VOLUME 22.2

THE JOURNAL OF COUNTRY MUSIC

The Magazine of the Country Music Hall of Fame and Museum

TEXAS MUSIC ISSUE

WILLIE NELSON, TEXAS ORAL HISTORY, GUY & SUSANNA CLARK, TEXAS DANCE HALLS, & HONKY-TONKERS

DIXIE CHICKS: BRINGING IT ALL BACK HOME

BY RICHARD SKANSE

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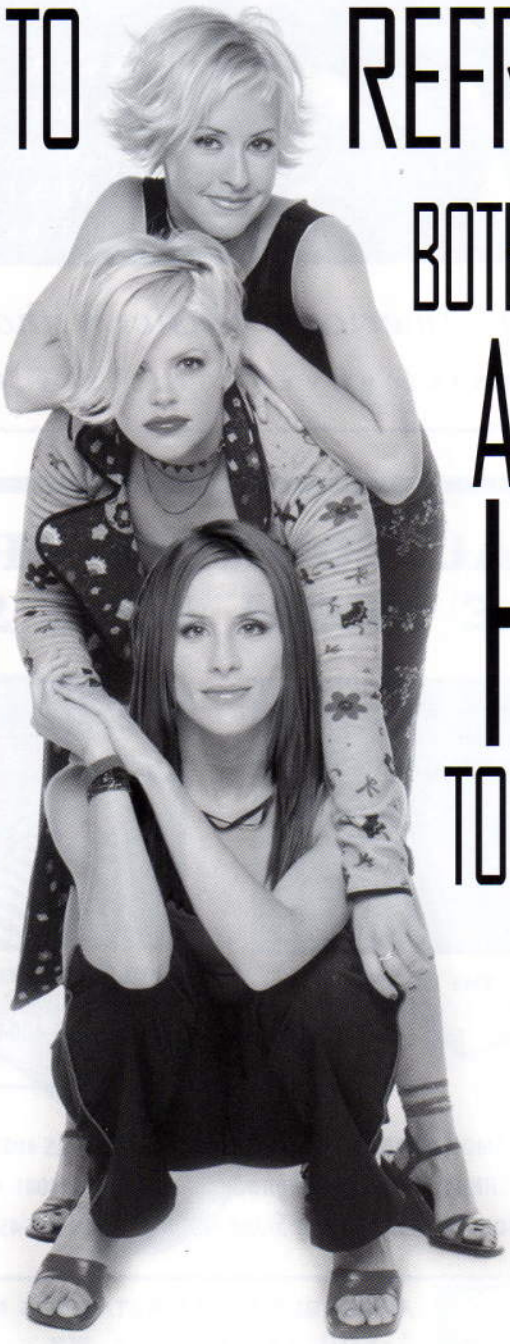
THE DIXIE CHICKS: BRINGING IT ALL BACK HOME.

IN ORDER TO REFRESH THEMSELVES BOTH PERSONALLY AND ARTISTICALLY THE DIXIE CHICKS HAVE RETURNED TO THEIR TEXAS ROOTS.



BY RICHARD SKANSE

From a strictly technical point of view, the 35th Country Music Association Awards were a bust for the Dixie Chicks. For the first time in four years, the reigning queens of the awards show circuit walked away from "country music's biggest night" empty handed. Maybe a year off the road made them a long shot for Entertainer of the Year (a prize they handily won in 2000, but lost out this time to Tim McGraw), but when Lonestar broke the Chicks' three-year stranglehold on Vocal Group of the Year, you half-expected to hear the mournful strains of the Band's "The Night They Drove Old Dixie Down" swelling to the rafters of the Grand Ole Opry House. It looked like a turning of the tide; the momentum the group had gathered on the wings of twenty million albums sold and their marathon *Fly* tour the previous year seemed gone, three years of near deafening buzz reduced to a whisper.

And then with a whisper, the Dixie Chicks roared louder than anyone had ever heard them roar before. When they took the stage for their performance mid-way through the show, there were no video screens, flashing lights, fog machines, or pyrotechnics. Just three young Texas women and a small back-up band in a bluegrass-style semi-circle, singing a heartbreaking song called "Traveling Soldier" about a high school girl with a bow in her hair and her chaste love for a lonely, frightened U.S. soldier writing to her from the hell of Vietnam. Penned by Dixie Chick Emily Robison's brother-in-law Bruce Robison, it was an uncommonly moving, timely song, rendered all the more powerful by an exquisitely delivered, sensitive performance rivaled only by the Dixie Chicks' premiere of their own song "I Believe in Love" on the *America: A Tribute to Heroes* telethon two months earlier. Even as part of a CMA telecast that seemed to favor traditional-minded fare like *O Brother, Where Art Thou?* and "Murder on Music Row" over neo-country commercial trifles like "I Wanna Talk About Me," the Dixie Chicks' acoustic performance that night raised the bar.

"It was all about the *song*," says *Dallas Morning News* country music critic Mario Tarradell. "Listen to the solemn, powerful nature of this song. *Absorb* it. The performance was not so much about the Dixie Chicks as it was about that song, and I think that was a real powerful statement. If people hadn't thought that there was another side to this band, then that performance revealed it."

