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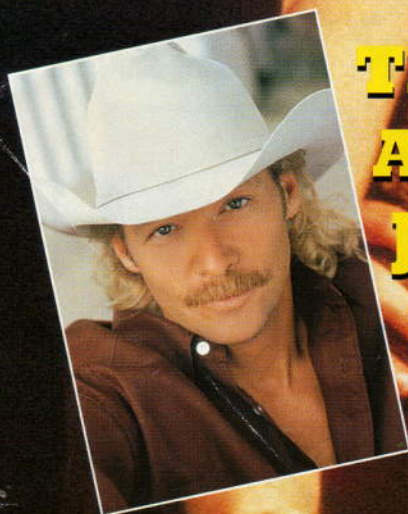
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**1998 CMA
Award Winners**

Dixie Chicks



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The No.1 Country Music Magazine

From a Dallas street corner to the most prestigious stage in country music

Dixie Chicks



Photo: Matthew Barnes

On Wednesday, September 23 at the 32nd CMA Awards Show, the feisty trio of singer-musicians from Texas walked away with the Group of the Year and Horizon trophies. Bob Paxman braved the ladies for a chat.

sing about heartbreak – I mean, you go through that when you're 12."

Emily Erwin concedes that *There's Your Trouble* fits right into the Chicks mold, in other words a tune with plenty of pluck. "We are a little partial to songs like that. There's a psychology behind it, you know, 'You're seeing the wrong one, buddy!' But we're just calling it like it is. People like things in plain English," she adds with a gentle laugh.

"It reminds me a lot of Tammy Wynette's songs. She was always saying, 'Girl, get your head out of your you-know-what,' and I loved her for that reason."

Naturally, they're getting pitched similar songs by everyone with an axe to grind.

"We're getting piles and piles of 'attitude' songs. Guess there's an awful lot of 'tude' out there," chuckles Emily in agreement. "But that's not our MO at all. The song, *Wide Open Spaces* (the group's current single), has a lot of depth to it. *Once You've Loved Somebody* is a great ballad. So, there's no formula for a Chicks song. If we like it, and we think we can put our harmonies to it, that's all we need."

The Chicks have been raised on music since they were, well, chicks. Sisters Martie Seidel, a champion fiddle player, and Emily Erwin, practically a ringer for Julia Roberts, learned their instruments as they were hitting double digits. Martie started fiddling at the age of five. Emily learned banjo at age ten and picked up the dobro and guitar soon afterward.

Even as teens, the Texas sisters were pulling down gigs and making more than a few bucks. They toured the country together in a teen bluegrass group, Blue Night Express, for six years before helping found Dixie Chicks. The Chicks were hatched in the summer of 1989 when 19-year-old Martie and Emily, then 16, plus two other original members, Laura Lynch and Robin Lynn Macy, took their instruments to a Dallas street corner and started playing for tips.

"We knew there was something magical – or at least lucrative – about women playing music together," cracks Martie. "The only problem was we didn't have a name."

But, by pure chance, the Little Feat song *Dixie Chicken* came on the radio one morning and a moniker was nearly born. The story goes that Martie didn't take to being a "chicken" so the name was eventually shortened.

Natalie, the daughter of record producer-musician Lloyd Maines, joined the group in 1995. It seemed she was groomed for the position. Like her band mates, Natalie learned music early on, spending summers hanging out at dad's recording studio in Texas and participating in Maines family jam sessions.

The Dixie Chicks will admit that they heard the voices of the "naysayers". Three women, playing a mixture of bluegrass, pop and straight country? It'll never fly (of course, the same was also said of Lindbergh). At this point, the act has not only flown but fairly soared, and you can use any "chicks" analogy that your brain can muster to describe their success.

They're flying high, ruling the roost, spreading their wings, and so on down the inevitable line. All they haven't done is lay the proverbial egg.

Their major label debut, *Wide Open Spaces* on the reborn Monument label, was just certified gold in the US. The first single, *I Can Love You Better*, soared into the Top 10, and the followup, *There's Your Trouble*, hit #1 on the American country charts. Now, they've lifted both the Vocal Group and Horizon trophies at the 1998 CMA Awards.

Where did they go right and the naysayers go wrong? Perhaps the secret lies with uniqueness, in an era that's starting to get notorious for sameness.

"Three women doing what we do is just so different in itself," agrees Emily Erwin, the tallest of the trio, who plays banjo, guitar, dobro and mandolin. "The fact that we play our own instruments has a lot to do with our signature sound. People probably look at us playing fiddles and banjos or whatever, and think, 'What are they DOING up there?' But it's fun for us, and I think we are breaking a lot of stereotypes."

