



NOTHING IS OVER (2/17/14)

The way I'd prefer to experience pain.
Then. Suddenly, all in one go.
Now. Slowly, a little at a time.

The way I'd prefer to experience joy.
Then. Slowly, for as long as possible.
Now. At once, with all my friends.

MOTHER OF INVENTION

WRITING, DIRECTING, PRODUCING, EDITING:
THE WHOLE FAMILY SEEMS TO OOZE CREATIVITY
AND COOL. WHAT IS IT ABOUT THOSE PROLIFIC
McALESTERS, TALKINGTONS AND EPSTEINS?

WE ASK THE ONLY PERSON
WHO CAN POSSIBLY EXPLAIN IT

by VIRGINIA SAVAGE McALESTER / portraits by NAN COULTER



THE MATRIARCH

Author and historian Virginia Savage McAlester, photographed at her house on Swiss Avenue in Dallas. McAlester is currently writing the pilot for a documentary series based on her *Field Guide to American Houses*. She spent five years expanding and updating the book; its revision was published in December 2013. She is an adviser emeritus for the National Trust for Historic Preservation.

THE STEPSON

Director, producer and writer Keven McAlester, photographed at Union Station in downtown Los Angeles. His most recent film project was as a writer and producer for the feature documentary *Last Days in Vietnam*. It premiered at the Sundance Film Festival in January and will be released theatrically this summer. It is scheduled to air in April 2015 as part of PBS' *American Experience* series. He recently completed a music video for the Dallas band Mind Spiders and is in development on his next directorial feature film.



t all started when our television broke in 1973.

Back then, your TV was a big piece of furniture and you had to pay a repairman to make a house call and hopefully fix it. But I didn't. I decided that my two young children, Amy and Carty, were watching too much television and I simply did not call a repairman. I told the kids that it would cost too much to fix. Little did I know that, in order to entertain themselves, they would soon be producing plays in the backyard with friends, learning to use a Super 8 camera to create stop-motion animated battles with toy soldiers from Hall's Hobby Shop and that Carty would learn to do magic tricks and train Amy to be his assistant. All of this sprung from the simple boredom of not being able to sit and watch TV all day.

CARTY: The movies that Amy and I made with the Super 8 camera had names like *The Monster That Ate My Sister* and *Ken and Barbie Have a Terrible Accident*. We did magic shows as "Cardini the Magic Man and his lovely assistant, Amy." Kill your television. Free your mind. Create with your imagination. I think that's the lesson my mother taught us.

When Lee McAlester and I married in 1977, we suddenly had a blended family of two second-graders (Amy and Keven), a third-grader (Martine) and a fifth-grader (Carty) — and a larger performing troupe. On weekends, we would go to my family's lake house in East Texas in our newly purchased family vehicle: an oversize, dark-brown, converted Ford "Good Times" van nicknamed the Cocoa Van — or *coq au vin* — lined with brown shag carpet. It also had an 8-track-tape player (kids: Google it) on which we played our favorite Texas music: Waylon Jennings, Willie Nelson, Jerry Jeff Walker. Hearty family choruses accompanied such songs as "Ladies Love Outlaws," "Me and Paul" and "London Homesick Blues." And during those weekends at the

THE SON-IN-LAW

Music editor and engineer Robbie Adams, photographed at Elysian Park in Los Angeles. He is married to Amy Talkington. He is currently music editor for the TNT series *Rizzoli and Isles* and for director Robert Rodriguez's TV adaptation of his film *From Dusk Till Dawn*.