Later that night, as singer Natalie Maines, banjo/dobro player Emily Robison, and her newlywed sister, fiddle player Martie Maguire (formerly Seidel, by a previous marriage) made their rounds at the after-show party circuit in Nashville, there were no condolences on their shut-out. Only awed praise, and congratulations for staying the course and true to their passion even while embroiled in a controversial contract-disputing lawsuit with their label, Sony Music. On a night dedicated to celebrating the achievements of a record industry, they had brought something more to the table: a celebration of artistic independence, a celebration of music. "There wasn't a new record or any product out there, so there was none of the politics of a new single or anything like that," says Emily's husband, singer-songwriter Charlie Robison. "They just got to play whatever they wanted to and have a good time. All the people talking about it afterwards was just icing on the cake."

"Friends of mine called me and said that their performance was the truest, best, let-me-show-you-my talent performance on the show," recalls Blake Chancey, who co-produced (with Paul Worley) both of the Dixie Chicks' mega-selling Sony albums, *Wide Open Spaces* and *Fly*. "Strip away the lights and the band and just focus on the music and what they do, and my God, these people are good."

That's essentially the same epiphany the Dixie Chicks themselves came up with in the months leading up to the *Tribute to Heroes* telethon and the CMA Awards. But in order to find their center again, they had to step out of the spotlight, completely out of the system and get back to their roots. Like Willie Nelson and the rest of the outlaw brigade before them, they had to get the hell out of the Nashville fishbowl and find their way back home to Texas.

In the fall of 2001, after nearly a year-off spending time with their families and recovering from the *Fly* tour, the Dixie Chicks entered an Austin studio to record some demos with Natalie's father Lloyd Maines, an in-demand producer on the Texas music scene and acclaimed steel guitarist (he's all over both of the Chicks' Sony albums). Casual was the rule.

"From the beginning, it was very much a business—that was not a concession. You can have your art, but you can be smart about how you promote yourself. We were the ultimate self-promoters."

— Emily Robison

"With our lawsuit with Sony and everything, we were just like, we're in Texas, we're off, we didn't have to do anything, but we were ready to be creative again," says Natalie. "We started out in my living room here in Austin, just playing around, playing music. Martie and I wrote some songs with Marty Stuart—we wrote 'I Believe in Love' and another one in that tempo. It just seemed like the next phase: just be laid back. I think we'll probably burn out from being the big performers and having to have everything be so *big*. It's nice to just make music, and make music that we all admire and are into right now. 'Traveling Soldier' was another one of the songs we did, and we *had* 'Angry All the Time' on our list of songs to record too. . . ." She pauses to laugh. "But we didn't tell Bruce so we didn't know when Tim McGraw recorded it."

When they began recording, they decided to keep the arrangements acoustic—and most significantly, drum free. "I think it's scary to put away the drums," admits Emily, "because there is a certain security blanket to having a band behind you. And when it's just basically acoustic instruments and you, you can hear the dobro and you hear banjo just *out there*. You hear the harmonies, and you hear the crack in your voice in the way that we're recording this. We felt that something that was missing on the other albums was just that presence, where you can hear every breath and you can hear every note, because when you have that many instruments things tend to get buried. So that's kind of the scary part of all of this, but I think it's turning out well—and it's pushing us to play better."

The world got to see evidence of that on the CMAs and on the telethon, but it remains to be seen whether the album the Dixie Chicks have been recording—they're past the phase of calling it demos—will ever see the light of day. They remain optimistic that it will, but how soon, well, that's the million-dollar question. Emily says they want people to hear it, and have an opportunity to pick it up at places other than local record stores in Texas. And unconventional as the recordings may be, one imagines that

Power in numbers: The Dixie Chicks—Emily Robison, Natalie Maines, and Martie Maguire (left to right)—have sold over twenty million albums while retaining their artistic integrity and a fierce independent spirit. The band has renewed its musical focus since returning home to Texas after the *Fly* tour.

