

ALBUM REVIEWS

Where would you like to fly?

Regardless, Dixie Chicks can get you there in fine country style

Dixie Chicks

Fly
(Monument)

★★★★^{1/2}

The much-anticipated *Fly* is an album of contrasts; fun and wildness are juxtaposed with sorrow and longing. Given that lead singer Natalie Maines was going through a divorce and banjo/dobro/steel player Emily Robison was preparing to marry at the time they recorded it, those contrasts make some sense. But they also ring true for humanity in general; emotions are fleeting and we all ricochet from joy to sadness.

Maines sets the tone in the opening *Ready to Run*, as she displays an increasing confidence. Her vocals are southern and sassy, though she's not bound entirely to that mode. In *Don't Waste Your Heart*, she offers a mountain-influenced reading that could've easily been borrowed from an early Patty Loveless recording, while *Without You* mines the lower end of her register, giving her more of a smooth Terri Clark feel.

The album is decidedly country, with Martie Seidel's bent fiddle lines and Robison's steel in *Hello Mr. Heartache* underscoring a Ray Price shuffle approach. The chugging banjo and wilderness imagery of *Cowboy Take Me Away* and the break into the



The success of their first album, *Wide Open Spaces*, created high expectations for their second. and *Fly* doesn't disappoint. From left: Emily Erwin, Natalie Maines and Martie Seidel.

country classic *I'll Fly Away* during the bluegrass-influenced *Sin Wagon* only add to the country textures.

Still, the standout part of *Fly* remains those integral Chick harmonies: tight, spunky and unapologetic.

Those harmonies are ideal for their let-your-hair-down numbers: *Sin Wagon*, *Some Days You Gotta Dance* or the humorously sinister *Goodbye Earl* (for which they actually included a disclaimer stating they "do not advocate premeditated murder"). And the harmonies provide an

excellent contrast for the more spare, thoughtful pieces: the cinematic *Cold Day in July*, the string-supported *Without You* or the bluesy closer *Let Him Fly*.

There's plenty of humor in the album's graphics, though it merely disguises the variety of emotions that run through the 14 songs on *Fly*.

Cumulatively, the songs verify what we suspected about the trio following their monstrously successful *Wide Open Spaces* album: The Chicks are for real.

- Tom Roland, Staff Writer

SCENE

NASHVILLE

September 2, 1999

Rising Above

Music Review

Country trio takes to the sky on new collection

Dixie Chicks

Fly (Monument)

By Michael McCall

Earlier this year, during a photo shoot for *TV Guide*, a New York-based photographer asked the Dixie Chicks if they'd mind leaving the recording studio where they were working to step outside in search of a more interesting setting. The trio cheerfully agreed. Once outside, however, the gravel parking lot didn't provide much more color than the compact studio. As the photographer gazed around, the three Chicks--Natalie Maines and sisters Martie Seidel and Emily Robison--took off down the street in search of a better locale, bopping down the road with carefree abandon.

At the end of the street, they found little more than a barren patch of trees. Then Maines spied a sign that said "No Dumping," and that was all it took. Within minutes, all three Chicks were crouched down in front of the sign with mock grimaces on their faces, making indecent grunting noises and laughing as the photographer clicked away. Afterward, as the Chicks dashed back up the street, the photographer smiled, shook his head, and said that he had never worked with stars who were as unself-conscious and as daring as this trio of young women.

That sense of daring and lack of self-consciousness shines through on *Fly*, the trio's outstanding follow-up to their multimillion-selling major-label debut, *Wide Open Spaces*. Sounding brasher and more confident than ever, the Chicks venture out wider--and wilder--on *Fly*. The payoff likely will be massive commercial success that also attracts widespread critical acclaim.

