HARMONY

An oral history of two generations of MAINES BROTHERS bands, and the third-generation

& ENERGY

songstress who followed their lead by DON McLEESE photograph by JOHN CARRICO

What's in a name? Many music fans associate the Maines family name primarily with Lloyd Maines, who came to prominence in the 1970s as steel guitarist with the Joe Ely Band and has since established himself as one of the leading producers in Texas. Many more associate the name with Natalie Maines, Lloyd's youngest daughter, whose voice has brought the Dixie Chicks to multiplatinum stardom.

Yet those who live in Lubbock might well know the name as that of a popular band of the 1980s, the Maines Brothers Band, who try to reunite on at least an annual basis and who continue to sell CDs through their website. Though their sound is more mainstream than Lloyd's work with Ely (and many of the other artists he produces), with a hint of Alabama in their vocal harmonies, their dynamic live performances and their dips into the Terry Allen songbook (Allen's "Amarillo Highway" is one of the band's signature tunes) are far more west Texas than Nashville.

Above: An early portrait of the Maines Brothers Band, swiped from the cover of their avidly collected In Person *album. At left: Lloyd Maines and friend, spring 2009. Photograph by John Carrico. Previous page, the Maines Brothers in person, March 1, 1986.*

And before Lloyd and his brothers Steve, Kenny and Donnie were the Maines Brothers Band, they were making music as the Little Maines Boys, because their dad and uncles were the original musical Maines Brothers, a dancehall favorite throughout the west Texas region in the 1960s. The Maines Brothers would let the Little Maines Boys, or the Little Maines Brothers, sing a few songs with them, and later open for them before the brothers were in high school. It wasn't until the original Maines Brothers quit playing that the younger generation dropped the "Little" and took the name.

The Maines Brothers Band subsequently extended the same sort of opportunity to Natalie, who first sang to audiences at the invitation of her dad and uncles. And now that Natalie is a mother — as are her bandmates — it would be no surprise to see the next generation of the musical Maines family debut onstage with the Dixie Chicks. It was the recruitment of Natalie Maines by Dallas-based sisters Martie Maguire and Emily Robison that turned the trio from a retro cowgirl novelty act into the most popular (and, later, most controversial) band in country music.

The stir following Natalie's anti-George Bush remarks a few years back has been well-documented (and proved prescient), so we agreed from the outset that this would not be a story about those matters — though the support of a loving, loyal (albeit conservative Republican) family never wavered. This story is ultimately as much about the strength of those blood ties as it is about music.

"So we formed a band, and I was the oldest at 14. And we started playing

THE ORIGINAL MAINES BROTHERS AND THE LITTLE MAINES BOYS

LLOYD: My dad [James] started playing acoustic guitar back in the '60s. My first relative who made somewhat of a living making music was my uncle, Wayne, and he played upright bass with High Pockets Duncan. High Pockets was the guy who gave Waylon Jennings his first job at a radio station and helped encourage Buddy Holly. He was a real driving force in the West Texas music scene for a long time.

And then my dad and my other uncle Son — his name was Raymond, but they called him Son — took an interest in it and they were all really good singers. At family gatherings they'd always play. It was old-time country stuff, and that was our first exposure. And they always surrounded themselves with great local players, which inspired me and made me want to learn a lot of that stuff. So they started a band and just called themselves the Maines Brothers. Mainly just weekenders, because they all had other jobs. But they really became a popular band in the '60s around the dancehall circuit there. Back in those days, Lubbock was a dry town, so they played a lot in Post, which was about 30-40 miles east-southeast of Lubbock. And they would also play out at the old Cotton Club that Tommy Hancock owned at the time.

Above: The Maines Brothers Band, grown up to be Polygram recording artists.

KENNY: Some of the very first memories I have as a child are of my dad and his brothers at our family gatherings, whether that be gathered around our kitchen table or the living room on a Sunday afternoon. I couldn't have been more than 3 or 4 years old.

STEVE: When I think back to the very first time of being interested in music, it was almost like it was simultaneous with Lloyd and Kenny and me. We'd be playing out in the front yard and there'd be music going on in the house. We'd pick up a shovel or a hoe or whatever and fake like we were playing. And I'm talking about when we were 3 and 4 years old. We were trying to emulate what our dad and uncles and all their friends were doing.

KENNY: There's a recording of Lloyd singing when he was 4 or 5 years old. And if I can get a hold of it I'd be happy to send it to you, just to blackmail Lloyd. He was singing the old rhythm & blues song "Mississippi Bullfrog." Anyway, it started with all of us at a very young age.

LLOYD: We were just skinny, awkward little kids with burr haircuts. And my dad would take us to these gigs and put us up onstage. We knew a lot of old, old country-type stuff. He'd let us sing a couple songs with the band, and the crowd thought it was really cool. So it perked our interest — it was really cool to go to a honky-tonk and go sing for a bunch of drunks. They weren't all drunk, but for a bunch of kids, it was an exciting time.

KENNY: I'm the third brother. Lloyd and then Steve and then me and Donnie. One evening after our dad came home from work — he worked as a mechanic in Slayton — my mom informed him

we had been singing, so he got out his guitar and had us sing a couple songs that we'd been singing along to the record player for the past week or so. And he had us sing those two songs, probably for a couple hours, just over and over.