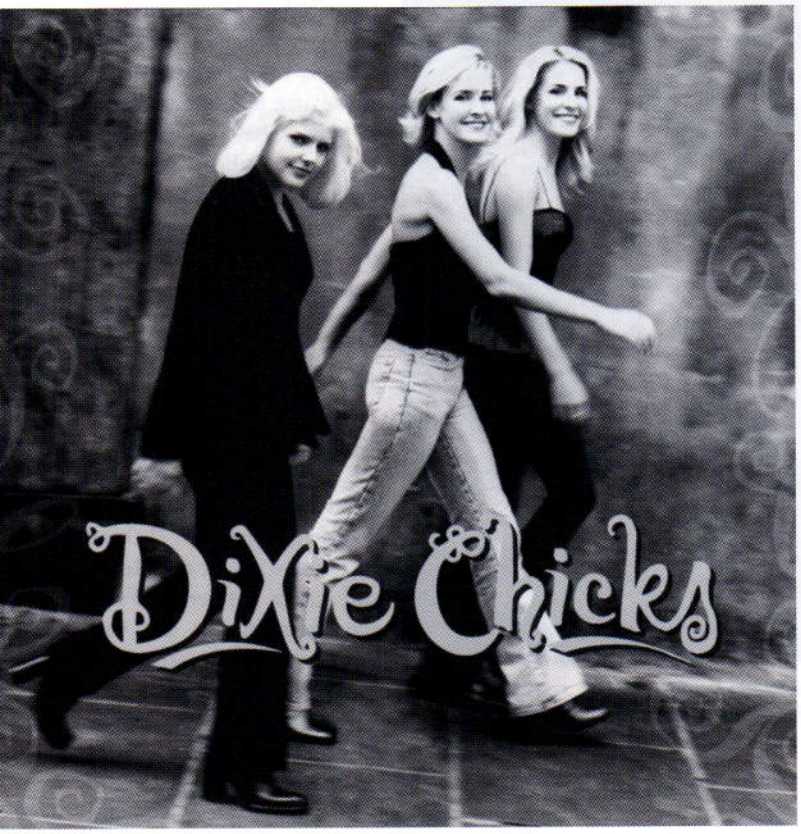
Sony would happily release it to patch things over and get the trio working on their next blockbuster. But before any of that happens, there's a very sticky contract battle to work out. Last summer, flush from the unprecedented success of their two albums and tour and feeling that Sony got a hell of a lot more than it originally bargained for when it signed the group to a six-album contract in 1997, the Dixie Chicks called for a renegotiation. Sony answered with a breach of contract lawsuit, and the Chicks answered back a month later with a $4.1 million lawsuit of their own. As this article was written, both parties were still in a deadlock. "There's nothing to tell at this point," sighs Emily. "The legal process is slower than the music business." Sony had no comment.

At stake is the immediate—and possible long-term—future of the single most dynamic, groundbreaking, acclaimed, and successful country act of the last twenty years. Others, most notably Garth Brooks and Shania Twain, can claim some of those titles, but the Dixie Chicks alone offer the full package. When examining the phenomenal success that the band has achieved since the 1998 release of their major-label debut *Wide Open Spaces*, there are two very different angles to choose from. There are the numbers, beginning with an astounding twenty million albums sold for two releases. *Wide Open Spaces* recently made it into the *Guinness Book of World Records* on the distinction of being the best-selling album by a country band of all time (it's certified eleven times Platinum, for sales of eleven million copies). *Fly*, the 1999 follow-up, trails close behind (9x Platinum at press time) but may very well eclipse it, as Sony continues to mine singles from it. The album debuted at the top of the pop charts and dominated the country charts for months, still entrenched in the Top Twenty more than two years after its release. The *Fly* tour, an eighty-five city marathon of sold-out arena and theater dates (including a two-night stand at New York's Radio City Music Hall), raked in $47.3 million, landing at #6 on *Pollstar*'s list of the Top Ten tours of 2000 (finishing ahead of blockbuster acts Bruce Springsteen, Crosby, Stills, Nash & Young, Metallica, and Britney Spears). According to the Chicks' lawsuit, *Wide Open Spaces* and *Fly* have generated no less than $175 million. Add to that ten Top Ten singles, five of them chart-toppers, and the awards: four Grammys, nine CMA Awards, including wins for Entertainer of the Year, Album of the Year (*Fly*), Video of the Year ("Goodbye Earle"), and Vocal Group of the Year in 2000, and eight Academy of Country Music Awards. The list goes on. And on.

Numbers like that—particularly the album sales—are not to be taken lightly, as the lawyers on both sides of the lawsuit between the Chicks and Sony Music would quickly testify. But they only tell half the story. No less significant in the big picture is the road the Dixie Chicks have paved on the way to breaking into the record books, leaving behind a trail of broken-down doors and untouched compromises. There are those that would contest the later. Robin Macy, who co-founded the group with Martie, Emily, and Laura Lynch in Dallas in 1989, balked at the addition of drums to the band's traditional, western swing, and bluegrass-inspired sound and flew the coop shortly after the group's second independently released

album in 1992. Three years later, when Martie and Emily asked remaining singer Lynch to step down in order bring Natalie Maines into the fold, the *Dallas Observer* alternative weekly screamed "sell out," a stance it has hardly strayed from since. Singling out *Wide Open Spaces* as one of the worst local releases of the nineties, a seething Zac Crain flippantly dismissed the album as "the sound of two talented musicians selling their souls, urged on by one chubby loudmouth."

Millions of fans, critics from *Rolling Stone* to *Billboard*, and musicians of no less caliber than Willie Nelson, Buck Owens, Ricky Skaggs, and Ray Benson of Asleep at the Wheel begged to differ.



The cover photo for 1998's *Wide Open Spaces*, which is listed in the *Guinness Book of World Records* as the best-selling album of all-time by a country band.

The album's first single, the Kostas and Pamela Brown Hayes-penned "I Can Love You Better" (#5) was bouncy, peppy country pop, as accessible and contemporary as any Shania Twain tune, but it was a Trojan horse. "There's a devil in that angel's face," warned Maines in the opening verse, and indeed there was—Robison's own snarling dobro, coursing throughout the entire song just below the hi-gloss surface like a snake in the grass. But it was the next single, "There's Your Trouble" (#1), written by Tia Sillers (co-writer of "I Hope You Dance" for Lee Ann Womack) and Mark Selby, that would turn the country music industry on its ear. Though dobro was not entirely unheard of on modern country radio, banjo was—and yet there it was in "There's Your Trouble," not as quirky color, but *driving* the song. "Getting the banjo on country radio literally scared me to death," admits Chancey. "It hadn't been on it for ten years. I kept going, 'Emily, I don't know . . . ' Finally she just put her foot down and said, 'Blake, this is what I play. You figure it out, but this is what I do.' Now all these people are introducing the banjo on their records because it's accepted, and that's 100 percent directly related to Emily."

