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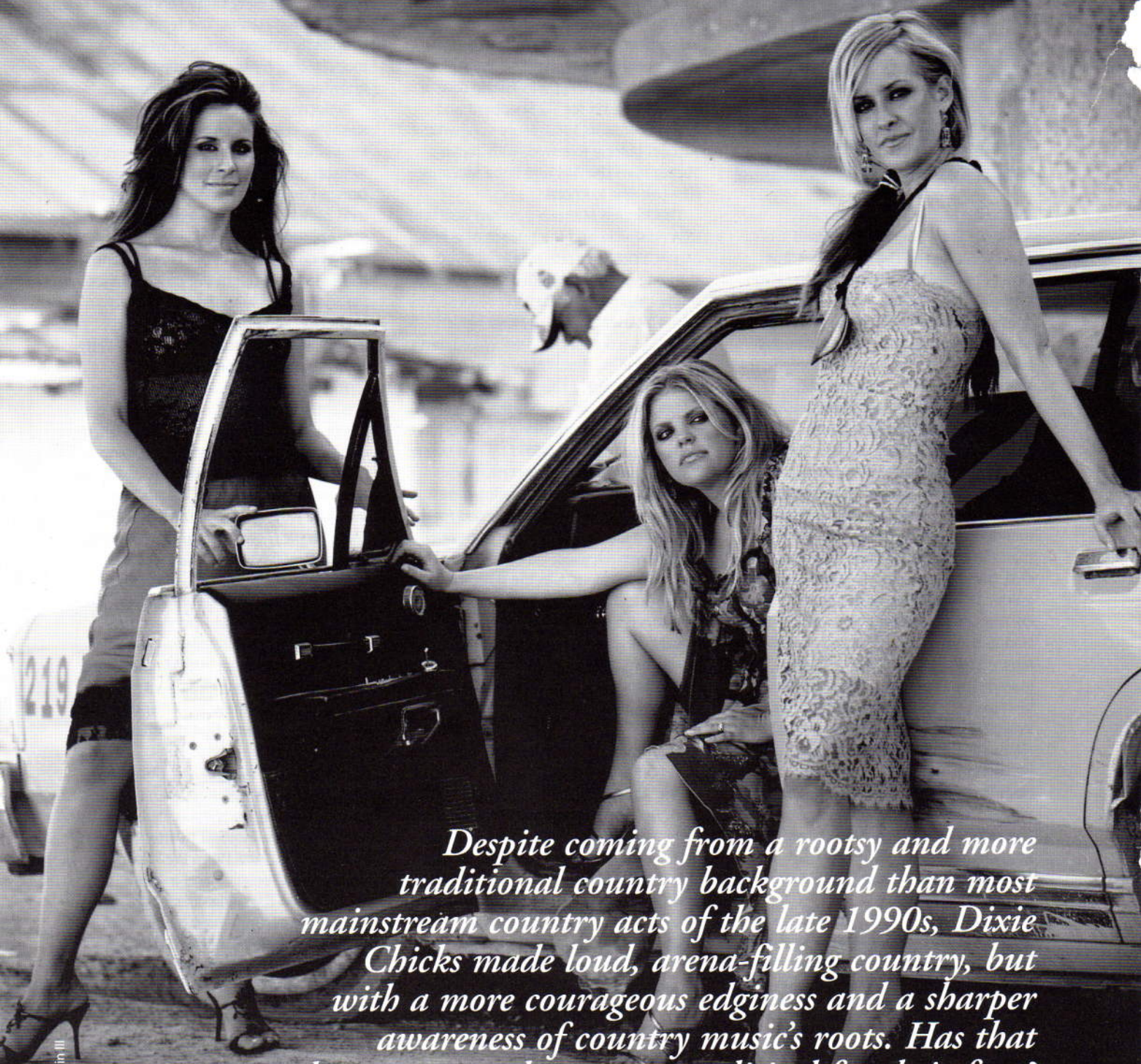
issue 15 • september 2003 • £2.60

CHICKS IN A SPIN



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The Chicks Grow Teeth



Despite coming from a rootsy and more traditional country background than most mainstream country acts of the late 1990s, Dixie Chicks made loud, arena-filling country, but with a more courageous edginess and a sharper awareness of country music's roots. Has that sharpness now become too political for their fans?

