

# THE TENNESSEAN

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## ARTS & Entertainment



The Dixie Chicks return to the CD bins on Tuesday with their new album, *Fly*. The question is can the Chicks overcome the sophomore slump?

## Just whistling Dixie

*Chicks take their time to hatch  
second album*

It would be considered chauvinistic for a man to say he wants to pick up some chicks on Tuesday.

Yet, the country music industry is hoping that plenty of consumers will do just that. The Dixie Chicks' second album, *Fly*, hits stores that day, as the genre's wackiest trio attempts to prove that its bizarre fashion sense and Beatle-esque sarcasm - a distinct contrast to the safe, nice-guy image that most of the industry tries to transmit - can sustain past one album.

That one album, of course, is *Wide Open Spaces*, a project that set some pretty awesome standards. With certification by the Recording Industry Association of America for sales of more than 6 million copies, it is the best-selling album ever by a country group. The album, and its single *There's Your Trouble*, brought them a pair of Grammy awards in February, they swiped three trophies from the Academy of Country Music in May, and they took two from the Country Music Association a year ago.

Amazingly, they're already in the running for the CMA's entertainer of the year award this year, even though they haven't headlined a major concert yet.

The music industry is well aware of the dangers of overwhelming success, the possibility that it will be followed by a sophomore slump. (Can you say Wilson Phillips? Can you say Christopher Cross? Can you say Billy Ray Cyrus?) Yet it's likely that The Chicks will prove themselves bigger than the sophomore legend.

*Fly* is a solid album brimming with confidence - an amazing amount of confidence. Their song choices are anything but safe (one telling song, *Goodbye Earl*, puts spousal abuse and cold-blooded murder in a happy, celebratory context). They react to industry expectations that they'll chase pop crossover possibilities by cutting ultra-country fare. And they made the entire project without a trace of echo.

"It sounds different than any record that you're gonna hear on the country airwaves," co-producer Blake Chancey proclaims. "You can, by not having a lot of reverb, hear every instrument. It has a place, and you can almost touch it. I think that's what we were shooting for. I think we achieved it."

They did so with a good deal of forethought, orchestrated by The Dixie Chicks themselves: Natalie Maines, Martie Seidel and Emily Robison. Traditionally, country artists find the follow-up to their first major success extremely difficult. The album gets recorded in bits and pieces between endless tour dates, booked as if the artist's marketability is only months from a nosedive.

The Chicks, however, treated the second album as the centerpiece of their future. When Chancey told them they would get the best product possible by clearing three months of their schedule to record, they didn't compromise. They took three months off the road - clearly turning down potential performance income - to make the album. They similarly cleared their datebooks to make time to write new material for *Fly*.

"We just kinda went into seclusion," Seidel says, on a cell phone from their bus, somewhere in Cleveland. "Nobody was allowed in the studio, and really, the label stayed away, management stayed away, and just us three and [producers] Paul [Worley] and Blake went in there. And if we got in there one day and didn't feel like it, we'd go home, or go play golf, or whatever, and we tried not to put any pressure on ourselves." And, from the producers' standpoint, there was no inordinate pressure surrounding *Fly*, just an acute business-like attitude, something one might not associate with The Chicks' carefree public image.

"I felt better about it," Chancey says, comparing the *Fly* sessions to *Wide Open Spaces*. "Everybody was takin' it a lot more serious: We're comin' to work, we got this time blocked out, and none of us were scared we couldn't find songs. We just knew we had a bar that had been set pretty high. We knew we had a goal we had to hit."

As a subjective endeavor, the goals in music are fuzzy at best. Yet, The Chicks clearly achieved one goal: They made an album that satisfied their country souls, rather than caving in to the lure of commercial success by veering in a pop direction.

In fact, it seems as if the trio stubbornly went out of its way to head even more staunchly in a country vein. *Fly* unfolds with the dancing tones of Seidel's fiddle and John Mock on tin whistle. *Hello*



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*Mr. Heartache* borrows the shuffle style that Ray Price made a standard part of the honky-tonk repertoire. The melody of *Don't Waste Your Heart* centers on an almost-yodel, and *Sin Wagon* puts "mattress dancin' - that's right, I said mattress dancin' " in a quasi-bluegrass context.

"We're a country group," Seidel says unequivocally. "That's what our expertise is in, country music. I mean, Emily plays a banjo, for God's sake. I play the fiddle. Natalie's got that undeniable twang that she will never be able to escape with all the speech therapy in the world."

