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Dixie Chicks

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HARD-WORKING



AND TALENTED



CHILLIN' * WITH * THE * DIXIE * CHICKS

by Stephen L. Betts



Until they crank up their highly-anticipated headlining “Chicks With Picks” tour in May, the Dixie Chicks have hung out the “Do Not Disturb” signs at their respective roosts.

After nearly five years of constant touring to promote two multi-platinum albums, the Chicks played to their last live American audience in Las Vegas at the end of October. They followed up with short stints in Great Britain and Australia, then closed their make-up kits, called off their “glam squad,” turned off their cell phones and headed for home for five months. One might expect that the trio would spend at least part of their imposed exile reflecting on the phenomenal success they’ve enjoyed since selling over eight million copies of their Grammy-winning 1998 debut disc, *Wide Open Spaces*, and potentially surpassing that figure with the critically-acclaimed *Fly*, which upon release in August 1999, vaulted straight to the top of the Billboard 200 chart and perched there for two weeks, making it the first time a country group had ever debuted at the number one spot on Billboard’s album chart. But, when asked just prior to their last show what she planned to do, the band’s fireball lead singer, Natalie Maines, revealed a long list of self-improvement goals, including learning French, taking cooking lessons and private yoga instruction.

Banjo picker Emily Robison,

and her husband, singer/songwriter Charlie Robison, whom she married in May, had more domestic endeavors in mind, and looked forward to working on their new ranch house in San Antonio.

The group’s fiddle player and Emily’s sister, Martie Seidel, who filed for divorce last November from her husband of nearly five years, was looking to improve her musical skills by studying guitar and mandolin at home in Texas, as well as collaborating with songwriters in Nashville. Of course, they’ll also be mulling over ideas for the upcoming tour as well. It’s no surprise that each of the Dixie Chicks, even if they don’t intend to spend their time-off in each other’s company, is still seeking new adventures and making improvements, both internally and externally. After all, it was these “new and improved” Dixie Chicks whose meteoric rise to country superstardom captured the collective imagination of an audience obviously tiring of country music becoming increasingly bland, pop-infused, or just plain “safe.”

The trio’s outspoken nature and their keen ability to embrace traditional music with a decidedly modern edge have proven an

effective antidote, catapulting them into platinum-selling success, and sending them on the road for nearly 300 days a year, opening for the likes of Tim McGraw and George Strait, not to mention a sweet spot on the testosterone-deficient Lilith Fair tour during the summer of 1999. For a time, however, it seemed the Dixie Chicks were a trio of “yes-girls.” “When so many opportunities are thrown our way in such a short period of time,” Martie admits, “it’s so easy to say ‘yeah, we want to do that...and that...and that.’ And then you lose the quality control. So we really try to get our heads together and think, ‘Okay, what’s the pace that’s doable, humanly possible, to where we can still have time to make it right? Make it something...that we’ll be proud of for a long time.’”

In the early ‘90s, the first incarnation of the Dixie Chicks were four big-haired Texas gals in frilly cowgirl outfits, playing hard-driving acoustic bluegrass on street corners in their native Dallas. Sisters Emily and Martie Erwin, along with former members Laura Lynch and Robin Macy, mastered a blend of western swing and bluegrass that caught on regionally, though made little impact elsewhere, even as they ventured into more country-pop territory.