Story by Alan Cackett

"We weren't expecting the audience to have such an amazing reaction. In the year and a half we hadn't been on tour, we had forgotten what it felt like."

The Dixie Chicks gave a much needed boost to a country genre that was in search of a megastar. With Garth Brooks retired to Oklahoma and Shania Twain missing in action in Switzerland, the timing couldn't have been better for the Texas trio.

Since their 1998 debut with *WIDE OPEN SPACES*, the Chicks have been highly visible and successful charting numerous number one hits, whilst their first two albums have both sold more than 10 million copies each, the only female group in history to claim such an accomplishment. Their third album, *HOME*, released just a year ago, following a protracted disagreement with their record label, rapidly gained multi-million sales, and seemed destined to match the figures attained by the first two, even though, in comparison, it was much more rootsy and less radio-friendly.

The Chick girls had waged a battle over royalties, claiming their label, Sony, had cheated them out of \$4 million. The band and label stared each other down for almost a year, ultimately agreeing to a huge increase in the Chicks' income and royalties. While the war of words was being fought, Natalie, Martie and Emily spent considerable time experimenting in an Austin studio, far away from Nashville's Music Row and all the haranguing that was going down.

At first, they hadn't thought out that they were making a new album. That came after several months of trial and error and working in a more laid-back, acoustic style. The creative inspiration for the new acoustic about-face began to gel when Natalie fell hard for bluegrass at Merlefest, the North Carolina music festival. Then the Chicks invited Ricky Skaggs and Kentucky Thunder out on numerous dates on their sold-out Fly tour where, Emily says, the top-flight bluegrass band "brought the house down."

It was Natalie who suggested the acoustic sessions for *HOME*, after the group had taken about a year off from touring and media appearances to nest and rest. "When Natalie said 'let's do some acoustic stuff,' I was really glad, because I knew Emily and I could go there, but I needed to know that that was what Natalie was feeling, too, because she could just as easily make a rock record," Martie says.

"So it was neat that we were all kind of on the same wavelength and being inspired by the same kind of music at the same time."

They needed the right environment, so Martie shopped around for studios in Austin, settling on an old

rock house on several acres of land in an otherwise residential area. "I was looking for us to be comfortable. It was kind of inspiring because it was old and had stained-glass windows," she says. "You felt isolated from the world. It felt like family. There was nobody there that seemed like an acquaintance or who didn't feel like part of our inner circle."

"To me, it wasn't so much that we were in one place vs. another. It was that we didn't have the record label looking over our shoulder," Natalie says. When recording on Music Row, they say, label officials would continuously drop by on thinly disguised 'social visits', which led to questions about potential singles for radio, song length and last-minute song pitches. "On the first two records, I think we felt in control and not pressured. But this was truly in control and no pressure," she explains.

The album was produced by Natalie's father, renowned musician Lloyd Maines. It was the trio's first foray into the studio with Lloyd, but according to Natalie, the family dynamic did not get in the way. "I think now that I'm a woman and am successful and make my own decisions and things like that, our relationship isn't as much father-daughter, but it is, but in the studio, there's none of that, you know? He's not intimidated by me maybe telling him what to do or how to do something, and I'm not intimidated the other way around, and I think that's why it works so great in the studio," she says. "I know how he works and we really communicate and relate well."

The Chicks had never envisioned that *HOME*, which earlier this year won a Grammy for country album of the year, would be the huge success it has become. "We thought maybe this would be a small project, maybe for a movie or to put on our website for fans, tying them over until our litigation with Sony was over," Emily explains. "Our manager played it for people and they loved it, so it kind of happened naturally. It really took other people listening to it to believe that it could be our third album."

Once the dispute with Sony had been amicably sorted little time was wasted in getting the new album out to the public. Several weeks before the record was released, the Chicks performed new songs from the album at the Kodak Theatre in Los Angeles. The concert was filmed and, as *An Evening With The Dixie Chicks*, was televised nationally in the US last December. "We did the whole album in its entirety," Natalie explains. "It was one of the first times we performed the songs live."