Martie's instrumental presence—on fiddle and mandolin—was just as prominent throughout the album. "What you have to keep in mind is it's *them* playing," marvels Bruce Robison. "Those girls could go to a bluegrass festival and hang on their own with anyone that was there, the hottest pickers in the world." They could write, too, as evidenced by the sisters' heart-wrenching "You Were Mine," the album's third #1 single and still Natalie's finest moment on disc. "Loudmouth" Maines was loud, brash, and not so much in-your-face as plowing right through it, her explosive West Texas twang bolder than Tammy Wynette crossed with a hungry wildcat. She brought an edge and an attitude that hadn't been heard on country radio since fellow Lubbock native Waylon Jennings was cutting Billy Joe Shaver sides in the seventies. But it wasn't an untamed beast, that voice; wrapped up in the sisters' angelic harmonies and channeled through a lyric like "You Were Mine," it could be an instrument of devastating beauty.

And yet when *Fly* was released in the fall of 1999, it made *Wide Open Spaces* (still entrenched in the Top Five) look like a baby step. "They make the competition sound like kid stuff," enthused *Rolling Stone* of the album. Even the *Observer's* Robert Wilonsky grudgingly praised it, including it on his list of the best albums of 1999. The fiddle, banjo, and dobro (and Lloyd Maines's steel guitar) were even more prominent (particularly on the rave-up "Sin Wagon"), and the songs across the board were better, an intriguing mix of group originals like "Cowboy Take Me Away" and "Without You" (both went to #1) and bold picks like "Let Him Fly," by Austin-based singer-songwriter Patty Griffin and the controversial "Goodbye Earle," by Dennis Linde of Elvis Presley's "Burning Love" fame. The latter song, a feisty, light-hearted take on the deadly serious subject of spousal abuse and revenge, initially hit a brick wall of resistance from conservative program directors, but bolstered by support by women's groups and the Chicks' own unyielding resolve, Sony stuck by it, releasing it as a commercial single that eventually went Gold.

"It's not like I practiced copying him [Joe Ely], but just that natural way of getting into the music and rocking out. Just seeing that Texas music and country could rock. It doesn't always have to be a two-step and you don't have to pop it up. It can have an edge." — Natalie Maines

The Dixie Chicks were no less unconventional in their approach to touring. Although they played before thousands of dedicated country fans on the George Strait Country Music Festival, they also reached out to the rock, folk, and alternative market by participating in the women-in-rock spectacle, Lilith Fair, a stint that earned them a very vocal fan in Sheryl Crow. And when they landed their own headlining tour, they didn't recruit another fellow hot new country act to open for them in order to boost ticket sales, choosing instead to share their mainstream audience with their own heroes. Taking alternate turns opening up for the Dixie Chicks on their *Fly* tour were artists like Patty Griffin, Ricky Skaggs, Joe Ely, Willie Nelson, and, for the tour's stop in Natalie's hometown of Lubbock, local legends the Maines Brothers, featuring her father and uncles.

"That was the first time the Maines Brothers had played together in about four years," says Lloyd, adding that the show went off

without a hitch despite no more rehearsal than a few minutes arranging a set-list backstage. "It was all the Chicks' idea. They thought that since it was in Lubbock, it would be a neat thing to have the Maines Brothers open."

Including the Lubbock show, Lloyd sat in with his daughter's band for ten dates on the *Fly* tour, an eye-opening experience even for a seasoned veteran with hundreds of gigs under his belt playing with grizzled road hogs like Jerry Jeff Walker, Joe Ely, and Robert Earl Keen. "They totally blew me away," he says with a mix of pride and wonderment. "That show was as big an undertaking as a Barnum & Bailey Circus, aside from having to clean up after the elephants. And those girls, even though they've got management and tour managers, they still ride pretty tight shotgun on how things are run. They're extremely involved, and a lot of the final decisions are theirs. That was about six months of solid, intense work, and I think they grew a lot and learned a lot about the business during that time."

Martie and Emily Erwin, Laura Lynch, and Robin Lynn Macy (left to right) gather around Lynch's cactus bass in this 1992 promo photo for *Little Ol' Cowgirl*.

But even though the headlining tour was a first of monumental importance for the Dixie Chicks, they were hardly the inexperienced, ditzy blondes they mockingly portrayed themselves as in a series of promo spots. When they first entered the studio to record *Wide Open Spaces*, it was patently clear that they brought more to the table than musical chops: they brought the savvy business sense and stubborn determination to back it up and hammer their dream into reality.