In 1992, Macy, unhappy with the direction the band was taking,



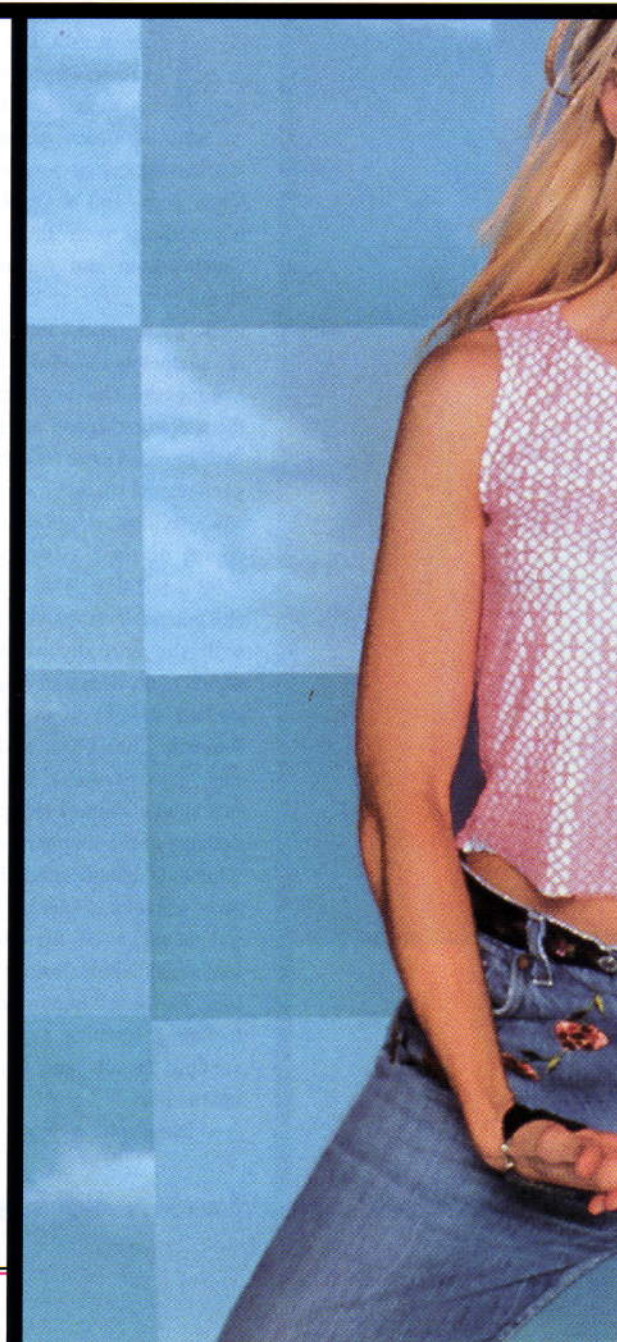
“WHAT WE DID FEEL LIKE WE COULD GET AWAY WITH WAS GOING, SONG-WISE, FARTHER TO THE LEFT AND FARTHER TO THE RIGHT, BECAUSE HAVING SUCCESS ALLOWS YOU TO TRY STUFF THAT IS A LITTLE MORE OUTSIDE THE LINES.”



left the group rather acrimoniously, and reportedly hasn't spoken to Emily or Martie since. The remaining trio then recorded 1993's slicker sounding *Shouldn't a Told You That*, before Lynch's eventual departure, on much better terms, in 1995. With Emily and Martie's discovery of powerhouse singer Natalie Maines, the trio was reborn, and soon on the fast track to a major label deal in Nashville.

C o-producer and Sony/Monument Records executive Blake Chancey says he initially passed on signing the pre-Natalie Chicks to his label three times. “[I saw] the poofy hair and the cowgirl dresses, and I thought, ‘Man, that’s just goofy.’ But, then every time I turned my head away and looked at the dance floor it was packed. And, I listened to the music as opposed to looking at them, and I noticed, by just listening, that Martie and Emily were incredible musicians. But, then I’d look back up at them and I’d see this campy look.” Chancey, however, agreed to visit the group at home in Dallas, asking them to show up outfitted as if they were going to be doing yard work. Though he found himself impressed with their musicianship, and agreed to sign them, Chancey says he also worried a bit because “the music they were doing at the time was real folksy, very simple music. Melodically, it wasn’t very stretchy.”

Chancey soon got a call from their manager, Simon Renshaw, announcing that they’d made the decision to hire Natalie. “I’ve signed acts before but I’ve never had one come to me and switch lead singers. I’ve had them switch bass players and drummers, but never lead singers. This was a little strange. But, Simon said Martie and Emily really wanted to do this, because this girl they found, they believed was really the answer.” The newly-formed Chicks asked Chancey to wait six months, after which time they’d unveil the new line-up for him at a live show. “Lloyd Maines was playing with them, and I was sitting there, and he says ‘I want you to meet my daughter, Natalie. She’s the singer now.’ I met her, and there was nothing special about her. She just kind of looked like the girl next door. It didn’t strike me as ‘Boy, this girl’s a star,’ or anything like that at all. I wasn’t expecting to be blown away. All of a sudden...Emily comes out playing the banjo, just rockin’ and Martie comes out doing this screaming





