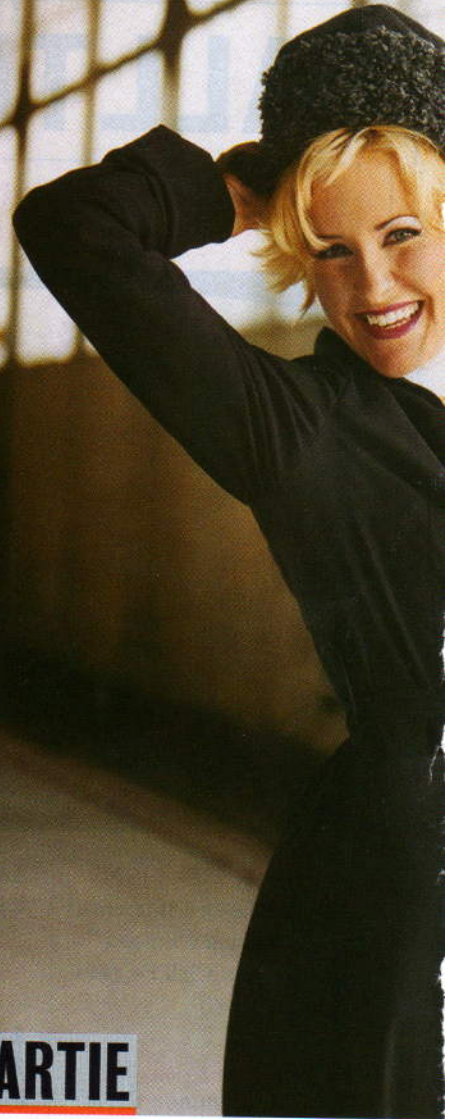


The **DIXIE CHICKS'** WIDE OPEN SPACES peevd country purists with its message of cowgirl empowerment—and that was *before* the bitter divorce proceeding, the black leather, and their blockbuster success

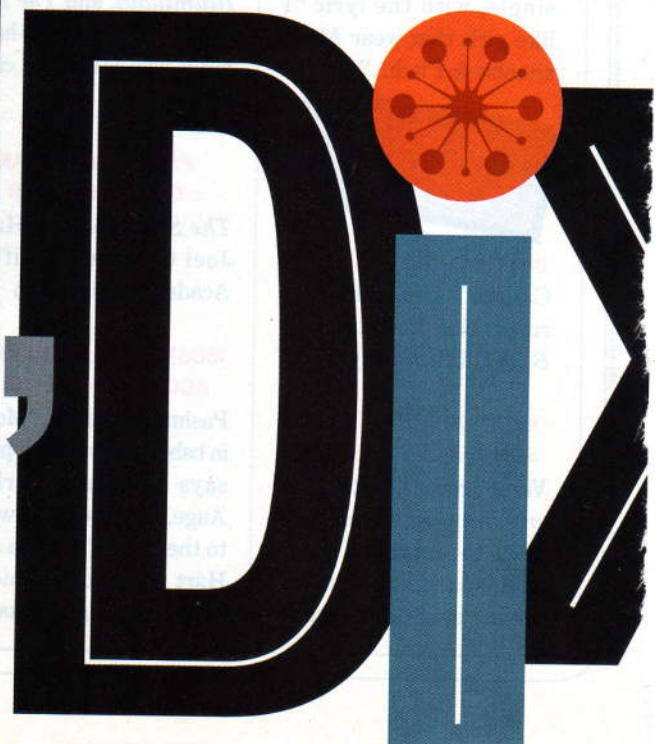
NATALIE



MARTIE

WHISTLIN'

By Chris Willman



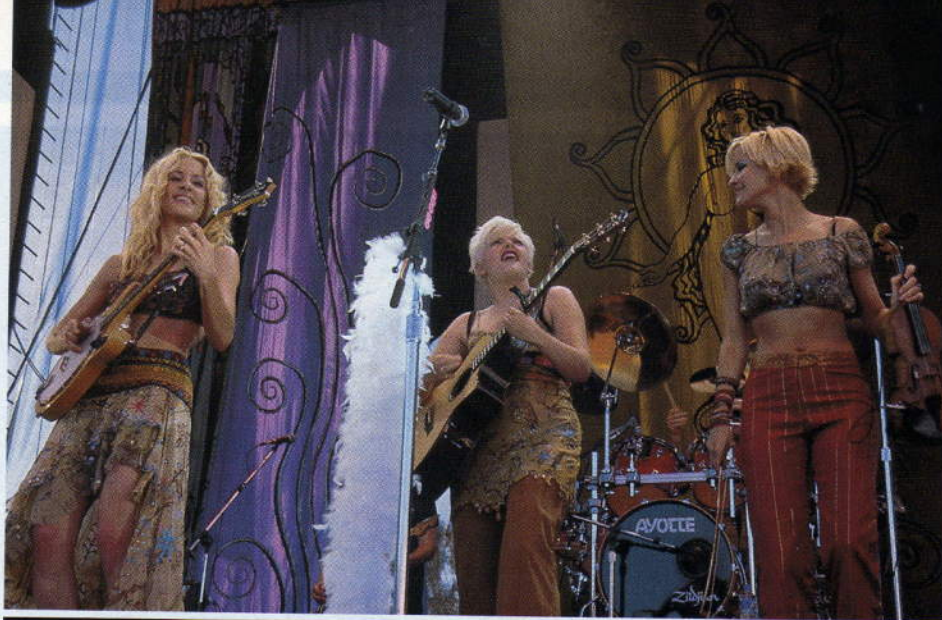
EMILY



Xtremes

THE DIXIE CHICKS ARE MORE THAN a little bit country, and Lilith Fair at least a little bit rock & roll. So when the glam-happy Texas trio signed on for 19 Lilith dates this summer, not everyone was convinced theirs was a match made in demographic heaven. But, as it turns out, even a Lilith crowd full of tattooed Valley Girls and West Hollywood lipstick lesbians loves a good d-i-v-o-r-c-e

