

# COUNTRY MUSIC

**PEOPLE**

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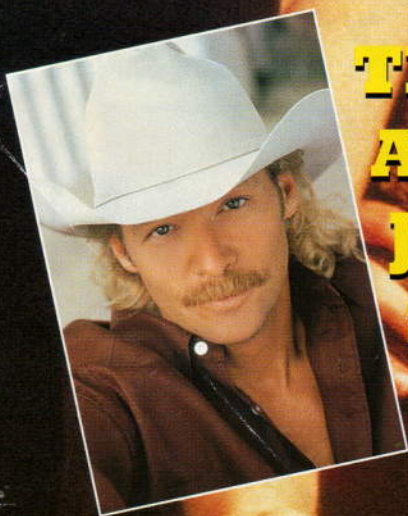
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1998 CMA  
Award Winners

## Dixie Chicks

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From a Dallas street corner to the most prestigious stage in country music

# Dixie Chicks



Photo: Matthew Barnes

On Wednesday, September 23 at the 32nd CMA Awards Show, the feisty trio of singer-musicians from Texas walked away with the Group of the Year and Horizon trophies. Bob Paxman braved the ladies for a chat.

The Dixie Chicks will admit that they heard the voices of the “naysayers”. Three women, playing a mixture of bluegrass, pop and straight country? It’ll never fly (of course, the same was also said of Lindbergh). At this point, the act has not only flown but fairly soared, and you can use any “chicks” analogy that your brain can muster to describe their success.

They’re flying high, ruling the roost, spreading their wings, and so on down the inevitable line. All they haven’t done is lay the proverbial egg.

Their major label debut, *Wide Open Spaces* on the reborn Monument label, was just certified gold in the US. The first single, *I Can Love You Better*, soared into the Top 10, and the followup, *There’s Your Trouble*, hit #1 on the American country charts. Now, they’ve lifted both the Vocal Group and Horizon trophies at the 1998 CMA Awards.

Where did they go right and the naysayers go wrong? Perhaps the secret lies with uniqueness, in an era that’s starting to get notorious for sameness.

“Three women doing what we do is just so different in itself,” agrees Emily Erwin, the tallest of the trio, who plays banjo, guitar, dobro and mandolin. “The fact that we play our own instruments has a lot to do with our signature sound. People probably look at us playing fiddles and banjos or whatever, and think, ‘What are they DOING up there?’ But it’s fun for us, and I think we are breaking a lot of stereotypes.”

They’re also latching on to a particular audience, mainly women in their twenties (which all three Chicks happen to be) looking for feisty role models. The debut Chick singles carried the proper “edge”, without the anger that seems to drive many female pop acts. They sent out clear, adamant messages that if you’re looking for wallflowers best send for Bob Dylan’s son.

“We are connecting with people our age, which means the most to us,” observes lead vocalist Natalie Maines. “The life we live right now is how we pick our songs. We haven’t sung about divorce because none of us has experienced that yet. But we do

sing about heartbreak – I mean, you go through that when you’re 12.”

Emily Erwin concedes that *There’s Your Trouble* fits right into the Chicks mold, in other words a tune with plenty of pluck. “We are a little partial to songs like that. There’s a psychology behind it, you know, ‘You’re seeing the wrong one, buddy!’ But we’re just calling it like it is. People like things in plain English,” she adds with a gentle laugh.

“It reminds me a lot of Tammy Wynette’s songs. She was always saying, ‘Girl, get your head out of your you-know-what,’ and I loved her for that reason.”

Naturally, they’re getting pitched similar songs by everyone with an axe to grind.

“We’re getting piles and piles of ‘attitude’ songs. Guess there’s an awful lot of ‘tude’ out there,” chuckles Emily in agreement. “But that’s not our MO at all. The song, *Wide Open Spaces* (the group’s current single), has a lot of depth to it. *Once You’ve Loved Somebody* is a great ballad. So, there’s no formula for a Chicks song. If we like it, and we think we can put our harmonies to it, that’s all we need.”

The Chicks have been raised on music since they were, well, chicks. Sisters Martie Seidel, a champion fiddle player, and Emily Erwin, practically a ringer for Julia Roberts, learned their instruments as they were hitting double digits. Martie started fiddling at the age of five. Emily learned banjo at age ten and picked up the dobro and guitar soon afterward.

Even as teens, the Texas sisters were pulling down gigs and making more than a few bucks. They toured the country together in a teen bluegrass group, Blue Night Express, for six years before helping found Dixie Chicks. The Chicks were hatched in the summer of 1989 when 19-year-old Martie and Emily, then 16, plus two other original members, Laura Lynch and Robin Lynn Macy, took their instruments to a Dallas street corner and started playing for tips.

“We knew there was something magical – or at least lucrative – about women playing music together,” cracks Martie. “The only problem was we didn’t have a name.”

But, by pure chance, the Little Feat song *Dixie Chicken* came on the radio one morning and a moniker was nearly born. The story goes that Martie didn’t take to being a “chicken” so the name was eventually shortened.

Natalie, the daughter of record producer-musician Lloyd Maines, joined the group in 1995. It seemed she was groomed for the position. Like her band mates, Natalie learned music early on, spending summers hanging out at dad’s recording studio in Texas and participating in Maines family jam sessions.