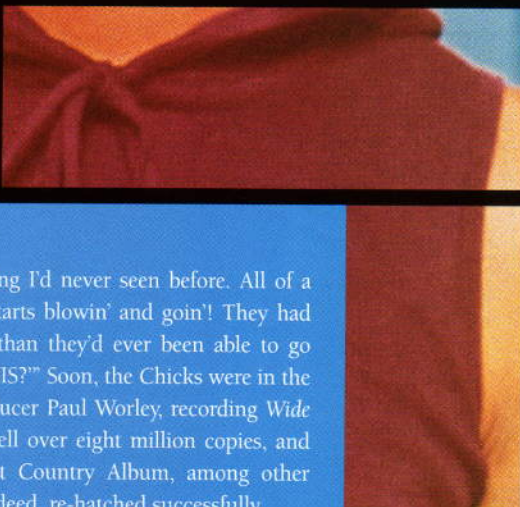


PLATINUM



I'm not going to say I was very good at it. It was a pretty big task to take on." Martie is seen as the trio's nurturing mother hen, while Natalie's tagged, not surprisingly, the group spitfire. "She's the one who's always going to push the envelope," Emily admits. "She's a big catalyst. Natalie's definitely the rebel." Of herself, Emily allows, "I'm very pragmatic. I'm the one that likes to make sure everything's okay. If something's going wrong, I'll try to shed some light on it. I'm very solid, I'm a rock." Early in their collaboration, however, because of the group's past history, their roles weren't as clearly defined, according to Martie, who says, "I remember Natalie saying 'I don't feel like myself. I just don't feel like myself.' She was joining a band that already existed. Even though we didn't have the image we have today, it took some of her coming out of her shell, being able to express herself and everything. Now, I don't care if she says whatever she wants to on stage cause it's totally her. At the beginning...she wasn't wearing the clothes she wanted to wear. She wasn't getting to say what she wanted to say. And you can't cage a wild animal."

With the success of *Wide Open Spaces*, the Chicks could finally leave others to the task of managing their daily schedules and business affairs, though the transition proved to be the proverbial double-edged sword. "We didn't want to be doing it anymore," Emily admits. "We realized we weren't the best ones for the job, but, it's tough because when you're so hands-on, it's hard to pass the baby on to someone else, and trust that someone has as much heart in it as you do. There were



solo. Musically, that was something I'd never seen before. All of a sudden, Natalie comes out and starts blowin' and goin'! They had gone to a totally different place than they'd ever been able to go before. I was just like, 'What is THIS?'" Soon, the Chicks were in the studio with Chancey and co-producer Paul Worley, recording *Wide Open Spaces*, which went on to sell over eight million copies, and earned a 1999 Grammy for Best Country Album, among other honors. The Dixie Chicks were indeed, re-hatched successfully.

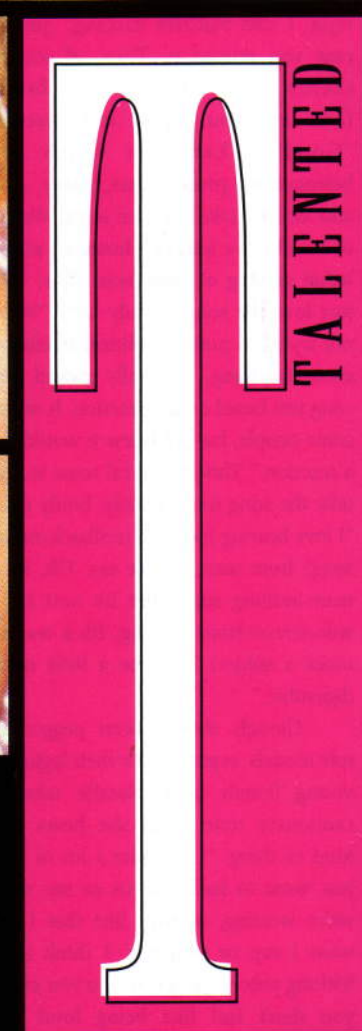
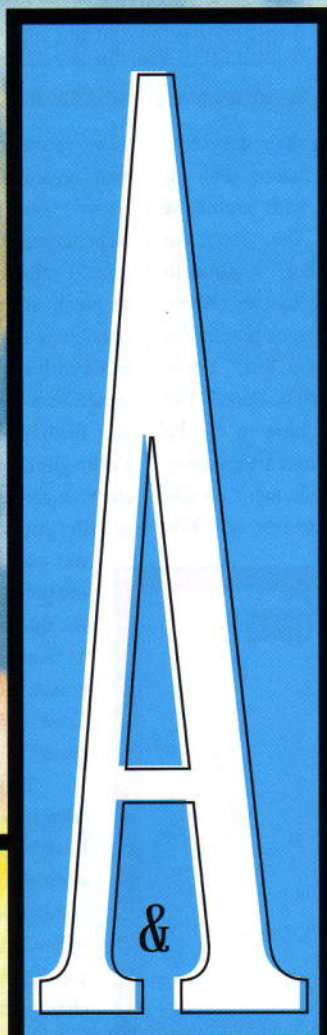
Chancey says his relationship with Worley and the Chicks has blossomed into a true democracy. "The five of us – me, Paul and the girls – really never agree on anything," he says, "but if we can get three to four of us to agree on something, nobody takes it personal, and we all go in that direction. We're always negotiating and talking to each other, so, musically we knew we were bringing in songs that were going in all kinds of different directions. But, we had to make all five of us happy."

