



by Jennifer Key

The Dixie Chicks are exactly like their music—fresh, fun, and a little quirky. After storming the music scene with their first major release, *Wide Open Spaces*, they've become the highest debuting act in almost a decade. And, clearly, they're loving every minute of it.

From the moment we meet at their record label's offices, the Chicks, comprised of Natalie Maines, Emily Erwin and Martie Seidel, are immediately animated, chatty and warm—unlike more world-weary entertainers, they actually seem to enjoy giving interviews. Totally uninhibited in the presence of a reporter, they banter and joke with each other about everything from their predilections for highwater pants to wearing high heels with overalls. In short, they love to have fun, and that's what makes this feisty group of young women so darn likable.

But the laughter stops when they talk about their music. Let it be known that the Dixie Chicks are far from being the country equivalent of the Spice Girls. Rather,

each of the women in the band has been performing since childhood and all three are championship musicians. They're also astute businesswomen, who, during recording, insisted on having a hand in every aspect of their album, including the selection of songs. "We wanted to approve every single thing on the album," Natalie says. "We never want to say 'If we had only....' You have to respect your record label and they have to respect you." Emily adds, "You have to create your own destiny. We knew no one was going to work as hard on this as we were."

Their journey into the spotlight began almost nine years ago, when sisters Martie (fiddle, guitar) and Emily (banjo, dobro) began singing bluegrass on street corners to make some extra cash. Within a few years they had quickly cornered the market as Texas' only cowgirl band, with a fan club boasting over 6,000 members. But despite their regional success, the Chicks felt something was missing. Enter Natalie as lead singer, whose voice Emily and Martie



Martie



Emily



Natalie



“latched on to right away.” It was then that the sound of the newly formed trio began to evolve from bluegrass to the more accessible, country-pop they perform today. Emily remembers the night they received their recording contract after executives came to a performance. “We were in our hotel room sitting on the bed just like a slumber party, just waiting and waiting for the phone call.” When the call from their manager, who is British, finally came, he spoke only two words: “Mission accomplished.”

With the record deal came more changes. The band had previously become famous in Texas for wearing outlandish, fringed cowgirl costumes, a la Dale Evans. But when Natalie came on board, their fashion sense changed as much as their music. “When I joined the band, I told Martie and Emily, ‘I’m not wearing those clothes,’” she laughs. “But actually, wearing the cowgirl stuff was a great business move for them [at the time]” she says. Emily agrees. “We had a niche, but we just grew out of it.”

Now the trio looks as much like Hollywood actresses as they do one of country’s hottest new acts. Young (in their twenties), blonde and stylish, they’ve traded their western gear for leather pants, snakeskin shirts and Doc Martens. They’ve also found that their new image can be a double-edged sword, as fans and critics have sometimes unjustly placed more emphasis

on their looks than their music. “We’re glad the fans are there screaming for us, but on the other hand we’re saying, ‘Don’t just watch us, listen to us!’” Natalie shakes her head. “It’s so hard to look at yourself as this hot babe. And I’m going, ‘I am such a dork. I am so non-sexy.’ So it’s very strange to me,” she says.

Now with their new single, “I Can Love You Better,” destined to become a Top-10 hit, the Dixie Chicks had better get used to the attention. They’ve already performed on the Grand Ole Opry, as well as opened for such perennial acts as George Strait and Alan Jackson. As hard as they’ve worked for their success, they’re still surprised to find themselves hurtling towards fame. “The other day we were in Florida playing this big festival,” Emily says. “We got to open up for Deana Carter and Alan Jackson. The crowd was huge—they knew our songs, and it was just great. Then afterwards we were walking up this staircase and I hear this bunch of people screaming, ‘Oh my gosh!’ And I’m like ‘Who’s going on stage? What’s going on?’ And I realized they were screaming for us.”

In spite of their popularity, the Dixie Chicks haven’t seen many of the financial rewards of their success, at least not yet. “Our lives haven’t changed that much. I mean, we’re still in our pink RV back in Texas traveling around to all of our shows. We don’t

even have a bus!” Natalie says.

When they get a little free time, that pink RV takes the three women home to Dallas, where they’ve lived since childhood. Martie and Natalie spend time with their husbands, while Emily, who is single, enjoys playing with her pets, a dog and a “big, fat cat.” Although the three women are good friends, they don’t socialize together when they’re not touring. When it’s time to go back on the road, however, it’s a different story. “We’re talking 100 miles an hour, saying ‘I missed you!’” Natalie says.

This summer will bring them together again as they begin touring, playing festivals and some club dates. A large-scale tour is tentatively scheduled for this fall.

But don’t ask the Dixie Chicks to try to predict the future. “We’ve learned not to expect anything,” Natalie says, “because it’s all a guessing game.” Perhaps their philosophy can best be summed up by a trip they recently took to the Air Force base in Okinawa, Japan. The Marines had cajoled the trio into going snorkeling in extremely rough seas. Despite the danger of the situation and the fact that none of the women had ever been snorkeling, the Chicks rose to the occasion. “It was scary,” Emily says. “But we have to take advantage of opportunities. This is our adventure.”

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