

On the Road with the Dixie Chicks

LHJ hangs out with country music's hottest trio

By Judith Newman

Three Rivers Stadium, Pittsburgh: 98 degrees, 80 percent humidity; fifty thousand fans have come out for a day of fun at the George Strait Country Music Festival. Much of the crowd is clearly waiting impatiently for the Dixie Chicks, arguably the hottest crossover phenomenon in country music since Shania Twain.

But that doesn't prevent the three well-bred blond Texas belles from being as down-home as can be. "You gotta take these," urges twenty-seven-year-old Emily Robison, the band's banjo-dobro player, passing along a box of Godiva chocolates given by a fan. "I sure don't need 'em." We're escaping the heat in the girls' RV, their home away from home while they tour the country for this festival and Lilith Fair. Snapshots of Emily and the two other Chicks—her fiddle- and mandolin-playing sister



Martie Seidel, twenty-nine, and lead singer Natalie Maines, twenty-four—cover the interior.

The girls are trying to relax before going onstage, having just endured the meet-'n-greet with fans. After watching the three of them try very hard to be polite to the good ol' boys pawing them in quick photo ops, I read Emily's quip, scrawled on the RV bulletin board, which seems particularly appropriate: "Life's too short to breathe bad beer breath."

No question about it: 1999 has been the Year of the Chicks. Their six million-plus-selling album, *Wide Open Spaces*, garnered them crossover status, two Grammys (including Best Country Album) and the 1999 American Music Award for Favorite New Artist (Country). (Each girl sports six tiny chicken-foot tattoos on her ankle; they've vowed to get more tattoos for each number-one single, number-one album, and when their albums go gold or platinum.)

Who are the girls who don't like to be called "the Spice Girls of country"? Natalie is surprisingly hard-headed about business. Martie is a championship-level fiddle player who started at age five. And Emily, Martie's younger sister, learned banjo at age ten and picked up the dobro and guitar soon after.

The Chicks—who always knew they wanted to be musicians—have had a loyal Texas following since 1989. In those days, Emily, Martie and two other girls were busking on Dallas street corners, decked out in denim and sequins; one performed with a rubber chicken around her neck. Back then they were known as the Dixie Chickens. Fans shortened it to the Dixie Chicks, a name that stuck, and between 1991 and 1995, they put out three independent albums. They were on the *(continued)*

Martie belts it out; the Dixie Chicks working the stage; Emily strumming the dobro; and lead singer Natalie in a Chicks sandwich at the mike

ALL PHOTOS, ALLAN TANNENBAUM/SYGMA

THE DIXIE CHICKS

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road constantly, cruising in a beat-up pink RV. They opened for artists like Garth Brooks and Emmylou Harris. By 1995, two of the chicks had flown the coop, and Natalie was recruited to sing. Nashville began to take notice; it couldn't have hurt that Natalie's father was legendary pedal steel guitarist Lloyd Maines.

Ditching dude-ranch duds for Todd Oldham and Cynthia Rowley, the Chicks got the attention of teens. But the Chicks hope fans see past the rags to the musical skill. "Kids playing instruments, that's a big thing for me," says Emily. "I just want them to look at Martie and see that after all those years of lessons, there is something you can do that's hip and cool and fun. It's important for fans to know we're not just microphone-holders."

Thirty minutes till showtime: Slugging back Evian, we talk about their



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lives on the road. Emily and Martie are happily married, to singer-songwriter Charlie Robison and pharmaceutical sales rep Ted Seidel, respectively. Natalie's nineteen-month marriage to bassist Michael Tarabay recently ended in divorce. (She confirms that a song on their new album, "Sin Wagon"—about "a girl who's been good for too

long"—is inspired by her divorce.) We talk about the gossip, of which Natalie is the main focus: "According to the Internet, Natalie slept with Martie's husband," says Emily. "And she's pregnant with [country-music artist] Deryl Dodd's baby." (A couple of extra postdivorce pounds on the tummy of the beautifully voluptuous Natalie have roadies calling her J.R.—for "Jelly Roll.")

The Dixie Chicks have not forsaken the traditional themes of country music—love and loss—but they navigate

those familiar waters with upbeat tempos and no-nonsense attitude. In many of their best tunes—most notably “Let Him Fly,” which will be on their new album, *Fly*, due out August 31—they are neither divas nor supplicants, but women who aren’t ashamed to say that love is what really matters, and even if they’ve been hurt, they can give it and get it with the best of ’em.

Naysayers talk about their “packaging,” and scoffed when Natalie thanked “our makeup artists and our hairstylists” at the American Music Awards. Then there’s also the question of how long can you be a Chick? Into your thirties? Forties? Fifties? Martie, who’ll turn thirty in October, already says she’s a little uncomfortable with the *Chicks Kick Ass* buttons the girls sell. Natalie, characteristically, cuts to the chase. “Of course you can be a Chick at forty, but when we’re forty, we’ll *look* forty,” she says. “We’re not going to be wearing glitter and platforms.” “Yeah,” says Emily, laughing. “We will make that pledge right now!”

They may take their music seriously, but they never want to take themselves too seriously. “We want to play the songs that I would sing to my sister in the car,” says Emily. “Songs that just make you want to dance.”

Time for the Chicks to get ready. It is so hot that JoDee Messina swoons onstage, and the crowd sits listlessly in the sun. But then, suddenly, a roar—and fifty thousand people are on their feet as the three ravishing blonds strut to the microphone.

“Oh dear, this moment still gives me butterflies in my stomach,” says a lovely, petite woman next to me. She is a high-school English teacher dressed in khakis and sensible shoes; she also happens to be Barbara Trask, Emily and Martie’s mother. “After all those years of lessons, I never imagined this,” murmurs Trask, as she watches her daughters cavort onstage in belly shirts

and hot-pink feather boas. “I always saw them in a symphony orchestra.” ■

Judith Newman wrote about Harrison Ford in the August issue of Ladies’ Home Journal.



Exuberant fans sweating it out at the George Strait Country Music Festival in Pittsburgh