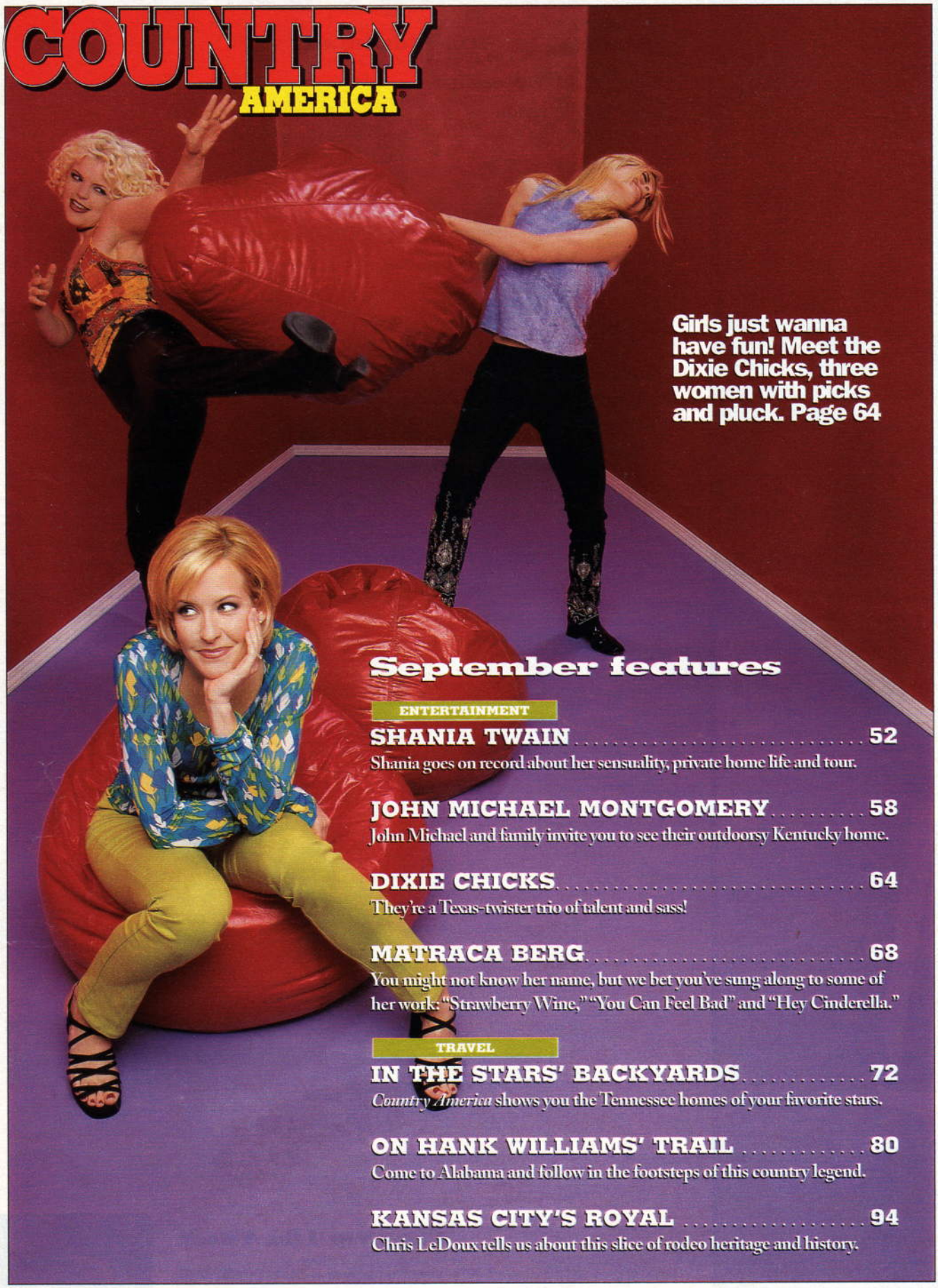
COUNTRY AMERICA



Girls just wanna have fun! Meet the Dixie Chicks, three women with picks and pluck. Page 64

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Photo by John Shipes, cover photo by George Holz

BY NEIL POND, SENIOR ENTERTAINMENT EDITOR

CHICKS *With* PICKS

WHEN IT COMES TO HOT LICKS, THE DIXIE CHICKS RULE THE ROOST!

