

CMA I • S E U P

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STANDING ON TOP OF THE WORLD

DIXIE CHICKS



TAKE THEIR HOME ON THE ROAD

It's the kind of innocuous question you ask more out of formality than curiosity. Ask a Dixie Chick how her year is going so far — any Chick, any year since '97 — and you know the answer ahead of time well enough to bet the proverbial farm.

"It's been good," answered Natalie Maines, her air of casual understatement betrayed by a laugh. Mind, it was only the first week of February, but 2003 was already off to a roaring good start for the Lubbock-born Austinite and her two band mates, sisters Martie Maguire and Emily Robison. They were in New York, rehearsing for their first-ever appearance on "Saturday Night Live." That very week, their five-month old, five-times Platinum first album on their own Open Wide Records label, *Home*, was back in its old position as the best-selling album not just in Country, but in **the** country. And to think, all the reigning CMA Vocal Group of the Year had done the week before was sing the national anthem at a little gig called "Super Bowl XXXVII," before an estimated 130 million American viewers.

All of this, of course, before the GRAMMY Awards, which would find the Dixie Chicks performing their Top 5 cover of Fleetwood Mac's "Landslide" and winning three out of four awards — Best Country Album (*Home*), Performance by a Duo or Group with Vocal and Instrumental ("Lil Jack Slade"), which makes seven total GRAMMYS won. Plus, they are the highest selling female group in any genre. "It's

the set-list to include not only the bulk of *Home* but all of their hits from *Wide Open Spaces* and *Fly*, albeit predominately acoustic. Now, anything goes. On the "Top of the World" tour, fans can expect to hear their old favorites stripped down. *Home* cuts may be dressed up with electric guitar and drums and anthems like "Goodbye Earl" performed as over-the-top and in-the-red as ever. Maines said they changed their minds primarily to entertain the fans, but also admitted, "I think I would get bored if we had a whole tour of just calm, acoustic music, because I love to run around the stage!" So the keep-it-simple aesthetic evolved into, "it's going to be even bigger than the 'Fly' tour."

Instead of small theaters, the Chicks will once again play arenas, with all the expected production and lightshow bells and whistles. Only this time, they'll be playing in the round. "We'll be in the center of the floor, and we'll have catwalks, so we'll be out into the crowd and closer to so many more people, because we're equal distance from everyone instead of being at one end of the arena," Maines enthused.

The Lipton Tea-sponsored tour, which the group officially announced Feb. 20 at a press conference in New York, will be their first extended road venture handled by their new booking agency, Creative Artists Agency. Look for the Dixie Chicks to star in a Lipton Iced Tea television commercial spot starting in mid-May and to be featured in store displays. The displays will promote Lipton Tea's



not that I ever thought that *nothing* else could happen to us that could surprise me," stressed Maines. "But I have to say that this year has surprised me. We're getting asked to do things that we've never been asked to do before that we've always wanted to do. And I think it's odd that the acoustic album has sort of broadened our audience even more, when, you know, I would have thought it'd be the opposite."

And to think that "the acoustic album" — which sold more than 750,000 copies its first week in stores and was certified quintuple Platinum within five months — has come all this way to date without a tour to back it up. Come May 1, when the Chicks open the North American leg (following a handful of European dates beginning with a sold-out March 10 show in London and preceding the grand finale in Sydney, Australia Oct. 3) of their 54 date "Top of the World" tour in Greenville, S.C., don't be surprised if the album and the group's better-than-average fortunes of late *really* start to fly. Bar a handful of prime television gigs and just four full-length concert performances in all of 2002 — the Houston Livestock Show and Rodeo, two nights at the Kodak Theater in Los Angeles and the Cotton Bowl as part of the Texas State Fair in Dallas — the Dixie Chicks have been off the road since their 90-city, \$46 million-grossing "Fly" tour of North American arenas touched down in December 2000. But they'll be making up for the time off with a vengeance.