Such a combination is a rarity these days. Country music's biggest sellers usually get trashed by the American rock press and by serious music enthusiasts as slick suppliers of generic ear candy. Garth Brooks, for instance, quickly turned from the sensitive good ol' boy of "Friends in Low Places" and "The Dance" into a superstar whose primary goal was to create big-ticket songs and events that kept his fame spiraling upward. Shania Twain, after the bold strokes of *Woman in Me*, returned with the overtly calculated *Come on Over*, which, despite a couple of nicely turned radio songs largely transformed the strengths of her previous album into superficial clichés.

It doesn't have to go down like that, and the Dixie Chicks realize it. Instead of second-guessing the marketplace or sticking to easily promotable themes and formulas, the Chicks let the music lead the way on *Fly*. They figure if they love a song, then other people will too; if they find or write songs that mean something to them personally, then they'll perform them with a conviction that will make the tunes come alive for others as well.

"I wanted to approach the album the same way we did the first one--that is, go into it as if you have nothing to lose, and don't try and figure out what someone wants to hear from you," Martie Seidel said during an interview that took place during the recording of *Fly*.

Vocally and instrumentally, the trio's performances

should erase any doubt about their skills. Throughout the album, the threesome flash both personality and ability in their seamless yet spirited blending of old-time string instruments and modern pop-country sensibilities. They take on honky-tonk, country-rock, mountain hoedowns, and acoustic balladry with energy and aplomb. *Fly* is that rare Music Row album that's both traditionally rooted yet thoroughly modern.

But what truly lifts the new collection is the way it tackles subjects that heretofore would have been considered suicidal for a developing country band. With *Fly*, the Dixie Chicks have taken their newfound creative leverage and pried open the future of country music.

Not only do they have the nerve to perform songs that tackle such risky subject matter as drinking for the fun of it, killing someone because he deserves it, and heading out on the town in search of sexual pleasure. They also have the audacity, not to mention the charisma, to make each activity sound like a God-given right. "We didn't want to limit ourselves by saying, 'We can't sing about that subject,'" Robison says.

And so on "Goodbye Earl" and "Sin Wagon," they cut loose and tell it like it is. It's on these two songs--as well as the snarling, stomping cover of Buddy Miller and Jim Lauderdale's "Hole in My Head"--that the Chicks charge, with boas flying, through any obstacles that might be holding them back.

"Goodbye Earl," written by Dennis Linde, tackles spousal abuse in a manner that manages to be gleefully vengeful without trivializing the subject. A stanza in the middle of the song establishes the horror of what the battered wife is experiencing: "Well, she finally got the nerve to file for divorce/She let the law take it from there/But Earl walked through that restraining order/And put her in intensive care." In a series of scenes reminiscent of *Fried Green Tomatoes* or *Practical Magic*, the wife and her best friend murder the abusive husband and dispose of the corpse without getting apprehended. Despite some initial inquiries from officials, Earl winds up being "a missing person that nobody missed at all," as Maines sings with unmistakable relish.

"Sin Wagon" is even more outrageous, at least for a country tune, because it doesn't bother with justifying its hedonistic message. Set to a furious acoustic stomp, the song finds a woman turning the tables on a deceitful lover by boasting that she's going to put on a red dress, get drunk, hunt down a new man, and do some mattress dancin'--"That's right, I said, 'mattress dancin';" Maines emphasizes, just in case any prudish listeners can't believe what they've just heard. Written by Maines, Robison, and Stephony Smith, the hilariously raucous tune kicks a platform heel through country-music conventions. "I'll fly away," the Chicks harmonize in the song's mock-gospel closing, which grabs a line from the famous hymn; then, in the most amoral tone they can muster, they add, "on a sin wagon!"

Fly boasts plenty of customary country songs as well, from a solidly performed barroom shuffle ("Hello Mr. Heartache") to nicely done pop-country songs ("Some Days You Gotta Dance" and the Celtic-influenced "Ready to Run"). The only slack song on the collection is a mid-tempo tune about a cowboy lover who restores a woman physically and emotionally--but, then, there are listeners more likely to connect with that fantasy than me.



