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Dixie Chicks finally find a place to roost

From singing on a street corner in Dallas to performing at Nashville's historic Ryman Auditorium, Dixie Chicks have come a long way.

Their first single, "I Can Love You Better," is already climbing the charts and their debut album, *Wide Open Spaces*, is being released Jan. 27.

"These women are the real deal," says Sony president Allen Butler. "Dixie Chicks are world-class entertainers and they aren't new to this. When they brought in songs for the project they said, 'This is us – this is who we are – this is Dixie Chicks.' They put their thumbprint on this album."

They know who they are because the Dixie Chicks – sisters Martie Seidel (fiddle, mandolin, vocals) and Emily Erwin (dobro, banjo, vocals), and 23-year-old lead singer Natalie Maines – have been around for quite a while.

Martie, 28, and Emily, 25, started out with a family bluegrass band, Blue Night Express, in the early '80s. By 1989, they joined with two friends to form a street band, performing for tips on that Dallas corner.

"We didn't have a name at all for a couple of weeks," Emily recalls. "When people started asking us who we were and wanting to hire us, we were going, 'Who are we? We don't know!' "

They soon found out. "We were on our way to the street corner one day," says Martie, "and the Little Feat song 'Dixie Chicken' came on the radio. So we decided to call ourselves Dixie Chicken, with a logo that had a chicken with long eyelashes. Then we shortened it to Chix, and finally decided on Dixie Chicks."

Dixie Chicks quickly became one of the most sought-after bands in Texas. Between 1990 and 1994, they recorded three independent CDs to sell at shows.

With their growing popularity, they opened shows for the likes of George Jones, Garth Brooks, Alan Jackson, George Strait and Emmylou Harris, and got prestigious bookings such as the Grand Ole Opry and Tennessee's 1993 Inauguration Ball for President Clinton.

However, after several personnel changes, one thing was missing – a dynamic lead vocalist. They were aware of Natalie Maines' talents as an entertainer in the Dallas area and decided that her powerful voice and personality were exactly what they needed.

Natalie, who joined the group in 1995, is the daughter of legendary Texas steel guitarist Lloyd Maines. "Country music was so prevalent in our family that I was fortunate to be exposed to it at a very early age," she said. "I always knew this is what I wanted to do."

She clicked immediately with the other Chicks. "With Natalie, that's when the wheels started rolling around," says Martie. "You could tell there was excitement there. There was energy."

Photo courtesy of Sony

'We know we will always be playing music together,' says Emily Erwin (right) with Natalie Maines (left) and Martie Seidel

The next step was to sign with a record label. "We were prepared to pay our dues for as long as it took," says Emily. "We were committed to longevity. We know we will always be playing music together, so we wanted to find someone who is just as determined and energetic as we are."

That someone turned out to be Monument, a label known for launching such superstars as Dolly Parton, Kris Kristofferson, Larry Gatlin and Roy Orbison. Dixie Chicks were the first act to be signed when Monument – out of business for 10 years – was revived by Sony Nashville.

When Monument held its re-launch party at the Ryman Auditorium, Dixie Chicks were thrilled to perform. The fabled room was packed with music executives, fellow artists and the press.

"We were excited to be on that stage," says Natalie, whose husband, Michael Tarabay plays bass guitar for the trio. "But only after the show were we told how tough a crowd we had just won over. If we had known that, we would have been a lot more nervous and probably not have had nearly as much fun.

"We want people to like us and I feel like they will. We put our hearts into the music we make."

— *Danny Proctor*