Within the group itself, Emily says that, apart from what they bring to the table creatively, each the Chicks have settled into a particular role. "Even back before we had a record deal, we all kind of excelled at different things on the business end," she says. "We were our tour manager, and we did our own books and ran the office. Martie was the road manager. She's the most diplomatic, probably of all of us. Natalie did the accounting, she was the office gal, and I did the taxes," she says, adding with a laugh, "We got audited twice, so



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a lot of growing pains in the last couple of years, especially the year before last. You're not looking at the books every single day, and there's a certain comfort factor when you're crunching the numbers in your head along with everybody. It was difficult, but it was a huge relief because it left us to do what we do best, which is the music."

The impressive sales figures for their first album allowed the group to stretch even further musically, and also afforded them their first massive exposure on CMT, with chart-topping videos for "I Can Love You Better," "There's Your Trouble" and the title track. They occasionally began showing up on mainstream rock channels such as MTV and VH1, although the group was unwilling to remove banjo and fiddle tracks from their hit single "Wide Open Spaces" to gain regular airplay on the latter channel. Surprisingly uncompromising and refreshingly outspoken, the Dixie Chicks were becoming the most talked-about act in popular music.

In mid-1999, the group had two singles featured on the soundtrack to the Richard Gere/Julia Roberts film, *Runaway Bride*, their pop-flavored remake of the Supremes' "You Can't Hurry Love" and the Celtic-tinged "Ready to Run," accompanied by their cyclonic performances as would-be brides, not quite ready to settle down.

In anticipation of their full-length follow-up to *Wide Open Spaces*, the trio's visibility and demands on their time reached fever pitch, and the Dixie Chicks juggernaut just kept rolling. When *Fly* was released, the main objective with the album, says Chancey, was

"She wasn't getting to say what she wanted to say. And you can't cage a wild animal."

not appearing to just go in another radical direction merely for the sake of doing so.

"What we did feel like we could get away with was going, song-wise, farther to the left and farther to the right, because having success allows you to try stuff that is a little more outside the lines." The "right" side, in the case of the songs on *Fly*, includes traditional sounding, hard-core country ballads such as "Hello, Mr. Heartache" and the exquisitely beautiful "Don't Waste Your Heart." As for the left, unquestionably, those efforts include the bawdy romp "Sin Wagon," which takes its title from a memorable scene in the classic '70s film *Grease*. The Chicks clearly took particular naughty delight in the lusty lyrics, especially the phrase "mattress dancing," even adding, "that's right, I said mattress dancing," just in case you missed it. Then, of course, there's the outrageously funny (and imminently more controversial) "Goodbye Earl," in which our beleaguered protagonists, Mary Ann and Wanda, take a notion to rid Wanda of her abusive lout of a husband with a lethal serving of black-eyed peas. "We just love the song," Emily says. "We're not trying to make a political statement about anything. We really picked that song just based on fan reaction. It scares some people, but we knew it would get a reaction." Though fearful some would take the song too seriously, Emily says, "I love hearing [positive feedback on the song] from men. People say, 'Oh, it's a male-bashing song,' but it's not! It's a wife-abuser-bashing song. It's a way to make a subject like that a little more digestible."