By now, the origins of the Dixie Chicks are fairly common knowledge, at least to casual trivia buffs. It's a back-story oft-summarized as a sort of *Beverly Hillbillies*-style fairy tale. Talented sisters Martie and Emily Erwin form band with original lead singers Robin Lynn Macy and Laura Lynch on a Dallas street corner. They dress in kitschy cowgirl outfits and play a wholesome blend of western swing and bluegrass for tips, eventually becoming the toast of the Texas banquet scene until Macy and Lynch leave the fold and firecracker Natalie Maines comes on board after the sisters are blown away by a demo given to them by her father. Out go the cowgirl duds (but not the girly, pink RV), along comes the major label deal, and well, there you have it.

While that more or less gets the job done in a quickie *Reader's Digest* kind of way, a little gets lost or distorted in the condensation. "Everybody always said it was a pink RV, but it was actually beige on the outside," insists Tom Van Schaik, who played a pivotal role in the Chicks' history as their first drummer. "It was pink on the *inside*." Scott Matthews, who filled the drum seat for the last few months leading up to the release of *Wide Open Spaces*, recalls that it was decorated with a disco ball, and somewhat affectionately adds that the Allegro RV was "a piece of shit."

More significantly, however, Matthews (now drumming with Austin honky-tonker Dale Watson) recalls the Dixie Chicks being the single most organized and well-run band he's ever played in. "That was the only band I'd ever been in at the time that had an office," he says. "They had their own suite in Dallas, near the Galleria. They had a secretary. I got a paycheck every week in the mail, with everything itemized, taxes taken out. . . . I'd never had that in any group before, and haven't since then either."

Emily laughs when Matthews's bewilderment is related to her. "Oh, we had our little business running, definitely," she says. "I think that was a lot of the Robin and Laura influence. From the beginning, it was very much a business—that was not a concession. You can have your art, but you can be smart about how you promote yourself. We were the ultimate self-promoters. We did start on a street corner, but we had our business card within three weeks of starting out on the street corner, because we wanted to have something to hand out to all the conventioneers that were walking by at West End Market in Dallas so hopefully we could play their party. We got an office, and we printed our own T-shirts. To me it was fun because I didn't go to college—I kind of put that aside to do this—but I did feel like I was getting my business degree in a certain way because I was learning how to do all this stuff. How to deal with promoters, book our own shows, hire out all our sound, all that kind of stuff. We knew about distribution, and we knew how much it actually costs to press a CD. That all came into play [later], because when you're doing your record contract, we were like, 'No, we've pressed our own CDs—it shouldn't cost that much, y'all are inflating that.'"

Not surprisingly, the Dixie Chicks did very well for themselves during their independent years. They did a brisk business in merchandise at shows and through the mail, and supplemented their low-paying club gigs and touring expenses by playing countless corporate gigs. They sang at Dallas Cowboys games, at Ross Perot parties, and inaugurations for both Governor George W. Bush and President Bill Clinton (the later landing them a pic on the front page of the *New York Times*). Debt was never an issue—they paid for everything, including hotel rooms, in cash.

But for all the seriousness in which they took their business, the driving force behind the Dixie Chicks then, as now, was the joy of making music. Lynch has nothing but fond memories of her days with the band. "All four of us had so much fun when we'd get together," she recalls of the earliest days. "It was just a big laugh-a-thon. We had what we called a really special synergy. Individually, not so much, but together, we were ten, not four. It was just really wonderful."

The four women first crossed paths while playing bluegrass festivals in central Texas in 1989. Martie and Emily, both graduates of the get-'em-while-they're-young Suzuki violin training-method, had been playing in the teenage bluegrass band Blue Night Express. Math teacher, actress, and die-hard folk music purist Robin Macy was fronting the Dallas-based bluegrass group Danger in the Air, and Laura Lynch, a former TV newscaster, was between gigs following the dissolution of her western swing and bluegrass band in Houston. Macy invited Lynch to sing back-up in Danger in the Air, Lynch met Martie before the show, one thing led to another and soon after they were all practicing their harmonies in someone's living room, preparing for their debut gig on the corner of Market and Corbin in Dallas' West End Marketplace. The Dixie Chicks Cowgirl Band was born.

Charting the dramatic evolution of the Dixie Chicks' sound is simple, provided you can get your hands on the band's out-of-print first three albums. Their 1990 self-produced debut, *Thank Heavens for Dale Evans*, is a testament to Macy's purist vision for the band. Characterized by Lynch as a "spur-of-the-moment, happy-go-lucky" project recorded for a song, it's comprised entirely of impeccably played, NPR-worthy cowgirl kitsch and spirited bluegrass. *Little Ol' Cowgirl*, issued two years later, found the other women making considerably more headway in steering the band towards a more diverse sound. Highlights included a stunning cover of Sam Cooke's "You Send Me" and the sexy, jazzy Lynch and Martie original, "Pink Toenails." It also introduced drums as a permanent fixture of the band's sound, after a trial flirtation on a two-song Christmas single, "Home on the Radar Range."

The cover of the 1990 debut album by the original Dixie Chicks Cowgirl Band.

"It was a step forward," understates Larry Seyer, who produced the album. "You don't usually have drums in bluegrass type bands. It was a bold step for the girls to make, and it was the right step, obviously."