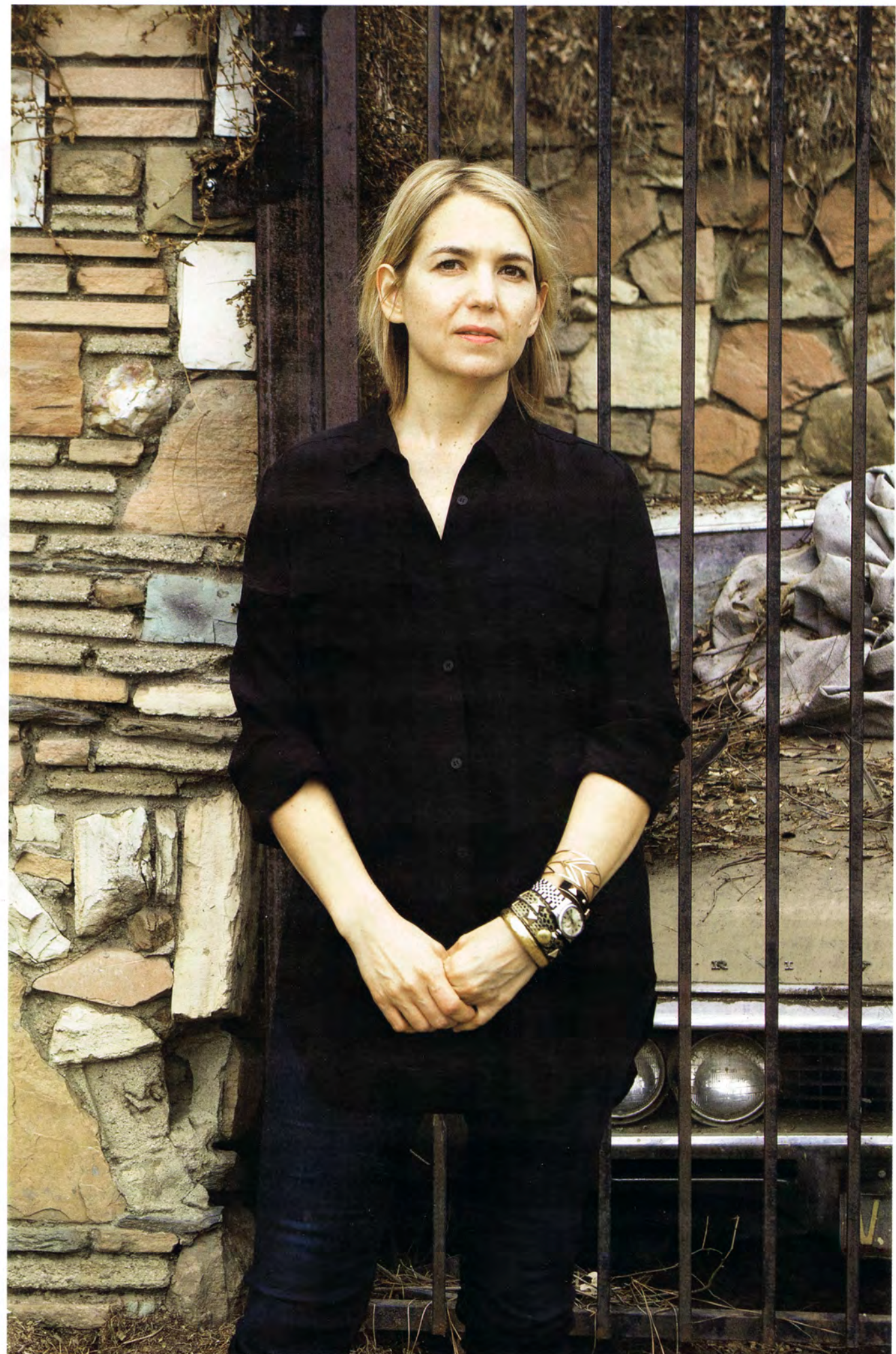
lake, I began in earnest to work on my first book: *A Field Guide to American Houses*.

My father, Wallace Savage [Editor's note: Savage was mayor of Dallas from 1949 to 1951], played a big role in my desire to write a book. When I left for college, he announced that he was bored with being a lawyer and took a two-year creative-writing course as a first step toward writing a mystery novel, *A Bait of Perjury*, published in 1970. With discipline and resolve, he had conquered what seemed to me a hopelessly mysterious process. The seed was planted: If he can do it, so can I.

Lee had written several geology textbooks and promised to help me write the *Field Guide*. The first thing he did was insist that I create a schedule where I sat and wrote for five hours a day — pretty much all of the hours I had free when the kids were at school. The phone was turned off and friends and family were informed that I would only talk to them after 2 p.m. They all felt a little insulted and I felt a bit bereft, but within four years, in 1984, the book was finished. Ever since, I tell anyone who asks — including my children — that it only takes two things to write a good book: passion for the subject and discipline.

By the time the *Field Guide* was published, the kids were in high school at Hockaday and St. Mark's. Near the end of Carty's senior year, a wonderful teacher named Ed Long — a mainstay of the music, theater and film departments at both schools — decided to make *Rage*, a feature-length narrative film starring two students. Carty was cast as the male lead and watched as Mr. Long wrote, costumed, shot and edited the film in just over a week. In the hands of Mr. Long, this insane schedule looked almost effortless, and for Carty, the seed was planted: When he graduated from college four years later, he headed directly to Los Angeles, wrote a script called *Love and a .45*, and, through some miracle, found the funding to direct the film himself in Austin.

As I was sitting in his hotel room the night before shooting began, I looked over at a little shelf of books, all of which had titles like *How to Direct a Film* and thought to myself, Oh dear me. And yet, somehow, watching him the next few days made it seem to me that working with then-unknown actors and actresses — among them Renée Zellweger — was easy and fun. And not just to me. His director's assistant also took note: his younger sister Amy.



