



POWER ACTOR

# Southern Charm

WHEN THE OPPORTUNITY FIRST arose to appear in the NBC television series *Friday Night Lights*, Connie Britton was skeptical. She'd already played the coach's wife, Sharon Gaines, in the 2004 film version of the H.G. Bissinger novel by the same name, based on the true story of a small Texas town and its football team. Now Britton questioned the range that the television role could offer. "Wife characters on TV shows that are about men or sports traditionally don't end up being that gratifying," she says. "I told Peter [Berg, the director], 'I appreciate your thought process, but I don't think this is going to work out.'"

Thankfully, Berg, who'd also directed the film, convinced her to take a chance. For the past three seasons, Britton has played Tami Taylor, now principal of Dillon High School in Dillon, Texas, and wife of Eric Taylor (played by Kyle Chandler), who coaches the town's beloved Panthers. Britton has made the role her own, bringing a natural strength and feistiness to the part as well as an authentic Southern charm. "I grew up in the South," she says. "I see Tami as an amalgam of a lot of different women I knew there."

It wasn't until she ran into NBC's Brian Williams on a flight that she truly realized the extent of the *Friday Night Lights* audience.

Born in Boston, Britton grew up in Lynchburg, Virginia, and always knew she wanted to be an actress. "I went to a public high school that had a great theater program," she says. "Right from the get-go, I started taking acting classes. That was it for me." For a time after high school, she considered pursuing a more practical career. "Acting was a dream that I had, but I didn't really think it would manifest," she says. It wasn't long before she realized how much she missed it. In her sophomore year at Dartmouth she auditioned for a play—and won the lead role. "I knew I had to at least try to see this through," she says.

And see it through she did. After graduation Britton enrolled in New York's Neighborhood Playhouse School of the Theatre and began pounding the pavement in pursuit of her dream. Her big break came when she answered a casting call for 1995's *The Brothers McMullan*, an independent film directed by Ed Burns. "Things really started changing after that," Britton says. "The movie won at the Sundance Film Festival, and suddenly I had agents knocking on my door." She relocated to LA but was soon cast in *Spin City*, a show that brought her back to New York.

Britton now divides her time between New York and Austin, Texas, where *Friday Night Lights* shoots. Critically acclaimed but ratings-challenged, the series is referred to by Britton as "the little show that could." But it wasn't until she was on a flight seated behind NBC news anchor Brian Williams that she truly realized the extent of its audience.

"I was a little bit starstruck," she recalls, "but he came up to me and said, 'I just have to tell you that *Friday Night Lights* is the only must-watch television in our house. I tell [NBC president] Jeff Zucker all the time that they really have to make the show happen.' To have someone like that bending the ear of the guys in charge? I think it goes a long way!"—RACHEL BOWIE