Macy felt otherwise. Citing "creative differences," she left the fold in August of 1992. "The other three women wanted to make a hard right turn toward the commercially-viable, radio-friendly, young country format," she explains. "I chose the path less traveled." She went on to record two albums with Dallas's "retro-metro" trio Domestic Science Club (with Sara Hickman and Patty Mitchell Lege), and now plays with the Wichita-based bluegrass band Big Twang.

Meanwhile, the rest of the Chicks pressed on with renewed focus. Although their third album, 1993's *Shouldn't a Told You That*, still bore the legend "Cowgirl Band" under the group's name on the cover, it was worlds removed from their debut of just three years earlier. Sweet, pretty, and immediately accessible, it plays like a kinder, gentler version of *Wide Open Spaces*, featuring tunes by writers like Radney Foster, Kim Richey, Jamie O'Hara, Jim Lauderdale, and John Leventhal. Finally, it seemed, they had a calling card suitable for entry into the big leagues, even if it wasn't the Chicks' artistic highpoint.

"We had just dreamed and prayed for major label interest of really any sort," says Lynch. "We really turned out a third album that was way below our potential in every way—vocally, arrangements, everything. But we hoped that would get us a major label, and it took awhile, but finally we did get Sony's interest." But according to Blake Chancey, who signed the Dixie Chicks to a developmental deal in 1996, it wasn't the commercial viability showcased on *Shouldn't a Told You That* that sold him; it was the Chicks' live show.

"To be honest with you, I had passed on them before," says Chancey. "But I had not seen them in their environment. But then I went and saw them at the Broken Spoke, this Texas honky-tonk in Austin, and I got to see them jam. Long solos. You could see how much they really enjoyed being on stage and just jamming and being musicians. That's what really got me. Their musicianship was incredible. I would have called them to do session work for other artists.

"Six or seven months after they were signed," he continues, "their manager came to me and told me, 'You're not going to believe this, but the girls want to try someone else singing lead. They've found this girl through Lloyd Maines, his daughter, who can really get up there and belt it out and allows them to stretch musically, to play outside the box more. They want to try this for four or five months and then they want you to come to a show, and if you don't like it, then we won't go forward.'"

Chancey was stunned at the news, but he played along and eventually caught the new lineup at Austin's La Zona Rosa. He sums up his reaction in two words: "Holy guacamole."

Natalie Maines grew up smack in the middle of what old-school Texas music fans affectionately call the "Lubbock mafia." There are numerous theories on why the West Texas city and the surrounding flatland plains have produced so many of the state's most treasured musicians—from Buddy Holly to Waylon Jennings to Terry Allen to Joe Ely, Jimmie Dale Gilmore, and Butch Hancock (collectively known as the Flatlanders)—ranging from UFO activity to the water supply to, most commonly, the simple fact that there wasn't a hell of a lot else to do in that area.

The Maines family name has been well known on the Lubbock scene for decades. The Maines Brothers lineup that Natalie's father played in when she was growing up was the second generation of the band, the name originally adopted by his father and uncles. In addition to his roadwork as a steel guitarist with the Maines Brothers and the Joe Ely Band, Lloyd Maines also established himself as one of the state's most in-demand producers, helming literally hundreds of Texas albums beginning with Terry Allen's 1979 masterpiece, *Lubbock (on everything)*. Terry and his actress/songwriter/playwright wife Jo Harvey were frequent visitors to the Maines household, and Natalie says some of her fondest memories of childhood were the vacations spent with the idiosyncratic couple. "Their life was way more rebellious than our life," she laughs. "Even though my dad was in music, we lived a very normal, boring life in Lubbock, Texas. So when I'd go out to Santa Fe and see them as a teenager, it was so

much more artsy and hippie and laid-back, and that's about where I was at that point in my life. I remember when I was little I would just love that Jo Harvey would cuss in front of me."

Growing up surrounded by music, Natalie began singing as early as age two. Though she figures she didn't give much more conscious thought to what her father did than any other kid might give their father's work, her confidence in the studio all these years later can no doubt be traced to the hours she spent—often bored out of her mind—sitting in on her father's sessions. Sometimes she might get to push the "record" and "stop" buttons on the control board when he was overdubbing a guitar part; other times he'd have her sing on a track or commercial when a child's voice was needed. She has no earthly idea what her debut recording was. "I'm singing on some old Terry Allen record [1983's *Bloodlines*], and I didn't even know that. They just told me the other day that I'm on there."

But whereas formal classical violin lessons were a house rule for the young Erwin sisters, Natalie insists her parents never pushed music on her. "I think when you grow up in a family like mine it's not something that has to constantly be recognized—it's just how you live," she explains. "I never took vocal lessons. I took some piano lessons and my dad would try to teach me guitar, but he'd wind up just playing and I would wind up singing so he wasn't the best teacher. But I always knew I was definitely going to do music. I wasn't the type that was in contests, always trying to be on television, trying to be heard, because I just knew it was something I would always do and that if I waited for my time that it would come, and that's exactly what happened."

