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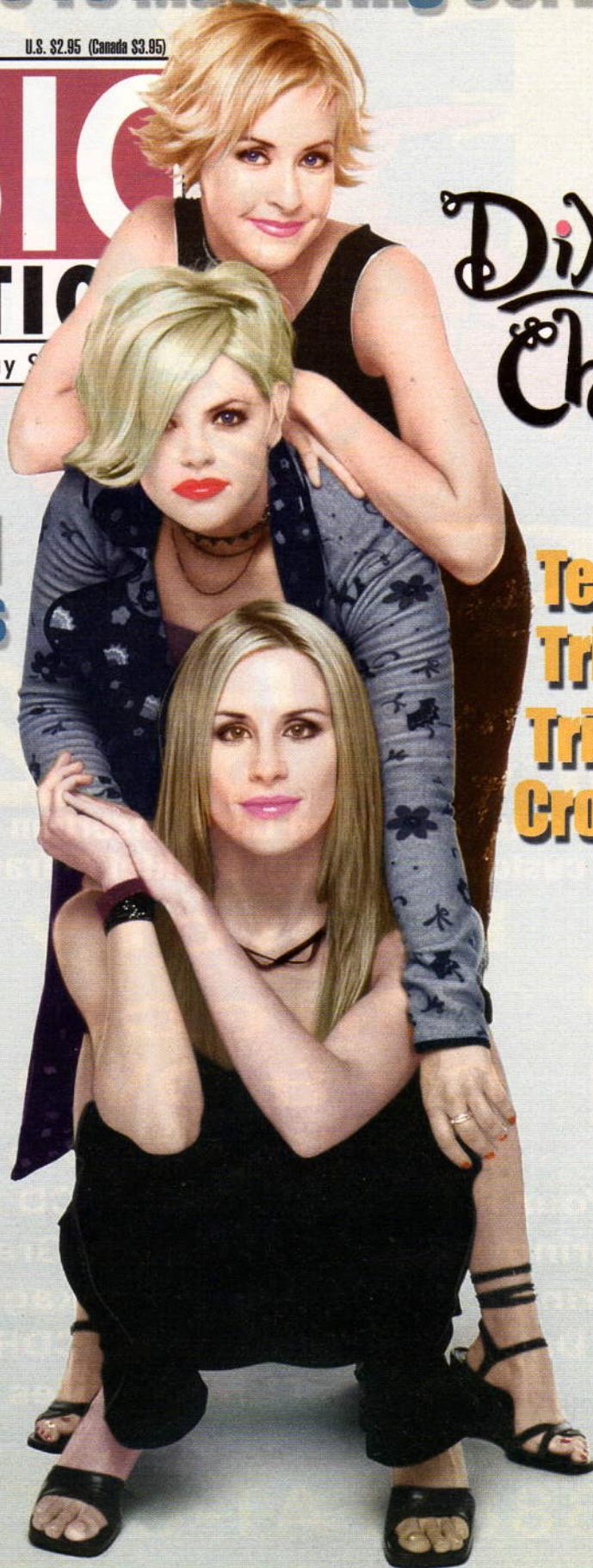


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# MUSIC CONNECTIO

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## Dixie Chicks

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# The Dixie Chicks

by Jana Pendragon



Martie Seidel, Natalie Maines, Emily Robison

*A hands-on approach to their career — and a hard-won compromise between image and substance — has helped these accomplished musicians branch out from the country charts to become a crossover phenomenon. Case in point: as Fly, the girls' next album, now hits stores their Monument Records debut, Wide Open Spaces, (released a year and a half ago) is still enjoying hit singles and selling through the roof.*

There is no way around it, the music industry has traditionally been a man's world. Yet, in the second half of the 20th Century, women — particularly Nineties artists such as Sheryl Crow, Lucinda Williams and Sarah McLachlan — have been testing that theory and pushing the envelope.

For country music, the last decade has brought pop-country to the forefront and the talents of Trisha Yearwood and her ilk have become the norm while bringing in significant profits. Still, somewhere beyond the blandness of pop-country radio, there are women with more traditional country & western roots who continue to toil in honky

tonks, bars and on the cowboy circuit.

While the masses will never be as familiar with most of these women as they are with pop-goes-the-country divas like Faith Hill, Reba McEntire or Wynona Judd, there are three females who have managed to break down the barriers and get Nashville and America to pay attention to their music across the board — the Dixie Chicks.

## Earning Country Credibility

Someone who has followed the Chicks' career is writer and journalist A.J. Flick. Covering the music scene as an entertainment features writer and country music columnist for the *Tucson Citizen* has given Flick a good perspective on the place of women in country music.

