



"Other musicians would die for what we've got now," says Erwin (right, with, from left, Seidel and Maines at Maines's Dallas home).

Feather Friends

With a platinum album and No. 1 single, Dixie Chicks rule country music's roost

When it comes to celebrating milestones, country music's Dixie Chicks know how to make a moment last. Shortly after the January release of the Dallas-based trio's debut album, *Wide Open Spaces*, lead

singer Natalie Maines had a wild idea: She and her bandmates Martie Seidel and Emily Erwin, who are sisters, would commemorate each gold record and No. 1 hit with a tiny chicken's foot tattooed on an ankle. "We said, 'Yeah, sure,' thinking it was way down the line," says Erwin. "Then five months later we were going gold, and we said, 'Oh, no! We're getting a tattoo!'"

Last month, *Wide Open Spaces* went platinum, and the single "There's Your Trouble" reached No. 1, requiring another not-yet-scheduled trip to the tattoo parlor in Nashville. Less painful achievements might be in store Sept. 23 at the Country Music Association Awards, where Dixie Chicks are up for Best Vocal Group and the Horizon

Award for best newcomer. Such honors are becoming routine, thanks to tunes that *The Washington Post* says have "harmonies and attitude to spare" and "recall the days before Nashville discovered ways of turning



"The music is the core to it all," says Seidel (right, onstage this year in Nashville).

out overproduced hits with assembly line efficiency.”

Even too-hip-for-country teens are getting into the act. A growing legion of adolescent female fans—often wearing Chicks Rule T-shirts and carrying I Want to Be a Dixie Chick signs—have prompted some to dub the Chicks the Spice Girls of country. But the trio quickly dispel that notion. “People show up thinking, ‘Well, they’re cute, and I kind of like that one song they do,’” says Maines, 23, the band’s lead singer. “I just love watching them react when Martie [the fiddle and mandolin player] and [guitarist and banjo player] Emily rip into a bluegrass instrumental.”

Growing up in Dallas, the two youngest of private-school teachers Paul and Barbara Erwin’s three daughters, Emily and Martie were fed a balanced musical diet. “I felt that they should know how to play an instrument,” says Barbara, 53, who split with Paul in 1989. “We took them to the symphony and bribed them to sit still by promising we would take them out to breakfast afterward.” As their mother moni-



SUE MUNLEY

Young Erwin (left) and Seidel (in 1975) practiced music and watched little TV.

tored practice sessions with an egg timer, the girls grudgingly mastered a variety of instruments, from violin to guitar. “I’d hear kids outside playing kickball, and I hated that I was inside,” says Erwin, 26. “Now, of course, I’m grateful for it.”

By 1984, the girls were performing in Blue Night Express, a bluegrass troupe that toured Texas. When it disbanded in 1989, they joined two singer pals and began performing on sidewalks in Dallas’s business district, raking in more than \$100 a day. Christening themselves Dixie Chicks after a Little Feat tune, they piled their hair high and glammed it up in denim and sequins. After Erwin graduated from the Greenhill [High] School and Seidel dropped in and out of several colleges, the foursome hit the road in a Dodge van. “It would be a hundred degrees with makeup melting down our faces,” recalls Seidel, 28. “And there’s one of us in each seat trying to pull on our little cowgirl suits and boots. Ugh!”

Undeterred, the Dixie Chicks whistled right along, recording three albums and playing at political galas for George Bush and Bill Clinton. But one singer left in 1992, followed by the second vocalist three years later, leaving the sisters without a voice. “Neither of us wanted to be a lead singer; that would’ve scared us to death,” says Seidel. Enter Maines, a Lubbock, Texas, native and Boston’s Berklee School of Music dropout whose dad, Lloyd, had played steel guitar on two of Dixie Chicks’ albums. Invited to join, “I told them yes before I even thought it over,” she says. “The only thing I knew for sure was that I wasn’t going to wear those cowgirl clothes.”

Today, their sartorial—and romantic—situation is much improved. Seidel and Maines are happily married (to pharmaceutical sales rep Ted Seidel and bassist Michael Tarabay, respectively), while Erwin plans to marry singer-songwriter Charlie Robison in May. On the road until early winter, the group has had little time to enjoy their success, but they’re not complaining. “There are lots of people who put out records you never hear from again,” says Maines. Seidel nods in agreement. “There’s no guarantee that won’t happen to us,” she says. “I feel like right now is the good old days. I think right now is the proving stage, to prove that we’re for real.”



KETH PHILPOTT

“We’ve worked our whole lives for this,” says Erwin (left, signing in Independence, Mo.).

- Jeremy Helligar
- Chris Rose in Dallas