

All BOOTED Up

Deana McGuffin learned bootmaking from her father, and teaches the craft in her Albuquerque studio.

BY *ASHLEY M. BIGGERS*

PHOTOS BY *MINESH BACRANIA*

Deana McGuffin (facing page) and some of her handmade boots.

NO BRAG, just fact: Deana McGuffin's workshop is stocked with museum-quality boots. A pair by her father and mentor, L.W. McGuffin, sits alongside her own metallic-green-with-gold-swallows creations—the Albuquerque Museum displayed both in the 2015 *Killer Heels* exhibit. The New Mexico Museum of Art's 2010 *Sole Mates* exhibition showcased her Day of the Dead boots, with jolly skeletons dancing across black leather. "I like flashy boots," she says of her immaculate inlay and overlay.

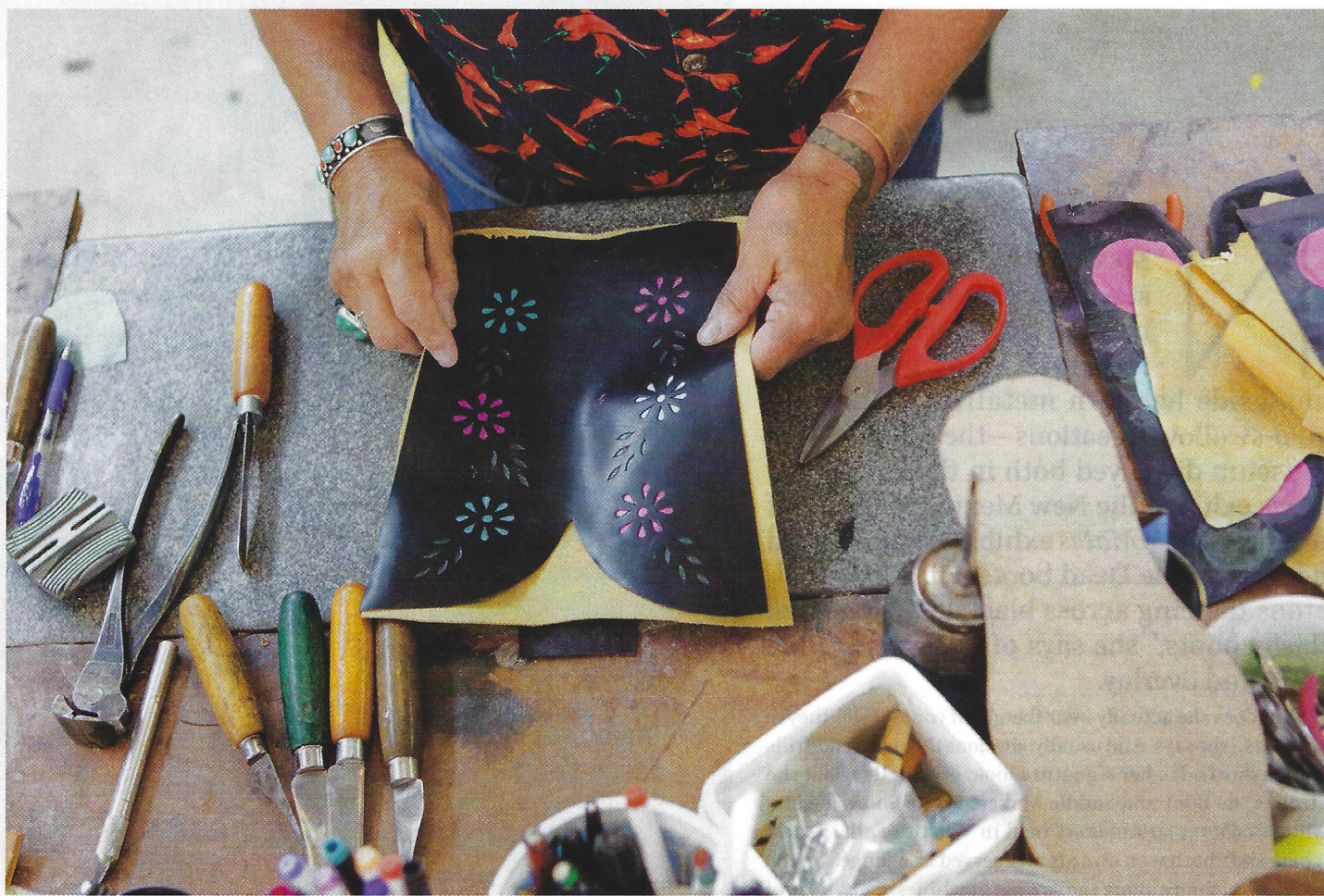
But does she actually *wear* them? "Of course I do! They're *my* boots," she says. And usually, she dons them with no-frills denim shorts. It's her signature look, especially when she attends the Boot and Saddle Makers Trade Show, a who's who of custom bootmakers held in Wichita Falls, Texas, where she's both won awards and served as a judge.

