

(From left)
Seidel,
Maines,
Robison

dixie
CHICKS

●●●“EVERYBODY TOLD US, JUST DO IT like you did it the first time,” says Emily Robison, 27, the banjo-playing Dixie Chick. “But, like Tina Turner sings, we never, ever do anything nice and easy,” cackles Natalie Maines, 25, the lead-singing Dixie Chick. Along with the fiddling Chick, 30-year-old Martie Seidel, theirs is the country act that pulled the entertainment rug out from under crossover queen Shania Twain and—who knows?—may have sent Garth Brooks over the edge into Chris Gainesville.

The Chicks have sold more than 8 million copies of their Grammy-winning '98 debut, *Wide Open Spaces*, but it was their August '99 follow-up, *Fly*, that really made industry insiders take full measure of these raucous soul sisters. Defying the sophomore jinx, *Fly* wafted its way up to No. 1 on the pop charts—not a surprise in itself, given the trio's hard touring and impressive displays of virtuosity. The shock was how good the album is: Ignoring the usual Nashville recipe—bake a dozen pop-inflected tunes delivered by Nashville cookie-cutter songwriting pros and serve chilled with studio professionalism—the Chicks instead served up hot 'n' steamy biscuits like “Goodbye Earl,” their ode to offing an abusive husband (oh, Lordy, unrepentant murder on conservative country radio!), and “Sin Wagon,” a yowling testament to “mattress dancin’” (oh, gracious: sex!). *Fly* coheres as a statement of independence in a genre whose stars are typically rewarded for their conformity. And bringing the fiddle and banjo back into mainstream country while continuing to get airplay on narrowly programmed, pop-minded country stations makes the Dixie Chicks this year's neo-trad heroines—a status certified in September with three Country Music Awards.

“They take chances,” says Buddy Miller, an unorthodox songwriter whose often-downbeat, lyrically intricate songs have relegated his own CDs to cult status, but whose song “Hole in My Head” the Chicks found entirely in keeping with their let's-go-crazy brand of country. “I wrote that song with Jim Lauderdale on the way to the recording studio,” admits Miller. “And the fact that they dug a tossed-off, kind of nutty song—well, not



With their sophomore hit, country's high-flyin' Chicks didn't just prove they could do it again—they proved they could do it better

many Nashville acts are willing to stick their necks out like that.”

Sticking their Chick-en necks out seems to be the plan. “The only way to please the people is to please ourselves,” says Maines, whose father, Lloyd, has played hardcore pedal steel guitar behind fringe country acts like Joe Ely for decades. “After you sell as many records as we did with *Wide Open Spaces*, you can pretty much do what you want,” adds Robison. “In fact, I don't understand why so many country acts, as they become more popular, take fewer chances—they don't want to mess with the style that got them famous. We look at each other and think, Hey, we're all *about* messing with styles.”

Success also brings pop-cultural outreach. The Chicks more than held their own with the rock acts Sheryl Crow assembled for her big Sept. 14 New York benefit concert. And, oh yeah, the video for that jaunty homicide tune “Goodbye Earl” could star *NYPD Blue*'s Dennis Franz as the murder victim if the Chicks have their way. Says Robison, chuckling, “Isn't the Chicks' world a crazy one?” Yeah, well, isn't that the point? —KT