Photographs by Jeffrey Thurnher



POULTRY IN MOTION Chicks Robison, Maines, and Seidel (left to right) take the Lilith crowd under their wings

OUR LABEL IS scared to death of that song because it says 'mattress dancing,'" boasts Maines, 24, taking time out in her tour trailer the day after the Chicks' triumphant Rose Bowl gig. "Sin Wagon" is the most controversial song on their new album, *Fly*, if only within the halls of Sony Nashville. Manager Simon Renshaw even took a meeting with label brass who wanted to ditch the track. "If we didn't have the success we've had and the control that the success gave us, they probably wouldn't have allowed it on the album," Maines asserts, chuckling at the ease with which they overruled the company's nervous Nellies.

story as much as the next bunch of Tammy Wynette buffs.

Launching into a rant about her almost-ex-husband, singer Natalie Maines has the rapt attention of the Pasadena Rose Bowl crowd this humid July afternoon. "The last thing he said was 'It's not about the money.' Seven months later, we're still not divorced and it's *still* not about the money," she informs the 18,000 assembled, her playfully indignant Texas twang rising to preaching level. "I haven't quite figured out what it *is* about. But what I do know is that with all the money he's gonna take, I'm gonna try and make some more. And so Emily and I wrote this song about a girl who's been good for *faaaar* too long, and she's gonna go out and do *alllll* her sinnin' in one night!"

With that, the gay divorcee-to-be kick-starts "Sin Wagon," a barnstorming bluegrass number that is the most traditional-sounding (and most sexually charged) song in the band's set. Her fellow Chicks, sisters Martie Seidel and Emily Robison, join in with fiddle and banjo solos, and later in the song all three harmonize a couple of snatches of the gospel standard "I'll Fly Away." But any bow to reverence in this beer-drenched bad-girl anthem is purely tongue-in-cheek, especially by the time Maines whoops, "When it's my turn to march up to glory/I'm gonna have one hell of a story!" She threatens to cap off her devilish night away from her future ex's clutches with "a little mattress dancin'—that's right, I said mattress dancin'!"

And all God's neo-feminists said, Amen.

"Sin Wagon" inevitably brings the house down just as much here as at a George Strait or Tim McGraw show, to cite the other two summer tours to which the Dixies have been hitching their wagon. The Chicks are further preaching to the choir when they subsequently offer Lilith fans the *Thelma & Louise*-esque "Goodbye Earl," an upbeat new tune in which two gals murder an abusive husband and walk away scot-free. Whether it's rednecks in the Sun Belt or same-sex neckers in L.A., folks do go nuts for cowgirl empowerment. And this *is* the group that was born to bridge the gulf between *You go, girl* and "Your Good Girl's Gonna Go Bad."

Nashville wasn't always so wholesome, but in today's conservative country climate, it takes a lot to win the right to cast a sexual allusion. The Dixie Chicks won that privilege by selling more than 6 million copies of last year's *Wide Open Spaces*, the first album sibs Seidel and Robison recorded with then newcomer Maines. It was a Grammy-winning crossover smash that launched the trio into a country stratosphere shared only by Shania and Garth. When a subject like "Sin Wagon" arises now, Renshaw says he's fond of reminding certain execs how they once fought to try to change the band's name, which many thought would offend Northerners and women alike. A couple of years later, *Spaces* is still selling more than 50,000 copies a week, and presumably not just to Southern men.

So mattress, schmattress: At this point, the Chicks are so beloved they could probably remake "Erotic City" and still be Opry shoo-ins. A bigger concern among country-radio programmers has to do with the possibility of the Chicks crossing the road, but if anything, *Fly*, due in stores Aug. 31, is even less "pop" than the last album. Their trademark banjo, fiddle, and dobro—a sound favored by Robison and Seidel since they were a teenage bluegrass act in their hometown of Dallas—were rendered almost inaudible on *Spaces*, not for Top 40 penetration but to placate upmarket country stations that find old-time instrumentation anathema. Happily, *Fly* brings the arcana back up in the otherwise very modern mix. "What the girls are trying to do with things like Lilith is bring people *back* to country," says manager Renshaw. "Natalie had a great line about it, which was that they'd rather be the rock queens of country than the lame queens of rock."

Maines may disarm a few purists by showing up in a black leather jacket on such non-TNN shows as *Politically Incorrect*, or with her charge that a lot of contemporary country is "pretty darn cookie-cutter and fake." But if their singer is a spitfire with a slight streak of provocation, the sisters who started the group a decade ago—Seidel, 29, described as "everyone's best friend," and Robison, 26, the "consummate musician"—provide more

PREVIOUS SPREAD: STYLING: JENNIFER LEVINE/BEAUTY & PHOTO: MAKEUP: CANDY AND STACY MARTIN; HAIR: MELANIE AND MICHAEL SILVA; MAINES'S CLOTHES: ANDRE B; MARTIE'S COAT: MICHELLE MANDSON/VISE; LA MARTIE'S HAT: DIESEL; STYLE LAB; EMILY'S CLOTHES: BEBE; (THIS PAGE) JEN LOWERY/LONDON FEATURES

