



**Nashville hath no fury like the older, wiser (and richer) Dixie Chicks**



By JOSH TYRANGIEL NASHVILLE

COUNTRY MUSICIANS AREN'T BORN dull, but they're quick studies. It is a generally held country principle that rough edges translate into lower sales, so record labels often send their most promising acts to media-training schools for a good dulling down. The stars of the future are then taught how to smile with lots of teeth, tilt their hats at the proper roguish—but not too roguish—angle and repeat variations on the “I'm just so glad to be making the music I love” palaver that plays between videos on Country Music Television. On her first day at media school, the Dixie Chicks' lead singer Natalie Maines told her instructor an oral-sex joke. The Dixie Chicks flunked media school.

The Chicks—Maines, 27, and a pair of sisters, Emily Robison, 30, and Martie Maguire, 32—are the most personable (and ribald) act in country music. As achievements go, this is like being the funniest guy in Belgium. Until recently, their breaches of country etiquette had the harmless air of cheerleaders caught smoking under the bleachers; they were rascals, but lovable rascals. After all, they moved tons of records, and their music was built around traditional country instruments (dobro, fiddle, mandolin) that they played themselves. But then the Chicks went from rascals to rebels: they sued their record company in the ugliest financial squabble in recent country history. “Now,” says Maines, “I realize that until this whole thing with Sony, we were complete wusses.”

The war with Sony started in 2001, after the group's first two albums, *Wide Open Spaces* and *Fly*, sold more than 10 million copies apiece. In an interview with Dan Rather that aired on CBS, the Chicks announced that by their math, Sony had made \$200 million off them but that individually they had yet to gross seven figures. Then, in a move that sent shock waves through Nashville (admittedly it's a town that's eas-

**HOMEODIES:** The Dixie Chicks, from left, Maguire, Maines and Robison, made their third album while living in their native Texas

ily shocked), the Chicks served Sony with papers claiming that because of the company's alleged accounting misdeeds, they were declaring themselves free agents. “We all know there are some major problems in the music industry,” says Maguire. “Every new act signs a bad deal. But we never dreamed that the s\_\_\_\_\_ deal we signed wouldn't even be honored.”

Sony sued the group for breach of contract; the Chicks countersued, alleging “systematic thievery.” As the charges escalated, the Chicks found themselves Nashville pariahs. For country acts, the relationship between label and band has historically been in loco parentis; bands presumed the label always knew best. “Everyone in the country industry kept telling us, ‘Keep your mouths shut. Why

the new tracks as an experiment. Musically, Maguire and Robison had grown up playing in bluegrass competitions, and they resolved to make a break with their old country sound and record in a more traditional bluegrass style, with lots of strings and no drums.

The Chicks called in Maines' dad, steel-guitar legend Lloyd Maines, to produce the tracks, and then, just to push Sony to DefCon 1, they shopped the material to other record companies. “We came very close to signing with another label,” says Maguire with a sly grin. “I think that's when they realized, ‘These girls are serious.’” Sure enough, Sony and the Dixie Chicks announced a new agreement in July. No one will talk details, but the Chicks now record under their own Sony subsidiary, Wide Open Records, and it is widely believed they received a \$20 million signing advance and 20% royalties on all future records. Sony refused to comment on the deal or the Dixie Chicks in general.

*Home* (out Aug. 27), the first record under the new deal, contains the bluegrass-y tracks the Chicks wrote on their sabbatical. The familiar story line—no record-company supervision equals more artistic freedom—turns

out to be true and a mixed blessing. The first single, *Long Time Gone*, is a floorboard stomper about the passage of time; *White Trash Wedding* (“I shouldn't be wearing white, and you can't afford no ring”) is a two-minute humor hurricane, and the two Patty Griffin-penned songs (*Truth No. 2* and *Top of the World*)

don't you appreciate what you have?” says Maguire.

As lawyers' fees clicked away, the Chicks retreated to their Texas homes last year to make music with their own money and at their own pace. They aren't precious about their songs (says Maines: “I'll never write as well as Sheryl Crow or Patty Griffin; I don't have the turmoil in my life”). But while strumming away in one another's living rooms, they talked about entering a new phase of life, with husbands and kids (Maines has a son, 1; Robison is seven months pregnant) and adult responsibilities. The songs they wrote and other writers' songs they chose to sing were more serious than their earlier work. Emboldened by their stand against Sony, they decided to record

show the Chicks can do melancholy credibly. But *Home* has a little too much melancholy. The Chicks say they were glad not to have record executives pushing them to tailor their songs to the short attention spans and upbeat expectations of radio listeners, but everyone needs a little editing. Maines makes no apologies. “This album's more mature, and I think we might lose some fans because of it. But this is where we are right now.”

The Dixie Chicks will sing happy songs again, and they're even promising to make a rock record somewhere down the road. Whatever they do, they have decided to make the music they want to and trust that the market will follow. Hardly the act of three wusses. ■

# DIXIE DIVAS