They're also latching on to a particular audience, mainly women in their twenties (which all three Chicks happen to be) looking for feisty role models. The debut Chick singles carried the proper "edge", without the anger that seems to drive many female pop acts. They sent out clear, adamant messages that if you're looking for wallflowers best send for Bob Dylan's son.

"We are connecting with people our age, which means the most to us," observes lead vocalist Natalie Maines. "The life we live right now is how we pick our songs. We haven't sung about divorce because none of us has experienced that yet. But we do



"Country music was so prevalent in our family that I was fortunate enough to be exposed to it at a very young age," Natalie recalls. "I always knew that singing was what I wanted to do."

Before becoming a bona fide Chick, Natalie was already a fan. As a college student in Lubbock, Texas, Natalie had seen the Chicks perform at clubs and dance halls. "Martie and Emily had always been the best part of the Chicks. I had been waiting for my shot because I knew I wanted to sing with them," says Natalie.

She sent the sisters a demo tape and soon got the call. Martie and Emily admired not only the voice but the somewhat brazen personality as well.

"I'm the one you can't control," Natalie agrees with a laugh and slight backward toss of the head. "I'm always bouncing around to the music on stage, which is kind of how I am in real life. People are always telling me that I should act. Sometimes, it's easier for me to do that than sing," she adds, smiling.

Natalie's country-edgy style was evidently the missing link.

"Our music evolved to this point once Natalie came in," Martie observes. "We started as a totally acoustic bluegrass band, but we really wanted to go mainstream country with this. The first five or six years was a growing time for this band. We went from street corners to dance halls, from jeans and boots to cowgirl get-ups with rhinestones. It took finding Natalie to make us say, 'We've got something.' That was the best thing that ever happened to Emily and me."

They became the first act signed to Monument Records when the label (former home to Roy Orbison and other stalwarts) resumed operations in 1997.

The media has raved, to the point of dubbing the band 'Country's Spice Girls', which they swallow with a grain of salt.

"Well, I hope we can have their sales someday," laughs Martie. "I suppose that's an easy identification to make because we're multiple women, we're young, we're very colourful. But the music is nothing alike, and I'm sure people realise that. We get a pretty good chuckle out of it."

Certainly, life is fun when you're a Dixie Chick (how could you not have fun with this act?). They've travelled throughout the US, did an extensive tour of Canada, and currently rank among the hottest sellers in the country market. But they are already looking ahead.

"One of our biggest goals is to write more of our own material," Emily says. "Not long ago, we went on a songwriter's retreat outside Nashville, and worked with all these great writers like Kostas and Matraca Berg. It was important for us to learn more about the craft of writing because we are new songwriters in

relation to a lot of other people."

Mainly, the pros taught them patience.

"I always thought that songs should come more quickly," Emily concedes. "Sometimes, things do pop out and you get a song written, but what we learned is that it's really a long process most of the time. I also learned not to beat myself up if it's not happening fast enough. The creative instrument is not always there, but if you think things through, it can spark ideas."

The experience bore enough fruit to be helpful. "We already have a handful of songs that we'll be recording for our next album. We are also trying to find other songs that we can record and take on the road with us," Emily notes.

They plan to go into the studio during the first months of 1999 to record and finish their sophomore album project.

Even though Music Row wags threw around words like "fresh", "exciting" and other sobriquets in praise of Dixie Chicks, many of the same were surprised (though pleasantly) at their ready acceptance. The prevalent thinking was that perhaps the Chicks would be just "too different" for mass audiences. Marketing them wouldn't be easy.

"We heard a lot of that," responds Emily, who seems to serve as unofficial spokesperson for the group. "One of the biggest impacts for us was definitely country radio. I didn't realise how much radio was spreading our music. But we've always been determined. We were prepared to pay our dues for as long as it took."

They got the "dues-paying" part down in typical fashion, playing the usual club dates and graduating to "opening act" status, filling bills with Alan Jackson, Loretta Lynn and Emmylou Harris, among others. To help with their often-limited budget, Emily did much of the bookkeeping and accounting herself.

"I really was not a good bean counter," she offers with a smile, "even though I did the taxes. But that's how we learned, and I think that gave us a better understanding of the business part of it. Now, we can turn that over to someone else and concentrate on our music, and that's what we do best."

Dixie Chicks, above all else, do seem REAL, even to the casual fan.

"We are not something that's been manufactured," Emily asserts. "We're real, we play our own instruments, which is kind of bizarre to a lot of people. Maybe we were considered different or odd or something but, you know, people who take the greatest chances often make the greatest gains. We tried to reinvent the wheel a million times before realising what the essence of Dixie Chicks really is. Now, we are definitely going to do this on our own terms." ■