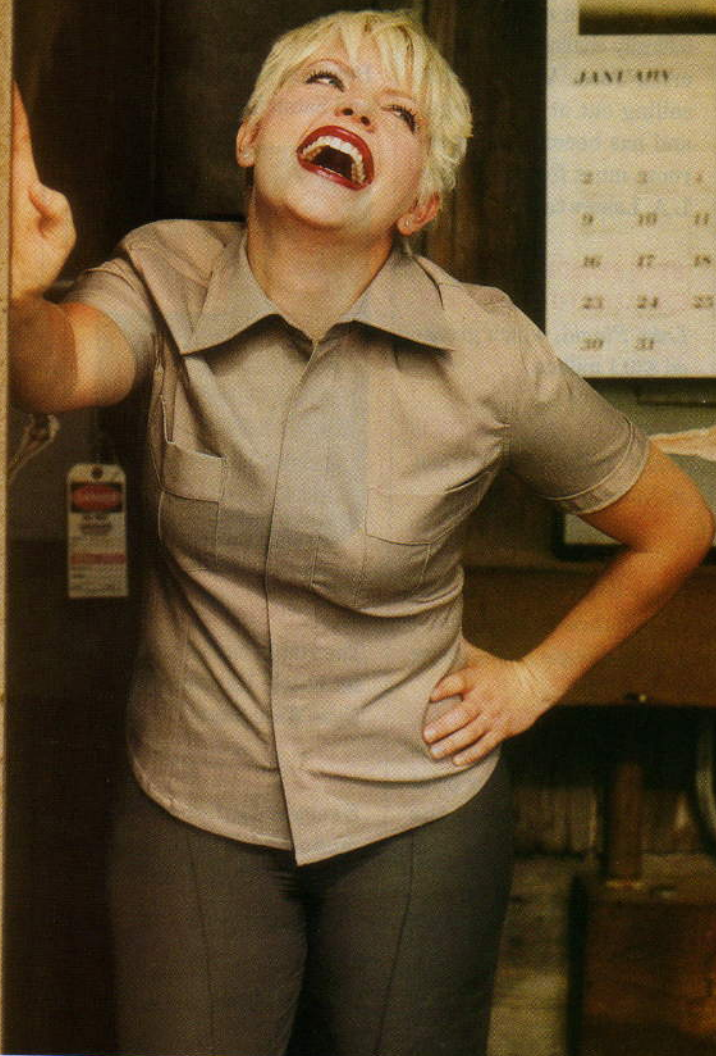


The **DIXIE CHICKS'** WIDE OPEN SPACES peeved country purists with its message of cowgirl empowerment—and that was *before* the bitter divorce proceeding, the black leather, and their blockbuster success

