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## Dixie Chicks

Martie Maguire talks to CMP

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As Dixie Chicks get ready for their London date this month, Rob Patterson talks to Chick Martie Maguire and recalls the trio's rise to the top.



Let's face it. Musical success doesn't come much bigger or better than it has for Dixie Chicks. Over the course of what is now three multi-million selling albums, they've had a chance to get used to it as well as deal with some of the problems success presents. But take Chick Martie Maguire back to her thoughts in the group's earliest days, and she still remains stunned and happily surprised by the group's incredible achievements and good fortune.

The year is 1990. The scene is the Hyatt Hotel in Austin, Texas during an afternoon in mid March. The South by SouthWest Music & Media Conference, at the time just a few more years out of its infancy than Dixie Chicks, has filled the hotel's conference rooms with several hundred folks. In the lobby atrium, on a small stage, a new all-woman acoustic band from Dallas performs a tasty blend of bluegrass and

western music.

With genuine instrumental proficiency, delightfully charming harmonies and a knack for visual packaging with their spiffy neo-western outfits, the newly hatched Dixie Chicks caught this listener's eyes and ears and left a firm impression.

But if the future had tapped me on the shoulder and whispered in my ear to say that, by the end of the decade, this group would be one of the biggest things in country as well as pop music, I'd still have scoffed at the notion.

And if her fate had flashed before Martie Maguire that day, her response would have been even more doubtful. "No way," she says she would have thought back then, laughing heartily at the vision. "I really never expected this at all."

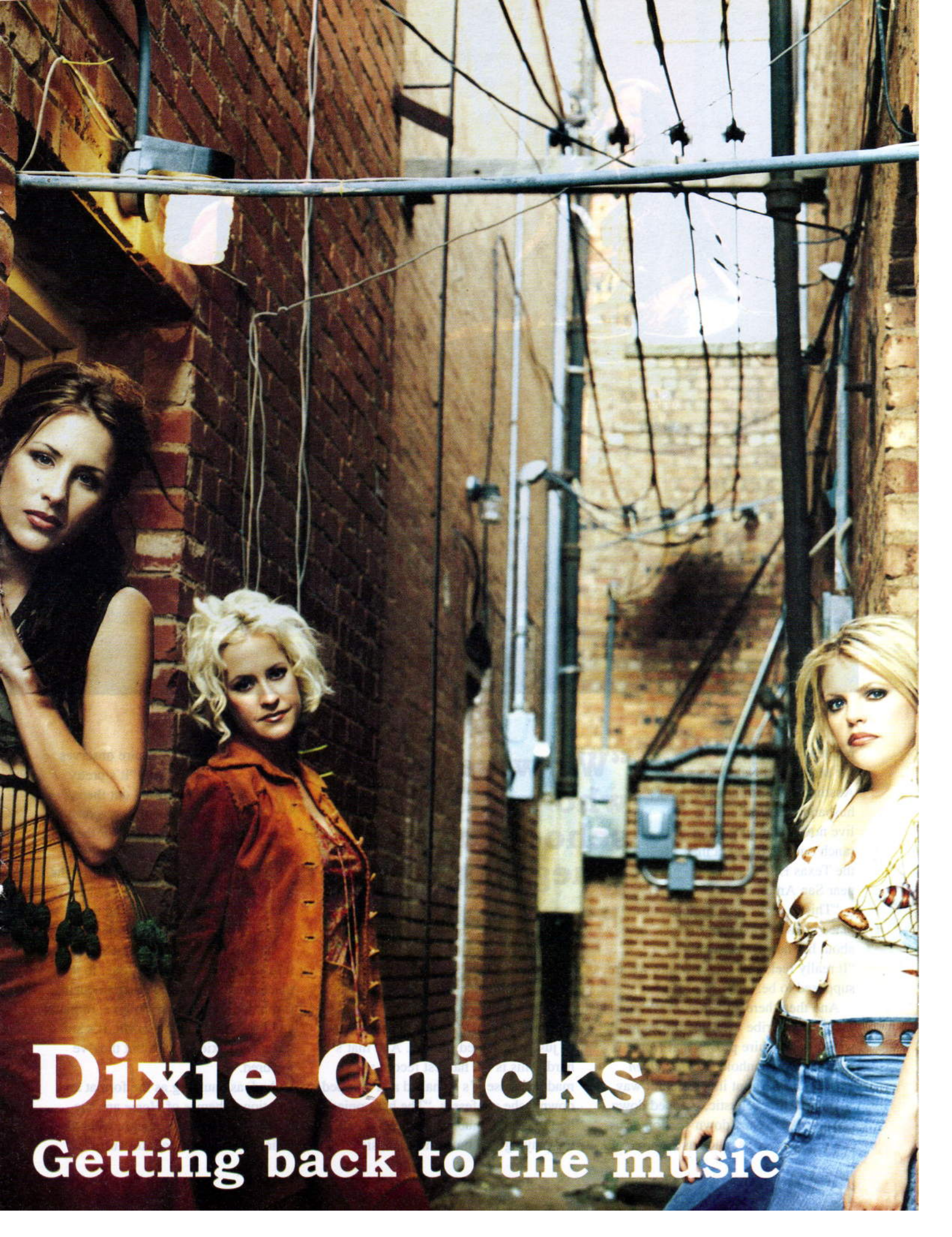
Not that she's complaining, mind you. As Dixie Chicks ease back into performing with a rare UK show this month after a few years of professional

