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Another outspoken trio of chicks

BY RICK ALLEN STAR-BANNER | Ocala Star-Banner

The term "Southern fried" generally refers to some protein source - chicken, tofu, roadkill - rolled in a batter of spices and deep fried so it's hot and crispy on the outside but tender and juicy inside.

So take three daughters of the South, roll 'em in the spice of their lives, mix 'em under the heat of stage lights and you get the **Southern Fried Chicks**.

It's a recipe for common-touch comedy anchored on three women, whipped up as chaser to the aperitif (a pair a what?) of the successful, mantastic Blue Collar Comedy Tour back yonder.

The Southern-fried entree will be served in Lecanto and Ocala this weekend as part of the Performing Arts menu presented by the Central Florida Community College Foundation.

The Southern Fried Chicks - Karen Mills, Leanne Morgan and Etta May; urban, suburban and white trash - take the stage at Lecanto's Curtis Peterson Auditorium at 3 p.m. Sunday and the CFCC Fine Arts stage the following night at 7:30.

Each chick solos about 30 minutes, with all three on stage for some wrap-up improv and Q and A. Mostly, their routines are honed from the separate Southern roads they've walked - or claimed to have walked, anyway.

By most reports, these Chicks may be Southern-fried, but audiences South and North, East and West are uniformly adoring.

"We're playing to packed auditoriums everywhere we go," says Mills - the "urban" chick. "I grew up in a rural small town, but now I'm a city girl. I live downtown, I love sushi ..."

She's also a certified sports star, an All-American and Hall of Famer in women's basketball at the University of Tennessee in Chattanooga, where she currently lives.

Working for a mortgage broker in Atlanta, Mills discovered a talent for humor during amateur nights at the Punchline, a comedy club there. Eventually, she became a headliner.

"It's better than any job I've had," she says.

The "suburban" Morgan plans to hang around Central Florida for a while after the show. With her husband, Chuck, and her three children - 9, 11 and 13 - she's going to Disney World for a week.

Described as "Scarlett O'Hara turned soccer mom," Morgan exudes traditional Southern charm; her side of a telephone conversation is liberally sprinkled with "honey" and "darlin'" and "precious" - even as she shivers from an icy wind in a Knoxville, Tenn., parking lot.

"I'm so blessed, honey. I know God has had his hand on me," she says. "I've skipped so many of the bad stages most comedians go through, sleeping in the car, bars where everybody's falling down drunk."

Her routines revolve around her "anal-retentive conservative Republican" husband and their kids.

"I'm living suburbia; I have three kids and I drive - well I used to drive - a minivan," Morgan says. "I'm not smart enough to make up any of this stuff."

She has appeared on ABC's "The View," was a finalist at a Las Vegas Comedy Festival and was a finalist on Nickelodeon's "Funniest Moms in America."

And if she could, she'd change "the perception others have about us here in the South."

Speaking of Southern stereotypes, there's Etta May, whose bio claims she's "white trash." Her talk can be as rough as No. 10 sandpaper.

Moreover, she revels in her "white trashness."

"I come from a long line of people proud to be white trash," May says. "We're thankful for our food stamps and bus fare."

Another advantage is seeing UFOs. "At least I think they're UFOs; it could be we're so drunk that if somebody throws a beer can we see something shiny overhead and think it's a UFO."

Now, if you promise not to tell anyone, one of the Chicks technically is not Southern; in fact, "Etta May" may not even be her real name.

Rumor has it, and the Asheville (N.C.) Mountain Xpress printed this as fact once, she once responded to the name "Brenda Ferrari" - an Iowan who had a small part in the film "A League of Their Own."

No one talks about it though; it's a what-happens-in-the-South-stays-in-the-South kind of thing.

"I'm not going to say anything," Mills says of Etta May.

"We're all scared of her," adds Morgan.

But May scoffs at the rumor. "I've had to change my name a few times because I wrote some bad checks. But it's Etta May and we'll go with it."

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MORGAN My husband got a buzz cut like Bruce Willis or Sting; we didn't know his head was pointed. And he said, "I look like somebody but I can't quite figure out who." And I said, "Is it Bull on 'Night Court'?"

MILLS I love working the South because so much of my comedy writes itself. I was going through Alabama and saw a sign for the Alabama Shakespeare Festival. Imagine that production of "Romeo and Juliet."

I'm on the road so much I got a radar detector. Now that's a handy device because it lets you know the moment that you're caught.

ETTA MAY Any deer hunters out there? Can you answer me, how come my husband can sit in a field in Wisconsin in November freezing his butt off, take a rifle, aim that rifle, shoot a deer at 100 yards right between the eyes, then come home and pee all over the toilet seat?

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