It's that undeniably country position that makes The Chicks such a remarkable phenomenon. The harmonies of *I Can Love You Better*, their first Monument single, are much closer to the sound of the Grand Ole Opry bluegrass band The Whites than to the pop-influenced harmonies of Sugar Ray.

Yet, The Dixie Chicks are seemingly selling to many of the same music-buyers who might pick up Sugar Ray albums. While a 1997 CMA study indicates that 85% of the

country listening audience is over the age of 25, 60% of The Chicks' album sales came from fans under that age.

And many of The Chicks' fans claim no allegiance to country whatsoever. "We feel like these last two years we've kind of been pulling the wool over non-country listeners' eyes," Seidel laughs. "They come up to us after a show, where we've played *Heartache's on Me*, and we've done a bluegrass instrumental - I mean, *Wide Open Spaces*, with the banjo and the steel. We put on this show, and fans will come up to us and say, 'I hate country music, but I love y'all. Y'all aren't country.' And we just kind of giggle under our breath, thinking, 'If we fooled 'em, that's fine, but we're country.'"

If they've fooled any of their fans, it's probably because of the packaging, which is decidedly non-country. There are moments when their silly blend of boas and spangles seems like *Hee Haw* gone haywire. But funky hair and punky attitudes are just as much a part of their visual schtick. One observer once referred to them as "The Lennon Sisters on acid." And Joan Rivers' daughter deemed their Grammy outfits, which used grungy safety pins, as the worst attire on any awards show this year. One unfortunate by-product of all the clothing chatter is that the music has become secondary in the public positioning of the group.

"I was sitting behind Brooks & Dunn at the ACMs, and I overheard Ronnie Dunn say to Kix Brooks, 'She's wearin' her dang pajamas,'" Seidel recalls. "I thought, 'Well, you know, we just gotta be us.' And if it takes the focus off the music, I guess that's a little frustrating. But we wanna be total entertainers. That's why we're so excited about bein' up for that [entertainer] award at the CMAs, 'cause we try really hard to make our look a part of our image - have image be an important thing, to help draw people to our music. It might draw some away from our music, but that's OK."

With *Fly*, they made a specific attempt to counter that trend by keeping their faces off the cover of the CD. As much as their image has propelled The Chicks, they want to prove that it's the music - not the wild-eyed glamor - that brings in those gaudy sales figures.

"We just felt it was time to put the music first," Seidel says. "We disagree with what the industry says about flashy covers help sell an album. We wanted to prove that our music could sell an album. It's not about faces being

on the front and catching your eye and that's why people buy it. We really don't believe that's why we've sold almost 7 million albums. We feel like it's been word of mouth. We could've looked totally different. We could've not had blond hair. We could've not had this image. We still believe that our music is strong, and we kinda wanted to prove that to the label."

Whether or not *Fly* sells the same number of albums, The Chicks have certainly proven that they can maintain a focus on their music in the face of trying circumstances. When they started recording the album in early-January, their lives had changed dramatically. They were instantly recognized, thoroughly scrutinized, and had received a nice financial jolt.

Emily Erwin was plotting her marriage to fellow recording artist Charlie Robison, and Maines was on the divorce trail.

Despite the chaos around them, or maybe *because* of the chaos around them, they made some creative strides that show up in the material on the album.

"Emily's wedding and Natalie's divorce set the whole tone" for the sessions, Seidel says. "My head was spinning. I didn't know what to think, whether to be happy for Emily or crying with Natalie. The first week, Natalie came in the studio crying, 'I'm getting a divorce, I've failed.' She was just so distraught, and I really felt like her songwriting that year had a lot to do with her unhappiness in her marriage. That's the time that songs really come from the heart."

That, Seidel suggests, is the reason Maines has three songs on the album, compared to two apiece for Seidel and Robison. And, ironically, Maines' three songs form a small unit in the middle of the album. *Don't Waste Your Heart* is a woman's warning not to get too close while she's dangerously unavailable. *Sin Wagon* is a wild, hedonistic romp of pure pleasure. And *Without You* bounces to co-dependency, with a string-supported I'm-nothing-without-you message, unusual for The Chicks, who usually exude confidence and independence.

"You can't write a whole album based on your strength when you know you're not always strong, and your audience for sure isn't always gonna be strong," Seidel says. "How are they gonna relate to your album if you've only got one emotion going on the whole time?"

Which is the thing about The Dixie Chicks. They have so many things going on at any given time: The sarcasm and silliness, the outlandishly punk costumes, and that solid country sound. Will it fly one more time?

They certainly hope that consumers will be ready Tuesday to go to the stores and pick up some Chicks.