THE DAUGHTER

Director and author Amy Talkington, photographed in Elysian Heights in Los Angeles. Her first novel, *Liv, Forever*, a ghost-mystery-love story, was published in March and named a Junior Library Guild selection. It has been optioned as a film. Talkington has multiple projects in development, including a TV adaptation of *X vs. Y: A Culture War*, a *Love Story*; the new book by Eve Epstein and Leonora Epstein, and a remake of *Valley Girl*. She recently directed an episode, "Minibar," of the web series *Little Horribles*. It was selected for the Narrative Shorts competition of the South by Southwest Film Conference and Festival in March.

AMY: Watching Carty work on *Love* was a huge inspiration. In high school, I'd been sure I was going to be a painter; then in college I started writing about music and film for *Spin* and *Ray Gun* and *Seventeen*, and at a certain point I realized that becoming a filmmaker myself would be a great way to put all of those interests together. I'd already been accepted to Columbia Film School when Carty's movie got green-lit. They let me defer a year so I could go work with him. I started making my own short films the next year.

Before long, Amy's short films were getting her into film festivals all over the world, including Sundance, and winning awards — which led to countless screenwriting jobs, her own feature film, *Night of the White Pants*, and, eventually, a Writers Guild of America award for another screenplay.

Keven was always obsessed with music, poring over books and records endlessly. From a very young age, he could recite what seemed to me to be every band, band member, song and lyric in existence. How this and a degree in history and literature would translate into a career was anyone's guess — including Keven's — but the knowledge proved valuable as he began to do a new music show on KEDGE-FM and became the music editor at *The Met* and later *New Times Los Angeles*. Then, seemingly out of nowhere, Keven decided that he, too, could make a movie and was planning, funding and then shooting *You're Gonna Miss Me*, his documentary about Roger Kynard "Roky" Erickson, the father of psychedelic rock.

KEVEN: I really wondered how my becoming a filmmaker would be received by the rest of the family. I mean, it took me like eight years to even admit



THE IN-LAWS

Editor and writer Eve Epstein (left) and executive, editor and writer Leonora Epstein photographed in Chinatown in Los Angeles. Eve is the vice president of programming at TakePart.com, the digital division of Participant Media (its films include *An Inconvenient Truth*, *Food, Inc.* and *Waiting for Superman*) and its newly launched TV network, Pivot. She is currently promoting her new book, *X vs. Y: A Culture War, a Love Story*, co-written with her sister Leonora and published by Abrams in March. Leonora is a senior editor at BuzzFeed Rewind and an essayist, whose writing will be included in the book *The Jewish Daughter Diaries: True Stories of Being Loved Too Much by Our Moms*, to be published in May.

to myself that I wanted to do it. And by the time I did, Amy was doing well at Columbia and Carty had made a feature and written several more. When I eventually started making *You're Gonna Miss Me*, Adrienne [Gruben, the film's producer and a fellow Dallas expat] and I had a running joke that my siblings probably referred to it as *Here Comes* [expletive]-head.

By this time, the troupe of performing children was expanding in other ways. Keven married Eve Epstein and suddenly the family had a new writer, editor and, with her position as editor-in-chief of *dailycandy.com*, a national style arbiter. With Eve also came her younger sister, Leonora. When Amy decided to make *Night of the White Pants* here in Dallas — actually, in my house! — she coaxed Leo into being her “assistant to the director.” After that grueling and 100-degree-plus summer shoot, Leo decided that writing might be more to her taste and, if her big sister Eve could do it, well, so could she.

EVE: Like Virginia's kids, Leo and I grew up in a blended family where a creative career was the norm — both our parents are professional musicians — so we both had little doubt that our jobs would involve some form of artistic or academic expression. Also, the life of a writer — a.k.a. hanging at home in one's pajamas for days on end, ignoring the phone and generally being a little strange — is, unfortunately, well-suited to my temperament, as Keven can attest.

Amy, meanwhile, married Robbie Adams, a gifted music producer and touring soundman for U2. After co-producing the