When opportunity knocked, it could not have come in a more laid-back fashion. Lloyd Maines was introduced to the Dixie Chicks when producer Larry Seyer hired him to play steel on *Little Ol' Cowgirl*, and the women took to him immediately. Later on, he proudly gave them the two-song tape he had produced for Natalie when she was auditioning for a scholarship to the Berklee College of Music in Boston (which she would only attend for one semester). "It was an Indigo Girls song and a Maria McKee song, 'Panic Beach,'" he recalls. "I thought it would be fun to give the Chicks a copy of the tape just to show them what my daughter sounded like. At that point they weren't looking for another singer—it was just a casual tape hand-off. I think Emily or Martie said, 'She's a great singer,' but then they just dropped it, and I didn't hear another word for six months."

During that time, the sisters had come to the fateful decision that they had taken their sound as far as it could go with Lynch. It was a painful transition, and one that Lynch confides she would have never made herself at the time. But the road had begun to take its toll on her, particularly as it didn't allow her as much time with her teenage daughter as she would have liked. She stepped down graciously and wished her former bandmates well, and insists that they remain close friends to this day. She now lives in Fort Worth with her second husband (a rancher and Texas State Lottery winner), and serves on the board of directors of the National Cowgirl Museum and Hall of Fame.

After Laura's departure in October of 1995, Martie and Emily went back to Lloyd Maines and asked if he could produce a demo of a song they had written, "You Were Mine." They casually asked him to try and get Natalie to sing on it. "They came to Lubbock, hired me to produce this demo and paid Natalie like $100 to sing this song," says Maines. "And Natalie just walked in and nailed it. But nothing was ever said about that being kind of a test. And then about two weeks later, Martie calls on a Monday night and says, 'What would you think about if we asked Natalie to join the band?' I said, 'I don't know—she's real young, she's been with a few bands in school, but she's never done this. She's a great singer but I don't know that she's ready for the Chicks.' Martie said, 'Well, we think she is. Laura's really needing to get off the road, and we're ready to make a move.' They called Natalie the next night, offered her the gig, and she was in Dallas by Sunday and she did her first gig that Tuesday—literally a week from the night they first called her."

Natalie's debut was an inauspicious one. It was for a Quaker State convention, and the Chicks were hired simply to dress up in saloon girl outfits and sing a couple Garth Brooks and Reba McEntire songs with lyrics changed to reflect a Quaker State motif. "All we had to do was sing these two songs once, and we stayed at this luxury resort all week," she laughs. "It was completely humiliating, but a lot of money and a lot of fun." But shortly thereafter, when she made her official Dixie Chicks debut at a show in Houston, she hit the ground running, and it was all the rest of the band could do to keep up with her.

"I think we'll probably burn out from being the big performers and having to have everything be so *big*. It's nice to just make music, and make music that we all admire and are into right now." — Natalie Maines

"Talk about a light switch," says former drummer Van Schaik with a low whistle. "It was all of a sudden the Dixie Chicks sound that everybody knows today. It was an instant fit, from the harmonies to the attitude."

That attitude in no small part can be traced directly back to music and characters Natalie grew up around, from the Allens to roadhouse rocker Joe Ely. "I think growing up watching him [Ely], I feel like I did subconsciously pick up some things from him," she says. "It's not like I practiced copying him, but just that natural way of getting into the music and rocking out. Just seeing that Texas music and country could rock. It doesn't always have to be a two-step and you don't have to pop it up. It can have an edge."

The last year has been a period of regrouping for the Dixie Chicks, both personally and musically. There have been new marriages (Natalie to actor Adrian Pasdar, Martie to Irishman Gareth Maguire), new responsibilities (the birth of Natalie's son, Jackson Slade Pasdar), and new family ties (Martie's husband's brother is married to Natalie's older sister Kim—making all three Chicks *officially* related, sort of).

"It's weird to think that we're both aunts to my sister's baby that she just had," laughs Natalie. "We love spending time with each other, but it's funny because I used to feel sorry for Martie and Emily because even though there was no fighting or hard feelings, sometimes you want to get away from people, and I felt bad that they had to spend Christmas together. And now that's me! But we're doing fine."

Bringing the Chicks even closer together is the fact that, after a period of hopping from different homes around the country, from Nashville to Los Angeles to New York to Montana, all three of them now live happily back in Texas. Emily and her husband Charlie reside in San Antonio (with a ranch in nearby Bandera), while Martie and Natalie live an hour north in Austin (also home to Natalie's parents). It's been a grounding—and rejuvenating—experience for all of them.

"I know a lot of people talk about it and I don't want it to become clichéd, but there's definitely something in Texas, especially in Texas

music that is just so different and you just can't grasp it unless you're here and you can experience it," says Emily. She and Martie are not natives—they were both born up East, but the family moved to Dallas when Emily was only two so she proudly claims the state as her own. It has, in no uncertain terms, made her who she is today. "I think when we came down here, music made its way into our family. Even in the middle of North Dallas, it made its way through and seeped into our family. There's just a culture about it—it's not just music, it's something more. And just from being in the middle of all that, I think that is what created my destiny.

The Dixie Chicks have been instrumental in getting acoustic instruments such as dobros, fiddles, and banjo back on country radio.