NATALIE

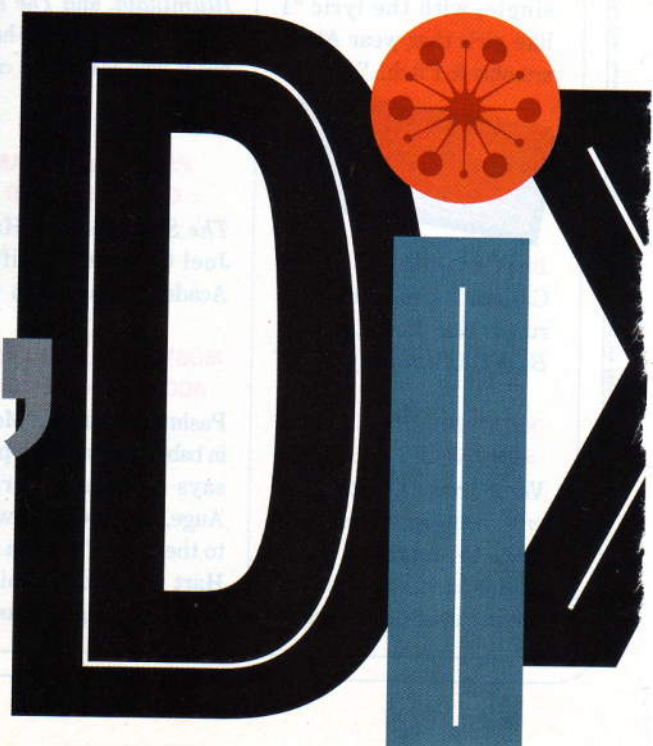


MARTIE



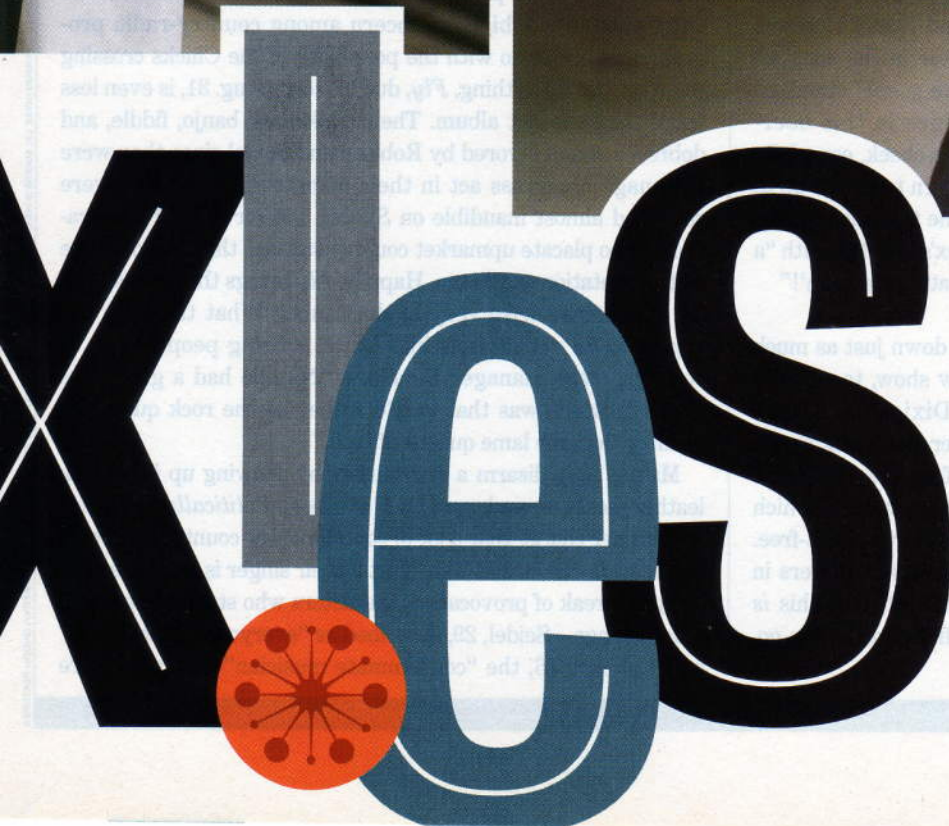
WHISTLIN'