Runmaging among the sewing machines, awls, piles of leather, and manila folders etched with customers' foot tracings, McGuffin holds up a pair by her student Wes Shugart. Freshly sober, Shugart spent two weeks with her finding, as he put it, something to do with his newfound idle time. He returned to Nashville with an eye toward turning professional. Music City Leather now outfits country stars with his own award-winning footwear.

After more than 35 years as a bespoke bootmaker, McGuffin spends as much time making as teaching, whether to budding professionals like Shugart or novices on learning vacations who want to take home an experience as much as a new pair of shoes from her workshop in Albuquerque's South Valley. They travel from nearby and far afield for McGuffin's tutelage and to earn their rite-of-passage photos, displayed on her Instagram page: from seing their first welts to modeling their new kicks. Teaching is a somewhat surprising development to her. "I never thought about doing it," she says. "When I was growing up, women could be a teacher, nurse, or mother, and I wasn't particularly interested in being any one of the three."

Yet this legacy is becoming more important. Brushing up against 70, McGuffin can envision a time when the physicality of bootmaking is beyond her. The art can be as tough as the cowhands that boots were originally designed for—bending and shaping the shank nail that becomes the arch support, forcing stitches through layers of unrelenting leather welting that connects the upper to the insole, and skiving leather layers so the boot's inner lining meets the outer shaft at an effortlessly feathered edge. The possibility of decline—a slide she watched her father endure—gives her





McGuffin at work with the tools of her trade. Facing page: A workshop student shows off her own boot.

pause. "It was heartbreaking. I could look at his work and see where he was beginning to slip. But it is what it is," she shrugs. "I can't do anything about it. I just hope when it happens I can look at it and back out gracefully."

Although her grandfather had been making boots in the state since 1915, she didn't come to the family craft early. At 32, Deana (pronounced "Deena") asked her father to teach her. L.W., a quintessential craftsman, wasn't keen on instructing his daughter, because he didn't think she could handle the labor. "You let me worry about that," she told him. "You just teach me."

Whether it was to carry on the dynasty or to help his recently divorced daughter and 10-year-old granddaughter, a year later, in 1982, the elder McGuffin relented. A snapshot hanging in McGuffin's workshop now captures her early apprenticeship. A black *Rocky III* T-shirt with cutoff sleeves exposes her muscular arms, already toned by the factory work and house painting she'd done previously. A red bandanna across her brow contains a dark mop of hair—just as Rocky's sweatband did. As one of the first females in the male-dominated field, she had to go ten rounds with her father's expectations as well as her customers'.

It took a decade—about the time the two were invited to do a demonstration at the Smithsonian Folklife Festival—before she earned her father's praise. "It was the first time he told me I made a good pair of boots without saying 'but' after," she says.

She's had shoppers walk out upon learning a woman had made the footwear they'd just been admiring. On one occasion, after she was introduced to a Midwestern repairman, he looked down at her boots and asked, "Did you make those all by yourself?" She recalls returning his gaze and saying, "There's only one thing men bootmakers have that women don't, and as far as I know, none of them use it to make boots with."

McGuffin can be found in the workshop nearly every day, filling a steady stream of custom orders (starting at \$2,800 a pair). "People are tired of things that are mass produced. They're tired of built-in obsolescence," she says. A pair will last 30 years—so boots made today, by McGuffin or one of her students, will endure into the middle of the century.

"She has a great eye for design. She's very artistic, very knowledgeable, and has the patience of a saint," Shugart says. "But the coolest thing is her heart. She's true-blue and doesn't beat around the bush."

Even if, in the future, she steps back from boot-making, it will never be far away: Classic vamp stitch-work is inked into the tops of her feet, as though her many days of boot wearing left permanent impressions, as she has left upon the craft itself. ■

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