respite for some well-earned rest – as well as marriages, babies, and a now-settled dispute over royalties with their record label – Maguire sounds positively ebullient. But where she expected to be by now is a bit of a different place than where she ended up.

"I figured I'd play music for a while," she remembers, "but then eventually I'd end up having a family and kind of being like my mother: teaching and getting my kids involved in music. And maybe playing some on the side. This is not at all what I expected. But, then again, I really love what I am doing instead."

And even if fiddler and mandolinist Maguire isn't (yet) a mom, the title of the new Dixie Chicks album, *Home*, still says it all for Maguire and her bandmates – her banjo and dobro playing sister Emily Robison and singer Natalie Maines. In recent years, the once Dallas-based act shifted their





# Dixie Chicks

Getting back to the music





residencies southward to, for Martie and Natalie, Austin, while Emily and husband Charlie Robison live not too far away on a ranch outside Bandera in the Texas Hill Country near San Antonio.

"This is such a great place to live," raves Martie about her new hometown.

"It really feels like this is where we are supposed to be."

And then there's the album. When asked to describe what she thinks its sound is, Maguire proves that *Home* is as hard to pigeonhole as *Wide Open Spaces* and *Fly*, but in a different way.

"I guess it's acoustic, stripped down, organic. A stripped down version of us. We didn't layer as much as before. And

**"We were weird kids who would leave after school to go play some bluegrass festival."**

we picked maybe songs that were a little more mature, and maybe weren't as silly."

Martie pauses. "It's more about, kind of just us revealed, I think. And that's hard. This is the hardest record we've made because it's so naked and stripped down," she confesses. "The harmonies had to be that much more precise and the playing that much more musical."

Maguire observes how, "it's pretty naked out there," recording acoustic.

Gone for the most part are the funky but chic outfits, the sometimes cheeky songs, and the rock'n'roll punch and attitude they

infused into the country mode. In their place came more simple yet eloquently fashioned ruminations on love, romance and one's place in the world. It's still the same Dixie Chicks, but they've matured.

And, as daunting as the format and emotional themes of *Home* are, the music flowed rather quickly when the Chicks decided to go into Austin's





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label, Open Wide Records, and a handsomely high royalty rate. Yet the group still weren't sure what sort of reception they would get from their fans.

"We really had no idea what people were going to think of this album, and whether the fans that bought the last two albums would buy this one," Martie notes. "We hoped they would like it, because we did. But we didn't know if we could count on that."

With *Home* at time of writing in its second run at #1 on the US pop charts, having notched up sales of three million and rising, perhaps they needn't have worried. "In retrospect, as Emily said in an interview earlier today, we were really guilty of underestimating our audience."

