EXCLUSIVE INTERVIEW

“It Was Magic”

Composer and producer Demitri Lerios talks with Paul Salfen about reuniting with his childhood friend Hailee Steinfeld to record the end-credits cover of The Cars’ “Magic” for Walt Disney Animation Studios’ Hexed, in theaters November 25.

Interview by Paul Salfen · AMFM Magazine



Walt Disney Animation Studios’ “Hexed”. © 2026 Disney Enterprises, Inc. All Rights Reserved.

When Demitri Lerios sat down with Paul Salfen, he had not yet seen Walt Disney Animation Studios’ *Hexed*. “I’m actually seeing it tonight for the first time,” he said. “The premiere’s today, so I’m gonna get to go. Yeah, that’s gonna be a really, really fun deal.” He had, he added, seen “literally the last 5 minutes of the movie, because that was really where our song kicks in there. But I can’t wait. I mean, I know it’s gonna be amazing.”

That song is Hailee Steinfeld’s new version of The Cars’ “Magic,” and Lerios produced it. Official credits also list him as recording engineer. Steinfeld, who voices the film’s lead, Billie Doe, performs the track over the end credits. Walt Disney Records released the single on October 23, 2026. The official *Hexed* soundtrack, which pairs the song with an original score by Kris Bowers, is due November 20.

The movie itself opens exclusively in theaters on November 25, 2026, and is rated PG. In the official synopsis from Disney, an impulsive and unconventional teenage girl named Billie discovers secret magical abilities that, once unleashed, hurtle her out of suburbia and into a spectacle-filled journey through a vast witch realm called Hexe.

Forced to team up with her cautious mother, Alice, voiced by Rashida Jones, they uncover family mysteries that could change the world of witches forever. Walton Goggins voices Beef Roger Crummchuk, a reclusive, magical three-eyed cat. Jodie Foster voices Queen Celeste. The voice cast also includes Henry Winkler, Dan Stevens, Tracey Ullman, and Stephen Fry. The film is directed by Fawn Veerasunthorn and Jason Hand, co-directed by Josie Trinidad, produced by Roy Conli and Yvett Merino, and written by Walt Disney Animation Studios Chief Creative Officer Jared Bush and Dana Ledoux Miller.

Lerios is not on the studio staff. He is a composer and producer who got the call, recorded the vocal, and, as he told Salfen, was about to walk into a Disney premiere with a song he had heard against only those last five minutes.

A PRETTY FULL-CIRCLE KIND OF MOMENT

Salfen opened on the friendship behind the record. “How cool! You got to work with your childhood friend on this, right?”

“That’s right,” Lerios said. “It was a pretty full-circle kind of moment. There’s no other relationship that you would rather be working with, somebody you know so well. So that was super fun.”

The childhood friend, Salfen told viewers who might not know, is Hailee Steinfeld. “Tell us about that whole friendship. That sounds so cool.”

“I met Hailee, gosh, when I was, we were probably 4 or 5 years old, which is insane,” Lerios said. “And through the years, we kind of veered off, and then reconnected, and then in another crazy full-circle moment, my wife and her became really great friends, and, you know, it was just, like, all the worlds colliding.”

Salfen has had Steinfeld on his show before. “We’ve had her on a couple times, and she is just one of the sweetest,” he said. “Always happy to talk about it. That’s wonderful.” Then he turned to the film. *Hexed*, he said, “looks so good,” even if “they have not shown it to us, or anybody really yet.” He asked Lerios to describe what audiences were getting into. Lerios said he was in the same position, headed to the premiere that night.

> *“It was a pretty full-circle kind of moment.”*

The publicist who offered the interview, Alix Becq-Weinstein of Rhapsody PR, had framed the booking the same way: Lerios had “just recently reunited with his childhood friend, actress and singer Hailee Steinfeld, to produce her rendition of The Cars’ hit song ‘Magic.’” The friendship is also how the record got made.

