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FLYING HIGH

Hanging tight to their acoustic roots, the Dixie Chicks take flight

By Kenny Berkowitz



CAROLINE MCNAMARA

BY THE TIME THE DIXIE CHICKS came to Nashville, they'd already been playing professionally for more than a decade. They'd released three indie albums of cowgirl pop, scored a jingle for McDonald's, and been named Best Country Band by the *Dallas Observer* four years in a row. They'd performed at the Grand Ole Opry and the Kerrville Folk Festival, opened shows for Garth Brooks and Doc Watson, appeared on the Dallas Cowboys' halftime show and Garrison Keillor's *Prairie Home Companion*.

It was more success than most bands see in a lifetime. But the Chicks wanted Nashville success. So in 1996 they signed a development deal with Sony, hired a new lead singer, and moved to Music City. Over the next two years of touring, woodshedding, and recording, the new Chicks—Natalie Maines on lead vocals and guitar; Emily Erwin Robison on banjo, Dobro, and guitar; and Emily's sister, Martie Erwin Seidel, on fiddle and mandolin—worked overtime to tighten their sound, making it edgier but always keeping one foot firmly planted in the bluegrass tradition.

Leaving the studio in the fall of 1997, they were hoping they'd recorded an album good enough for a handful of critics to take notice and a single poppy enough to make it onto country radio. They ended up with *Wide Open Spaces*, the fastest-selling country recording that Nashville had ever seen.

"The way it took off was just amazing," says Emily Robison, talking from her home just outside of San Antonio, Texas. "It's mind-boggling. You're so deep in the eye of the hurricane that you don't realize what's going on around you. We thought it was going to

be one of those little left-of-center projects that musicians in Nashville get to hear. Our goal was to build our fan base. We never thought it was going to be a radio success."

In the two years since they recorded *Wide Open Spaces*, more than eight million copies have been sold, making it the best-selling group album in the history of country music. The Chicks have

erful, the sound more exciting. They're writing their own songs, playing their own solos, calling their own shots. And at a time when the rest of Nashville is moving toward a smoother, cleaner sound, the Chicks have maintained their edge, keeping their acoustic instruments at the front of the mix and staying true to their roots. Their independence has been well rewarded. In addi-



toured all around the world, scored a string of No. 1 singles, and taken home dozens of awards, including the 1999 Grammy for Best Country Album and the 1999 Academy of Country Music's Album of the Year.

At the beginning of 1999, they recorded a follow-up album that's better in absolutely every way. On *Fly*, the Chicks don't hold anything back: the playing is more confident, the singing more pow-

erful, the sound more exciting. They're writing their own songs, playing their own solos, calling their own shots. And at a time when the rest of Nashville is moving toward a smoother, cleaner sound, the Chicks have maintained their edge, keeping their acoustic instruments at the front of the mix and staying true to their roots. Their independence has been well rewarded. In addi-

At left, the Chicks on stage: Emily Robison, Natalie Maines, and Martie Seidel. Above, Robison makes her Dobro sing.