"The Chicks have the bravado to aggressively push themselves into a macho industry," Flick says, observing, "they're hip enough to be mistaken for a pop or hip-hop group without losing any of the Texas twang that makes their music country. I don't think anyone buying a Shania Twain album, thinking that it's typical country music, would then be inspired to purchase a Patsy Cline, Tammy Wynette or Dolly Parton record."

Flick adds with certainty, "But, it is con-

ceivable that someone who doesn't normally listen to country music might snatch up a Dixie Chicks' CD and explore the rest of what country has to offer."

## Hatchlings

This Texas-bred trio started playing on the streets of Dallas as teenagers when sisters Martie and Emily Erwin joined forces with two friends, singer-guitarist Robin Lacy and singer-bassist Laura Lynch. Their bluegrass-meets-Texas Swing foundation and their strong, tight harmonies propelled them beyond Dallas and their home state. Favorites with the cowboy crowd, the Dixie Chicks were also a huge draw in Europe. Sporting traditional, wild, western cowgirl fashions set them aside visually from other all-female acts.

But, it was their obvious musicianship, especially fiddle champion Martie and banjo picker Emily, that made them such a stand-out from the start. Releasing their first indie project in 1992 on the Crystal Clear label, *Thank Heavens for Dale Evans*, put them on the country music radar. A second album in 1993, *Shouldn't a Told You That*, displayed the band as a trio for the first time as their professional prowess became more apparent. This was followed by another project, *Little Ol' Cowgirl*, before Lynch left the hard-touring band to be replaced in 1995 by current lead vocalist, Natalie Maines, the daughter of Texas steel player and producer Lloyd Maines.

"For any artist going into a new record deal there are certain compromises you have to make just to get to that level. We were clear about what compromises we would make and which ones we wouldn't."

—Emily Robison, *The Dixie Chicks*

Fortunately for the Dixie Chicks, somewhere along the way insightful Nashville producer and Sony Nashville chief Blake Chancey caught wind of their talent and enthusiasm. He and Paul Worley would eventually produce the Chicks' first Monument project, *Wide Open Spaces*, released in 1998. Selling over six million copies and chalking up a number of major awards, including a Grammy for Best Country Album of 1999, *Spaces* gave the Chicks the kind of clout in "Music City" that only sales figures can bestow.

## The Female Factor

Speaking with Emily, the recent bride of Texas bard Charlie Robison, it is clear that the three women have been able to ride out the first wave of success with grace and dignity. They are also more than prepared for whatever the business throws at them.

Still, the new Mrs. Robison does not look at being female as a handicap nor does she believe that being an all-female band made the Dixie Chicks' rise to fame and fortune any more difficult. Robison pauses before she speaks, "I'd be lying if I said it was more difficult — I think the fact that we were an all-female act was a novelty for a time and we really played on that novelty. Then we grew and figured out what we wanted to do musically." Adding thoughtfully Robison states, "I don't feel that being female had any ill effects on our career. I think it's just as hard for men these days to stick out in the crowd."

The fact that the Chicks considered being female an advantage may have had a lot to

do with their positive attitudes early on. "Women are able to play around with their image. In country, if you're not in boots and a hat, it's hard to make it. But, for women [like us], who are so diverse right now, [changing our image] really helped us."

Robison adds, "You have to pick your battles as a female and know what your limits are." Realizing that this attribute was a strength for them hit home after they signed on with Monument. As Robison notes, "For any artist going into a new record deal there are certain compromises you have to make just to get to that level. We were clear about what compromises we would make and which ones we would not."

Moving from cowgirl chic to contemporary cool allowed the Dixie Chicks to be more of a crossover act as they gained momentum from the release of *Wide Open Spaces*. Their image about-face seemingly gained acceptance from the VH-1 crowd and pop radio, where substance never seems to go beyond the surface. This was a change, however, that the Chicks were ready for after Maines joined the act, and one that all three remain comfortable with.

## Takin' Care of Business

Concerning their new status as Monument label stars, Robison looks back fondly upon a time when the Chicks took care of all aspects of their business, from booking to management. Asked if life

before signing a label deal was simpler, she shakes her head and replies, "Simpler? I don't think it was simpler. I think we had to scrape a little more before we were signed and had some record sales under our belts." Continuing her train of thought Robison notes, "We used to be our own road manager and accountant; we did the contracts and we booked ourselves. It gave us a little more insight into how things work in this business." Still, she confesses, "We don't do the demographics thing — we pay no attention. The only things we pay attention to are our gut feelings and the crowd reactions at live shows."