MAKE IT FEEL LIKE A RECORD TODAY

“So then tell us about the song, because this is so cool,” Salfen said.

“The song is a cover from The Cars,” Lerios said. It was a hit back in the day. (The original, written by Ric Ocasek, was released in 1984.) “The way it all came together was insanely quick, which is how all really fun and great things happen, I think. But I got a call from Hailee. She was like, hey, would you want to do this? And I was like, absolutely, like, whatever it is, I’ll do it, I’m there.”

The next day, he was on the phone with the team at Disney. “We’re talking through the song, and what they wanted, and what we were envisioning for this,” he said. “It is the end credits, so it’s kind of, you have this big climactic moment in the movie, and then we hit the credits, so we wanted it to feel strong.”

The assignment, as he heard it, was contemporary. “It was really, how do we make the song feel like a record today? And that was really the task.” They went right at it. “She and I recorded in 2 days. I recorded her and the vocals, and it was magic.”

> *“She and I recorded in 2 days. I recorded her and the vocals, and it was magic.”*

He did not over-explain the arrangement, and he did not pretend to have seen the whole picture. He had the call, the friendship, two days in the room, and a cue in the last five minutes. The rest of the movie was waiting for him that night.



Billie Doe (voiced by Hailee Steinfeld) in Walt Disney Animation Studios’ “Hexed”. © 2026 Disney Enterprises, Inc. All Rights Reserved.

KEEP YOUR HEAD DOWN

Salfen pointed to the rest of the resume. “Speaking of credits, you have some of the coolest credits, and when you look at the stuff you’ve done, when other people hear about the stuff that you’ve done, what do they want to know the most about? Because it just keeps going.”

“There’s a lot of really fun projects I’ve been able to be a part of,” Lerios said. “I think always going after the next one is always the goal and the task, but I’ve been able to do two Apple TV shows, where I’ve done the actual composition and the score for those.” One of them, he said, was *Goldie*. “It’s an animation, so another kind of animated project, but so much fun working on that. So many fun scores that I wrote for it, so I’m really proud of that. That was a really fun project to be on.”

(The Rhapsody PR note also lists Apple TV+’s *Best Foot Forward* alongside *Goldie*, among other film and television credits. Lerios did not walk through that full list in the interview.)

Salfen asked what advice he would give someone trying to follow in his footsteps. “It’s not easy, but it can be done.”

“That’s true, it can be done, and it is not easy,” Lerios said. “But I would say, keep your head down, constantly work and hone your craft. This business, the entertainment business, in whatever facet you’re trying to go after, I think having the fortitude to just keep chugging along.” Sometimes, he said, “the business will tell you where to go. And I’ve seen that in my life, I’ve seen that in my career, where I thought I was going this way, and then suddenly I’m over here.”

The work, in other words, is to stay movable. “To be malleable in that way, and not be too steadfast, and this is my vision and my goal, and this is the only thing I see, because sometimes it shifts, and it shapes, and it goes, oh wait, maybe it was something I didn’t even know was the thing. So I think keeping your head down, and just rolling with the punches, because there are a lot of them.”

Salfen's co-host is Drew Pearson, the Dallas Cowboys Hall of Famer who caught the Hail Mary, and the show likes to ask guests about their own Hail Mary moments, "the moment in your life or career where you just kind of have to go for it and it works out for you."

Lerios had more than one. "There have been a lot of moments," he said. He named two. "Long time ago, when I was in a band, and that band was signed, and I think that was a Hail Mary moment in the sense that I thought the whole world was gonna happen. And it didn't in the way I thought it was."

Then came a second decision. "I had this decision that I needed to make, where I was like, do I keep going down this path of being in a band and writing songs and doing that? And then there was this other thing of, like, do I go for composition? And I, I've had that Hail Mary kind of like, let's just try it, let's go for it, and here we are, you know, 5, 6 years later. I think it's been a very fun adventure to be a part of."