Maguire says they are thrilled to be wrong. "Maybe the best thing to come out of making this album is that we now know that we can trust our audience to understand us and change and grow with us. We've always felt like we've had this great relationship with our fans, and this only confirms that even more for us."

And in bringing themselves "home," Dixie Chicks have also brought the many fans they have won since releasing *Wide Open Spaces* in 1998 back towards the sound they started out with almost a decade prior to that. Yet, at the same time, the lessons learned from riding high on the country and pop charts have enabled the trio to create string band music with a modern enchantment.

**L**ong before *O Brother* gave bluegrass its greatest pop culture cachet since *Dueling Banjos* was a fluke hit in the early 1970s, young Martie and Emily Erwin were mastering its chops. Raised in Dallas and encouraged by their music loving parents, they both teathed on classical violin soon after starting school.

Elder sister Martie shifted her style to fiddling as she hit her teens while Emily picked up banjo at 10 and later dobro and guitar after the Chicks were formed. The girls spent their teens playing bluegrass with another pair of youthful siblings in a group called Blue Mountain Express.

"We were the weird kids who would leave after school to go play some bluegrass festival," Martie recalls with

a chuckle, noting how it's now a pleasure as she travels to run across so many more young players.

In 1989, during the summer after Martie's freshman year of college, she and Emily teamed up with fellow local singers, musicians and songwriters Robin Lynn Macy and Laura Lynch. In an attempt to stave off getting summer jobs, the four started playing on the street in downtown Dallas. Not only did they rake in hundreds of dollars to their open instrument cases, they were quickly offered a regular gig at a nearby barbecue joint.

The quartet found a name when they heard the Little Feat song, *Dixie Chicken*, on the radio, and rather quickly became Dallas's favoured musical daughters, as well as a popular act in the rest of Texas, playing almost any sort of gig imaginable. Many of the later Chicks hallmarks were evident early on: a smart sense of fashion (albeit more retro then), a slightly offbeat and highly lovable charm in their manner and songs, a canny feel for marketing and fan relations, and the instrumental savoir faire of Martie and Emily.

The group played the Grand Ole Opry in 1991, and even President Bill Clinton's inauguration a year later. But, over the course of three self-released albums and countless forays to Nashville, Dixie Chicks could never get past being the adorable regional sideshow travelling around in the pink RV known as "The Sneaker" (for the lingering smell in its sleeping quarters). Macy left after album two and, following album three, it became clear that the sisters were heading in a different direction than Lynch.

It was a pivotal point, Maguire recalls. She wasn't quite ready to veer off the road into family life, though stardom had never really been a goal or seemed a likely option. But she and Emily still wanted to at least get their chance to play the game in the big leagues.

Enter Natalie Maines. "Emily and I never really had that dream that we were going to be stars someday," Martie points out. "We loved playing music and that was a big part of our lives. But we never had that drive you need to really become a star."

She explains how this recently became quite evident while watching

Cedar Creek Studios in 2001 while still in the middle of their dispute over royalties and their future with Sony Music. Co-producing was Lloyd Maines, Natalie's father and a Texas music stalwart esteemed for his steel guitar playing and productions.

"We'd always intended on working someday with Lloyd," Maguire explains. The elder Maines had played on the group's independent albums in the early 1990s and later suggested his daughter when the Chicks needed a new singer. And one unexpected benefit of cutting *Home* in a stripped down fashion in Austin was, Martie happily notes, "it really didn't cost very much to make, either."

That fact boded well for the Chicks once they settled their differences with Sony and were rewarded with their own



the TV series, *Driven*, on the VH1 cable channel, which details the early and prolonged desire for stardom that most stars display and generally need to get to the top.

"Those people knew they were going to be stars from a very early age. We never felt that way. But Natalie announced she was going to be a star when she was three years old," Martie says, her awe for that determination still resonant.

Natalie's voice and determination were an essential ingredient in what came next, mixing with what Martie and Emily had already built to take Dixie Chicks to the next level. The burgeoning backbeat, electricity and pop savvy in the group's music increased even further, and Sony finally offered Dixie Chicks the major label deal they'd spent many years trying to secure.

