

# sun country

SUMMER 2009

THE HOMETOWN AIRLINE

## STAR POWER

Meet Samantha Harris of *Dancing with the Stars* and *The Insider*, and Broadway's newest star!



Welcome to Branson  
The All-American Vacation

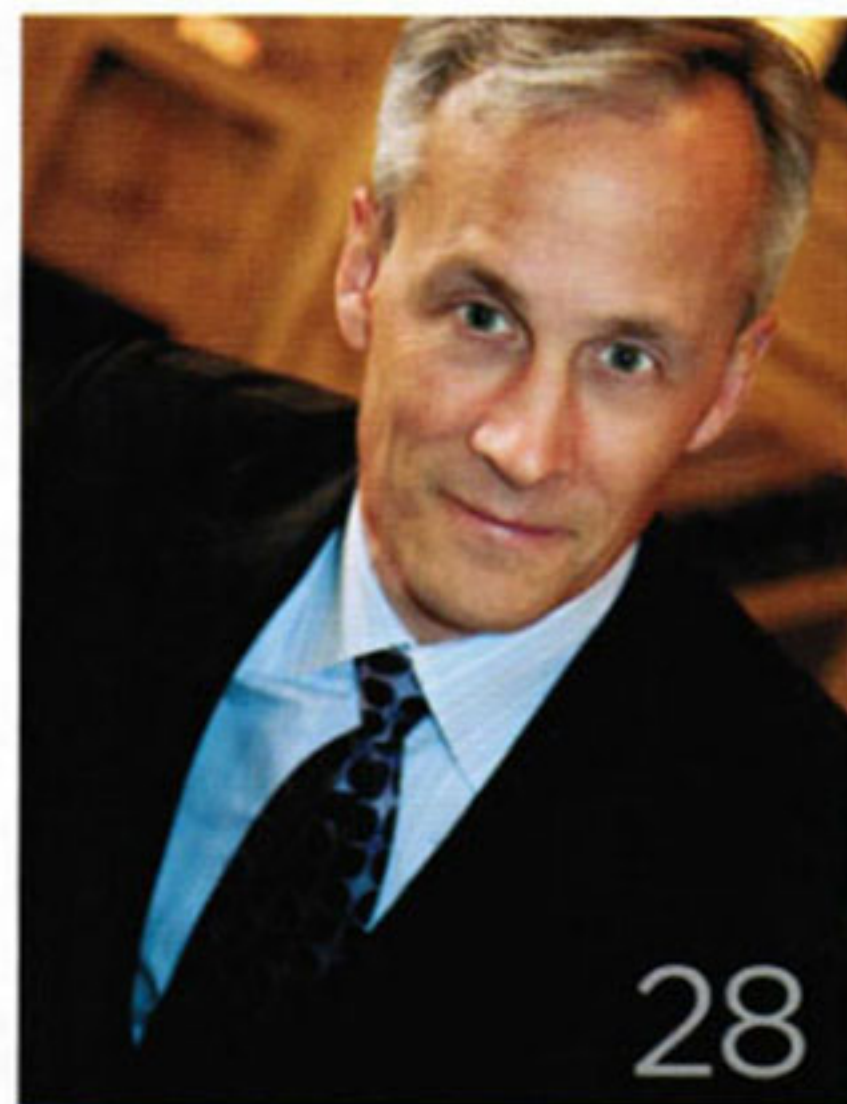
**RENAISSANCE MAN**  
**TOM HOCH**  
brings new life to the Minneapolis theatre district



# CONTENTS **SUMMER 2009**

SUN COUNTRY MAGAZINE | THE HOMETOWN AIRLINE

22



## That's Entertainment

**18 FEATURE** Meet Jim Johnson, co-founder and COO of Alloy Media + Marketing, creators of *Gossip Girl*, *The Vampire Diaries* and other must-read, must-watch teen entertainment properties.

## Renaissance Man

**28 FEATURE** The quiet force behind the transformation of the Minneapolis Theatre District, Tom Hoch has helped put Hennepin Avenue on the Broadway map.

## The All-American Vacation

**33 FEATURE** Rediscover the simple pleasures of a classic family vacation in lush, beautiful Branson, Mo.

## The Reverend Billy sings the redneck blues

**46 LAST LAUGHS** The Reverend Billy C. Wirtz is a fake televangelist with a bawdy, burlesque brand of redneck musical humor.