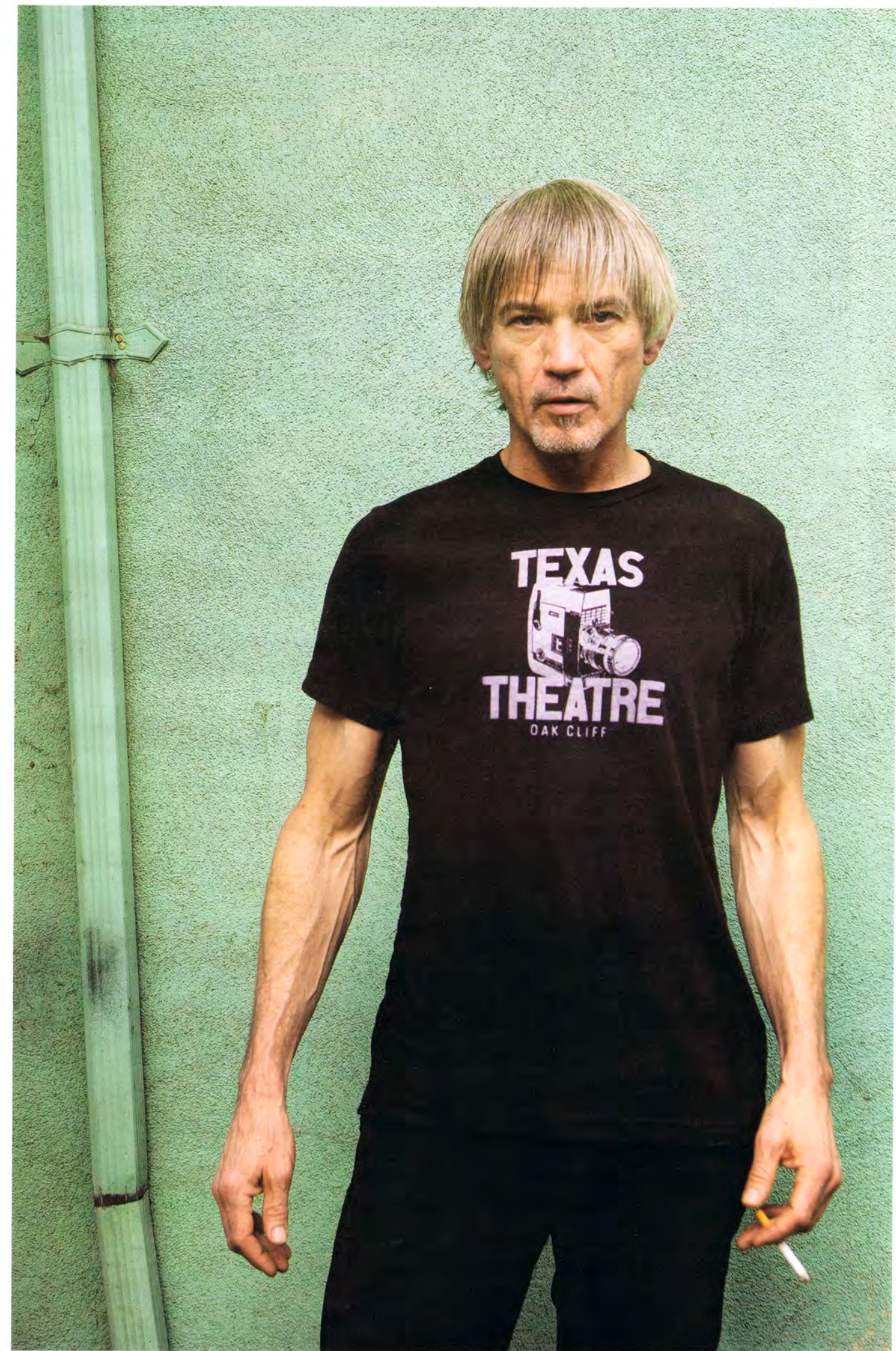
music for *U2 3D*, the supergroup's 2007 3-D concert movie, he transitioned into work as a music supervisor and sound editor for films and TV. He has become the family's go-to consultant about sound and music.

Though the family has mutated in various ways over the years via marriage, divorce, loss, remarriage, birth and a seemingly unstoppable westward migration, our bonds remain strong, allowing us all to stay connected even through difficult transitions such as Keven and Eve's recent split. I've found that having this extended troupe of husbands, wives, siblings, stepsiblings, exes, in-laws and step-in-laws for critiques and thoughts on one another's work is a rare gift. We all seem to understand what the others are going through, no matter the medium — although I have to confess to a motherly pride that books have entered the mix. Weekly “family dinners” in Los Angeles have become times to exchange ideas and moral support. Recently, I've even started a script to adapt *A Field Guide to American Houses* into a documentary series.

If they can do it, then, perhaps, so can I. ■



A 1980 family photo taken by Virginia Savage McAlester. From left: Keven McAlester, Martine McAlester, Amy Talkington and Carty Talkington.



THE SON

Director and writer Carty Talkington, photographed in Echo Park in Los Angeles. His newest screenplay, *The Mexican Contract*, a political thriller, has been optioned and is currently being cast. His recently completed first documentary, *Mud Mules & Mountains*, about the 36th Infantry Division, the first American soldiers to land and fight on European soil in World War II, is currently being submitted to festivals. He sings and plays guitar in the band Texas Radio.