PHOTOGRAPHS BY JOHN SHIPES

"We're, like, traditional women with big dreams and very liberal ideas about what women can and should do," says Dixie Chick Martie Seidel (*left*) alongside musical mates Natalie Maines (*middle*) and Emily Erwin (*right*).

The rooster crows, the Dixie Chicks used to say. *But the hen delivers.* "We've got a new slogan now," bubbles the group's lead singer, Natalie Maines. "*Chicks Rule.* That's not just us, but all chicks."

Okay, all chicks—but *especially* the Dixie Chicks. They're country's hottest new group, a trio of blondes who made feathers fly with their hit debut single, "I Can Love You Better." Everywhere they perform, they leave audiences dazzled by the fact that they don't just sing and strum—they're knockout musicians in every way. On *Wide Open Spaces,* their CD released earlier this year, each and every tasty fiddle, mandolin, Dobro and banjo note was picked by a Chick.

"When we kick off our first song," says Emily Erwin, "we make sure it's a real doozie, where we're just wailin' away at everything we do best. And you can just see it in the audience: They're nudging each other, going, like, 'Oh my God, they're the real thing!' You can actually see it happening on their faces."

The Dixie Chicks are, indeed, the real thing. They sing in three-part harmony. They play with an arsenal of licks that runs from Monroe to Motown. Their *Wide Open Spaces* CD broke a record previously held by Diamond Rio for the biggest-selling album by a new group in country music history. Clearly, a hip and happening new act has arrived.

But the Chicks aren't quite the overnight stars they seem. They've actually been around since 1989, which is when the act started wowing crowds and winning followers in their Dallas hometown. Bluegrass-trained sisters Martie Seidel and Emily founded the group as teenagers. Three independently produced albums later (after a couple of other members came and went), they hooked up with vocal powerhouse Natalie in 1995. Then the Chicks finally found their niche—and a big-time Nashville recording contract.

"For a while, we really didn't have these visions of Nashville and record deals," says Emily. "We just wanted to have a weekly gig and be able to not have a day job. And we did that, for about eight and a half years."

That weekly gig ended up taking them all over the world. They played state fairs and music festivals throughout the South. They appeared on the Grand Ole Opry and on TNN. They opened shows for Garth Brooks and Alan Jackson. They toured in Japan and Europe, recorded a jingle for McDonald's and lassoed an ad campaign for Justin Boots.

They also experimented with different sounds and looks. For a few years, they camped it up as cowgirls in chaps, rhinestones and Western shirts. "We milked it for all it was worth," says Martie. "It was almost like playing dress-up. All the conventioneers wanted us for their events; they'd bring in a bunch of New Yorkers and want to show them 'what Texas was all about.' But when people started coming to our shows more concerned about what outfit we were going to wear instead of what song we were were going to play, we said 'Whoa.' "

"We don't want to be too cautious. Be yourself, that's our thing. Tell the truth...don't get wrapped up in what's politically correct."

They turned down a record deal with Warner Western, the cowboy-music label, because they didn't want to be pigeonholed as a cowgirl band. They parted ways with their manager, who also handled the Grand Ole Opry act Riders in the Sky. "He started kind of trying to railroad us into that only-the-cowgirl thing, and we wanted to keep our options open," says Emily.

Spending all those years exploring their options paid off. "People always ask, 'How does it feel to take eight and a half years to become an overnight success?' " says Martie. "I'm just glad we had the time to work out all the kinks and figure out what we wanted to do, what's our sound, what kind of image we wanted to put out there. A lot of people only get one chance, and you'd better be ready."

