

Country girl's star shines brightly with a new album and a new baby

Sara Evans

Like so many overnight successes, Sara Evans burst onto the country music scene in 1997 only after a lifetime of desire, dedication, and perseverance. Her husky voice, with a hint of Missouri twang, paints a picture of life on the hard edges of America, full of folks one paycheck away from having the water turned off but still raising kids with love and hope.

Evans' latest release, *Real Fine Place* took the No. 1 spot on the Billboard Country Album Chart and the No. 3 spot on the Top 200 Album Chart. She's toured with superstars Alan Jackson and Brad Paisley, and her previous CD, *Restless*, went platinum. She was named one of the 50 Sexiest People in 2005 by *People* magazine and has performed on the *Today* show and *Good Morning America*.

Her second album, *Born To Fly*, was nominated for CMA Album of the Year in 2001, and her follow-up, *Restless*, received an Academy of Country Music nomination in the spring of 2005.

She was pregnant with her third child while writing the songs on *Real Fine Place*, and she takes all three in tow on a hectic touring schedule. She spends the bulk of each year on the road, singing in front of a growing base of fans who identify with her down-home grittiness and homecoming-queen sizzle.

Off the road, she divides her time between a home in Nashville and a residence in Oregon, her husband's native state. The country music mecca of Nashville is a long way from the farm where she was raised in southern Missouri, near a town of 1,200 people. At age 5 she sang every weekend in her family's band and was a recording veteran by the time she was 11.

Her desire for a music career led her to Nashville the first time in 1991, but it was a bittersweet adventure. Her music career didn't take off, but she did meet her husband, Craig Schelske, also a musician at the time. They were both waiters at a Holiday Inn, a time in her life she remembers fondly.

They migrated to Oregon, performed together, and got married in 1993. The couple returned to Nashville in 1995 determined to conquer the music world. But she doesn't go by the hotel on Briley Parkway to relive old times.

"I try to not even look at it," she says. "But it was a fun time in my life. I was incredibly poor and naive and didn't know anything about the music industry and didn't know anybody in town. Now it doesn't seem like the same city."

In 2005, *People Magazine* named Sara Evans one of the "50 Most Beautiful" people. We agree.



Real Fine Place seems darker than some of your earlier work, with stories of love and hard-luck characters, yet an affirmation of the family. Where did these songs come from?

I felt like I wrote better this time than I've ever written before. I don't know why that is—just confidence, I guess, or pregnancy. I was pregnant again when I was writing this record, and my personality really changes when I'm pregnant. I'm more gutsy.

A lot of female artists are exerting more creative control over their albums, the Dixie Chicks being one example. Do you have as much input as you'd like?

I was co-producer on *Real Fine Place*, along with Mark Bright, and co-wrote 6 of the 13 tracks. Even when I was touring, I was able to be heavily involved in all of the nuances, from picking musicians to fine-tuning the harmonies. I'm really, really, really opinionated when it comes to my music. Nobody's going to do anything on one of my songs or one of my albums that I do not want.

You've taken some risks, stretching the comfort zone of country music. Have those gambles paid off for you?

On *Born to Fly*, we brought in Matt Chamberlain, a rock drummer from Seattle who had played with The Wallflowers. I was always fascinated by drums—I'm still fascinated by drums and drummers. I think it's the most amazing instrument, because I am all about feel and rhythm.

For *Real Fine Place*, we brought in bass player David LaBruyere, who worked with Chamberlain on John Mayer's album. It is so amazing when you bring in a pop drummer or a pop bass player, to hear what they will do on a country record. It's phenomenal. They do not play the typical country stuff. They think differently. I mean, 4/4 time is 4/4 time. A waltz is a waltz. So you don't have to be a Nashville drummer to be able to play country music, but it's just so interesting to me to hear the spin they put on it.

Do you still take direction from other producers or the band?

My brother, Matt Evans, who plays bass in the road band with me, really challenged me. The biggest thing he contributed to this record was helping me stretch myself vocally. He's a great singer, and he'll say, "Why don't you try this?" There's a song on the CD called "New Hometown," which he and I wrote, and there are all these different ways that I sing each chorus. That was because Matt told me, "Do this. Now do that." I'd say, "I can't do that!" But he would fire back, "Yes, you can, you big sissy." So he just pushed me.

What's it like for the family when you're at home?

I'm one of those people who goes to the grocery store every day to get supper. Supper time is a huge deal in our family. Whatever we do all day long we know that our goal is to get to cooking supper, sitting down as a family, eating, then bath and then bed. We're just very, very normal.

Can you still go out unrecognized, or has your success closed that door for you?

In between Grand Ole Opry shows the other night, I walked all the way down to Big River Grill to eat, right in the middle of the crowd, and not a single soul noticed me. When we left the Opry, we were joking, "Let's see if we can walk down the street," and it turns out we could. It was kind of a letdown. I'm sure fans weren't expecting to see me out on the street. I usually hear, "You look so much like Sara Evans."

How do you juggle being named one of the sexiest people in the country—touring, recording, writing—with all that goes into raising a family?

I separate things so easily in my mind. I can literally, literally change a diaper or discipline Avery and then walk on stage. I'm such a multitasker, you would not even believe. If I just had a few more arms, there's no telling what I could do. I think that's the trademark of a true woman.

