

The Dixie Chicks don't look like cultural revolutionaries, but this spirited Texas trio is changing country music in a big, big way.

Big enough, in fact, that the Chicks—lead singer Natalie Maines and multi-instrumentalists/harmony singers (and sisters) Martie Seidel and Emily Robison—have become a certified pop phenomenon.

Now, with the release of their new album, "Fly," the Chicks are poised to soar even higher with their exuberant blend of bluegrass-bred instrumental virtuosity, rock 'n' roll attitude, country-music earthiness and self-empowering lyrics.

The trio's 1997 major-label debut, "Wide Open Spaces," is the best-selling album ever by any country band, male or female, at 6 million-plus and is still selling 50,000 copies a week. Its success saw the Chicks outsell all other country groups combined in 1998, and has earned them praise from such well-respected artists as Dwight Yoakam and Buck Owens.

"There is a billboard in Nashville for an album by a new female artist, and it reads: 'The best album since 'Wide Open Spaces,'" said Seidel, the Chicks' fleet-fingered violinist, violist and mandolin player.

"We were just tickled to death that somebody would use our album as a gauge for quality," she continued, speaking last month from a Lilith Fair tour stop in Cleveland. "It's kind of neat that we might've set a standard for the next female trio or solo artist. I hope we have."

The success of "Wide Open Spaces" also extended to this year's Grammy Awards.

The Chicks won two Grammys at the star-studded February fete, including Best Country Album honors, a surprise victory that saw these brassy gals from Dixie beat out the likes of the heavily favored Shania Twain and Vince Gill.

By summer's end, the Texas threesome had earned additional headlines for stealing the show almost nightly on the national George Strait Country Music Festival stadium tour. They also provided a jolt to the Lilith Fair tour, winning over thousands of Sheryl Crow and Sarah McLachlan fans who previously may not have come much closer to country music than watching a Twain video on MTV.

"It's obvious we're crossing over without trying," said Seidel, the group's oldest member at 29.

"We were a little nervous going into Lilith Fair, because we thought the masses [of pop fans] wouldn't be familiar with our music. But we were really surprised. Because a Lilith audience and a Tim McGraw audience are very similar. A lot of our young fans are listening to Sheryl Crow and the Indigo Girls, and to Tim and Shania.

"And that's what I like to see. To appreciate music, you have to listen to all kinds of styles. Our CD collections in the band range from opera to Lauryn Hill. I don't understand people who say: 'I don't like such and such kind of music,' and they rule out all groups that play that music. It's like saying you don't like a certain race of people; it's so close-minded."

Opening, not closing, minds is what the Dixie Chicks are all about.

Dismissed less than two years ago as a Texas-bred version of the Spice Girls, the talented trio quickly dispelled such notions.

Seidel and her sister, guitarist, banjo player, dobro player and lap-pedal-steel player Robison, 26, are both accomplished instrumentalists and strong harmony vocalists. Lead singer Maines, 24, who joined up in 1995 after the departure of two of the Chicks' co-founders, studied at Boston's prestigious Berklee School of Music and learned the ropes from her father, famed pedal-steel virtuoso and album producer Lloyd Maines.

The three were so confident about their abilities that, when it came time to sign a major label deal with Sony/Monu-

ment in 1996 (after three self-produced albums), they had some very specific stipulations included in their contract.

Justly proud of their instrumental prowess, Seidel and Robison insisted they do their own playing on their albums, rather than allowing Nashville session musicians to perform the sisters' parts. And all three Chicks were adamant that they have equal say with their producers regarding which songs they used on their albums.

Such stipulations are almost unheard of in Nashville, where record companies routinely tell new and established country artists alike exactly what to do (and when,

## dixie chicks cross the road to get to the other side of country...

By George Varga



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where and how), not the other way around.

"We really had our identity intact before the big label deal came along," said Seidel, who with her sister joined the first edition of the Dixie Chicks 10 years ago in Dallas.

"We also felt a lot of pressure from ourselves, our families and our very small fan base—we had 6,000 people on our mailing list—to stay true to ourselves. It's almost like a hardheaded, Texas kind of thing. You don't grow up around the Texas music scene and then go to Nashville and sell out.

"We were already supporting ourselves, doing corporate dates, playing in honky-tonks and restaurants, and making our own DIY [do-it-yourself] CDs. So when we went to Nashville, we were very headstrong and we didn't compromise."

The Chicks' desire for creative expression is even more pronounced on "Fly."

The new album features five songs written or co-written by Seidel, Maines and Robison, four more than "Wide Open Spaces." At least two of those songs could raise eyebrows.

Written by Dennis Linde, "Goodbye Earl" is an upbeat tune about an abused wife named Mary Anne and her best friend Wanda. After Mary Anne's husband repeatedly beats her and ignores a restraining order, the two women decide: *Earl had to die / Goodbye, Earl / We need a break / Let's go out to the lake, Earl / We'll pack a lunch / and stuff you in the trunk, Earl...*

The bluegrass-driven "Sin Wagon," which was co-written by the recently divorced Maines, makes two references to "mattress dancing," though Seidel playfully claims the phrase might be innocent.

"'Mattress dancing' could very well be about jumping on the bed," she said. "It's adult humor in a way that's safe for our audience to hear. Country music has been risqué ever since Tammy Wynette sang 'D-I-V-O-R-C-E' in the '60s. Our approach is more lighthearted. Sometimes we do forget that we have some conservative listeners. But nothing we say or sing is anything we're ashamed of. I have a 5-year-old boy, and I use him as a gauge. Can he hear 'Goodbye Earl' or 'Sin Wagon'? Yes."

Seidel laughed when asked if the Dixie Chicks are feminists.

"We don't use that word," she said. "But there's got to be a '90s word for strong women. I feel like the word 'feminism' and the women's movement left a bad taste. And we are very traditional females; we love men and a lot of the traditional female roles. So I don't think we're feminists. But we are looking for that perfect word that will sum up the strong, 'I can do anything' '90s woman." ■