



the www.insidecx.com OCTOBER 2002 ISSUE

the inside connection

Today's #1 Source for the Music Industry

FREE

Feature Interview

THE DIXIE CHICKS GET BACK TO BASICS

THE TIMELESS QUALITIES OF
GRAHAM NASH

JAMMING
WITH
**JAMES
COTTON**

IN EACH ISSUE
EXCLUSIVE COVERAGE ON:

Blues • Jazz • Metal • Folk • Classical • Rock • Industrial • Hip Hop •
Rap • Country • Christian • Alternative • Dance • R&B • Classic Rock

Homeward Bound

The Dixie Chicks Get Back to Basics



by Elianne Halbersberg

When the Dixie Chicks began recording their new album, *Home*, they had no idea that the bluegrass-flavored demos they were cutting could debut on the *Billboard* 200 and *Billboard Country Albums* charts at No. 1.

In fact, lead vocalist Natalie Maines, fiddle player/vocalist Martie Maguire and multi-instrumentalist/vocalist Emily Robison didn't know whether the material would ever be released, given that the group was in the midst of a lawsuit with their label, Monument/Sony Nashville, over royalties the Chicks claimed were owed to them for record sales of 20 million units.

"We had no label, we didn't know what we were going to do," says Maines. "We took a year off and needed to rejuvenate after working for five years, and the Fly tour took a lot out of us. We weren't feeling creative, and we thought we'd go in the studio and record whatever we wanted to. We were all inspired by acoustic music lately and wanted to record something acoustic based."

"When we say demos, we go in thinking that we'll just play around, but we're not the type of people who can do that. We worked out the arrangements meticulously at my house before we entered the studio, and as we became more serious we knew that it had gone beyond demos, but we had no idea what it would be."

The Chicks reached a settlement with Sony, and *Home* was released on the trio's new Sony imprint, Wide Open Records. It was produced by Maines' father, Lloyd, legendary in the music industry as a producer and pedal steel player, and recorded with top bluegrass musicians from the Chicks' hometown of Austin, as well as stellar Nashville players.

The album made immediate history as it entered the charts with the highest first full week's sales of any female group, and any Columbia Records album, in the SoundScan era. *Home* also set the record for the highest first week's sales for any female country artist and any country group, breaking the Chicks' previous title in both categories (for *Fly*). The Chicks are now the only country group and the only female country group to have two No. 1 debuts on the *Billboard* 200.

The group selected Cedar Creek Studio in Austin, where Lloyd Maines produces many of his projects. According to Natalie Maines, the change in location "was way more low-budget in cost, not quality. People don't charge in Texas what they charge in L.A., Nashville and New York for studio time, and it always bothered us how much it costs and that the labels pay it."

Not only did the Chicks change venues; they also changed producers, musicians and labels. While the circumstances surrounding the making of *Home* put them in complete control, Maines says it wasn't

so different from making *Wide Open Spaces* and *Fly*. "I would have said that [we had control] on the last two records, so it's difficult to just say it now," she remarks. "We were always in control of our sound. The first two albums were the albums we wanted to make, and this is a reflection of our lives now and probably the only time in our lives we'll work without a record label, so this is as independent as we'll ever be. We don't listen to outside voices, and to not have them there while we recorded this album is what made it so pure. There was no one to say, 'How long are the songs?' We were able to arrange them to our ears, the way it should sound, and not have someone standing there with a stopwatch, saying, 'Radio is not going to play something that long.'"

