

Dixie Chicks Chronology

1969 — Martie Erwin Seidel born Oct. 12
 1972 — Emily Erwin born Aug. 16
 1974 — Natalie Maines Tarabay born Oct. 14
 1983-86 — Maines Brothers Band on country charts

1984-89 — Martie & Emily in teen bluegrass band Blue Night Express
 1987 — Martie wins second place at national Old Time Fiddlers Contest
 1989 — The Dixie Chicks formed
 1990-93 — All-female lineup on two independent CDs

1993 — Third independent CD recorded in Nashville.

1995 — Natalie joins band

1997 — First single / *I Can Love You Better*

1998 — Monument Records CD *Wide Open Spaces*



SONY MUSIC

Not just 'Newcomers' the Dixie Chicks have been around long enough to prove they're the real deal

whistlin' Dixie

By ROBERT K. OERMANN

Music Row is crowing about discovering the Dixie Chicks, but Texans have known about these ladies for years.

The band celebrates the release of its *Wide Open Spaces* CD with a performance Friday at The Wildhorse Saloon.

Prior to getting their Nashville recording contract, the Dixie Chicks had played the gigantic Texas, Louisiana and New Mexico state fairs, as well as Dollywood, Summer Lights and the Kerrville Folk Festival. Country listeners in Dallas named the Dixie Chicks their favorite country group for four years in a row. The trio has a mailing list of 6,000 fans, an active Internet site and three previous "homemade" CDs.

Although still in their 20s, the three

women who make up the act's front line have more credentials than any other "newcomers" around.

The Dixie Chicks have already played the *Grand Ole Opry*, the Kennedy Center and a Dallas Cowboys half-time ceremony. They've opened for Garth Brooks, Alan Jackson, Loretta Lynn and Emmylou Harris. They've toured Europe and Japan, recorded a McDonald's commercial, earned a Justin Boots endorsement and appeared on TV's *American Music Shop* and *Nashville Now* shows — all without a major-label recording contract.

Is this the hardest working act in show biz?

You wouldn't think it to talk to them. Lounging in a hotel room prior to a recent

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Hear 'The Chicks'

To hear a sampling of the Dixie Chicks, call *The Tennessean's Source24* line, a free 24-hour news and information service, at 242-2424. Punch in category code 1052 to hear *Once You've Loved Somebody* from the album *Wide Open Spaces*.



Getting there

The Dixie Chicks celebrate the release of *Wide Open Spaces* with a 10:30 p.m. show Friday at The Wildhorse Saloon. Tickets (\$8) are available in advance at the Wildhorse gift shop or at the door.

It's the real deal with the Dixie Chicks

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Nashville performance, the Dixie Chicks were breezy, chatty and perfectly relaxed. The atmosphere was like a slumber party, with all three women flopping around on the beds. There wasn't a trace of pre-show jitters.

"We're in this for the long haul," said fiddler Martie Erwin Seidel. "We know we'll always be playing music together," added her sister, Emily Erwin, who plays mandolin, Dobro, guitar, banjo and just about anything else with strings on it.

"Everybody in this band is just passionate about music," said lead singer Natalie Maines Tarabay. "We want people to like us. And I feel like they will. Because I know we are good."

The act's nine years of success is based on its musicianship. At a Dixie Chicks show, you're likely to hear the honky-tonk stomper *Tonight the Heartache's on Me*, the rocking *Let 'Er Rip*, the soaring ballad *Once You've Loved Somebody* and the hit single *I Can Love You Better*. All are on *Wide Open Spaces*. But you're just as likely to hear a bluegrass song, a Western swing number or a blues tune.

"To me, that's what's fun about this group," Martie says. "You can tell there's excitement and energy."

At 28, Martie is the senior member. She has been playing fiddle

since she was 5 and placed second in the national Old Time Fiddlers Contest. Emily, 25, began playing instruments at the age of 7. She and her sister spent five years in a teenage Texas bluegrass band called Blue Night Express.

Natalie, 23, is the daughter of noted steel guitarist and producer Lloyd Maines. His Maines Brothers Band placed six singles on the national country hit parade in the 1980s. Lloyd played on one of the Dixie Chicks' earlier albums, and Natalie says she was a fan of the band long before she joined.

It all started after school let out in 1989. Teen-agers Martie and Emily were thinking about getting summer jobs. On a lark with two other female instrumentalists, they went to a Dallas street corner and began playing for tips. When they made more than \$100 the first hour, the idea of getting jobs evaporated. People began asking to hire the band before it even had a name.

En route to the street corner a few weeks later, Martie and Emily heard the Little Feat song *Dixie Chicken* on the radio.

"So we decided to call ourselves Dixie Chicken, with a logo that had a chicken with long eyelashes," Emily recalls. "Only Martie didn't want to be a chicken. We shortened it to Chix, but that looked like we were some X-rated stripper group.

Finally we settled on the Dixie Chicks."

Natalie comments: "Before I joined the band, their logos always had a chicken. I never thought they were calling themselves 'chicks' as 'babes.' I never even thought about it until it came up about whether we should keep the name" during negotiations for a Music Row contract.

At any rate, the name and the all-female lineup attracted attention instantly. So did the outfits. In its earlier incarnation, the members dressed up in flashy cowgirl costumes. Their first two "homemade" Dallas albums — 1990's *Thank Heavens for Dale Evans* and 1992's *Little Ol' Cowgirl* — also underscored this image.

"We thought we'd do the female-Riders-in-the-Sky thing," Emily says. "But that felt ... too narrow. And to wear the big Dallas hair and the Western fringe kind of diminished the music. We wanted to get out of that gimmicky thing. We were at a point where we really wanted the music to speak for itself."

Martie simply calls it "finding some fashion sense."

In 1993 the Dixie Chicks began aiming for the country mainstream, initially with a third CD, *Shouldn't a Told You*. Recorded in Nashville, it featured male sidemen and songs by such Music Row favorites as Rodney Foster, Kim Richey, Jamie

O'Hara and Jim Lauderdale. By 1995 the two other women — Robin Lynn Macy and Laura Lynch — had left the band. The Erwin sisters put their heads together.

"We knew we weren't going to leave each other high and dry," Emily said. "Martie and I really started thinking about what we wanted. We were really at the point where we were wanting that major-label success."

"We also knew we needed a lead singer," Martie added.

Lloyd Maines gave the sisters a tape of his daughter's vocals.

"So they called and asked if I'd sing on a demo tape," Natalie said. "I had always loved watching them play, but I was not impressed at all with the singing. I had been waiting for my shot."

"So I sang the song *You Were Mine* and started getting the feeling like I was at an audition. Martie is talking to me, like, 'So do you like country music? Do you think you would ever want to sing country music?' I'm like, 'I love country music. I would LOVE to sing country music!'"

Natalie's fiery lead voice and the creamy harmonies and sharp instrumental abilities of Martie and Emily perked up ears at the Sony company in 1996. The Dixie Chicks have now been officially "hatched" as the flagship act of Sony's revived Monument Records label. ■