

You'd better smile when you address Natalie Maines and sisters Martie Seidel and Emily Erwin as "chicks." That's the effect this trio's music seems to have on all who come within listening range of their on-the-mark three-part harmonies and multi-instrumental talents. Maines, Seidel and Erwin are country music's ultimate chicks—the Dixie Chicks. And 1998 certainly was their year.

Their major label debut album, *Wide Open Spaces*, sold two million copies. And they pulled off the rare combination of winning both the Country Music Association's Horizon Award (akin to rookie of the year) and group of the year honors. *Wide Open Spaces* was the highest debut for a new vocal group since 1991. The album, producing such hits as "I Can Love You Better" and "There's Your Trouble," consistently held a Top 10

position on the *Billboard* country album charts, making them the top selling group of last year.

And it just keeps getting better for these savvy artists, who also landed a showcase on NBC-TV's *The Tonight Show With Jay Leno*. "Everything has gone our way," says Martie Seidel, a championship-level fiddle player who took up her instrument at the age of five. "I thought at the beginning of 1998 that it would be great for our album to go gold. Then it went double platinum in less than a year. It felt like we had done a full year's worth of work, though. We've worked very hard to get to where we are."

She admits that winning both CMA awards came as a surprise. "I was shocked. I didn't expect to hear our name called for Group of the Year. We thought for sure it would be Diamond Rio. It didn't hit me for a couple days."

She remembers how nervous she

used to get just watching the awards at home and wondering how she would feel if she were up for one some day. "That's why I practiced my fiddle so hard as a kid, just wanting to do that [be on the awards podium]. For all the things that happened last year, those two awards probably were the most special to me. That's something that will always be on your shelf and you'll always have that title."

Though still in their twenties, these ladies are no, er, spring chickens in music, having played together for almost 10 years and releasing three independent CDs. There are still a lot of people who think they are a new group, but that's just fine with Seidel. "I feel the more they dive into our history and find out about us, the more respect they will gain for us," she says. "I'm so glad we've had that time to grow and change and mature musically and personally. Because I feel pre-

DIXIE CHICKS

The Only New Success Story Of '98

by Rex Rutkoski

The
Country Girl
Explosion



pared and ready for what comes at me.”

The group is proud to be carrying country's banner. “I think we are a true country act and hopefully are bringing a younger generation back to country, getting them to appreciate country. Our roots are deeply embedded in country,” Seidel says. “We've had people coming to our shows saying they really don't like country music, ‘But I like you guys.’ A number of people said we kind of converted them over to country.”

She feels people are intrigued with the Chicks because there have not

been many trios. “And we are strong enough to back up the image of three blondes playing instruments,” she says. Maines won a vocal scholarship to the prestigious Berklee School of Music. Erwin started on banjo at 10.

“All of us are such strong artists ourselves. When we come together we're even stronger,” says Seidel.

Seidel senses that the public perception of the group is that they are “a little wild. Especially Natalie, who is wild and crazy,” she says, laughing. “We don't take ourselves way too seriously. I don't mind that. Maybe I'm the more conservative of the bunch.

I'm willing to try just about anything that has integrity. I want to explore all different types of music and songs and stage shows. We have crazy ideas of what we want to do for the audience when we are headlining.”

Live is her favorite part of what the group does. “It's just the interaction with the crowd,” Seidel says. “They are getting a chance to show you what great fans they are. They know all the songs. There's just such an adrenaline. It's just the happiest time when we are on stage. I love being able to interact with the other two girls. Natalie is just a wild woman on stage. We are fun, the three of us up there wanting to relate to the audience.”

In making the *Wide Open Spaces* album, Seidel says the group sought a good representation of who the Dixie Chicks are. “We had done some indie albums. We wanted this album to sum up all our strong suits. I think our next album maybe will have a little more pickin'—fiddle and dobro; show Emily and I off a little more.”

The Chicks have been writing a lot more as they prepare for the new album. “We went to a bunch of writing retreats last summer and it was amazing who wanted to write with us; great people. We got a lot of good potential originals for the next album.”

