

ou gotta taste this—just once.” Reba McEntire, dressed for comfort in jeans, a T-shirt and sneakers, is in the kitchen of her ranch outside Nashville, coaxing a guest to join her in a “little snack.”

“It’s homemade corn bread and vegetable soup,” she explains, inhaling deeply. The tangy aroma of the spices is strong enough to straighten McEntire’s signature red ringlets, but that’s fine by her: The 41-year-old superstar likes her food *hot*. She takes a hearty bite and beams. “You won’t know what you’re missing unless you try it.”

McEntire has an equally adventurous taste for life itself. Whatever she does—chauffeur-ing a bunch of rambunctious six-year-olds, including her son, Shelby, to school; performing in front of a crowd of 80,000—she seems to do without trepidation. “Hell, yeah, I’m a risk taker,” she exclaims with a bravado that she says comes from her father, a rodeo rider and rancher who castrated bulls.

“You fall out of the saddle, you get right back in it. That’s what I believe. Nothing ventured, nothing gained. Fear is a waste of time, so I meet it head-on.”

Barbara Mandrell, her friend for more than 14 years, confirms McEntire’s plucky self-assessment. “What I love most about her is her gutsiness,” she says. “She’s cocky and fun-loving, and she rides as good as any cowboy.”

McEntire wasn’t always so courageous, however, and she has had to grapple with some persistent fears in her life. As a child growing up in Chockie, Okla., (population: 96), she was petrified of the dark and of heights.

“My older brother and sister, Pake and Alice, used to climb up in the rafters of the hay barn, attach a

rope and then swing down,” she recalls. “I’d stand up there, and they’d go to lunch and come back an hour later, and I’d still be up there. I could never bring myself to make that leap. I was always afraid of my own shadow.”

And though McEntire has proved courageous enough to carve a spectacular career for herself in the supercompetitive field of country music (selling 30 million albums and winning more than four dozen awards), her world was badly shaken in 1991 by an airplane crash that killed seven members of her band.

The tragedy stunned her and threatened to destroy everything she had worked so hard to accomplish. No

**n**ow I realize life is too short to worry about things that are out of your control.

one—not even friends or her second husband, Narvel Blackstock—seemed able to reach her.

“I hid,” McEntire admits quietly. “I didn’t want to get close to anybody. I didn’t want to run the risk of losing someone I loved.” Says country singer Linda Davis, McEntire’s close friend, “It was a very, very dark time for her.”

**Beating the odds:  
The vital lessons she’s learned**

Yet, ironically, the tragedy ultimately had a positive effect on the rest of McEntire’s life. It inspired her to reassess her place in the world and look beyond the stardom she had already achieved.

“After the plane crash, I realized we could be plucked off this earth in the blink of an eye,” she says.



With her husband and manager, Narvel Blackstock, above, and with her six-year-old son, Shelby, left. “Their love is my strength,” McEntire says.



“That makes you want every moment to count even more. Why stop at just a recording career? Why not do movies and TV? Why not

see new things? So I thought I’d better get off my butt.”

But knowing she had to change was one thing—actually doing it was another. Throughout the process, McEntire drew strength from her religious faith and from the people she loves, especially Shelby, who was just one year old at the time of the crash. “In his own innocent way, he helped her recover,” Davis says. “She could just focus on being a mom and on loving and caring for him, and that brought her back around. I believe God gave her Shelby to get her through it.”

No one could blame a mother for being overprotective of her child after living through such a horror, but the accident had the opposite effect on McEntire. “I let him fly with me all the time—even after the crash,” she says. “I don’t want Shelby to grow up being scared. I want him to feel the sky’s the

# Reba's

HAIR, SANDI SPIKA; STYLIST, SANDI SPIKA; MERCHANDISE CREDITS, P. 138; OPPOSITE PAGE, TOP TO BOTTOM: LISA ROSE GLOBE PHOTOS INC.; LISA O'CONNOR/CELEBRITY PHOTO

Haunted for years by tragedy and childhood fears, country music superstar **Reba McEntire** has a new outlook on life: Take risks, dream big and never, ever hesitate.

BY SHERYL KAHN  
PHOTOGRAPHED  
BY MARK TUCKER

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(continued from p. 34)

limit and encourage him to dream those big dreams. I just have to trust that he's in God's hands."

This renewed faith in religion was one of the key factors in McEntire's recovery. A spiritual person, though not a regular churchgoer, she found comfort in prayer. "I remember saying, 'Lord, get me through this; I can't do it by myself.' And He did. I see now that life is too short to sit and worry about the things that are out of your control. Too short not to try things, take risks, grow and learn."