"We promised ourselves way early on before any of the success, or kind of when the success just started, that we would always leave time to just get re-inspired," she continues. "We saw a lot of our counterparts working so hard and burning out. I think we understand the importance of mental health as well as physical health. It was just a natural time to take some time off. My husband and I live on a ranch, so it's been taking care of the animals and doing stuff that has completely been a 180 from the road and what you do to promote a band out there, so it really is very grounding for me. I think it makes us want to go back in the studio and want to go back out in front of people, because you get hungry for it again, and I think that's ultimately very important for longevity."

In light of the Dixie Chicks' decision to put aside the drums for the sessions they've been recording recently in Austin, it's tempting to cite destiny again. A full decade after they first introduced drums to their sound, here they've come full circle, back to their purer beginnings. But it's not so much a retroactive step back as it is a matter of all three of them continuing to do what's always served them best: making the music that they want to make, *their* way.

"It is scary going in and making that big change," admits Natalie. "We didn't know if we were ever going to release these songs, or if they would just be for us, because we thought, 'Are we going to completely scare our audience by doing something like this?' It's probably been the first thing that is sort of an unknown to us. Usually we're very confident about the albums. But I know that I'm very confident about this record, and I know that I love what we're doing. And then to get the huge feedback we got from the *Tribute to Heroes* thing and then the CMAs—even from our manager, who listens to dance music, he loves it—that's awesome. We'll see what happens with it."

Whatever happens to the acoustic album, Natalie is adamant about one thing. "We're not basing our career on the legal issues," she says with conviction. "That was our big deal going into this. We're not going to have this lawsuit dictate when we can put out music or when we can record music or when we can go on tour. That's what we made our management and our lawyers promise us, that we would get to continue even if it caused a couple of problems [*laughs*] for them, that we would get to do what we wanted musically."

"I know a lot of people talk about it and I don't want it to become clichéd, but there's definitely something in Texas, especially in Texas music that is just so different and you just can't grasp it unless you're here and you can experience it." — Emily Robison

Speaking strictly for himself—albeit from his Sony office in Nashville—Blake Chancey exudes nothing but optimism that he will be working with them on a new, full-on ("commercial") Dixie Chicks album very soon. "I don't know if the business end will all be straightened out, but I think we'll get together and talk about the music, because we all love it so much that we cannot not talk about it." The lawsuit, he insists, has not come between him and the women at all.

"I trust [Emily's] judgment in everything," says Charlie Robison unequivocally when asked about the Chicks' contract battle. "When you do something like this, it's a very scary thing—almost like signing with a record label for the first time, only this is even scarier than that. But one of the reasons I wanted to marry my wife was they've always done stuff by their heart, and if this works against us then we'll deal with it. It's just about doing the right thing for themselves—trying to stay true to themselves. It's just doing what they like to do."

"I have every confidence in the fact that they totally know what they're doing," offers Lloyd Maines with equal conviction. "They're still on a steady path."

RICHARD SKANSE spent three years as an editor of RollingStone.com in New York. He wrote the Dixie Chicks' first profile in *Rolling Stone* and has contributed to the *Rolling Stone Encyclopedia of Rock & Roll, Performing Songwriter, Blender, George, US Weekly, NME,* and *Texas Music* magazine, where he's currently managing editor. Like the Dixie Chicks, he is proud as hell to be back home in Texas.

DIXIE CHICKS' DESIGNER SHOOTS FROM THE HIP

Spontaneous. Hip. Unconventional. These words could be used interchangeably to describe either the Dixie Chicks or fashion maverick Todd Oldham. Both are known for mixing it up—whether it be music or fashion—and both are known for their widespread youth appeal: Oldham, primarily as one of the hosts of MTV's *House of Style* (1993–1996) and the Chicks from their incendiary live performances and award-grabbing albums. Moreover, both have the kind of irreverent attitude about their respective industries that simultaneously thumbs its nose and pays homage to what has come before.

Oldham's designs toy with unexpected combinations, and the Dixie Chicks costumes for the 1998 Grammy Awards Show, currently on display in the special "Nashville Salutes Texas" exhibit at the Country Music Hall of Fame, are no exception. The trio of outfits combine glamour and sass: a high-collar, pooling train, and floor-length jacket mixing it up with a mini-skirt, hip huggers, and spaghetti straps. The outfits are unified by their respective trim of shiny safety pins—at once a classy reference to the punky, fetishistic, 1970s fashions of Malcolm McLaren and a riff on the heavily sequined and beaded stage costumes of famed rodeo tailors Nudie and Manuel.

The Chicks punk out at the 1998 Grammys.

The accessories, crafted from barbed wire ("Oldham, of course," offered Chicks' stylist Renee Fowler), recall both Oldham and the Chicks' shared Texas roots.

Oldham's clothes have been favorites of all three Chicks both on stage and off. And he loves designing for them: "I am very inspired by them and the way they mix modern references with traditional country sounds. You never quite know what they will do next, so I thought a punk rock-inspired look would be appropriate. We called it 'Punkin'," he explained.

"I would have only suggested the punked out look for a rock award show. [But] the Chicks' look was a constant evolution. I thought it would be exciting for the Chicks to come out in a look that absolutely no one would expect," concurred Fowler. "It definitely shocked many people, but they are truly the only ones who could pull it off." —Lauren Bufferd