By Chris Willman





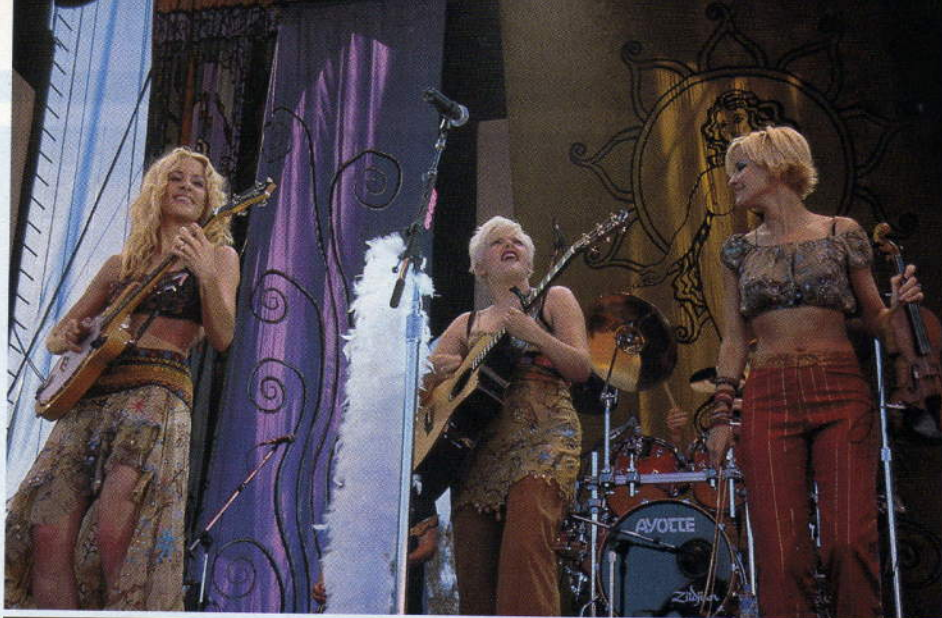
EMILY



LIES

THE DIXIE CHICKS ARE MORE THAN a little bit country, and Lilith Fair at least a little bit rock & roll. So when the glam-happy Texas trio signed on for 19 Lilith dates this summer, not everyone was convinced theirs was a match made in demographic heaven. But, as it turns out, even a Lilith crowd full of tattooed Valley Girls and West Hollywood lipstick lesbians loves a good d-i-v-o-r-c-e

Photographs by Jeffrey Thurnher



POULTRY IN MOTION Chicks Robison, Maines, and Seidel (left to right) take the Lilith crowd under their wings

story as much as the next bunch of Tammy Wynette buffs.

Launching into a rant about her almost-ex-husband, singer Natalie Maines has the rapt attention of the Pasadena Rose Bowl crowd this humid July afternoon. "The last thing he said was 'It's not about the money.' Seven months later, we're still not divorced and it's *still* not about the money," she informs the 18,000 assembled, her playfully indignant Texas twang rising to preaching level. "I haven't quite figured out what it is about. But what I do know is that with all the money he's gonna take, I'm gonna try and make some more. And so Emily and I wrote this song about a girl who's been good for *faaaar* too long, and she's gonna go out and do *alllll* her sinnin' in one night!"

With that, the gay divorcee-to-be kick-starts "Sin Wagon," a barnstorming bluegrass number that is the most traditional-sounding (and most sexually charged) song in the band's set. Her fellow Chicks, sisters Martie Seidel and Emily Robison, join in with fiddle and banjo solos, and later in the song all three harmonize a couple of snatches of the gospel standard "I'll Fly Away." But any bow to reverence in this beer-drenched bad-girl anthem is purely tongue-in-cheek, especially by the time Maines whoops, "When it's my turn to march up to glory/I'm gonna have one hell of a story!" She threatens to cap off her devilish night away from her future ex's clutches with "a little mattress dancin'—that's right, I said mattress dancin'!"

And all God's neo-feminists said, Amen.

"Sin Wagon" inevitably brings the house down just as much here as at a George Strait or Tim McGraw show, to cite the other two summer tours to which the Dixies have been hitching their wagon. The Chicks are further preaching to the choir when they subsequently offer Lilith fans the *Thelma & Louise*-esque "Goodbye Earl," an upbeat new tune in which two gals murder an abusive husband and walk away scot-free. Whether it's rednecks in the Sun Belt or same-sex neckers in L.A., folks do go nuts for cowgirl empowerment. And this is the group that was born to bridge the gulf between *You go, girl* and "Your Good Girl's Gonna Go Bad."