But that's not to say she doesn't question why bad things happen to good people. "I wonder why some have to die so young," she says softly. "I chose Paula K. Evans as my backup singer over Faith Hill, and Paula was killed on that plane and Faith is a big star now. Why?" She pauses for a tense moment. "Yeah, I've got a hundred jillion questions to ask God when I get there."

Some of the most profound life lessons she's come to understand in the past few years she learned from people who have challenged overwhelming odds. "Christopher Reeve is a remarkable human being, a great man. He's making a difference in the lives of everyone he touches," she says intently. "He is teaching us about courage and conviction. Maybe that's what God had in mind for him—a greater purpose." The singer is also inspired by her ten-year-old niece, Haley, who is severely disabled with a chromosomal deficiency. "Haley is like a little angel. She's been brought into my family's lives to show us you don't have to be perfect to be loved."

Compared with such monumental problems, McEntire says, her own lingering fears eventually came to seem trivial. Take her terror of heights, for example: "Narvel and I decided to cure my fear by having me lowered from the ceiling of the Houston Astrodome for the opening of one of my shows," she says, laughing. Yet a moment later her blue eyes widen as she recalls the horror of hanging 200 feet in the air. "Lord, I was terrified!

I was sick for three weeks thinking about it! But Narvel kept saying, 'I know you can do this.' He was right, and I put my fears of heights and darkness behind me for good."

**"Our Reba": Why her fans love her**

One thing the superstar has never feared, however, is something that bothers legions of other celebrities: rabid fans. As if to illustrate this point, a tour bus pulls up at her front gate, honking a hello, and she steps out to wave to the crowd. "Sometimes I'll just go outside

that it's Copper Penny). An airport newsstand manager reports McEntire has been reading a copy of Nicholas Evans's best-selling novel, *The Horse Whisperer*, while on her 125-date concert tour.

Yet McEntire has been the subject of some unpleasant gossip as well, particularly when she divorced her first husband, rodeo rider Charlie Battles, and then married Blackstock in 1989. "You can't be afraid of what people might think" is all she will say about having been labeled a home wrecker when Blackstock left his wife for her.

**Living with the pain of what might have been**

She does have one regret, though—that she and Blackstock have just one child. "I'd have another in a heartbeat," she says, "but Narvel doesn't want any more children. He's a grandfather now, and the thought of a little one running around the house again...well, I wish I had done it sooner, but I guess I missed out."

As for the rest of her life and the roads she's taken, McEntire says she wouldn't change a thing. "Every right and wrong has made me into the person I am today. I'm thankful for everything I have."

"Everything" includes a multimillion-dollar recording business, Starstruck Entertainment, which is opening new offices in Nashville. McEntire also has numerous commercial endorsements, from Fritos corn chips to the Visa credit card.

Obviously, all that is not enough for her. "I want to keep pushing myself," she says. "Things are constantly sparking my interest."

Her face lights up with an idea. "I hear Robert Redford is making *The Horse Whisperer* into a movie—I could see myself in that film. I'd be perfect!" When it's suggested she should call up the legendary actor-director and announce her interest, McEntire shyly blushes. "Me? Call him?"

She drums her spoon on the edge of the kitchen table, pondering the possibility. "You get me his number," she says, uncertainty hardening into fierce determination in the space of a few moments. "I'll do it, you betcha." ■

**REBA's best buds**

"Friendships with country music people mean a lot to me."



and say hi. I don't treat my fans as if they need to be on the other side of a barrier. I treat them like my friends, because that's what they are. I make myself accessible to them. I don't have bodyguards. They don't see me as a star—just a nice, friendly old gal."

And that's precisely how McEntire wants to be known. "It would be okay with me if that's what my tombstone said," she announces with a grin. "What you see is what you get. You just ask anybody."

In fact, a quick, unscientific survey of some Nashville residents does reveal a great deal about the familiar affection they have for "our Reba." A taxi driver tells how the star and her husband built their 80-acre ranch on the Cumberland River in 1989. A waitress at the local Pancake Pantry claims she knows which auburn shade of hair-color McEntire uses (rumor has it

CLOCKWISE FROM TOP RIGHT: CRAIG SKINNER/CELEBRITY PHOTO; MICHAEL FERGUSON/GLOBE PHOTOS INC.; STEVE GRANITZ/RETNA LTD.; BETH GWINN/RETNA LTD.