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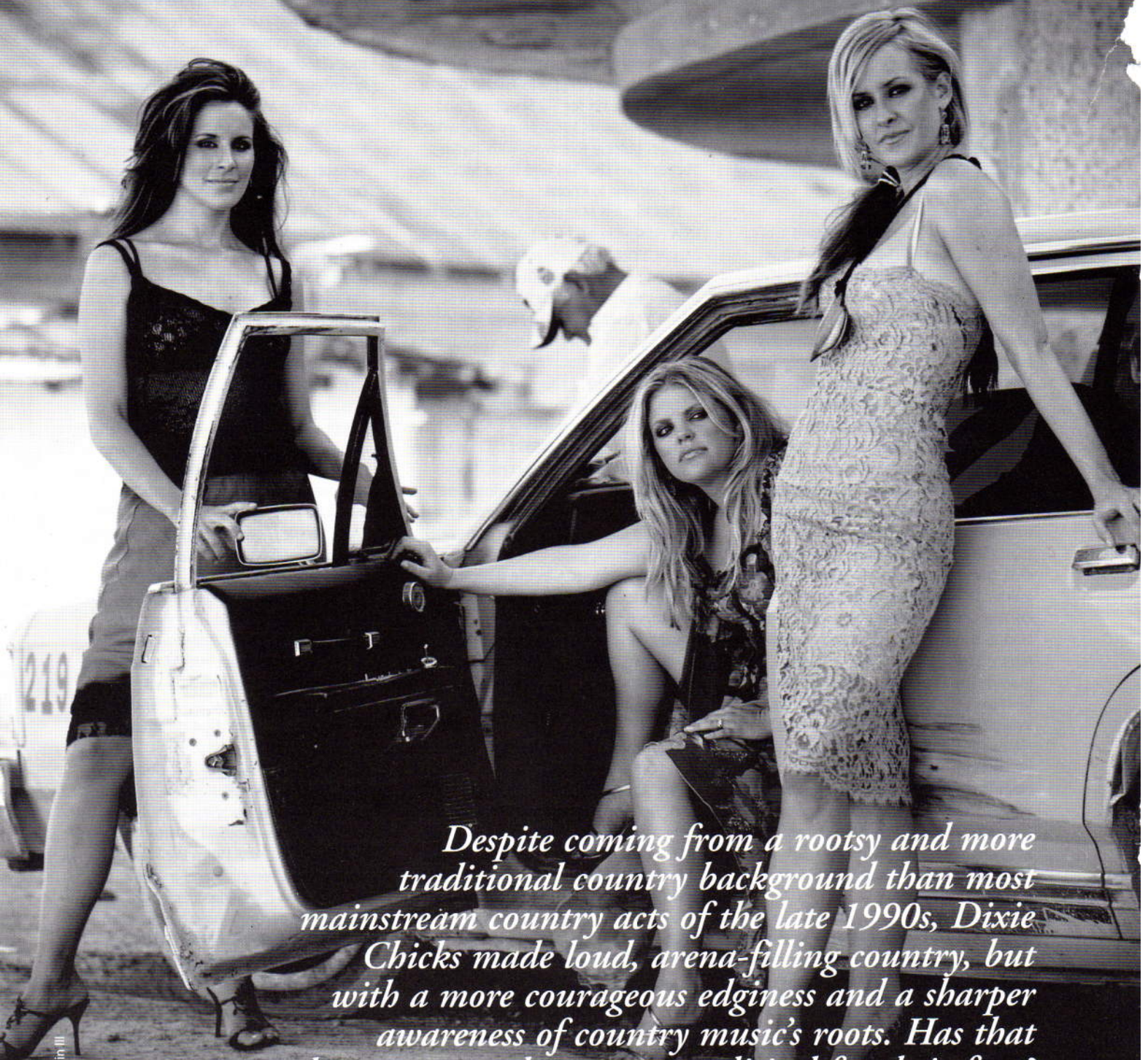
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CHICKS IN A SPIN



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The Chicks Grow Teeth



Despite coming from a rootsy and more traditional country background than most mainstream country acts of the late 1990s, Dixie Chicks made loud, arena-filling country, but with a more courageous edginess and a sharper awareness of country music's roots. Has that sharpness now become too political for their fans?