OUR LABEL IS scared to death of that song because it says 'mattress dancing,'" boasts Maines, 24, taking time out in her tour trailer the day after the Chicks' triumphant Rose Bowl gig. "Sin Wagon" is the most controversial song on their new album, *Fly*, if only within the halls of Sony Nashville. Manager Simon Renshaw even took a meeting with label brass who wanted to ditch the track. "If we didn't have the success we've had and the control that the success gave us, they probably wouldn't have allowed it on the album," Maines asserts, chuckling at the ease with which they overruled the company's nervous Nellies.

Nashville wasn't always so wholesome, but in today's conservative country climate, it takes a lot to win the right to cast a sexual allusion. The Dixie Chicks won that privilege by selling more than 6 million copies of last year's *Wide Open Spaces*, the first album sibs Seidel and Robison recorded with then newcomer Maines. It was a Grammy-winning crossover smash that launched the trio into a country stratosphere shared only by Shania and Garth. When a subject like "Sin Wagon" arises now, Renshaw says he's fond of reminding certain execs how they once fought to try to change the band's name, which many thought would offend Northerners and women alike. A couple of years later, *Spaces* is still selling more than 50,000 copies a week, and presumably not just to Southern men.

So mattress, schmattress: At this point, the Chicks are so beloved they could probably remake "Erotic City" and still be Opry shoo-ins. A bigger concern among country-radio programmers has to do with the possibility of the Chicks crossing the road, but if anything, *Fly*, due in stores Aug. 31, is even less "pop" than the last album. Their trademark banjo, fiddle, and dobro—a sound favored by Robison and Seidel since they were a teenage bluegrass act in their hometown of Dallas—were rendered almost inaudible on *Spaces*, not for Top 40 penetration but to placate upmarket country stations that find old-time instrumentation anathema. Happily, *Fly* brings the arcana back up in the otherwise very modern mix. "What the girls are trying to do with things like Lilith is bring people *back* to country," says manager Renshaw. "Natalie had a great line about it, which was that they'd rather be the rock queens of country than the lame queens of rock."

Maines may disarm a few purists by showing up in a black leather jacket on such non-TNN shows as *Politically Incorrect*, or with her charge that a lot of contemporary country is "pretty darn cookie-cutter and fake." But if their singer is a spitfire with a slight streak of provocation, the sisters who started the group a decade ago—Seidel, 29, described as "everyone's best friend," and Robison, 26, the "consummate musician"—provide more

PREVIOUS SPREAD: STYLING: JENNIFER LEVINE/BEAUTY & PHOTO: MAKEUP: CANDY AND STACY MARTIN; HAIR: MELANIE AND MICHAEL SILVA; MAINES'S CLOTHES: ANDRE B; MARTIE'S COAT: MICHELLE MANSON/WISE; L.A. MARTIE'S HAT: DIESEL; STYLE LAB; EMILY'S CLOTHES: REBE; (THIS PAGE) JEN LOWERY/LONDON FEATURES

reserve. What all three share, maintains their bemused British manager, is that “they are *such* girls.” For anyone suspicious that their high-fashion high-jinks image is just good marketing, he insists that “they *are* their audience. They like to shop, do makeup together...it’s like a f---in’ slumber party on the bus. I’ll go on and they’ve got their pajamas and their blankets and some girlie movie going—it’s the cutest thing.”

The group used to be even cuter, or at least campier. With two other long-gone members, the pre-Natalie Chicks made a decent living around Dallas through the early ’90s as a high-spirited retro-Western act, recording indie albums like *Thank Heavens for Dale Evans*, and playing deb balls and buffet lines. (Governor and GOP presidential front-runner George W. Bush was one early adopter, so order those inaugural-ball tickets now.) But about the time Sony began sniffing around in 1995, the sisters parted ways with cofounder Laura Lynch—their elder by more than a decade, and a mother—and took a chance on an inexperienced sprite of a singer they barely knew. The Natalie hookup came through the Chicks’ longtime association with her father, Joe Ely’s esteemed steel guitarist, Lloyd Maines. “Because her dad was on the road her whole life, we knew Natalie understood the lifestyle. But I’m amazed how well we get along for having walked into it fairly blindly,” says Robison, who reckons they’ve become best friends and then some in the years since.