He did not name the band. The turn he talked about was the one that led him into composition, and, years later, into a Disney end-credits session with a friend he had known since they were small children.

KEEP THE BLINDERS ON

Salfen asked about mindset, "something that you keep in mind or tell yourself that kind of keeps you focused on that right path, because, you know, as creative types, we're hard on ourselves."

"Oh, every day it ebbs and flows," Lerios said. "One day you're on the top of the mountain, the next day you're like, I don't even know where I am." What he tells himself is simple. "I do try to tell myself to keep the blinders on, all the time. That's something I think kind of gets me through, because I think there's a lot of noise, there's a lot of things happening all the time. I think also in this day and age, you kind of feel like you're missing out not doing everything, which can be very difficult sometimes to manage, because you're like, well, wait, should I be doing that? Should I be doing this?"

That, he said, is hard. "So you have to kind of find your center, and your, you know, what works for me, and what's gonna be the best route for me. So, I wake up, I go put the blinders on, and keep working. That is the biggest thing, of just, like, hone your craft, work at it every day."

Some days still feel shaky. "Some days you don't feel great. Some days you're like, oh my god, you know, is this even, is this plan even working, you know? And some way, somehow, it does, if you just, I think, not to be long-winded, but I think the biggest thing as well, I always say, is just keep moving. As long as you're moving, something will take shape. Something will happen."

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Salfen put the week in perspective. "Look at you now, like, going to the big Disney premiere that you have a song in."

"Yeah, yeah, it happens, you know," Lerios said. "It's just chugging along."



L - R: Billie Doe (voiced by Hailee Steinfeld) and Beef Roger Crummchuk (voiced by Walton Goggins) in Walt Disney Animation Studios' "Hexed". © 2026 Disney Enterprises, Inc. All Rights Reserved.

KEEPING IT MOVING

Before they signed off, Salfen asked what else to look out for. "I know that you always have such cool stuff going on, so besides this, what else do we need to look out for?"

"This is the funny part about this business," Lerios said. "You do a project, you finish it, and now you're out going for the next thing. So I'm actually in between two projects right now that I'm gonna be starting in two weeks or so here. I have a film, and then I actually just started a short, which was great, which I always love doing, you know, shorts when they come around," if, he said, "it stylistically feels exciting." And then, as always, the page. "Always writing. So, you know, keeping it moving."

He did not name those next titles, and they are not named here. The posture was the point. Finish the work. Take the call. Keep the blinders on. Move.

Salfen closed with congratulations. "We're so happy that we got to talk to you and catch up about the song, about the movie, about everything that you got going on. Congratulations on all the success. We know we're gonna hear so much more from you."

"Thank you very much, Paul," Lerios said.

Hexed arrives in theaters on November 25. Listeners can already hear "Magic," the two-day record Lerios and Steinfeld made after a phone call and a conversation with Disney about making a familiar Cars hook feel like a record today, then landing it after the film's big climactic moment, as the credits roll.

FIND HEXED

In theaters: Walt Disney Animation Studios' *Hexed* opens exclusively in theaters on November 25, 2026. Rated PG. Official film page: movies.disney.com/hexed

Soundtrack: The official soundtrack, featuring Kris Bowers' original score and Hailee Steinfeld's version of The Cars' "Magic," is scheduled for release on November 20, 2026. The single, produced and recorded by Demitri Lerios, was released October 23, 2026, on Walt Disney Records.

Official trailer: youtube.com/watch?v=mtC4sjABZNw

Listen to "Magic": youtube.com/watch?v=sGDm9CuFIjw

The film: Directed by Fawn Veerasunthorn and Jason Hand; co-directed by Josie Trinidad; produced by Roy Conli and Yvett Merino; written by Jared Bush and Dana Ledoux Miller. Hailee Steinfeld voices Billie Doe. Rashida Jones voices Alice.

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.