

## Arts & Entertainment

### Good Old Grrrls

**Nashville has seen the future — and while it looks like the Spice Girls, it sure sounds country. The Dixie Chicks rule the roost, and ruffle a few feathers while they're at it.**

By David Gates and Devin Gordon

Last Wednesday, midtown Manhattan, 11 p.m. The Dixie Chicks are hemmed in on all four sides by the studio audience for PBS's up-close-and-personal "Sessions at West 54th" — from the front row, you could reach up and pluck Emily Robison's banjo or Martie Seidel's fiddle — and America's hottest band is ready to roll. Ahem: they've *been* ready. This taping should have started at 10, and now host John Hiatt keeps screwing up his long introduction. Lead singer Natalie Maines, in a black T shirt reading UGLY GIRL, lets out a yawn — then realizes where she is, snaps her mouth shut, erupts into giggles and turns crimson. Only the blush is out of character: when Hiatt finally nails his intro, Maines looks down and greets the crowd around her shins with typical forthrightness. "I thought I was gonna be concerned with everyone staring at our asses all night," she says, "but now I'm worried about boogers."

We'll see if PBS cuts that line when they air the show in November. By that time, this Texas-based trio, whose second album debuted three weeks ago at the top of the pop charts, may have revolutionized country music — or they may be so overexposed that mainstream record buyers won't want to hear a banjo for *another* 30 years. (The band's core fans, predominantly female and 60 percent of them under 25, weren't even born when the theme from "Bonnie and Clyde" was a hit; neither were the Chicks.) Last week, in addition to the West 54th taping, the Chicks did "Letterman," "Rosie O'Donnell" and the "Today" show. This week they play the Country Music Awards, where they're nominated in four categories, including Entertainer of the Year. (Never before has Nashville put up a rookie act for its MVP award, though the smart money's on Tim McGraw.) Their sextuple-platinum first album, "Wide Open Spaces," outsold any record, ever, by a country-music group; with their new CD, "Fly," the nation's best-selling album for two weeks, they've become the biggest country crossover since Garth Brooks. But Brooks's idea of reaching a hip audience was to cover Billy Joel; this summer, the Dixie Chicks played



Chart-toppin': The Dixie Chicks (Albert Sanchez)

Lilith Fair. "We felt like dorks," says Maines.

For Nashville, the Chicks have arrived none too soon with their bluegrass-based sound and rock-and-roll attitude. Country record sales are flat, and so is the music. "Fifteen-year-old LeAnn Rimes singing about commitment?" says Seidel. "You want to go, 'Yeah, right'." Discerning country-music fans, like Billboard's former Nashville correspondent Ed Morris, seldom bother to listen to country radio anymore, with its Shania Twain clones. "The conventional wisdom is that if there's something too unlike what came before, listeners will switch the station," Morris says. "It's to radio's advantage to play nothing surprising." Though only up to a point. "You can't just keep bottling the same thing over and over again and think the audience isn't going to catch on," Seidel argues, and the industry is coming to agree. "A lot of our music has started to sound alike," says Allen Butler, president of Sony Music Nashville, whose subsidiary Monument signed the Chicks. "The numbers are off at radio. Sales are off at some record labels. We all acknowledge that."

Robison, 26, and Seidel, 29 — they're sisters — were playing bluegrass and Western swing on Dallas street corners 10 years ago; several labels turned them down before they hooked up with Maines, 24, in 1995. Their banjo, fiddle, Dobro and spring-water-pure harmonies give mainstream country its strongest infusion of mountain music — Nashville's perennial signifier for authenticity — since Ricky Skaggs in the early '80s. Maines's father, the veteran sideman Lloyd Maines, lays on pedal steel for honky-tonk nostalgics who still miss Buck Owens (who, predictably, is a fan.)

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And Natalie has chucked the diva approach to country singing — melismatic self-display, calculated catches in the throat — in favor of the intensity and directness of a Bonnie Raitt or a Lucinda Williams.

That is, when the Chicks aren't in cutesy grrrl-power mode. Unfortunately, they're getting attention for two ersatz-sassy new songs. "Sin Wagon" condones "mattress dancin'," and blasphemously interpolates the gospel classic "I'll Fly Away"; in "Goodbye Earl," Thelma-and-Louise-like friends poison an abusive husband's black-eyed peas. "When [writer] Dennis Linde played it for us," Robison recalls, "we were like, 'That is *so* Dixie Chick'." In rock or rap, this would only raise eyebrows for its hokiness; in the world of country, it's a call-in-show controversy and a boardroom crisis. "This is rightly or wrongly considered a family format," says Sony's Butler. "Also, we're keenly aware that a lot of young girls — 6 to 10 years old — bought this record." Why did Sony let the Chicks get away with "Earl"? "Because they have things they want to say," says Butler. Possible translation: money talks. Seidel tells it this way. "They had three strong-headed blondes saying, 'Hey, it's on there.' And we know how to work it. We were playing "Earl" live and telling the fans 'This'll be on the album'."

Such feistiness isn't up to rock-star standards, but it still may not sit well in Nashville. "Sometimes they're talking when they should be playing," says Morris. "They just sound so goddam full of themselves. They want to be glib and flippant. When you're a certain age, you can ignore that" — Morris is 64 — "but I can't. Part of it comes from critics saying they're the salvation of country music. They'd do well not to read their own publicity." But the Chicks think they've succeeded *because* they flout old-school decorum. "If the younger audience has to hear one more time, *Ahm jus' so happy to bay here*," says Robison — "I mean, that's a real turn-off." Just what the older audience might say about butts-and-boogers talk.

But the generation gap ends when the music begins. Morris admits the Dixie Chicks are a welcome respite on country stations. And the Chicks really don't want to pick a fight — even with a singer from whom they've supposedly saved country music. "People are trying to say Shania Twain's not country," says Maines. "Well, what's 'country'? Let's *make* that country — and then put Buck Owens back on the radio, too." We should all live so long. But meanwhile, the Dixie Chicks will keep true-believing country fans hanging on — and bring some new ones in.

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