Though they've been pegged as role models, especially for their legion of young female fans, Natalie takes a cautionary tone when she hears that kind of thing. "I feel like a lot of kids just want to look like us or see what we're wearing, or they like that I say what I say, or whatever. I think it's a lifelong process to get to who you are. If you don't feel like being loud and outspoken and saying things that are off the wall, then don't be that. If you feel like going in a corner and reading a book, or if you feel like you're the nerd in school, whatever. Who cares? As long as you're happy being who you are. And if the Dixie Chicks are role models for anything, it would be individuality."

"Having success allows you to try stuff that is a little more outside the lines."

Clearly comfortable with their irreverent side, the Dixie Chicks often passed time on their tour bus between cities with rounds of their now-legendary game, "I Dare You." An off-shoot of "Would You Rather," a game in which the willing participant has to choose between two equally disgusting or potentially embarrassing scenarios, "I Dare You," Emily says, is also a variation on "Truth or Dare." "But there's no truth to it, so you have to do the dare." The hijinks kicked into overdrive during the Dixie Chicks' stint as performers on the Lilith Fair tour during the summer of 1999,

perhaps as somewhat a defense mechanism for initially feeling a bit out of place among the more recognizable pop/rock artists, including tour organizer Sarah MacLachlan and Sheryl Crow. "We were kind of the red-headed stepchildren on the tour, the country act on the tour," Emily says. "So, it was a great way for us to break in and break the ice with the other musicians. And, they jumped right in." When faced with a Dixie Chicks' dare while at a trendy dance club in Toronto, Sheryl Crow proved she was flush with enthusiasm for the challenge. Emily gleefully recalls, "We dared her to go all the way across the dance floor, and get a piece of toilet paper, about eight feet long and get it wet on the end, stick it down the back of her pants and walk through the crowd like she didn't know it was in her pants. She did it! And, you're not only saying, 'There's a person doing that, my god, that's Sheryl Crow' - with toilet paper coming out of her pants!"

Though protective of their privacy, especially during their down time, the Dixie Chicks have become involved in working with the World Wildlife Fund, helping to educate the public about that organization's mission to save endangered species from extinction. "We picked a charity that we could donate more than just our money and our name to," Emily says. "We wanted to really dig in and give our time, too. I'd love to go to Borneo, or to see an orangutan rescue site or whatever. I just really want to find out what's going on, what projects they're working on." The Chicks plan to publicize the organization's efforts, and to include them in their upcoming tour.

Another plan for the tour, currently being titled "Chicks With Picks," is the inclusion of artists, yet to be announced, who are perhaps seen as more influential in country music, rather than currently red-hot. It's another nod to the Dixie Chicks free-spirited ingenuity. "The Chicks are about the best thing that's happened to country music in the last five years," Blake Chancey says. "It's changed the way people can address country music. Their style knocked so many doors down that it's helped widen the scope of country music-especially at radio. People can actually take chances, and say, 'It worked for the Dixie Chicks. It can work for us.'"

THE LAST WORD with THE DIXIE CHICKS

I have never learned to...

Martie: sky dive
Emily: hang glide
Natalie: be a trapeze artist

One thing I don't understand is...

Martie: sex education
Emily: calculus
Natalie: quantum physics

My first teen crush was...

Martie: Rex Smith
Emily: Rick Springfield
Martie: Donny Osmond

If reincarnation is possible, I hope I come back as...

Martie: A record company president
Emily: Pamela Lee's figure
Natalie: Mrs. John Travolta

If reincarnation is possible, I hope I DON'T come back as...

Martie: a banjo
Emily: Martie
Natalie: our manager

I love the smell of...

Martie: freshly baked bread
Emily: roses
Natalie: summer rain

I can't stand the smell of...

Martie: coffee
Emily: ammonia
Natalie: chewing gum

The most amazing sight I have ever seen is...

Martie: Emily getting married
Emily: the sunset over the west Texas skyline
Natalie: Emily getting married

★ CHICK-EN SCRATCHES

As the "CMT Showcase Artist" for September 1999, the Dixie Chicks had plenty to say. So much, in fact, that even if you watched the entire month-long Showcase, there were still plenty of great moments you missed. With each issue of CMT *Country Music Today Magazine*, we'll bring you exclusive, never-before published or aired portions of the CMT Showcase interviews!

★ SUCCESSFUL...BUTT HUMBLE

NATALIE MAINES: I walked back to the back of the bus the other day, and they're both standing there almost naked going, 'no, you have more dimples, but mine are deeper. I'm telling you'. And I'm like, 'what are y'all doing?' 'We're comparing dimples on our butt.' So we're humbled every single day of our lives.