The Chicks weren't ready, they admit, when they started out as a folksy, down-on-the-corner bluegrass band without so much as a business card. They weren't ready later as a yee-haw cowgirl trio. And they weren't ready when they showed up, uninvited, in the lobby of David Letterman's office building in New York and staged an impromptu audition. They got thrown out.

But they're ready now, and practically giddy with excitement. As Emily, Martie and Natalie sit cross-legged on a bed in a Nashville hotel room, they laugh themselves silly remembering the band's colorful past.

"We used to buy Chiclets, those little boxes of gum, by the pound," says Martie. "We'd throw them out at our shows, hoping we wouldn't bonk anybody on the head and draw blood."

Natalie says she's surprised by the act's newfound status as sex kittens. "I thought we'd have this big female following," says Natalie, pointing out that, instead, she often looks out beyond the spotlight and sees an audience of drooling guys. "You know, 'girl songs.' I thought they'd relate to our album and everything. I just never dreamed that all these guys would be standing at the front of the stage. It's so hard for me to put myself in that perspective. I'm going, 'It's just me. I'm a real dork, I promise. Really, you don't need to be fawning.' "

"There've been guys at our shows on my side of the stage who yell at me,

'Switch places with her!'" Martie says, nodding toward Emily, who's younger by three years. "They don't want to look at me! They want me to go to the other side so they can look at her!"

Emily just shakes her head at the teasing, smiles and points to Martie's ring finger—implying that guys see her older sister's gold band and know she's not available. In fact, Emily is the only unmarried Chick. But she was previously in a serious romantic relationship with another musician who went on to find stardom as the lead singer of a popular new band.

"Heath Wright—Ricochet!" blurts Natalie.

Well, yes. Emily and Heath broke up about the time Ricochet had their first hit, back in 1996.

"And she *cri-i-i-ed*," Natalie and Martie chime.

"I mean, she dumped *him*!" says Natalie.

"It was a mutual parting," says Emily.

"Oh, *yeah*!" says Natalie, rolling her eyes.

"It *was*," insists Emily, but it's clear this is one friendly ribbing she's going to have to take.

Talk turns more serious as Martie and Natalie both agree they miss being home with their respective husbands now that the band's career has kicked into overdrive. Martie has been married for three years and Natalie just celebrated her one-year anniversary.

