



# DIXIE DARLINGS

From Howard Stern to Ross Perot, everyone loves country's hottest trio, the Dixie Chicks

The Grammy Awards air Wednesday, February 24, 8 P.M./ET, on CBS



BY MICHAEL MCCALL

**T**he Dixie Chicks are not only country music's hottest new group—they're also its leading cause of whiplash. The trio's stunning good looks always get attention, but what really turns heads is the band's astonishing musical prowess.

"We like the idea that we're blond *and* we can play our instruments well," says Natalie Maines, the group's 24-year-old lead singer. "We know people say things like, 'Wow, that girl looks like Julia Roberts and she plays the heck out of the banjo!'"

"We enjoy the fact that when people

come to see us, they're blown away by how well we play," says 29-year-old Martie Seidel, the group's accomplished fiddler and older sister of 26-year-old banjo player (and Julia Roberts look-alike) Emily Erwin.

The band's fusion of instrumental virtuosity and progressive songcraft has earned it an enthusiastic following. The trio's debut album, *Wide Open Spaces*, has sold more than 4 million copies since its release last January. And the Dixie Chicks have even made an impression on the quintessential city slicker: New York's notorious deejay Howard Stern. When a guest on the Stern radio show recently derided the Dixie Chicks as nothing more than the Nashville version of the Spice Girls, Stern took issue. He asserted that the three band members were outstanding musicians. (Of course, Stern being Stern, he also took time to leer, calling the Chicks "babes.")

The trio received more meaningful recognition in the form of three Grammy nominations, including a nod in the prestigious Best New Artist category.

The rest of the field this year (Lauryn Hill, Natalie Imbruglia, the Backstreet Boys and opera phenom Andrea Bocelli) is incredibly eclectic and competitive, but the Dixie Chicks have momentum: They have already been designated best newcomers by the Country Music Association and the American Music Awards.

The band's soaring success has its roots in years of dues-paying. Erwin was a 16-year-old high school student in her native Dallas and her sister Martie (Seidel is her married name) was in her first year of college when they formed the

MARC ROYCE FOR TV GUIDE; HAIR: MELANIE SHELLEY; MAKEUP: CANDICE BURTON/THE GRAY AGENCY



*There's a feminine flair to this year's Grammy Awards, from country sensations the Dixie Chicks to host Rosie O'Donnell. And in a year of dark horses, we've got the biggest surprise of all: Shawn Mullins. Finally, just so you have something to compare the broadcast to, we recall the best and worst years in Grammy history. It's not only rock & roll—and you'll like it.*

Dixie Chicks in 1989 with Laura Lynch and Robin Lynn Macy. Even then, the sisters were accomplished musicians: Seidel began playing fiddle at age 5, and she'd won several awards at bluegrass festivals by the time the Dixie Chicks were founded; Erwin began playing the banjo at age 10.

The band originally performed on street corners, playing a combination of old-time Western swing, cowboy music and bluegrass. They dressed in outrageous Western wear, and Lynch hung a rubber chicken from the neck of her acoustic bass to go along with the band's original name, the Dixie Chickens (taken from a song by the rock group Little Feat). Fans kept abbreviating the name to the Dixie Chicks, and the group soon followed suit.

"If we had known we were going to get beyond the street corner, we probably would have thought about the name more," Seidel says, laughing.

Between 1991 and 1995, the band put out three independent albums that sold more than 90,000 copies. Among their fans was Texas magnate Ross Perot, who adopted them as his favorite band and regularly featured them at political rallies during his presidential bid.

However, Nashville ignored



Pretty talented: Erwin, Maines and Seidel (from left) sound off.



the band until the group was whittled down and Maines, originally from Lubbock, Texas, was recruited. With the former Berklee School of Music student as lead vocalist and guitarist, the Dixie Chicks modernized their sound and their image.

"I was always impressed at how well Martie and Emily played their instruments," Maines says. "But as far as the cowgirl music they were playing, I wasn't really into it." But the sisters insisted that they were eager to change their sound, too. They convinced Maines with a song they had just written, "You Were Mine" (it recently became the fourth single from *Wide Open Spaces* to reach the Top 10 on the country charts).

The trio's broad blend of influences has resulted in a distinctive style. With Seidel and Erwin firmly rooting the band's sound in traditional instrumentation, and with Maines providing an energetic and thoroughly modern spark, the Dixie Chicks are proving that country music can move forward while maintaining a link to its past.

"It's funny, because half the people come up and tell us that they're glad we're staying with traditional country music," Erwin says. "And the other half say, 'Y'all are so different. It's great to hear someone taking country music in a new direction.' For us, it's not about definitions. We don't worry about whether it's too country or too out there. We just know when it's right."

**Play time:** Performing in East Lansing, Michigan