Now that they've got America's attention, the Chicks plan to keep it by challenging themselves and by boldly following their musical instincts. By avoiding the calculated sounds and careful marketing maneuvers of most country hit-makers, they might actually garner something rare for a '90s Nashville star--artistic respect.

SEPTEMBER 6, 1999

People

weekly

P i c k s & P a n s

Album of the week



Cow belles: Dixie Chicks Robison (left), Maines and Seidel hatch a winner on the *Fly*.



S o n g

Fly

Dixie Chicks (Monument)

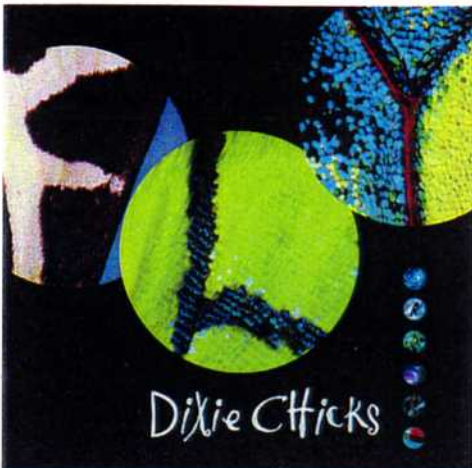
Three cute, cookie-cutter blondes, the Dixie Chicks look like poster girls for the new, pop-flavored Nashville sound. Now the release of this second album while their 1997 debut, *Wide Open Spaces*, still hovers near the top of the country charts, prompts speculation that the glam trio is aiming at a Shania-like crossover success. Happily, it ain't

so. Just as full of down-home Texas twang as their first, *Fly* is a sophomore album that soars along on Martie Seidel's fiddling and sister Emily Robison's (née Erwin) banjo picking. But it is honky-tonk angel Natalie Maines whose lead vocals give the Dixie Chicks sound its saloon-door swing. Among the highlights here is "Cowboy Take Me Away," a tune Seidel cowrote and the Chicks sang at Emily's May wedding to singer Charlie Robison.—S.D. **Bottom Line:** Neither pop nor corn, just deep-fried country with lots of snap

MUSIC ROW[®]

NASHVILLE'S MUSIC INDUSTRY PUBLICATION

ALBUM REVIEWS



DIXIE CHICKS/*Fly*

(Monument NK69678) Producers: Blake Chancey, Paul Worley

Prime Cuts: "Fly," "Goodbye Earl," "Sin Wagon," "Hole In My Head"

Critique: For the country music industry, *Fly* may be the most important album of the decade. With at least four of the genre's top acts crossing the pop fence, Dixie Chicks belong solely to Nashville and country radio. But these are uncertain times. As we've repeatedly seen, a multi-platinum debut is no guarantee of stardom—and we need stars. Thankfully, the Chicks have delivered an excellent album, even though (and precisely because) it isn't what the consultants would have ordered up. *Fly* employs

stronger harmonies, more aggressive instrumental work and the most powerful vocal performances we've yet heard from Natalie Maines. But unlike *Wide Open Spaces*, this disc's strength is not in obvious hit singles. "Goodbye Earl" finds two women joyfully poisoning and taunting an abusive husband before disposing of him. Break-neck bluegrass romp "Sin Wagon" finds a newly single woman boozing up, bedding down and, finally, seeking forgiveness. "Hole In My Head" would be right at home on a George Thorogood album. The album certainly has its share of conventional radio songs: "Cowboy Take Me Away" is beautiful in the "Wide Open Spaces" vein, and "Without You" is a big, orchestral ballad. Nothing, however, is as engaging as when the Chicks dance on the ledge of propriety. How Monument chooses to present *Fly*, and radio's response, will ultimately determine whether the Chicks are viewed for what they are—the only country artists with the momentum and gumption to obliterate the uptempo positive veneer that has shackled this genre for too long.

-Chuck Aly

