

From Chicks to Hounds: Dixie Duo's New Act

Album Court Yard Hounds
Due Out May

By David Browne

WHEN THE DIXIE Chicks wrapped their last tour, in December 2006, the trio agreed to take a break. Three years later, guitarist-banjoist Emily Robison and her sister, fiddler Martie Maguire, were eager to make new music – but lead singer and songwriter Natalie Maines, who'd moved to L.A. and has two young children, wasn't. "Emily and I had the itch," says Maguire. "And every time we'd call Natalie and say, 'Are you ready?' she wasn't ready. She's just not in the place to want to agree to do anything. Honestly, me and Emily needed to get back to work."

Armed with a modest budget from their label, Columbia, the sisters began recording at Maguire's home studio in Austin last June. The result is *Court Yard Hounds*, a Robison-and-Maguire project on which Robison steps up to the plate as lead singer and principal songwriter. (The name is a reference to a fictional book in David Benioff's bestselling novel *City of Thieves*.) Most of the songs were written in the wake of Robison's 2008



SISTER ACT Robison (left) and Maguire formed Court Yard Hounds three years after the Dixie Chicks went on hiatus.

divorce from country singer Charlie Robison. "When Natalie's singing a song, it has to be something that strikes a chord with her," says Robison. "But these songs were very personal."

Co-produced by the sisters and engineer Jim Scott, the album features Robison and Maguire backed by some of the Chicks' touring band and Maines' father, pedal steel legend Lloyd Maines. "We hand-

picked the band in 15 minutes and texted them ourselves," says Robison. "This was more freeing than the Chicks. It was like, 'What do we have to lose?'" Like the last Chicks album, 2006's *Taking the Long Way*, *Court Yard Hounds* veers closer to Seventies-style singer-songwriter pop than country, such as "See You in the Spring," a breakup duet with Jakob Dylan. The pair also tackle politics on "Then Again," a portrait of a politically incorrect redneck, and "Ain't No Son," a rowdy, banjo-fueled track about an intolerant father. "It's about a man who can't respect his son's lifestyle," says Maguire. "Growing up in the South, we saw a lot of that."

With Maines still on an extended sabbatical, Robison and Maguire are making plans without her. The duo will premiere their new band at South by Southwest in March, then launch a national tour. Have the Chicks penciled in anything for 2010? "Nope," says Maguire. "I don't think we have a date in mind. It could be two years or five years or 10 years." Despite the side project, the sisters insist the Chicks haven't disbanded. "I'm hoping she'll come out to one of our shows," Maguire says of Maines. "Maybe it'll inspire her to want to make music again." 25