## Star Power!

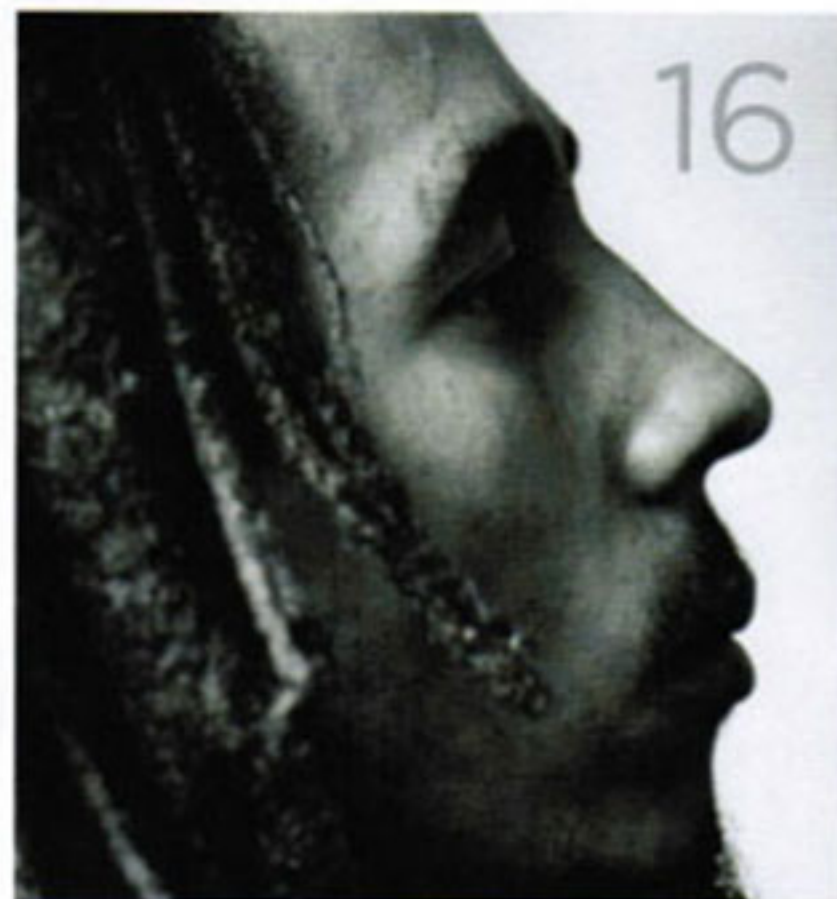
**22 ON THE COVER** Samantha Harris, co-host of *Dancing With The Stars*, correspondent and fill-in anchor on *The Insider* and Broadway's newest star, is one of America's favorite entertainment personalities.

