

HIGH-FLYIN' CHICKS

Appeal goes mainstream but music stays true to country

By Miriam Longino
STAFF WRITER

The Dixie Chicks have plenty of reasons to cluck.

As their highly anticipated new album, "Fly," reaches stores today, the perky country music trio is hotter than a sparkler — media darlings du jour. They are everywhere, from the pages of Seventeen magazine to giggling sound bites on "Entertainment Tonight." Designer Todd Oldham begs them to wear his clothes. Julia Roberts romps through her latest movie to their music. Dressed in ripped leather costumes, blond hair streaked in black, the group was this year's camera grabber at the Grammy Awards, where it won for best country album and duo/group. The women are nominated for four Country Music Association trophies, which will be handed out Sept. 22, including the coveted entertainer of the year, which they just might win. Move over, Garth Brooks.

It is rare (Brooks, Dolly Parton) that a country music act creates such a buzz outside Nashville circles. But the Chicks haven't done it by catering to pop. Their music is solidly country - a breezy, fun style rooted in the traditional bluegrass backgrounds of sisters Emily Robison (banjo, dobro) and Martie Seidel (fiddle, mandolin) and the powerhouse vocals of lead singer Natalie Maines.

"I think they are having a profound impact on country music, and an important, positive impact," says country singer Dwight Yoakam. "They are continuing the illustration of the case in point that females can and will continue to help shape country music into the next decade."

A mere 19 months ago, few outside Texas had heard of the group with the big smiles and cutesy name. They were a quirky novelty act that dressed like Dale Evans and mostly played conventions in and around Austin. After nearly a decade of rejection, they were "discovered" by Monument Records' producer Blake Chancey, who says he had to close his eyes when he listened to them to get past their somewhat cartoonish looks. Even after a major record deal, the trio was turned down for an appearance on an Atlanta TV show in 1998 for having a name that was "politically incorrect" (i.e. the word "Dixie").

With the release of the album "Wide Open Spaces" in January 1998, however, fans of all ages responded to their music. It spawned five hit singles, and went on to sell 7 mil-



The Dixie Chicks dazzled a Lakewood Amphitheater audience in late July. They had been booked months earlier as the opening act to headliner Tim McGraw.

lion copies, making the Dixie Chicks over night superstars.

The phenomenon was glaringly apparent at the Chicks' July 25 show at Lakewood Amphitheater, where they opened for Tim McGraw, a date booked long before anyone had gauged their mass appeal. At a backstage party hosted by country radio stations Kicks 101.5 and Y-106.7, the trio was smothered by the normally blasé VIP crowd like a blond float at a Mardi Gras parade. As cameras flashed and bodies pressed against them, the Chicks wore dazed smiles and dutifully signed autographs until handlers whisked them back to their lipstick red bus.

Reflecting on the meet-and-greet, Maines called the coach her "safe haven."

"I love meeting fans, but I started feeling very panicky. When there are a lot of hands on me like that, I start freaking out 'cause I don't know these people. Everything has happened so fast.

One day you could walk through a mall, the next day you couldn't. You have to know when ▶ Please see **CHICKS, E2**

CHICK IT OUT: History: The band was formed in Dallas in 1989 by sisters Emily Robison, 27, and Martie Seidel, 29, along with two friends. They played western swing, mostly on street corners, and wore campy cowgirl outfits with fringe. In 1995 Nashville producer Blake Chancey told them to ditch the costumes and signed them to a record deal. Six months before going into the studio, Robison and Seidel decided to change lead singers, and asked Maines, 24, to join the group. The result was the album "Wide Open Spaces," which sold 7 million copies.

- **The sound:** Robison and Seidel's parents were private school teachers in Dallas who insisted their daughters take music lessons. Robison became proficient on dobro and banjo, Seidel on fiddle. Maines attended the Berklee School of Music in Boston, but was heavily influenced by her father, Texas steel guitarist Lloyd Maines.
- **The name:** Dixie Chicks is derived from the tune "Dixie Chicken" by Little Feat.
- **The hits:** "I Can Love You Better Than That," "There's Your Trouble," "Wide Open Spaces," "You Were Mine," "Tonight the Heartache's on Me," "Ready to Run."
- **The new album:** "Fly," in stores today.

