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Dixie
& Chicks

The new album



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Dixie Chicks

Lucky Douglas McPherson finds himself in bed with a delectable Dixie Chick discussing their latest album - among other things ...

I guess there's a lot of guys who'd like to be in my boots. Not that I'm wearing any boots. I left them at the foot of the bed with the rest of my kit before slipping under the duvet for a late night chat with Dixie Chicks.

As working conditions go, it beats digging ditches. Dim lights, a hot mug of cocoa and three of the most desirable creatures in country music.

Actually, only one of the Chicks deigns to whisper in my ear. But even so I'm not going to complain about a nocturnal encounter with Emily Robison, who is arguably the prettiest Chick of all. It's just a pity she's married. And a greater shame that I'm in an English village and she's in the Motor City, Detroit, Michigan. Ah well. I've got my album sleeve to gaze at ...

Of course, nobody who saw the Chicks on their recent UK visit will be

surprised that I had to wait up past my bedtime on a Sunday night to take the call from my Dixie darlin'. Yawning fans at London's Shepherd's Bush Empire had to twiddle their thumbs for an hour between the departure of opening act Ilse DeLange and the arrival of Nashville's answer to The Spice Girls.

"What was that all about?" I demand, nudging Em awake before the pillow talk gets too cosy. Her response is to laugh it off, the way only a pretty woman can.

"That was so foreign to us!" gushes the Dallas-based beauty. And, naturally, it was someone else's fault.

"It had to do with some production thing. It wasn't a choice of ours. Then everyone started getting so mad. I was, like, oh, my god! They hate us before we even go on! We were not prepared for that reaction. In the States, if you go on fifteen minutes late that's a luxury to

most people."

The reason for Emily's call is the release of *Fly!*, the Chicks' crucial follow-up to their enormously successful major label debut album, *Wide Open Spaces*.

Of the differences this time out, Emily says, "We're a little more confident. I think we took more chances with the production and the song choices. Things like putting a banjo solo on *Sin Wagon*, and an Irish penny whistle on the first single, *Ready To Run*.

"I think we felt we had nothing to lose. We kinda got back to that place where you do what's best for the song and not worry what the single's gonna be.

"I think there's a little more room for emotion on this one, and it tells a little more about what we were going through when we were making the album. It's a

little more of us, I guess."

What the Chicks "were going through" were some pretty major emotional upheavals. Emily was newly engaged to her now husband, singer-songwriter Charlie Robison. Lead singer Natalie Maines, meanwhile, was in the throes of divorcing her husband of just 18 months – a former bass player with the band.

Did that create an awkward atmosphere?

"It was bizarre that that was going on, but as far as awkward I don't think so. I think Natalie kept some of her emotions from me. I think she didn't want to bring me down.

"But at the same time I think she was finding out how happy she was now she had finally come to terms with the change that she had to make in her life. I've never seen Natalie happier than after she had verbalised what she had been dealing with. She'd been holding it inside so much that by the time she said, 'OK, this is gonna happen,' it was so much of a weight off her back.

"In that respect, it was actually harder before she came out and said what was gonna happen."

The actual making of *Fly!* was quite different to *Wide Open Spaces*.

"We were touring during the making of the first album, so we would keep having to go back and forth to Nashville. For this one we pretty much set aside January through May to do the album. It was a little more concentrated but I think it was easier on us because we could just delve into it. We weren't sidetracked insofar as, 'Oh, now we gotta go and do a gig'."

That sense of focus reflects a change in the Chicks' attitude towards the management of their time.

"We're not running about like screaming banshees any more!" laughs Emily. "We're a little more methodical about what we do. We've taken a little more time off and it's helped us all in the sanity department."

With building laughter, Emily screeches, "After the last year we were, like, oh, god, I never want to see you again! We'd probably been home forty days out of the entire year and as much as we love each other we were, like, 'I need a life!'"

"When the success came, it was, like, 'Yeah, we had to do that to make it pay off.' But I refuse to do it all over again!"

An important aspect of *Fly!* is the increased presence of the Chicks as songwriters.

"You hear scare stories about the sophomore album. You spend so long doing the first, then the second one suffers because you're so busy. We tried to forestall that in that, the year before, we went on writers' retreats and took some time out to write.

"That was a big goal for us, to have more originals on this album. We had one on the first one and this one's got five, so I think it's really good that we went away and took some creative time off from the road."

"We'd like to get younger people to realise that country music isn't all Kenny Rogers and Dolly Parton."

Not that the Chicks wanted to get their writing credits on the sleeve for the sake of it. Or just to increase their income.

"Our motto was always the best song wins. We're all young writers and I think we're fairly objective about our writing, which is a good thing.

"I'm kinda of the mind-set that if you take outside songs you get a more rounded album. If you're just writing all your material things tend to have the same timbre throughout the album. If you take outside songs you can delve into different personalities that you might not within your own writing.