The trio recorded with producers Paul Worley and Blake Chancey who

*Mine*, the Chicks proved they could hold their own in the mainstream. After nearly 10 years, Dixie Chicks were music's latest "overnight success".

By the time they released *Fly* the next year, Dixie Chicks weren't just in the mainstream but helping to redefine it. The trio were drawing in a new and younger audience to country, and their music played just as well opening for George Strait as it did on the Lillith Fair tour. They also broke gender



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Maines had grown up with a father who played in Joe Ely's groundbreaking early bands, and then his generation's version of the Maines Brothers Band which went on to country chart success, before becoming one of the most prolific producers on the Texas music scene. His prodigious musicality was inherited by Natalie whose vocal talents won her a scholarship to the prestigious Berklee College of Music, America's Oxbridge of jazz.

had already sketched the blueprint for sassy feminist country-rock with two albums they made with Joy Lynn White. Soon after the release of their major label debut, *Wide Open Spaces*, Dixie Chicks started winning fans at country radio with *I Can Love You Better* despite Sony's perception of their new act as an alternative and leftfield quantity.

As the disc continued to spin off more singles, such as its title track, *There's Your Trouble* and *You Were*

barriers and instrumental traditions with Martie and Emily playing on their records and tours, and making fiddle, banjo and dobro integral ingredients in their nonetheless modern and pop-inflected sound. Both albums eventually bypassed the 10 million sales mark, and Dixie Chicks were stars. And not only that, but stars who were unafraid to buck the system and sometimes take controversial stances.

But, as the three musicians wound down their professional lives after *Fly*



to take a well-earned break, they began to carp quite loudly in public about their contention that Sony Music had underpaid the band after all their considerable sales. The group's comments eventually prompted the company to sue the Chicks in July 2001 in an effort to ensure their continued compliance with the record deal.

"We really didn't know what was going to happen or how it would turn out," Maguire says of the dispute. But, at the time, enough good things were happening in the group's personal lives to balance out the crisis.

As the Chicks were on their way up, both Martie and Natalie were ending marriages. Maguire even attributes some of the feminine moxie on *Wide Open Spaces* and *Fly* to the fact that "we were both getting divorced and feeling very free and independent."

But then Emily met and soon after married singer-songwriter Charlie Robison. At that wedding, Natalie met Charlie's friend, actor Adrian Pasdar, and ended up marrying him. And then at the wedding of Natalie's sister Kim, Martie met Irishman Gareth Maguire, the brother of the groom, whom she

subsequently married.

So when asked if, by now, Natalie has all but become another sister to siblings Martie and Emily, Maguire has to chuckle. "She really is family now that she's my sister in law." And the extended brood has grown bigger as both Natalie and then Emily gave birth to sons during the interim.

With all members ensconced in new homes, comforted in family happiness, the group decided to embark on their next record even if they hadn't yet settled their differences with Sony.

"We'd taken a break and all these great things happened for each of us. But we now felt like it was time to get back to the music, even if we didn't know how we would put it out," Martie explains.

As well, it should be noted, the very act of doing so at that point was a powerful move in the chess game of contract renegotiations. And finally last year, Sony and the Chicks came to terms in a new deal that allows the group to establish its Open Wide label as a conduit for not only their work but that of other artists in the future. The prospect seems to whet Maguire's

interest as the one unfulfilled musical ambition she admits to is wanting to produce other artists.

Other than a slight trepidation about the group's reception on their upcoming visit to Europe – Martie seems reassured when I mention that Ralph Stanley preceded the Chicks on the cover of this magazine last month – Maguire announces that she and her bandmates couldn't be happier these days.

When asked what she is most proud of, she points to how Dixie Chicks "have pretty much been able to do what we've done on our own terms," and with their integrity intact, no less. Her only admitted regret is "that I haven't yet been able to have children. That's something that's really important to me," she stresses.

As for now, Martie can certainly point with pride to her creative offspring, *Home*. Like many artists, she says, "I never really listen to our music. But I actually like listening to this. My husband listens to it all the time, and I'll get in the car and he'll have it on, and I'll go, 'Hmmm. That sounds pretty good.'" **CMP**