The personnel layoffs and blond-on-blond glamour infusion earned the group some withering press from former boosters convinced Dallas’ favorite daughters had sold their souls to Nashville. Seidel admits the backlash stung but claims they had no other choice. “I had contemplated leaving the group. I told my husband, ‘Musically, my growth is being stunted. I can’t play bluegrass and cowgirl music forever. I can’t wear these gawd-awful spangles and rhinestones forever! I’ve got to make a change, [even if] that’s having babies and giving fiddle lessons the rest of my life.’ So Natalie saved us.”

IT MIGHT BE hyperbole to suggest that these cheerfully childless twentysomethings are going to help save country music, but their rambunctiousness is certainly bringing back loads of the younger listeners the format has so conspicuously failed to attract. Not that the criticism directed at *Spaces* by some older fans was unwarranted: That “debut” does bear the timid hallmarks of someone’s realization that the Chicks could be competitive with Reba instead of stuck in some alt-country gutter. But there are a lot more guts to go around in *Fly*, a much more accomplished collection that’s roughly three times as much fun as its megaplatinum predecessor.

The trio is also responsible for five coauthorships here, versus one the last time around. To Maines, their personalities are “way more in this than the first one. I don’t think you get more trite than ‘There’s Your Trouble’ or ‘I Can Love You Better,’” she adds, mildly dissing *Spaces*’ two biggest singles.

The singer told her partners she was leaving her husband a week into recording *Fly*, and “it shed a new light on the whole project,” says Seidel. “There’d be a phrase in almost every song where I’d get choked up and have a hard time singing because I’d be thinking of Natalie about to go through that. And then there are songs like ‘Cowboy Take Me Away’ where I was thinking about Emily about to get married.” The Chick formerly billed as Emily Erwin took songwriter Charlie Robison’s name after they exchanged vows last May. Recording *Fly* represented “the height of [the group’s] bonding,”

Seidel figures, “because you’ve got two emotional extremes, and how do you get up for one and also get to the level for the person who’s down and depressed?”

If Maines was blue then, the determinedly upbeat figure before us today hardly seems like a candidate for Zoloff. “I felt like I could take a breath, finally, after a year and a half,” she says of her decision to file for divorce from musician Michael Tarabay in January after 18 months of marriage. “Maybe just once every few weeks when I get a call from my lawyer do I ever remember I’m married. So the divorce didn’t occupy my mind at all during the making of the album. There’s no sappy songs about leaving.” Well, there *is* “Let Him Fly,” a Patty Griffin-penned closing lament. But don’t read it the wrong way. “In the studio, I sang that live, in one take, with

the guitar player, and we all felt a tear in our eyes,” she allows. “But...I wish my husband could sing those words to me. I wish he would let me go. It’s awful that my marriage has turned into this money thing.” (Tarabay’s attorney, Maclin P. Davis Jr., speaking hopefully of a settlement and resisting the Lilith spirit of full disclosure, responds, “I would predict her lawyer doesn’t know she’s going around insulting her husband in public.”)

But only an act of God could keep the super *Fly* from selling enough to refill Maines’ alimony coffers dozens of times over. And anyway, a recent development causes the devilish twinkle adored by middle and outer America alike to return to Maines’ eye. It’s not even a sinful thought that puts it there. “I wasn’t looking for love, but I found love, at Emily’s wedding, actually,” she confesses. “Someone who treats me right for once. I had very low expectations of love—and life—and now they’re back up. To fantasy! Which is where I think they should be.” Sounds like the makings of a you-know-what song. ■



STATUE-ESQUE BLONDS At the 1999 Grammys