

# Hot Chicks

## Who are the Dixie Chicks, and how have they come to rock & rule the roost?

BY RICHARD SKANSE

IT'S THE ENCORE OF SHERYL CROW'S September 14th concert in Central Park, and some 25,000 people are watching Dixie Chick Natalie Maines shake and shimmy in a black leather outfit during an all-star jam of Bob Dylan's "Tombstone Blues." But nobody is watching her more closely than Keith Richards, crouched down over his Telecaster and matching her sassy sway with a wicked, co-conspiratorial grin.

"That's one of those things you never imagine is going to happen," says the twenty-four-year-old singer with a laugh two days later, while the Chicks are holed up in a New York hotel during tropical storm Floyd. "We met him Monday at the rehearsals, and Tuesday there were flowers in our trailer from Keith. The cool thing is, he said his daughters love us and that they're more impressed with the Dixie Chicks than they are with him."

The Rolling Stone's brood is not alone. *Fly*, the Dixie Chicks' second major-label album, moved 341,000 copies in its first week, to claim the Number One spot on the *Billboard* 200, a feat not even achieved by Shania Twain's 13 million selling – and considerably more mainstream – *Come On Over*. *Wide Open Spaces*, their 1997 debut, is still in the Top Forty and certified seven-times platinum. The past year has seen the unconventionally hip and irreverent trio nab two Grammys, while radio programmers have lunged at every Dixie Chicks track they can get their hands on.

"I talk to country-radio stations all week, and the most requested

Seidel, Maines and Robison (from left) are a little bit rock & roll.

songs they have are anything by the Dixie Chicks," says Jamie Matteson, country editor for the music trade magazine *Gavin*. "Anything" includes not only album singles but left-field picks like their straight-up pop cover of "You Can't Hurry Love," from the *Runaway Bride* soundtrack, and the Western swing nugget "Roly Poly," from Asleep at the Wheel's Bob Willis tribute album, *Ride With Bob*. "Right now we're playing 'Ready to Run' [Fly's first single] every three hours and 'Roly Poly' every four and a half hours," says Rob Carpenter, program director for WCTQ in Sarasota, Florida. Carpenter says he hears six or seven singles on *Fly*, including the full-throttle rave-up "Sin Wagon," in which Maines belts out her hell-bent intention to do some "mattress dancing." "That song has frightening potential," he says. "If alternative and pop radio do not play that one, it

may turn the fortunes of country radio around. It's a song that people are just going to want to hear, and it's going to clash really badly with pop or alternative, because of the banjos, but I think that's what makes it edgy. How many songs do we play at country radio that have banjo solos in them?"

"Sin Wagon" is one of the first cuts to fully capture the spirited intensity of the Chicks' live show, which in the past year they've taken from the stadiums of the George Strait Country Music Festival to the main stage at Lilith Fair. At a taping of *Sessions at West 54th*, their performance of the song is positively punk, like the Go-Go's running amok through the cornfields of *Hee Haw*. Maines even looks the part of vintage Belinda Carlisle, with a short, choppy do, a leather skirt and

a baby T emblazoned with UGLY-GIRL. While the other two Chicks, fiddle-and-banjo-playing sisters Martie Seidel and Emily Robison, rip through equally high-energy numbers like Bonnie Raitt's "Give It Up or Let Me Go" and the gleeful revenge anthem "Goodbye Earl," Mains stomps her feet and pumps up the band. The group is adept at ballads – Sheryl Crow calls their self-penned "You Were Mine" "one of the best songs ever written" – but more than anything, the Chicks like to rock.

"A year ago, my friends would say, 'Oh, I get this Dixie Chicks thing – they're like the Spice Girls, except country,'" says Brian Phillips of Susquehanna Radio in Dallas. "If you go to see them, you think that for about thirty seconds – and then you realize that they're one of the most accomplished, tightest and best-sounding live acts that you'll ever see."

Fly co-producer Blake Chancey saw enough potential [Cont. on 34]



[Cont. from 29] in the Chicks four years ago to give them a demo deal. He loved the virtuosity of Seidel and Robison, who had been playing fiddle, banjo and dobro in bluegrass festivals since childhood; but with lead singer Laura Lynch on board, the group was still a soft-folk act. After signing the Chicks, their manager informed them that Lynch was out in favor of a new singer, a "firecracker." Four months went by before Chancey heard the new incarnation. "When they kicked off the first song, it was just this upbeat, turbo-rocking song," he says. "It was unbelievable. And then Natalie opened her mouth and I went, 'Oh, we've got something here.'"

"It was so different that it was either going to be huge or it was going to be virtually rejected, which is often the case in our format for things that aren't ordinary," says Allen Butler, president of Sony Music Nashville.

From Day One, a key to the Dixie Chicks' success has been their determination to follow their instincts – and the relative leeway given by their label has allowed them to do so. "They have great business sense," says Natalie's father, Lloyd Maines, the accomplished Texas producer and steel guitarist who plays on both Chicks albums. "On the first album, they got a little resistance on 'Wide Open Spaces,' but the girls held fast and it paid off."

"We do have to fight some battles, but they're getting much less since we've had the success," says Maines. "But they underestimate us all the time, still. We just do what we want to do. We were sort of naive when we were making *Wide Open Spaces*, and I think we want to keep that."

Asleep at the Wheel's Ray Benson, an early supporter of the Chicks, says he has faith in their ability to maintain their integrity even as the record company kicks into marketing overdrive. "It is amazing to watch the machine take over," he says. "But if their convictions are there, which I think they are, they'll do fine. I applaud them. If you can be successful in mainstream music and still have a musical identity, that's a real trick."

But how long can the honeymoon last? Kyle Young, director of the Country Music Hall of Fame and Museum, has little doubt about the Chicks' staying power. "When I think of them, I think of people like Willie Nelson and the Judds and Garth Brooks, who have taken something, built on it and created something new. When that happens, it's almost an assurance that they'll have longevity."

For now, the Chicks are looking forward to an overdue vacation before their first headlining tour, next summer. "We're going to take time off, because we're sick of the Chicks and we don't want people to get sick of it," says Maines. "We are going to give the album a chance to breath without all the hype, and we need time to gather ourselves and to be human. I'm thinking of dying my hair black or getting extensions so I can be incognito for a while." ○