"We'd like to see even more of our own songs on the next album, but we

don't want to put a song on there just because we wrote it. We vote on the songs. We like that song or we don't like that song. It doesn't have to be one of ours."

Once again, *Fly!* finds the Chicks playing their own instruments.

"I got to expand a little bit this time," enthuses Emily. "I added lap steel to my repertoire – which was a harrowing experience for the producers! They were, like, 'OK, Emily ... One more take!' But they wanted to give me that experience. So that was kinda fun."

Wasn't it also a little scary, sitting down to play alongside Nashville's vastly experienced session cats?

"I think on the first album it was a little intimidating," confesses Emily who, in the same breath, admits, "I tried my hardest to show off and play something that might impress them!"

"But we used pretty much the same band for the second album, so we've become friends with them. We're comfortable around them. They've learned to trust our instincts and we trust theirs.

"Because even though you do a lot of preproduction, you're still kinda producing along the way. And we like to take other people's opinions. We always have the last word, but it's a collaborative kinda thing. This one was fun because everyone knew each other, we're all friends, and it was more of a jam session situation."

Until this point in the interview it's interesting that Emily has referred to

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Fly! as the group's "second" album and *Wide Open Spaces* as the "first". Such is the success of their major label debut – six million sales and rising – that it's easy to forget the Chicks released three independent albums – *Thank Heavens For Dale Evans*, *Little Ol' Cowgirl* and *Shouldn't A Told You That* – before hitting the big time.

Dixie Chicks have a history. Including two founding members who fell by the way before fame came a'knocking. As the band moved away from folk and bluegrass to more mainstream country sounds, Robin Lynn Macy split to form The Domestic Science Club in 1993.



Photo: Ian Tilbury

October '95 right when Natalie joined. It was kinda like 'Natalie could take your place'.

"We did it very gingerly but I think it's hard no matter what. There was about a year when it was real touchy feely. Everyone was trying to keep their head high and do the right thing and it turned out for the best. Laura's very supportive of the band now."

Is she kicking herself for leaving?

"No. I think she realises that it wouldn't be this without Natalie. I think Natalie was such a spark for us in terms of the direction we wanted to go in and the energy that she had. And we did put

want to do the fringe stuff anymore. But when Natalie joined we revamped everything. We just kinda said, 'This is our opportunity ... we'll probably lose some fans along the way ... the hardcore bluegrass and swing fans ... because we're changing our music. But let's figure out what we wanna be. We're 20 something. Let's dress like we wanna dress, not like we feel the music is dictating..'

"We didn't want to be kitschy. We didn't want it to be like a gimmick and we felt that sometimes people saw us as a gimmick because of what we were wearing. It was important for us to change that."

New image. New singer. New label. For their big money relaunch on Monument, did the Chicks consider changing their name as well?

"We knew it was being kicked around within the label and that was one thing we would not agree to. We felt like there was too much history. Even though it wasn't the same band, the name preceded us. I don't think people all knew what our music was but they might have heard the name."

"And just the fact that we had been paying our dues for so long. We wanted that to count. We wanted people to say, 'Yeah, I've heard of that band. They've been touring for years.' I think it added to that credibility."

It's at this point that Emily gets the signal to prise her sweet lips from the phone. "Maybe one more question?" she suggests. So I ask her about the Chicks' plans for the UK.

"We definitely want to tour over there as part of our tour next year. I think it's important to let the people in the UK know that we're serious about being a global band. We may not be as popular over there but we see our career as larger than just the States. And what better way to see the world than to do it with the music?"

What about Britain's youth? Will the Dixie Chicks' sassy brand of gal power endear them to the All Saints generation?

"We'd like to get younger people to realise that country music isn't all Kenny Rogers and Dolly Parton," says Emily. Then she laughs. "As much as I love those two artists ... I think the people in the UK think of them as, you know, not so hip!"

"So hopefully we can cross some of the younger people over to liking country. Maybe we can fool 'em enough to think that it's not. We'll see. We'll try." ■

Laura Lynch, who, like Robin, is a decade older than the remaining founders, sisters Emily and Martie, was replaced by Natalie Maines (daughter of steel guitar ace Lloyd) shortly before the group entered their current period of success.

Do Robin and Laura stay in touch?

"We don't see Robin at all. She left under not so wonderful circumstances. She wanted to do a different kind of music so we had a little battle of minds there. But as far as Laura is concerned, yeah. She's come out to shows quite a bit in the last year. Her daughter's a big fan."

So why did Laura leave? Was she pushed or did she jump?

"It was one of those things where she had kinda been hinting that she wouldn't be in it for the long haul, the year before Martie and I kinda asked her to step down. It was hard at the time but in retrospect we all knew it was for the best."

"Laura knew Natalie. She left in

in another year and a half or two years of dues even before the record label came on.

"I think Laura realises that this is the chemistry that makes the Dixie Chicks work. It wasn't like if she'd been in it for two more years, 'Oh, my time would have come'. I think we were kinda running ourselves into the ground at that point. We weren't inspired anymore."

