

Looking Closer at Kevin Spacey,

Star of AMERICAN BEAUTY

INTERVIEW BY MATT MCCORMICK

Kevin Spacey established himself as one of Hollywood's most gifted actors with his Oscar-winning role in 1993's *The Usual Suspects*. Known for his ability to lose himself in a character, Spacey went on to star in such films as *Midnight in the Garden of Good and Evil* and *The Negotiator*.

His new film, *American Beauty*, has opened to widespread critical acclaim and box office success across the country and has many people saying his name and Academy Award in the same sentence again. *The Battalion* participated in an interview with the actor as he talked about his latest film and the character he plays, Lester.

Q When you take on a character, you always have a different look. How do you prepare for a character role?

It starts with usually a discussion. Sometimes you might have a notion of how somebody might look, just from reading it. Or, in fact, it might be described by the writer. It usually starts with a discussion with the director. How do you see this character looking? How do you see them dressing? Do they have a particular walk or way of moving that's different? So I usually try to collaborate with the director. Then you have other people come on. You have a production designer who decides how your desk in your office is going to look and a costume designer who may bring in a huge rack of stuff. All of those things go in to make a sort of image and a picture of what someone will look like. Hopefully you do it in connection with all the other departments. You're not showing up in a jacket that, against that wallpaper, looks like hell.

In this movie, there was this transformation that Lester had to go through, and we didn't have the luxury of shooting in sequence. In the morning, we created Lester, and we had his kind of pear-shaped, defeated pasty look with slightly larger costumes and really white, horrible makeup. I slumped a great deal. And then in the afternoon, I'd be shooting the later stuff. I had to be in the best shape possible during the whole shooting of the movie. We just sort of created the earlier stuff in the movie through performance.

Q When you were shooting some of the earlier stuff later in the day, would you go work out?

It's embarrassing to admit, but we had a muscle truck. It was like a roving gym. It was a big moving van, but they made a gym out of it. I'd go in there before a particular scene — we had target dates for particular scenes — so we worked toward the target. I and the trainer, knowing I had to have a certain kind of build for that next two weeks. If they needed me to be a little bloated, he would let me go out and eat pizza and banana splits and all sorts of stuff.

Since there was never a moment in the screenplay when there was an epiphany, or a sudden change, we never wanted the audience to see him change. We wanted there to be an almost seamless and organic evolution of who he became.

Q Mentally, what makes you draw into this Lester character?

I just think I understood, maybe like most people do, the feeling of wanting to break out and do new things. I was on that sort of journey for the last couple of years, and this gave me the opportunity to go to a new place. I think everybody understands the feeling of wanting to shake it up and try new things. Who wouldn't want to tell their boss what they're really thinking about them?

Q Lester's transformation was shaped by the music of his youth — What kind of music shaped your youth?

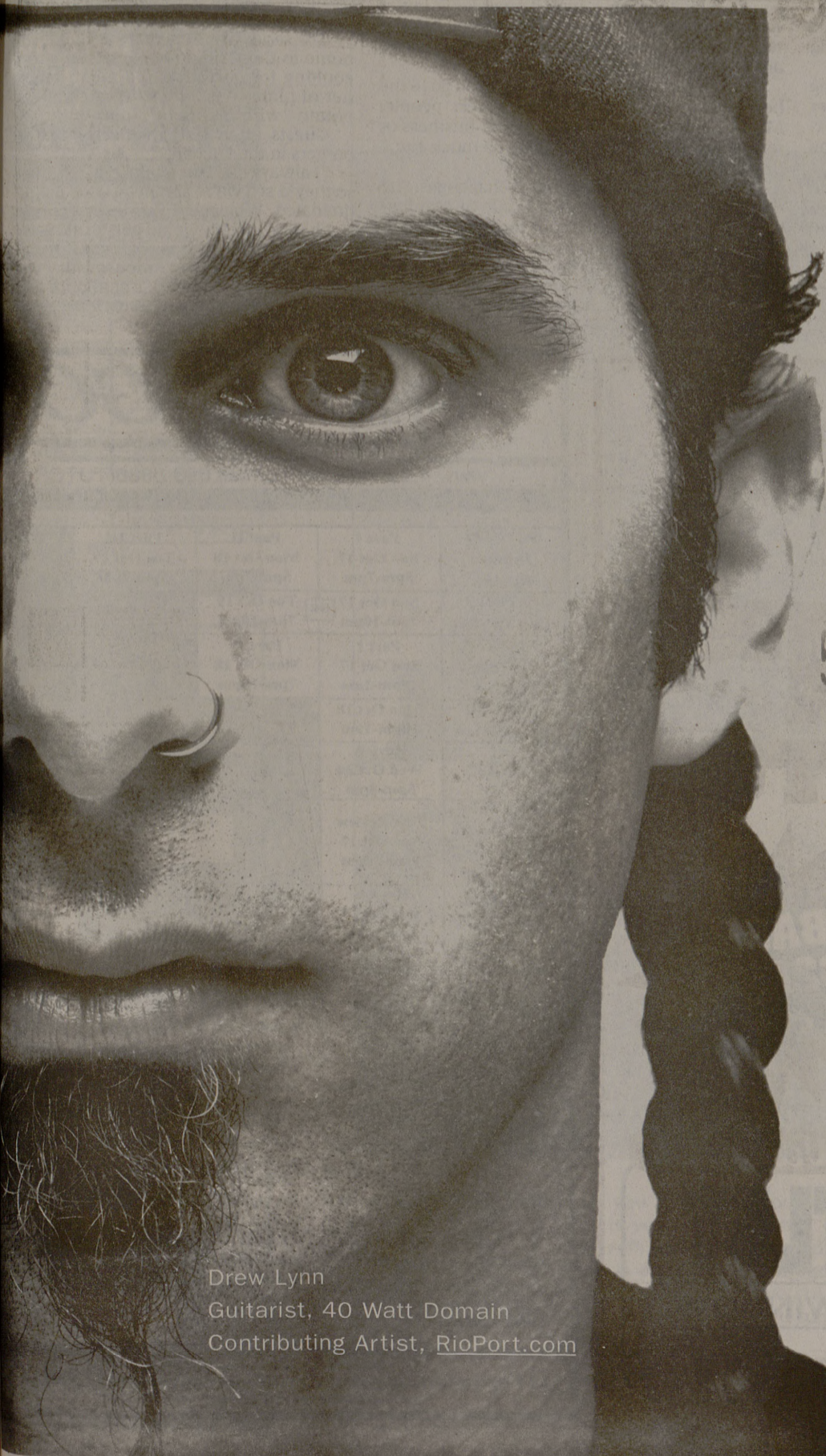
A lot of that music I loved, and Sam (Mendes, director) was very specific about music very early on about the kind of cuts he was going to try to get. "The first issue in movies is 'can you get the rights?'" Will the songwriter or their estate let you use it? We got very lucky with a lot of cool music. You forget the '70s and the trajectory of what that music was and all the artists. We found something in common. We say "Wow, that's the kind of music I would listen to in my garage." So I listened to a lot of the similar stuff that Lester listened to. He's two years older than me.

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PHOTOS COURTESY OF DREAMWORKS PICTURES

Lester Burnham (Kevin Spacey) takes flak from his wife (top) and gets buff (bottom) for his daughter's best friend in the new release from DreamWork's Pictures' *American Beauty*.



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