



LONE STAR CHICKS

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*With an eye on Nashville,
Texas's Dixie Chicks sing along
the long road to fame*

IN THE SOMETIMES OVERLY PACKAGED WORLD of country music, the first thing you've got to know about the Dixie Chicks is that they are a band, not an act. This is an important distinction, like the difference between, say, Vince Gill and Billy Ray Cyrus: Gill is a highly accomplished guitar player, songwriter, and singer whose talents will yield a long career, while Billy Ray reportedly used to dance for Chippendales.

"For us, being an act would be too limiting," says Laura Lynch, the Chicks's vocalist, referring to the trio's developing musicianship. Over the din of a brunch crowd at Kathleen's Art Cafe, a sunny, two-room Dallas restaurant, the three members of the band—Lynch, and sisters Martie and Emily Erwin—have settled down for some dishing about where they've been and where they'd like to go. It's a talk they've been having more often lately, as they find themselves inching closer to true success and stardom.

After seven years of touring the Western way—that is, by bus, by dusty back road, to anyplace where they think people might appreciate their sound and kick up their heels a bit—the Dixie Chicks are primed for a breakout. Their three well-received, self-produced albums have the big labels scratching at their door, and stars like Alan Jackson have signed them as an opening act.

Relaxed on straight-backed wooden chairs, waiting for their blue-corn pancakes and iced tea, the Chicks seem at home. Given the time they've spent hanging out in Kathleen's, they almost are. All three wear Wranglers and simple blouses. Later tonight, on stage, it will be mariachi pants and lace shirts with spangles somewhere in the mix. Significantly, none of the three wears a Western hat. But there was a time, not too long ago, when Western hats defined the band.

BY JOHN HASSAN

PHOTOGRAPHS BY TERRY SHAPIRO

The Dixie Chicks met in early 1988. Laura was a back-up singer in a band, a divorcée, single mother, and possessor of a résumé that listed a journalism degree from University of Texas, Austin, some sales for Trammel Crow, and a stint as a weekend television news reporter. Absent from the résumé, however, was any extended success in music. So, when Laura, singing one evening at the Hotel Worthington in Fort Worth, spied locally renowned fiddle player Martie Erwin in the audience, she approached her during a break. The two clicked.

A few weeks later, Laura went to Jellystone Park in East Texas to hear Blue Night Express, a teenage band that featured Martie and her banjo-playing sister Emily. "With Martie and Emily, the chemistry was just there," Laura remembers. "We liked the same music and we had fun together. We just laughed and laughed." Soon after, they decided to put a band together. A friend of Laura's, Robin Lynn Macy, rounded out the group.

April of that year, the Dixie Chicks played their first gig—a street corner in Dallas's West End. They made \$400.

In those early days, the band's mode of transport was Mama Erwin's gray Caprice Classic, which, when it wasn't shuttling Martie to classes at Southern Methodist University or Emily off to high school, carried the girls' parents, both educators. One fall afternoon in 1990, the Caprice pulled up in front of Emily's high school just as it let out. A well-connected band manager who was courting the Chicks had arranged a few high-profile bookings for the young band. "We picked up Emmy and drove to Shreveport," recalls Laura. "We opened for Garth Brooks at the Louisiana State Fair that night." Other big-name openings followed, and the group gained experience and confidence. Not that self-confidence, or at least strong will, was ever in short supply. "Back when we were starting out," says Laura. "We went to New York and played on the street in a few places."

"Like Columbus Circle," says Emily, picking at a fruit salad.

"And Washington Square," adds Martie between bites of pancake.

"When we started that day," continues Laura, "we didn't have enough money for a hotel room. At the end of the day, though, we did. We paid the hotel clerk in ones."

In 1990, the band released the first of their three self-produced albums, *Thank Heavens for Dale Evans*, an engaging effort that reflects the band's at-

With the combined talents of Martie, Laura, and Emily (top photo, from left to right), the band has found a sophisticated country sound that, Martie says, "comes from the heart."