There's a serious bottom line to what the Dixie Chicks hope people take from their music. “We want to touch them way deep inside like music touches us,” Seidel says. ★

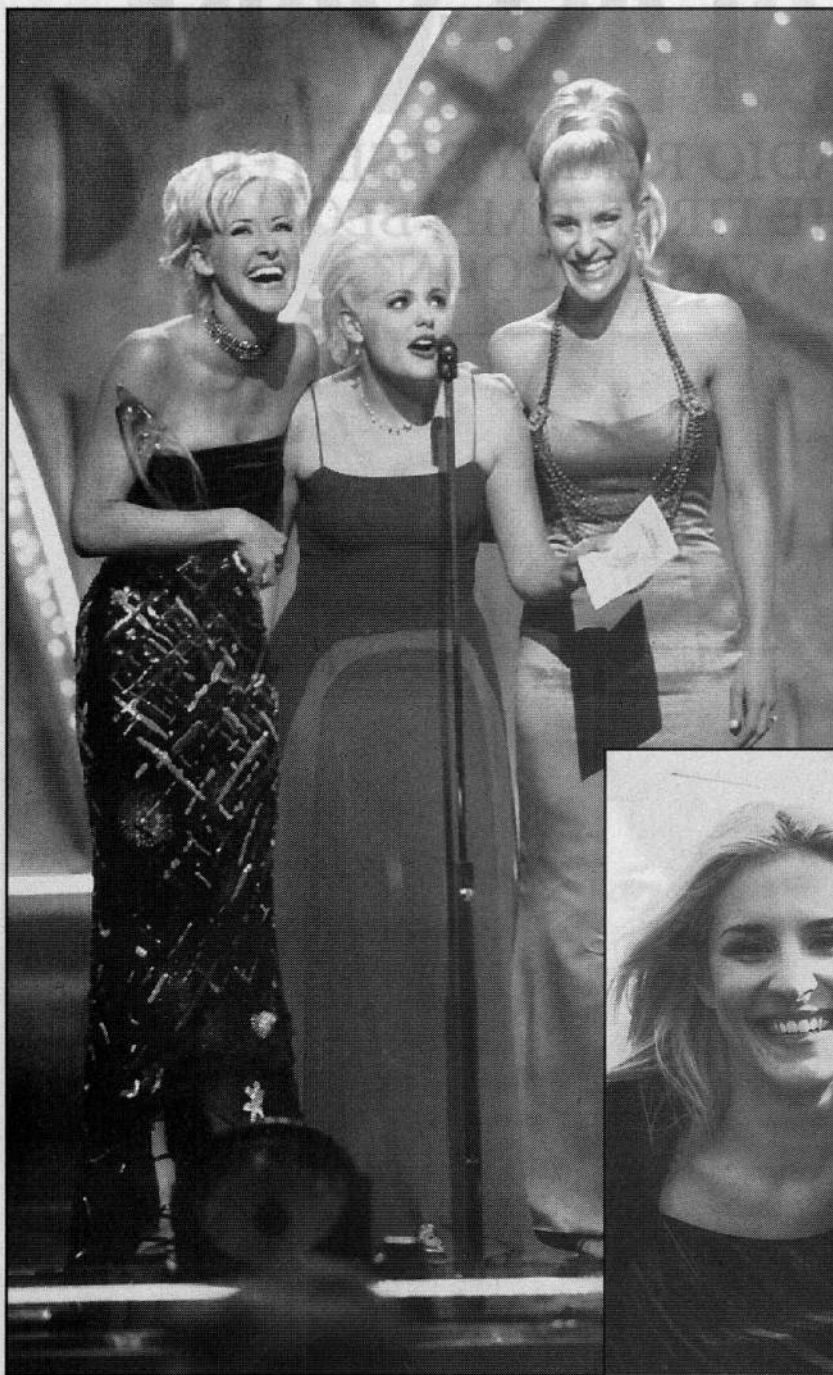


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