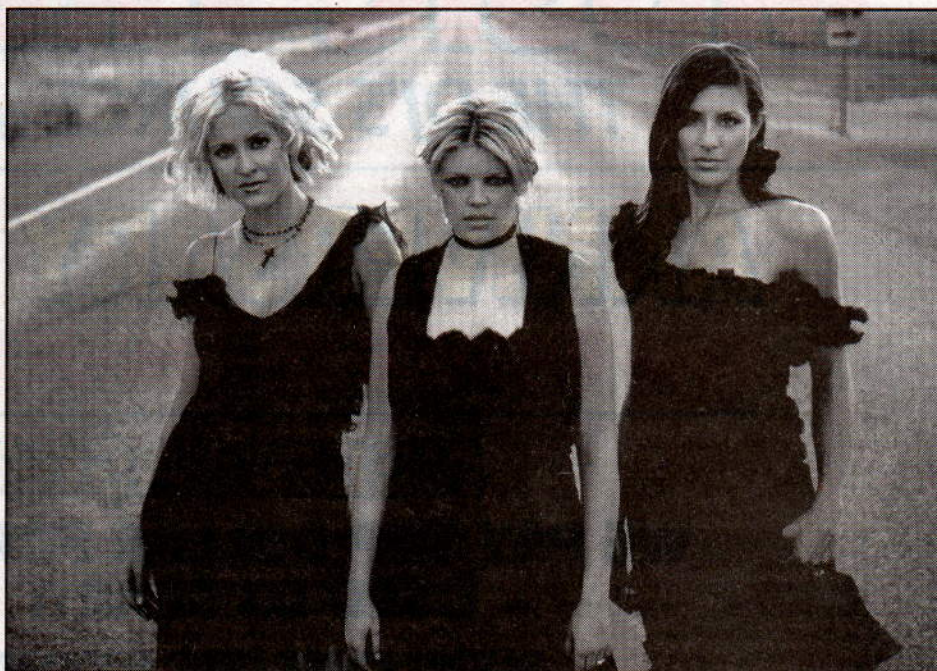
Maines, who attended the Berklee School of Music on a vocal scholarship, also plays piano and guitar. "People think I play piano," she laughs, "but I'm so out of practice. I wanted to play guitar on this

"One worry with this record was that while we could broaden and expand our audience to older people and men, we might lose younger fans."

album, but with my dad and Bryan Sutton playing, it would be self-indulgent to slap something on there just to have my name on the credits. And onstage, to be honest, it's difficult to do a show and concentrate on remembering the words and emotions and focus on chord changes and rhythm."

Emotion, however, does not seem to be a stretch. Maines wraps herself around every note, whether she's going 90 miles per hour on something as lightweight as "White Trash Wedding" or baring every bit of her soul on tracks like "Godspeed." Again, with *Home*, the recording process changed from the Nashville method of cutting parts repeatedly for a pasted-together final track to Lloyd Maines' preferred practice of complete takes.

"When we did *Wide Open Spaces*, I sang everything six times, and piecing a song together was completely foreign to me," she says. "I don't remem-



ber the order I sang these songs in, but a couple of them I sang through three times, and then I went to singing once. 'Godspeed' was completely live, with the tracks being laid at that time. It was done late at night and I wanted to capture the moment, so we lit candles and set up the atmosphere for it."

While Maines would love to follow in her father's footsteps and eventually produce other artists, she admits that right now she's just concentrating on making records and touring with the Dixie Chicks, as well as dividing her time carefully between career and family. "We had a million things going on with this album," she says, "from recording it to doing all the artwork and credits and proofreading it ourselves. Maybe there will be a time when I can focus on the production aspect of things. A lot of people learn on their own."

Wide Open Spaces and *Fly* established the Dixie Chicks not only as talented musicians and songwriters, but also as favorites among a young female audience—a demographic that is 60 percent under the age of 25. The irony, of course, is that the Chicks frequently record music that is lyrically mature. Now they've released an album steeped deeply in blue-

grass tradition. And while it's a hit out of the box, Maines was concerned as to how the shift in direction would impact their fan base.

"One worry with this record was that while we could broaden and expand our audience to older people and men," she says, "we might lose younger fans. [When] we played it [at a listening session] for the industry and press people, a lot of radio winners were there. Those who were in their 20s and older loved it, but there was one little girl who was 6 or 7 and I felt sorry for her. She was there for an hour of new music and it was probably boring for her. I am aware that we may leave fans with this record, but we will probably gain more. We're getting older and the music probably sounds older."

Maines has remarked that each Chicks album is a reflection of where the women were in their lives at the time of writing and recording. With *Home*, she says, even the title is indicative. "We are just settled and centered," she states, "and now, with a child [her son, Slade], I don't feel I'm an attention hog anymore. I'm more laid back and calm. I'm happy. We found our home and we feel very normal." 🎵