Story by Alan Cackett

"We weren't expecting the audience to have such an amazing reaction. In the year and a half we hadn't been on tour, we had forgotten what it felt like."

The Dixie Chicks gave a much needed boost to a country genre that was in search of a megastar. With Garth Brooks retired to Oklahoma and Shania Twain missing in action in Switzerland, the timing couldn't have been better for the Texas trio.

Since their 1998 debut with *WIDE OPEN SPACES*, the Chicks have been highly visible and successful charting numerous number one hits, whilst their first two albums have both sold more than 10 million copies each, the only female group in history to claim such an accomplishment. Their third album, *HOME*, released just a year ago, following a protracted disagreement with their record label, rapidly gained multi-million sales, and seemed destined to match the figures attained by the first two, even though, in comparison, it was much more rootsy and less radio-friendly.

The Chick girls had waged a battle over royalties, claiming their label, Sony, had cheated them out of \$4 million. The band and label stared each other down for almost a year, ultimately agreeing to a huge increase in the Chicks' income and royalties. While the war of words was being fought, Natalie, Martie and Emily spent considerable time experimenting in an Austin studio, far away from Nashville's Music Row and all the haranguing that was going down.

At first, they hadn't thought out that they were making a new album. That came after several months of trial and error and working in a more laid-back, acoustic style. The creative inspiration for the new acoustic about-face began to gel when Natalie fell hard for bluegrass at Merlefest, the North Carolina music festival. Then the Chicks invited Ricky Skaggs and Kentucky Thunder out on numerous dates on their sold-out Fly tour where, Emily says, the top-flight bluegrass band "brought the house down."

It was Natalie who suggested the acoustic sessions for *HOME*, after the group had taken about a year off from touring and media appearances to nest and rest. "When Natalie said 'let's do some acoustic stuff,' I was really glad, because I knew Emily and I could go there, but I needed to know that that was what Natalie was feeling, too, because she could just as easily make a rock record," Martie says.

"So it was neat that we were all kind of on the same wavelength and being inspired by the same kind of music at the same time."

They needed the right environment, so Martie shopped around for studios in Austin, settling on an old

rock house on several acres of land in an otherwise residential area. "I was looking for us to be comfortable. It was kind of inspiring because it was old and had stained-glass windows," she says. "You felt isolated from the world. It felt like family. There was nobody there that seemed like an acquaintance or who didn't feel like part of our inner circle."

"To me, it wasn't so much that we were in one place vs. another. It was that we didn't have the record label looking over our shoulder," Natalie says. When recording on Music Row, they say, label officials would continuously drop by on thinly disguised 'social visits', which led to questions about potential singles for radio, song length and last-minute song pitches. "On the first two records, I think we felt in control and not pressured. But this was truly in control and no pressure," she explains.

The album was produced by Natalie's father, renowned musician Lloyd Maines. It was the trio's first foray into the studio with Lloyd, but according to Natalie, the family dynamic did not get in the way. "I think now that I'm a woman and am successful and make my own decisions and things like that, our relationship isn't as much father-daughter, but it is, but in the studio, there's none of that, you know? He's not intimidated by me maybe telling him what to do or how to do something, and I'm not intimidated the other way around, and I think that's why it works so great in the studio," she says. "I know how he works and we really communicate and relate well."

The Chicks had never envisioned that *HOME*, which earlier this year won a Grammy for country album of the year, would be the huge success it has become. "We thought maybe this would be a small project, maybe for a movie or to put on our website for fans, tying them over until our litigation with Sony was over," Emily explains. "Our manager played it for people and they loved it, so it kind of happened naturally. It really took other people listening to it to believe that it could be our third album."

Once the dispute with Sony had been amicably sorted little time was wasted in getting the new album out to the public. Several weeks before the record was released, the Chicks performed new songs from the album at the Kodak Theatre in Los Angeles. The concert was filmed and, as *An Evening With The Dixie Chicks*, was televised nationally in the US last December. "We did the whole album in its entirety," Natalie explains. "It was one of the first times we performed the songs live."