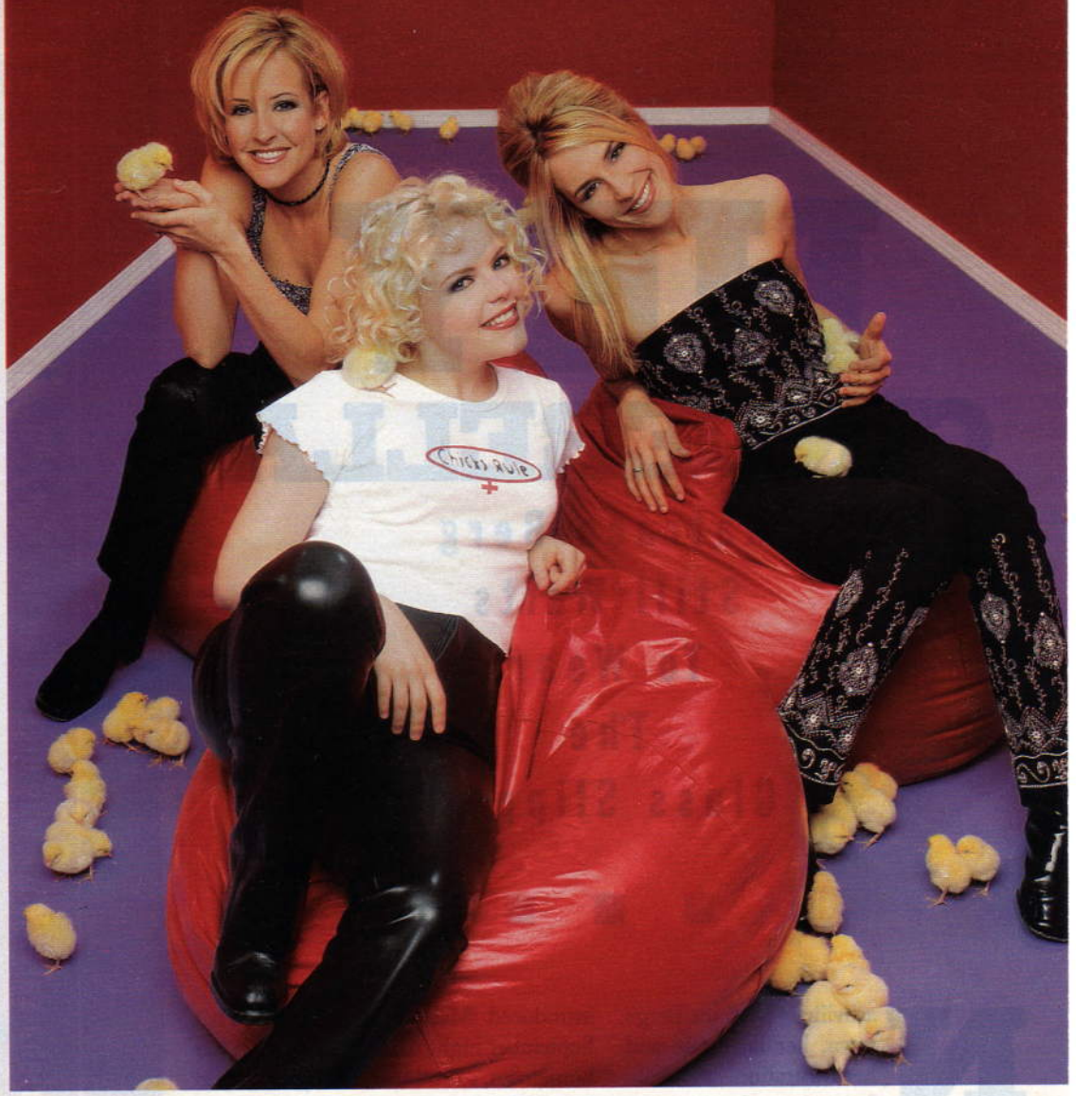
Martie says the fact that she's a wife and a mom also affects the way she feels about some of the group's high-spirited, candidly unrehearsed antics.

"I've got a 4-year-old [step]son, and I don't want to do anything that I can't tell him about," she says. At a recent Nashville convention of radio programmers, for instance, the Chicks made jokes about their female anatomy, each sporting Dixie Chicks buttons as pasties on top of their shirts.

"You get wrapped up in the music and do crazy things," admits Martie. "But we don't want to be too cautious. Be yourself, that's our thing. We never want to quit having fun and doing unexpected things. But we certainly never want to offend anyone."

In other words, expect the Chicks to sing. Expect them to pick. Expect them to entertain and dazzle you in various, unpredictable ways.

Just don't expect the Dixie Chicks to do anything…well, *cheep*. ★



In past non-musical lives, Martie (*left*) worked in an ice-cream parlor; Emily (*right*) was a restaurant hostess; and Natalie (*middle*) waitressed. The band took its name from the song "Dixie Chicken" by the rock group Little Feat.

HIGH NOTES...Martie Seidel, who started playing fiddle when she was only 5 years old, was born October 12, 1969, in York, Pennsylvania... Her sister, Emily Erwin, who plays banjo, Dobro, mandolin and guitar, was born August 16, 1972, in Pittsfield, Massachusetts...Lead singer Natalie Maines, the daughter of Texas session musician Lloyd Maines, was born October 14, 1974, in Lubbock, Texas...The Dixie Chicks' current CD is titled *Wide Open Spaces*...You can write to the Dixie Chicks at the Dixie Chicks Fan Club, P.O. Box 670444, Dallas TX 75637-0444.