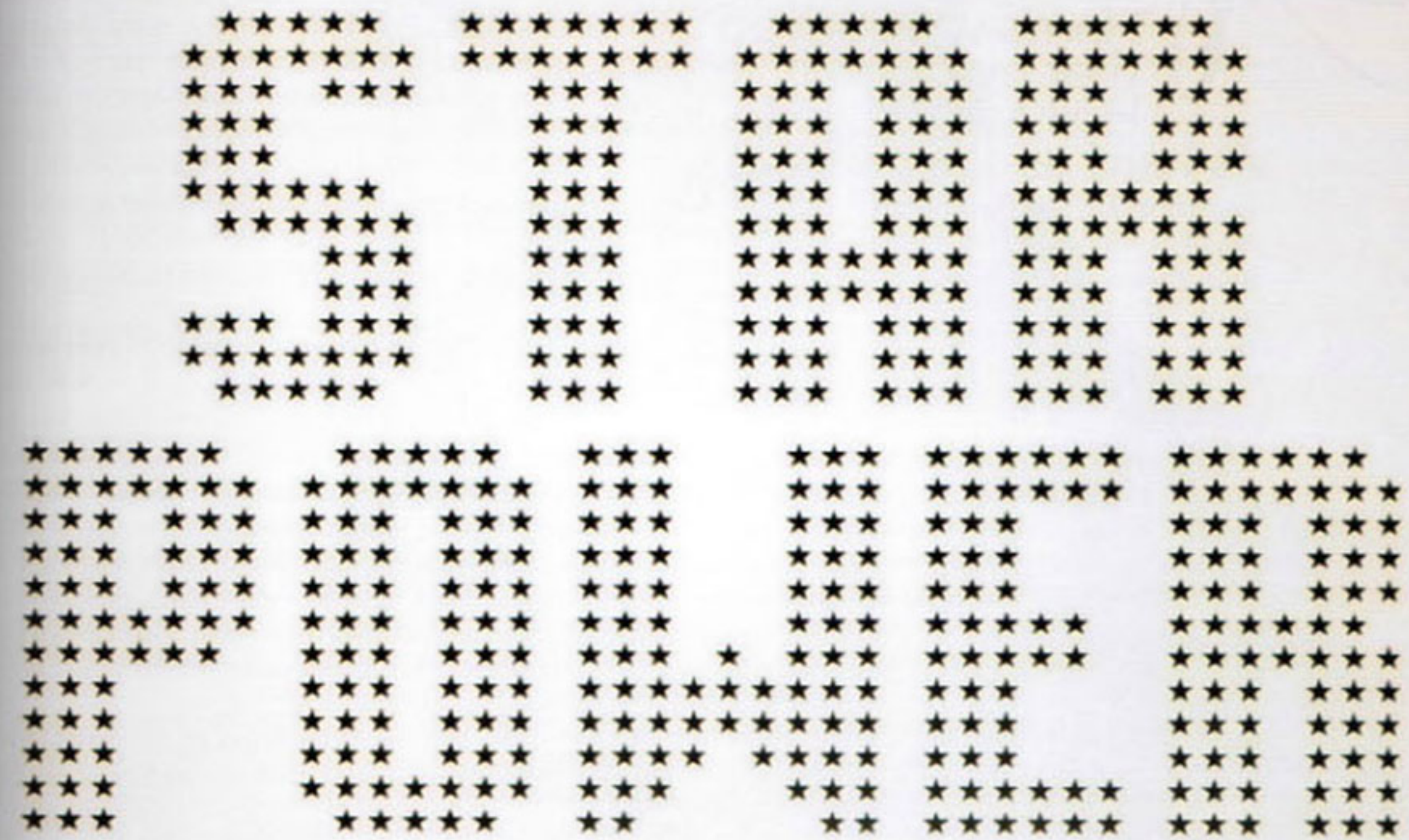
## MAGNET

**11 THE ARTS** Discover the bold, brilliant work of Twin Cities artist Richard Graves.

**12 STYLE** How to look and feel like a mythic island entrepreneur, a dealer in Polynesian art or Trader Vic

**16 MUSIC** A new book of photos offers an intimate portrait of reggae musician Bob Marley.





*Samantha Harris*, co-host of *Dancing With The Stars*, correspondent and fill-in anchor on CBS Television Distribution's *The Insider*, is also now a Broadway star in her own right!

By Melinda Nelson Photos by Bradford Rogne

Although Samantha Harris will tell you that everybody in Hollywood works just as hard as she does,

this young journalist/TV host/actress/dancer/singer/wife/mom has amassed an impressive body of work by any measure. Since arriving in L.A. in 1997 from her native Minnesota, the petite brunette has become one of America's favorite entertainment personalities. We caught up with Harris in a rare moment between interviewing celebrities, getting fitted for one of her many glamorous red carpet outfits and driving home to do what she loves best—relax with her husband Michael and their daughter Josselyn.

**SCM The requisite Minnesota question—where did you grow up?** **SH** I grew up in Hopkins and I went to Alice Smith Elementary School, North Junior High School and Hopkins High. My whole family still lives in the western suburbs of Minneapolis, including my mom and stepdad, my sister and brother-in-law and their two kids, and most of my extended family.

**SCM Tell me about your childhood.**

**SH** I grew up in a very creative, very theatrical household. My mom was in a dance company when I was young, and my dad, Dick Shapiro, was a rock and roll promoter. I literally grew up backstage at the St. Paul Civic Center (now the Excel Center), the Orpheum Theater and the Target Center. I'd run alongside my dad, trying to keep up as he strode through the hallways, negotiating deals, making sure the bands were taken care of. We'd eat backstage with the bands before the show and close out the concert at the end of the night. We're talking the 80s, so it was Rick Springfield, Cyndi Lauper, Madonna, Prince and Michael Jackson, all in their heyday. Even my 18<sup>th</sup> birthday party was at the Paula Abdul concert. It was a really amazing experience for a kid, especially one from Minnesota.

**SCM How did your dad get into the music business?**

**SH** When my dad was 16, he and a friend saw a band rehearsing in a garage. My dad walked up to the band and said, "You guys want to book some gigs?" They said, "All right, sure," and he said, "All right, cool." I'm sure it was probably more eloquent than that, but that's my childhood recollection of how it went down.

**SCM It sounds so easy!** **SH** My dad was quite the entrepreneurial fellow. He was quick, he figured things out, and he made them happen. He was a mover and a shaker and he was absolutely the light of our whole family's life. His—and my mom's—creativity and theatricality are truly what inspired me to go into this business. Sadly, we lost my dad to colon cancer 13 years ago, when he was only 50. He was just an amazing, amazing person and truly a life force.

