it—Tomlinson lit up.

“Yes, I do,” he confirmed. “It’s going to be funny. It’s going to be scary. And it’s got me and Curry. Yeah, it’s a lot of fun.”

NO EGO ON SET

If sharing a call sheet with Bryce Dallas Howard and Aaron Paul wasn't proof enough that life has changed since *Obsession* broke out, the daily reality of Hollywood after a half-billion-dollar indie hit certainly is. Salfen asked what has been the most surprising part of watching this level of success land all at once.

"There's so many doors that have opened, and I've gotten to meet a lot of my heroes and have conversations with them," Tomlinson said. "And it's just been so much fun, and I can't wait for what's next."

Even so, nobody standing on a \$750,000 set can predict a cultural tidal wave of this magnitude. Salfen asked whether, while they were actually filming *Obsession*, Tomlinson and the team ever stopped to think about the kind of impact the movie might have once it reached audiences.

"I thought whoever saw it was going to like it," Tomlinson said honestly. "I think the cast and crew love movies, and they just loved—like, there was so much dedication and passion that went into making this every day, which was why it was such a great time. And yeah, I can't believe it's gotten to this, but it was big, you know? It was so fun."

Part of why that passion translated onto the screen is how the production operated behind the scenes. Salfen pointed out how rewarding it had to be for Tomlinson not only to play Ian onscreen, but to serve as a producer on the project as well. On a nimble independent shoot, a producing title isn't a vanity credit; it means pitching in wherever the day demands.

"Yeah, you know, like it was great to be there every day," Tomlinson said. "And everybody wore so many hats. You have to with a movie like this. And there was no ego on set. Everybody was just doing what they could to make sure we got the shot and made the movie."

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That egoless, all-hands-on-deck ethos also yielded the single biggest lesson Tomlinson carried straight from the set of *Obsession* onto the larger canvas of *Anything But Ghosts*. When Salfen asked for the biggest takeaway he brought from that set to the new movie, Tomlinson's answer was simple and immediate.

"Listen, listen to everybody, you know," Tomlinson said. "Everyone had something to say on this, and it made the movie better. It elevated it. So, yeah—listen to your peers."

Salfen wrapped the conversation the way horror fans and indie-film supporters have been talking about *Obsession* since May: congratulating Tomlinson on the run, telling him how proud AMFM is of everything he has done, and urging everyone to watch *Obsession* right now while we wait for May 7.

"Thank you," Tomlinson said warmly. "It was so nice to meet you too. I'll see you soon. Thank you."

Two friends in a film-school line who didn't know a soul in Los Angeles. An \$800 slasher uploaded to YouTube because no distributor would take it. A \$750,000 Hail Mary about a broken willow branch that outgrossed almost everything Hollywood put in theaters all year. And a lifelong *Spider-Man* fan who learned to listen to his peers, never waited for permission, and just wrapped his next movie alongside Gwen Stacy herself.

Cooper Tomlinson didn't wait for anybody—and now the whole town is watching what he and Curry Barker do next.

FIND OBSESSION

Written, Directed, and Edited by: Curry Barker

Produced by: James Harris, Haley Nicole Johnson, Christian Mercuri, Roman Viaris

Executive Produced by: Jason Blum, Leonora Darby, Mark Lane, David Haring, Ruzanna Kegeyan

Associate Producer: Cooper Tomlinson

Starring: Michael Johnston (Baron “Bear” Bailey), Inde Navarrette (Nikki Freeman), Cooper Tomlinson (Ian), Megan Lawless (Sarah Harper), Andy Richter (Carter)

Cinematography by: Taylor Clemons · **Music by:** Rock Burwell · **Production Design by:** Vivian Gray · **Costume Design by:** Blair James · **Casting by:** Skyler Zurn

Distributor: Focus Features (United States) / Universal Pictures International · **Production Companies:** Blumhouse Productions, Capstone Studios, Tea Shop Productions, Under the Shell

Story: After breaking the mysterious “One Wish Willow” to win his crush’s heart, a hopeless romantic (Michael Johnston) finds himself getting exactly what he asked for—but soon discovers that some desires come at a dark, sinister price.

Release & Streaming: Following its September 5, 2025 world premiere at TIFF and its May 15, 2026 theatrical release (\$523M+ worldwide; 97% Certified Fresh on Rotten Tomatoes; “A” CinemaScore), *Obsession* (109 min., Rated R) is available now on Digital/PVOD (Prime Video, Apple TV), on 4K Ultra HD, Blu-ray, and DVD via Universal Pictures Home Entertainment, and streaming exclusively on Peacock.

Up Next: Curry Barker and Cooper Tomlinson reunite as co-writers and co-stars on the horror-comedy *Anything But Ghosts*, starring Tomlinson, Barker, Violet McGraw, Chris Reinacher, Bryce Dallas Howard, and Aaron Paul, arriving in theaters nationwide May 7, 2027 from Focus Features and Blumhouse-Atomic Monster.

Interview conducted by Paul Salfen for AMFM Magazine, October 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.