"Initially, when we made this record, we thought we were just going to tour theaters, be really low key and have this intimate relationship with the audience," said Maines. That was the model for their performances at the Kodak Theater, which were filmed for an NBC special and their first DVD, *An Evening with the Dixie Chicks* (released Feb. 11). They played the songs from *Home* in sequence, followed by an encore of four of their older songs acoustic style. But by the time they played the Cotton Bowl two months later, they'd already expanded

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Natalie Maines

national contest wherein consumers check inside their package of Lipton Tea for a chance to win a VIP event with the Dixie Chicks as well as CDs, tour jackets and T-shirts. Plus Lipton Iced Tea and Lipton Tea products will be sampled at all the U.S. Dixie Chicks dates.

The "Top of the World" tour will also find the Chicks backed by a mostly new band, anchored by "Fly" tour veteran John Mock on mandolin and Texas guitar hero David Grissom (of Joe Ely, John Mellencamp and Storyville fame) on lead guitar. Missing-in-action will be steel guitar legend Lloyd Maines, Natalie's father and the producer of *Home*. "We begged him to play," sighed Natalie, but her father remains committed to touring with Texas singer-songwriter Terri Hendrix (who co-wrote *Home*'s GRAMMY winning instrumental, "Lil' Jack Slade.") As a concession, Lloyd did make the trip to New York to perform with the Chicks at the GRAMMYS.

While the "Fly" tour featured some of the Chicks' biggest Americana and Country Music influences as special guests (Willie Nelson, Ricky Skaggs, Joe Ely and Patty Griffin), this year's openers lean a little more towards the contemporary rock and pop scene: Joan Osborne for the first half of the tour, Michelle Branch for the second. Tickets for the *entire* North American leg of tour, which wraps on Aug. 4 at the Gaylord Entertainment Center in Nashville, went on sale on March 1.

"I think one thing that's really interesting about this tour, what they're trying to do which had never really been done before, is they're putting the *entire* tour on sale in one day," said Rob Light, head of CAA's music and personal appearances division. "We knew they were going to be on the Super Bowl, the cover of *People* magazine, 'Saturday Night Live,' and the GRAMMY Awards, and that huge media exposure over a four-week period led to our decision to put the entire country on sale at once and have it be a Dixie Chicks weekend. It's so rare that so many things like that line up. You've got the whole country

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Dixie Chicks

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talking about the girls anyway, so we thought, let's take advantage of that and follow it all the way through."

Fans and subscribers to Yahoo!'s new official "Dixie Chicks Artist Club," (the first of its kind on Yahoo!) had access to a special allotment of tickets for members to purchase prior to the March 1, public on-sale date.

In addition to the new tour, the Chicks are also planning their own outdoor music festival, which Maines said would ideally feature a rock night, a bluegrass night, and "some other kind of night."

"We also want to have workshops and involve people that want to play, because Martie and Emily grew up doing that at bluegrass festivals, and it was very nurturing," she said. "Right now, our managers are having a hard time finding the perfect place to have it, but we said, 'Find it, because we're not giving up on it.' If they think they can find it next year, then we hope they can find it this year, because we're ready to get it underway. We hope it can be a yearly festival."

Speaking for the booking agency, Light said the proposed festival is "past the embryonic stage, but not fully realized yet."

And that's not the only iron the Dixie Chicks have in the fire. According to Maines, one of the reasons they decided to move to Creative Artists Agency was to work with an agent "who can go outside of just doing concerts." Light said CAA is already looking at film projects for the three women, as well as opportunities in scoring, animation and book deals. "I don't think there's anything that they can't handle or tackle," said Light. "It's just a matter of desire or time."

Of course, it was the Dixie Chicks' desire to spend more time with their families outside of the limelight that started their *Home* odyssey. The nearly three years off the road allowed them ample time to get back in touch with their acoustic roots, iron out a controversial contract dispute with their label, Sony Music, and perhaps most importantly, ooh-and-ah over Maines' new son, Jackson Slade. Which begs the question — now that they're gearing up to hit the road again full throttle, where's the downtime for Robison and her new baby, Charles Augustus, born Nov. 11? Do banjo players not get the same maternity leave as lead singers? "Hey, we were all supposed to get pregnant at the same time — it's not my fault!" laughed Maines. "But we all needed that time off after the last tour. And now Gus is out here with us and Emily sees him every second of the day, so it's fine. We're finding the way to make it work."

Richard Skanse

On the Web: www.dixiechicks.com