Dixie Chicks

THE DIXIE CHICKS SUE SONY, STRIP DOWN THEIR SOUND AND REWRITE THE RULES OF MAINSTREAM COUNTRY – AGAIN

FTER TWO CHART-TOPPING ALBUMS AND MORE THAN 20 MILLION in record sales, the superstar country trio the Dixie Chicks came home to Texas, took a daring gamble and hit the jackpot. Natalie Maines, Emily Robison and Martie Maguire sued their record label, Sony Music, for more than S4 million in royalties and won, snagging their own imprint, Open Wide Records, in the process.

Most importantly, in late August, they released *Home*, a return-to-basics triumph that sold 780,000 copies its first week in stores and by November had moved 2 million on the strength of the first two singles, the sprightly bluegrass romp "Long Time Gone" and an acoustic cover of Fleetwood Mac's classic ballad "Landslide."

The album was recorded in Austin's remote and peaceful Cedar Creek Studio, a quaint house-turned-recording-facility surrounded by an empty field. With Lloyd Maines, Natalie's father and Texas country's premier record producer at the boards, they crafted a mature, stripped-down record that showcases the vocal and instrumental chops of the group, which spent years playing bluegrass-derived acoustic material in Dallas and throughout Texas before crossing over to the mainstream with their 1998 major-label debut, Wide Open Spaces.

Home is a record that captures the introspective, acoustic soul of a group known for serving up high-energy, rock-charged country. It's also an effort without boundaries, where bluegrass mingles with rock and classical, pop and folk. "We're in a different place in our life now," Robison says from her home outside San Antonio. "We have all found our homes. We're all in a very comfortable place personally, and there's a comfort to this album."

The 12-song opus was made sans major label intervention. While the Chicks' lawyers — who are, by design, not based in Texas — were mired in paperwork, the band leisurely sang and picked what they initially thought would be demos to shop for another record label should the lawsuit prompt their leaving Sony. The stress of the lawsuit proved beneficial because it paved the way for a fruitful, creative period in the studio.

"It really helped us expand and broaden our view of ourselves musically," says Robison. "There's more of our instrumentation, and there's more of our harmonies, and there's more of our arrangements. We're peeling back everything we did on Fly and Wide Open Spaces. It's what the three of us have to offer."

And it fits beautifully with the bluegrass movement spearheaded first by Alison Krauss in the late '90s and then cemented by the six-million-selling success of 2000's O Brother, Where Art Thou? soundtrack and the out-of-nowhere victory of contemporary bluegrass trio Nickel Creek, who scored a Top 10 on the country album charts with their second album, This Side. But despite sales success, mainstream country radio has largely ignored Nickel Creek's singles, as well as anything from Krauss' last three CDs. Some played "I Am a Man

of Constant Sorrow," the award-winning tune from O Brother, strictly as a novelty. But the Chicks' bluegrass excursion is all over the airwaves.

"They are in this position because they are the Chicks and they can pull that off," said Paul Williams, program director for Dallas-based KPLX (FM 99.5) "The Wolf." "It's a great record. But the Chicks have the venue and the opportunity to make it happen."

There will be more venues in the Chicks' future. Although they only played a handful of gigs in 2002, including the Houston rodeo in February and Dallas' Cotton Bowl in front of 40,000 fans as part of the Texas State Fair in October, a bigger tour should start in the spring, after Robison spends time with her newborn son, Charles Augustus Robison, born Nov. 11. By then, Home could rake in another four million in sales and continue to fill up radio playlists with even more banjo, dobro, fiddle and mandolin.

-MARIO TARRADELL