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Dixie Chicks

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The Dixie Chicks

by Jana Pendragon



Martie Seidel, Natalie Maines, Emily Robison

A hands-on approach to their career — and a hard-won compromise between image and substance — has helped these accomplished musicians branch out from the country charts to become a crossover phenomenon. Case in point: as *Fly*, the girls' next album, now hits stores their Monument Records debut, *Wide Open Spaces*, (released a year and a half ago) is still enjoying hit singles and selling through the roof.

There is no way around it, the music industry has traditionally been a man's world. Yet, in the second half of the 20th Century, women — particularly Nineties artists such as Sheryl Crow, Lucinda Williams and Sarah McLachlan — have been testing that theory and pushing the envelope.

For country music, the last decade has brought pop-country to the forefront and the talents of Trisha Yearwood and her ilk have become the norm while bringing in significant profits. Still, somewhere beyond the blandness of pop-country radio, there are women with more traditional country & western roots who continue to toil in honky

tonks, bars and on the cowboy circuit.

While the masses will never be as familiar with most of these women as they are with pop-goes-the-country divas like Faith Hill, Reba McEntire or Wynona Judd, there are three females who have managed to break down the barriers and get Nashville and America to pay attention to their music across the board — the Dixie Chicks.

Earning Country Credibility

Someone who has followed the Chicks' career is writer and journalist A.J. Flick. Covering the music scene as an entertainment features writer and country music columnist for the *Tucson Citizen* has given Flick a good perspective on the place of women in country music.

"The Chicks have the bravado to aggressively push themselves into a macho industry," Flick says, observing, "they're hip enough to be mistaken for a pop or hip-hop group without losing any of the Texas twang that makes their music country. I don't think anyone buying a Shania Twain album, thinking that it's typical country music, would then be inspired to purchase a Patsy Cline, Tammy Wynette or Dolly Parton record."

Flick adds with certainty, "But, it is con-

ceivable that someone who doesn't normally listen to country music might snatch up a Dixie Chicks' CD and explore the rest of what country has to offer."

Hatchlings

This Texas-bred trio started playing on the streets of Dallas as teenagers when sisters Martie and Emily Erwin joined forces with two friends, singer-guitarist Robin Lacy and singer-bassist Laura Lynch. Their bluegrass-meets-Texas Swing foundation and their strong, tight harmonies propelled them beyond Dallas and their home state. Favorites with the cowboy crowd, the Dixie Chicks were also a huge draw in Europe. Sporting traditional, wild, western cowgirl fashions set them aside visually from other all-female acts.

But, it was their obvious musicianship, especially fiddle champion Martie and banjo picker Emily, that made them such a stand-out from the start. Releasing their first indie project in 1992 on the Crystal Clear label, *Thank Heavens for Dale Evans*, put them on the country music radar. A second album in 1993, *Shouldn't a Told You That*, displayed the band as a trio for the first time as their professional prowess became more apparent. This was followed by another project, *Little Ol' Cowgirl*, before Lynch left the hard-touring band to be replaced in 1995 by current lead vocalist, Natalie Maines, the daughter of Texas steel player and producer Lloyd Maines.

"For any artist going into a new record deal there are certain compromises you have to make just to get to that level. We were clear about what compromises we would make and which ones we wouldn't."

—Emily Robison, *The Dixie Chicks*

Fortunately for the Dixie Chicks, somewhere along the way insightful Nashville producer and Sony Nashville chief Blake Chancey caught wind of their talent and enthusiasm. He and Paul Worley would eventually produce the Chicks' first Monument project, *Wide Open Spaces*, released in 1998. Selling over six million copies and chalking up a number of major awards, including a Grammy for Best Country Album of 1999, *Spaces* gave the Chicks the kind of clout in "Music City" that only sales figures can bestow.

The Female Factor

Speaking with Emily, the recent bride of Texas bard Charlie Robison, it is clear that the three women have been able to ride out the first wave of success with grace and dignity. They are also more than prepared for whatever the business throws at them.

Still, the new Mrs. Robison does not look at being female as a handicap nor does she believe that being an all-female band made the Dixie Chicks' rise to fame and fortune any more difficult. Robison pauses before she speaks, "I'd be lying if I said it was more difficult — I think the fact that we were an all-female act was a novelty for a time and we really played on that novelty. Then we grew and figured out what we wanted to do musically." Adding thoughtfully Robison states, "I don't feel that being female had any ill effects on our career. I think it's just as hard for men these days to stick out in the crowd."

The fact that the Chicks considered being female an advantage may have had a lot to

do with their positive attitudes early on. "Women are able to play around with their image. In country, if you're not in boots and a hat, it's hard to make it. But, for women [like us], who are so diverse right now, [changing our image] really helped us."

Robison adds, "You have to pick your battles as a female and know what your limits are." Realizing that this attribute was a strength for them hit home after they signed on with Monument. As Robison notes, "For any artist going into a new record deal there are certain compromises you have to make just to get to that level. We were clear about what compromises we would make and which ones we would not."

Moving from cowgirl chic to contemporary cool allowed the Dixie Chicks to be more of a crossover act as they gained momentum from the release of *Wide Open Spaces*. Their image about-face seemingly gained acceptance from the VH-1 crowd and pop radio, where substance never seems to go beyond the surface. This was a change, however, that the Chicks were ready for after Maines joined the act, and one that all three remain comfortable with.

Takin' Care of Business

Concerning their new status as Monument label stars, Robison looks back fondly upon a time when the Chicks took care of all aspects of their business, from booking to management. Asked if life

before signing a label deal was simpler, she shakes her head and replies, "Simpler? I don't think it was simpler. I think we had to scrape a little more before we were signed and had some record sales under our belts." Continuing her train of thought Robison notes, "We used to be our own road manager and accountant; we did the contracts and we booked ourselves. It gave us a little more insight into how things work in this business." Still, she confesses, "We don't do the demographics thing — we pay no attention. The only things we pay attention to are our gut feelings and the crowd reactions at live shows."

More at ease with success and with their second project, Robison adds, "[We have

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