**SCM When did you know that you wanted to be in show business?** **SH** (laughs) At age 12, I asked my parents to find me an agent! Then, when I was in 8<sup>th</sup> grade, I went on the college visiting tour with my sister. Right then and there, I decided that I wanted to move to L.A. after college. I knew that I wanted to be in this business, but I didn't really know if I would end up as an actor or as a stage performer. At the time, there weren't television hosts, unless you were a news anchor or on *Entertainment Tonight*.

**SCM Where did you go to college?** **SH** I went to Northwestern University in Evanston, Ill. I graduated from the journalism school with a double major in journalism and theater. It was incredibly intense and a wonderful training ground. I had world-class teachers who prepared me to walk directly into a working newsroom and hold my own. In the theater department, there were wonderful classes including acting, dance, and voice and articulation. Everything that I learned still helps me on a daily basis.

**SCM What happened when you moved to L.A.?**

**SH** It was the first time that I had to pay my own rent, so I had at least two or three jobs all the time while I was auditioning for TV commercials and shows. Through a temp agency, I got placed at a major talent management company. I worked there for six years and did everything from being a receptionist to working in the accounting department. Among all my many jobs, I did kids' birthday tea parties and I was Eric Idle's personal assistant.

**SCM Was that as fun as it sounds?**

**SH** Absolutely! I started out babysitting for Eric and his wife, and then became his personal assistant. Eric eventually started casting me in various projects of his, which led to *Eric Idle Exploits Monty Python*, a 23-city tour in the U.S. and Canada, singing and dancing alongside him. I also sang on the Spamalot demo CD



and did the reading for Mike Nichols, who eventually signed on to direct the Broadway musical.

**SCM** How did you get into hosting?

**SH** While I was doing all these jobs and trying to put together what was a sad excuse for an actor's reel, I did some commercial work, including a Honda Civic commercial and a bit part on CSI. My big job was playing Mary Ann in *Surviving Gilligan's Island*, a CBS made-for-TV-movie. Slowly but surely, as cable shows needed personalities, hosting jobs started to pop up. With acting auditions, I only got callbacks about five percent of the time, but with hosting auditions, I got callbacks 90 percent of the time. I think something bigger than my own intuition was saying, "Samantha, the Universe is throwing you towards hosting."



**SCM** So then what happened? **SH** Many months later, my agent called to tell me that I was on the short list for the second season of *Dancing With The Stars*. When I told her that I wouldn't have time for the rehearsals in addition to my full-time entertainment news job, she said, "No, you'd be the host!" My jaw dropped and practically hit the floor. I was just over the moon because I never thought that the host position would be an option. Weeks went by, and finally I got a call for an on-camera test—that same afternoon! My stylist helped me pull together a gown, my hair and makeup team made me look *Dancing With The Stars*-worthy, I drove to the studio, did the test and the rest is history!

**SCM** 2009 has been a big year for you, and it's only halfway over. **SH** I know! I still can't believe it. When I joined *The Insider* in January, I was thrilled. I had no idea that I would also be offered the starring role of Roxie in *Chicago*—on Broadway. What a dream come true!

**SCM** How do you find time to be an entertainment correspondent, a TV co-host, a mom and now a Broadway star? **SH** Like all working women, you just do it somehow. I thrive on juggling a full schedule and I just try to squeeze every second out of each day. I honestly couldn't do any of this without my husband Michael. He is a truly wonderful partner and a great hands-on dad, and that allows me to do what I do with confidence. As far as my work schedule, the next season of *Dancing With The Stars* starts in the fall, and I can shoot *The Insider* from New York, so I can be in *Chicago* in New York from July 7 through August 16, and in Greenville, South Carolina from August 18 through August 23.

**SCM** Which is all quite extraordinary.

**SH** I feel extremely lucky to have parents that always encouraged me to follow my dreams. My mom is beaming right now. I know that my dad is watching me, too, and I know that he's proud. 🍷

“My dad was absolutely the light of our whole family's life. His—and my mom's—creativity and theatricality are truly what inspired me to go into this business.”



**SCM** How did you end up on *Dancing with the Stars*? **SH** I started out by covering the first season of the show as an entertainment reporter. I said to my agent and the show's publicist, "I love this show. If there's ever a second season, I'd love to be considered." I just loved the dancing and wanted to give it a shot myself.

**SCM** Do you love to dance? **SH** I do. I took several years of dance and I was on the Hopkins High dance team. I thought I was a good dancer until I walked into the room with

all of these professional dancers. I realized that I'm not a great dancer—I'm just a good mover. When you watch *Dancing With The Stars*, you don't quite realize just how hard it is to dance as well as our pro dancers do.