INSIDE:

- THE STORY BEHIND THE MAKEOVER / E2
- A REVIEW OF "FLY" / E2

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Chicks: Solid music, solid image

► Continued from E1

you step outside, you're a Dixie Chick."

Producer Chancey says he had no clue just how popular the trio was going to be until he celebrated his 4-year-old niece's birthday in Florida. "It was a theme party, and everyone showed up dressed as their favorite Dixie Chick," he says. "The record hadn't been out all that long. That's when I realized, 'Omgod, this is going to be huge.'"

Perhaps the formula behind the Chicks' appeal is a combination of solid musicianship and successful imaging.

The acoustic instruments that make up most of the group's sound are more than props. Robison and Seidel are superb pickers who have a knack for knowing how to turn traditionalism into something fresh and new. "When is the last time you heard a banjo on a country record?" Chancey asks. On lead vocals, Maines has a set of pipes like a whistle on a Mississippi steamboat, packed with twang and sass.

RCA recording artist Sara Evans says, "I knew I really loved them when I heard them sing 'Stand by Your Man' at the Academy of Country Music Awards last year. Natalie has a wonderful voice, and she just hit that note right on. That's a hard song to sing, and they sounded perfect. I looked at my husband and said, 'These girls are great!'"

On top of the tight sound, the Chicks exude an image of countrified girl power — best girlfriends who can be harmlessly fun hell-raisers. They have tiny chicken tracks tattooed on their feet, one for each No. 1 record. Onstage, they banter about Maines' recent divorce, and are self-deprecating about their looks. Maines quips, "Emily's goal in life was to be on 'Hee Haw,' but I told her 'Sorry. They don't take double A's on that show.'" The new CD even comes with a tune called "Sin Wagon," in which the Chicks say they want to "do a little mattress dancin'."

Maines certainly exudes a devilishness straight out of "Thelma & Louise," as if she'd take a dare on a moment's notice. She says what she thinks, quite often making her label executives grimace. Onstage, she dances and sings



Dallas Morning News

Before the makeover: The Dixie Chicks, circa 1994, had limited appeal for a limited audience.

TRÉS CHICK

There's been nearly as much buzz about the Dixie Chicks' look in the past year as their music, and Melanie Shelley intends to keep it that way. She's the Nashville hairstylist who oversees the band's image as part of a consulting team known as the Glam Squad.

From her funky headquarters near downtown Nashville, a vintage 1950s beauty parlor called Trim Classic Barber & Legendary Beauty, she meets regularly with the Chicks to come up with the quirky hairstyles and costumes that define their style.

"I would describe the look as 100 percent fun," she says. "The Chicks aren't afraid of color, of

pushing the boundaries of what's tasteful and what's not. They can't stand not to change, and that allows me to be super creative."

Shelley is the one who put those black streaks in the band's hair for their splashy Grammy appearance. ("A lounge hostess look," she calls it). Costume concepts, from hair barrettes to platform shoes, are typically sketched out on a board, presented to the band, then sent to designers.

"Not everyone approves, but everyone notices," Shelley says. "Nobody looks at TLC and says, 'I think they are going too far or changing too often.' They are a girl group who really loves their bodies and fashion. To me, the Dixie Chicks are a country TLC."

— Miriam Longino

with such energy you worry she's going to pop out of her tiny body in a puff of spontaneous combustion. Her style has apparently always been a bit of a joyride.

"Since I was 3 I was like this. There was this time I was sitting at a piano banging on it, and my dad came in and told me to stop," Maines recalls. "I wouldn't, so he said, 'If you play one more key, you are going to the bathroom and get spanked.' I looked directly in his eye, lifted one finger and pressed one key. He couldn't believe I had the nerve. He didn't spank me, and, in a way, I think that's when he knew I could go out there in the world and stand on my own."

Both the Chicks and their producer say they didn't feel under

the gun while recording "Fly," or pressured to repeat the success of their "Wide Open Spaces." "I think we felt more confident, if anything," Maines says. "Our voices blended better, our producers were more comfortable. We didn't want to remake 'Wide Open Spaces,' but we didn't want to go pop. I think we took some risks creatively."

And what if the Chicks lay an egg?

"If it bites me in the butt tomorrow, so what," Maines laughs. "They can take my money, but they can't take my happiness."

■ To hear selections from "Fly," dial 511, enter 8600 and Soundline number 434. Each call costs 50 cents.