Looking back at the Laura Lynch era version of the Chicks, it's hard to reconcile their western outfits with the street fashions they sport today. Shuffling their previous releases on my duvet, I'm particularly struck by a rare single, *Home On The Radar Range*, from 1991. The picture sleeve finds the girls dolled up as all-American housewives à la some kitsch 1950s tv commercial.

It seems Ms. Maines was responsible for binning the retro look.

"Natalie said, 'Yeah, I'll join the band but I'm not gonna wear those clothes!'" laughs Emily

"We were already thinking we don't

deserved country success of their first Monument album, *Wide Open Spaces*, into a world-wide popular music phenomenon that has recast these beautiful and talented ladies into the mould of hillbilly Spice Girls and spokespersons for the more radical side of country music in Nashville (if, indeed, there is one ...)

That they've done it with music that remains fiercely and proudly traditional while the country world and its wife is bleating on that "traditional is bad, change is good" is just fantastic. And for their sophomore effort, the trad elements remain and are, if anything, even further forward in the mix.

The Erwin (now Robison/Seidel) sisters' acknowledged proficiency on a variety of stringed instruments is featured on every track, and the plaintiveness of Natalie Maines' irrevocable hardcore vocals could never be mistaken for anything but country. (This plaintiveness is even more apparent on *Fly* than it was on *Spaces*, thanks to the excellent way producers Paul Worley and Blake Chancey have recorded Maines' voice in a dry, flat manner that makes it sound as though she's singing the songs live in your living room)

All this is good news for country fans and for country music, which has seldom been as capably represented nowadays as it is on this album.

Some of what you hear will be familiar to anyone who attended the Chicks' recent London shows or who heard the Radio 2 in-concert broadcast which captured the gig's highlights. The spunky Celtic funk of *Ready To Run* and the group's achingly-soulful revival of Joy Lynn White's *Cold Day In July* were both highlights then, and still are now - as is the frantic, saucy bluegrass rave-up that is *Sin Wagon*.

Less familiar highlights come in the form of a bludgeoning, no-nonsense *Hole In My Head* (originally cut to a lesser effect by its co-composer Jim Lauderdale on 1997's *Whisper* album), a classic four-to-the-bar shuffle, *Hello Mr. Heartache*, that was part-penned by Michael Henderson, and Dennis Linde's *Goodbye Earl*, a black tale of the disposal of an abusive husband that recently hastened the departure of Sons Of The Desert from Columbia when that label declined to issue their original version of the song as a single once the Chicks had delivered

their take on the subject.

The Chicks themselves are also responsible for plenty of good cuts and, as writers, excel on ballad material like the tender Robison-Maines co-write, *Don't Waste Your Heart*, and Martie Seidel & Marcus Hummon's gentle *Cowboy Take Me Away*, a song dedicated to sis Emily's recently-found marital bliss with Charlie Robison.

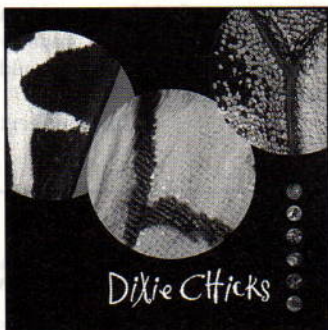
Plenty of highlights here, then - and none more so than the cut that gives the album its title. *Ready To Fly* seems to be something of a personal exorcism for Maines, who recently underwent a divorce that's obviously hurt her. The feeling she pours into Patty Griffin's uncompromising lyrics ("*There was really nothing to it, I just went and cut right through it ...*") makes this one of the great Deep Soul performances of recent years. It may be too painful to listen to regularly, but it needs to be heard at least once.

If there's anything to criticise, it's the album sleeve, a dark, arty affair featuring butterfly wing markings but, surprisingly, no picture of a trio of women that are among the most attractive musicians (any category!) of the day.

But this seemingly hasn't put off the punters, and there are plenty of really nice shots of the Chicks in the 20-page booklet, so that's a minor beef, really.

If you don't have this album yet, my advice would be to walk - no, fly - to a record store and buy it immediately.

Chris Bolton



DIXIE CHICKS Fly

Ready To Run / If I Fall, You're Going Down With Me / Cowboy Take Me Away / Cold Day In July / Goodbye Earl / Hello Mr. Heartache / Don't Waste Your Heart / Sin Wagon / Without You / Some Days You Gotta Dance / Hole In My Head / Heartbreak Town / Let Him Fly

Producers: Blake Chancey & Paul Worley

Monument/Epic 4951512

(48m 50s) [UK]

★★★★½

As I write, *Fly* has entered the Billboard country and pop charts at #1 (and it also enjoyed a brief but nonetheless important spell on the UK pop charts, where it entered and peaked at #38) so in some ways a review of an album that - literally - millions of people already own seems a pretty academic exercise.

In case you hadn't noticed, Dixie Chicks have parlayed the