More at ease with success and with their second project, Robison adds, "[We have

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become] much more comfortable in the last few months. I've let it sink in a little. At first it was such a whirlwind and so many things were being thrown at us. Finally we realized, 'Let's just take it one decision at a time.' The three of us are like-minded and that makes it easy for us to come to an agreement."

## Fly

Regarding their second Monument project, *Fly*, (with "Ready To Run" as the first single, a tune that is on the soundtrack for the Julia Roberts/Richard Gere film, *Run-away Bride*) Robison admits that this time around things were easier and the group were willing to take more chances. "We did not want to remake *Wide Open Spaces*," states Robison. "The first time, everyone was trying to figure each other out, what would work and what wouldn't. This time, it just seemed like a big party."

*Fly* is more traditionally based and personal, the Chicks seeming to have built upon their crossover appeal while remain-

ing true to their original vision. Maines, whose singing on *Fly* takes on dramatic proportions, was more comfortable vocally on the new album. Too, some of the arrangements are sparse, as on the ballad, "Let Him Fly." Robison notes, "We took more time, also, to work out the specific instrumental parts. There's more pickin' and more harmony singing." There are more songwriting credits for the Chicks on *Fly*, as well. One of the favorites is a song inspired by Emily and Charlie Robison and written by her sister

"I think they caught the business here in Nashville and in general, by storm. They have surpassed anybody's expectations or hopes."  
— Jim Lauderdale

Martie and Nashville-based singer-songwriter Marcus Hummon. "Cowboy Take Me Away" is probably Robison's favorite cut on *Fly*. "I really love what it says," explains the new bride. "We wanted a positive love song for this album and it has one of those timeless melodies that is almost organic."

Robison herself has written with hot, bi-coastal talent Jim Lauderdale, whose own new RCA release, *Onward Through It All*, features the tune, "Please Be San Antone," written by Robison and Lauderdale. Lauderdale, whose songs have been recorded by the likes of Vince Gill, Patty Loveless and George Strait, sees the Dixie Chicks as something quite unique when he says, "I think they caught the business, here in Nashville and in general, by storm. They have surpassed anybody's expectations or hopes." Laughing, he adds, "When I think about the amount of records they are selling..." Completing his thought in a more personal tone, Lauderdale firmly states, "I'm so happy for them — they really have the goods to back it up."

A mutual admiration society exists between Jim Lauderdale and the Dixie Chicks, who chose to record his hard driving, balls-to-the-wall "Hole In My Head," a co-write with Buddy Miller. It is performed with a distinctively female voice that allowed Maines to show off her range and depth as a vocalist. On a lighter note, Emily Robison declares, "I think we will forever have a shuffle. Being from Texas we are suckers for a shuffle!" The Michael Henderson-John Hadley co-write "Hello, Mr. Heartache" fits the bill as Robison explains, "It has a very Texas honky tonk kind of feel. Twin and triple fiddle and steel — it's so country. And, if it's

going to be country, it's got to be c-o-u-n-t-r-y!"

What about pop-country radio? "We can't complain because they've been so supportive. That makes or breaks a country career. A hit on radio still works." However, all of the Chicks are outspoken, according to Robison. "We let our opinions be known if we're talking to radio people." Still, Robison admits, "I think radio has gotten a little stale. We have people come up to us all the time who thank us for being different."

Texas-born producer and L.A. music icon Dusty Wakeman concurs and says of his fellow Texans, "They are refreshing and



good for the business. They are also good for Texas!" Laughing with a wild Texas spirit that is common among natives of the Lone Star State, he continues, "The Dixie Chicks are one of the few things on the radio that is any good."

## Longevity

As for the Chicks' future, which looks incredibly bright, Robison muses, "Our biggest goal is longevity. I've seen people be on top one day and not the next. You have to work constantly at your career." Being very business-minded because of their early, indie experiences Robison, Seidel and Maines are also realistic. "Our motto is, 'If we fail, we want to fail on our own terms.' As long as we're doing the music we want to do, keep growing, and we believe in it, we know it will be no one's fault but our own [if we fail]."

The chances that these women will falter, however, is slim to none. Even though they have muscled their way into a business that still tries to color itself as a man's world, the Dixie Chicks will more than likely be around for a very long time. More, you can bet that along the way they will inspire and encourage other young women to join their burgeoning ranks.

After all, as Emily Robison notes, "I love seeing strong-willed women inspire little girls. And that's one thing I think we are, strong-willed. I hope someday some new artist will say, 'I was inspired by the Dixie Chicks.'"