We weren't expecting the audience to have such an amazing reaction: They went crazy. In the year and a half we hadn't been on tour, we had forgotten what it felt like to get that from an audience. In the beginning it was ego boost to get that kind of fan adoration, but now I just feel appreciation for it."

The first single from the new album, *Long Time Gone*, made number one on the country charts, followed by their inventive re-working of Stevie Nicks' *Landslide*, which also made an impact here in the UK. Everything seemed to be cooking for the Chicks' new acoustic-based music. Following a UK concert at the Shepherd's Bush Empire they had set up a lengthy US tour, which was to be the first leg of an extensive world tour.

But, inadvertently, Natalie threw a spanner in the works. Whilst introducing one of the songs at Shepherds Bush, she mildly ridiculed President Bush before the start of the Iraq war, making it quite plain that she was against the forthcoming war. Natalie's comment, said off-the-cuff and tied in with the song's message and lyric, was blown up out of all proportion by the American media. Within days, the group was subjected to an ugly crusade: their music was taken off radio playlists, CDs were ceremoniously burnt and trashed, and caricatures of Natalie were posted on the internet.

There has since been a backlash to this, as many in the US feel that her First Amendment rights (freedom of speech) were abused. Large radio chains had played a major role in retaliation against the Chicks and in fomenting public outrage. There has even been rumours that far right extremists masterminded much of the crusade against Natalie. So much so that the US government has started an enquiry into how much power that large radio conglomerates hold to curb free speech and punish those with whom it disagrees politically.

The Chicks records fell off the charts, and sales of the *HOME* album slowed down for a time to a mere trickle. There was talk that fans would stay away from this summer's Chicks' concerts, but the signs are that this hasn't happened, with sold out signs going up right across the US.

Though Natalie made a public apology, she remains unrepentant. In fact her anti-war stance started months before the Shepherds Bush incident. Last year she publicly criticised fellow country musician Toby Keith and his war-mongering song, *Courtesy of the Red, White*

and Blue (The Angry American).

Keith responded with public comments that Maines wasn't in his league as a songwriter. In his concerts, Keith had been showing on big screens behind the stage the doctored photo of Maines and Saddam Hussein that began circulating on the internet shortly after Maines had criticised Bush.

Just as the controversy appeared to be dying down, she chose to take another shot at Keith during the Chicks' performance at the Academy of Country Music Awards in May. She wore a sleeveless shirt with the letters FUTK on the front. Most viewers, including awards show presenter Vince Gill interpreted the letters as an expletive aimed at Keith. After opening the envelope that revealed Keith had won the night's biggest award—entertainer of the year—Gill quipped, "I think his name was on someone's shirt tonight."

Naturally, the American media picked up on this, especially country radio, who once again placed the Chicks' music on the banned list. It's a shame that the best album that the Chicks have made, artistically, and in terms of rootsy, traditional country music, should suffer in this way.

In recent years bluegrass and roots music (encompassing traditional country, blues, gospel and regional folk music) have grown rapidly, nurtured by fans and artists alienated from radio's mass-appeal sound. The *O BROTHER* soundtrack, a defining recording by many of roots music's leading lights, burst into the mainstream, selling 6 million copies, despite seeing little airplay.

And a few veteran country artists, including Patty Loveless, Ricky Skaggs and Dolly Parton, have turned boldly to bluegrass and acoustic roots with acclaimed albums likewise overlooked by radio. The Dixie Chicks stood poised to change things even more with *HOME*, because the band was that rare creature: a wildly popular group that's also respected by critics of classic Americana.

Only time will tell if the controversy has a long-lasting affect on the Dixie Chicks' career. Hopefully, the US media and the music buying public will come to their senses and realise that music should be accepted and appreciated for what it is, and not be caught up in politics. And for her part, just maybe the outspoken Natalie Maines will come to think that the stage is not necessarily the appropriate place for making controversial comments—but heck, we at Maverick still believe in free speech and all that. **■**