★ HEAD-BANGER'S BALL

MARTIE SEIDEL: Well I think you really feel the music, because the other day...nobody's there. We're having sound check. [Emily's] head-banging during sound check. So on the music to "Ready To Run," I can just tell that song really moves her to want to dance and spin around. I mean that's what it's all about. And she has different levels of rocking out. Like if she's not feeling so good one night, she might not be quite as head-banging as she would another night. So the music has to move you to do stuff like that.

★ GOOD TIME GIRLS

EMILY ROBISON: We have to have a good time and make each other laugh or we're in trouble. So, people get a little bit shocked. Road people not so much, because they're pretty much the same way.

NATALIE: People think like Emily is the quiet thinker, always looking at her instrument. And she's really just cracking jokes all the time. She has the most infectious laugh.

MARTIE: It's very typical to sit in a room with Natalie, you wouldn't think of sitting in a room with Natalie and just saying nothing. You know, she's a thinker not just a talker.

★ CHICKS OF A FEATHER

EMILY: I think the music is what drives us to be so wild on stage. But, people attribute a lot

of things to us off stage that aren't true, just because they assume we're one way or another.

NATALIE: And we're a lot more alike off stage than on stage. I think we melt together into one really fat person!

★ THE BIG "D"

NATALIE: Divorce is never good. But, in different aspects of life, failing is something...you can laugh at everything. And I think you should. You should never take yourself too seriously. And I think I used to think I was above divorce. Like even when I wasn't happy I was a little cocky about, well I can withstand anything and I'll never get a divorce. The minute you start taking yourself too seriously and saying 'I'll never', that's not good for anybody to have that sort of image like you can't fail and people aren't gonna accept it.

★ GETTING PINNED

MARTIE: As far as going too far in saying things that (aren't) role model-like for kids, we don't try to think too much about it. We just try to be ourselves. But I have a five-year-old stepson and I kind of gauge it like, 'Are we saying anything (on our CD) that I wouldn't want him to hear? Am I saying anything on TV or anything in the public eye that I would be ashamed for him to see or hear?' We have a pin that says 'Chicks kick ass.' And when that came out, I really fought these two, because I thought, 'I don't want my five-year-old to wear a pin that says 'Chicks kick ass.' So what we did is, we tempered it to where I was happy, and that meant you can't buy that pin unless you're 12 years old. If you're with your parent you can, but your parent has to be with you, unless you're [over] 12 years old. So I was happy in that.

NATALIE: We're making money. We make three dollars off that pin and I don't care if they're two years old. No, I'm kidding. I am SO teasing. See, that is something I'll get in trouble for!

★ GIRL THANG

MARTIE: It's not about girl power, and women with attitude and all that stuff. I mean we love men. And I think we're very traditional as far as a man being a man and us being the female role. Even though we look like that strong women thing. And we're very much traditionalists. Emily had a very traditional

wedding. We're not women's libbers per se. We just believe that women should have equal rights. And we're glad that women are kicking butt right now. And we think a lot of women opened the door for us to do that, to be successful.

★ WEDDING BELLS (AND HOWLS)

MARTIE: I wrote "Cowboy Take Me Away" with Marcus Hummon, who is a great writer. That song came together in just a matter of hours. And I remember having the title in my little writing book, and I think I was thinking of those old Calgon (bubble bath)

commercials, "Calgon, take me away," but "Cowboy, take me away." Emily at the time was just dating Charlie. They met at Fan Fair. And I was guess I was just hoping that this was the one. Because there were so many that weren't the one that she'd come home to us and say, "He's the one. I'm gonna marry him."

NATALIE: "This is it. This is it, y'all, I'm telling you. I'm gonna marry him. I love him."

MARTIE: It's a very sentimental song for us. We sang it at Emily's wedding, very tipsy. And nobody will ever see that footage.

EMILY: We were so out of tune. Oh my gosh!

★ OOH...SCARY

NATALIE: It looks a little silly to be rocking out when everyone (in the audience) is sitting still, going, "She's scaring me. Is she scaring you, because she's scaring me!"

EMILY: People are just like...looking at each other going, "Is she going to fall off the stage?"

NATALIE: I probably will some day.

Check out more from the Dixie Chicks CMT Showcase at countrymusictoday.com. 