STEVE: Then Lloyd, being the oldest, he started learning chords on the guitar. He was a little bigger and he could handle our dad's guitar better than Kenny or I could. And all this time Donnie was five years younger than me, so he was a little further behind as far as getting in the mix. So Lloyd learned chords first, and then he taught Kenny and me. Then the interest level started picking up. I think Lloyd just has a God-given talent for being a music genius. For a long time he just played the lead guitar, and then he switched over and started messing with the steel guitar.

LLOYD: When I was in about the eighth grade, I bought a guitar chord book and started learning how to play acoustic guitar, just rhythm, and then I taught my brothers to follow along. And then Kenny decided that he would try bass. So this was all happening when I was about 14, Kenny was like 11, Steve was 12. Donnie, who later became the drummer, was way too young to even think about it. But us older guys had a friend of ours who played drums and had a fiddle player around.

So we formed a band, and I was the oldest at 14. And we started playing every honky-tonk in the area. And people would hire us because they knew my dad, they knew my uncles, they knew that we had their permission. As long as we didn't drink in the clubs. And, man, we had a big following. We just did a bunch of old Bob Wills, Ray Price, Johnny Bush, Merle Haggard songs. It was primarily dance music, but people just ate it up. Because we were just a bunch of kids up there, playing something other than rock 'n' roll, Beatles stuff. Which at that point we really hadn't been exposed to that much rock. And when the Beatles hit, they hit Lubbock about six months later than everywhere else.

Lloyd Maines, producing a smile. Photograph by John Carrico.

STEVE: Our dad's name is James and then his brother just younger, Wayne, he was a bass player. And he had an electric bass and amp, and he'd quit playing and left it with us. And I don't know how it happened, but Kenny migrated over to bass, and he started messing with that and became the bass player. And I continued playing rhythm guitar. And how did Kenny end up being the lead singer? Beats the dog outta me. I enjoyed singing harmonies, and Lloyd enjoyed singing, but not that much, so it was like OK, Kenny, you take the leads here.

LLOYD: They called us the Little Maines Brothers, just so they wouldn't get us confused with my dad's band. And for about two years there, my dad and our uncles would play every Sunday night at the Cotton Club from like 8-12, and we would play like from 4-7. So we had a steady gig there when I was in high school and the other guys were in junior high. We just had a ball doing that. And we really honed in on our chops.

THE MAINES BROTHERS BAND

KENNY: I don't even know that billing is the right term. They were the Maines Brothers and so we were the Little Maines Boys, so as not to confuse people. And we remained the Little Maines Boys or Little Maines Brothers until I had just gotten into high school, and my dad had decided to leave the band. And at that point we took over the name, around 1968.

STEVE: Once we started playing the instruments, as fate would have it, the guy who was playing fiddle with our dad at the time had a son who was playing fiddle. He was our age and so we started messing around playing music with him. And the guy who was playing drums for our dad had a nephew who played drums. And he became our drummer. We had a five-piece group, and played our first paying gig in Slayton, Texas, which is about 18-20 miles outside of Lubbock. It was a VFW dance. We were in junior high at that point in time, and we were known as the Little Maines Brothers, because our dad and his brothers were the Maines Brothers. And we carried that name for several years, and then once our dad and his brothers stopped playing, we were able to move up and take over the big name. And then when we started doing our recordings around 1978 and added the other guys in the band who still play with us today, we became the Maines Brothers Band. Because it was more than just the brothers, it was the band that went with us.

LLOYD: Not until I was 16 or 17 did I get a steel. Until then I was playing really bad electric. But you know little kids doing what we were doing was such an unusual thing that we could kind of get by with the bare necessity talent. I mean, I played enough electric to make it sound authentic. And then the steel player from my dad's band, his name was Frank Carter, had a homemade steel he had been building for himself, but then he kind of aborted the project. But he had it built enough to where it could play. And I was at football practice one afternoon and came home and it was set up in the living room. He said, "Take it. It's yours."

So I started messing with it. There were really no teachers back then. It was just kind of figure it out for yourself. When I think back on it, I think that attributes to the style that I have. I don't really play like anybody else, and maybe that's because I had to work it out for myself. Frank did show me a few things, but I just learned steel by watching intently anybody who would come to town.

The guy that I saw most of all was Jimmy Day, because by that point he was playing with both Willie Nelson and Johnny Bush. And Willie would come play the Cotton Club, back in '68 and '69, when Willie had the crew cuts and the leisure suits. And Willie didn't draw enough to make the $1,000 guarantee, so I remember the manager of the club trying to haggle

he was playing with both Willie Nelson and Johnny Bush." — Lloyd Maines

him down. As a kid, that was a memorable thing — the fact that a guarantee wasn't always a guarantee. But it must have worked out, because Willie came back a lot. I would set up by the side of the stage and just watch every move that Jimmy Day made, every nuance. But I would watch anybody and everybody who came through.

KENNY: When I graduated high school, I got a job at a clothing store at South Plains Mall here in Lubbock, working for minimum wage which at that time was $1.60 an hour. And I discovered really fast that it took me a week there to make the same money that I was making in one night of playing music. So it wasn't a tough decision for me to decide what I wanted to at least attempt to do for my career.

From left to right: Jimmie Dale Gilmore, Lloyd Maines, Richard Bowden, and Terry Allen, in a Lubbock state of mind. Photograph by John Carrico.

LLOYD: My plans never concerned music. I was just playing because it was fun at the time. I never wanted to be a star or some great, acclaimed musician. My plans were to go to college, which I did, South Plains College and Texas Tech, and got married to Tina in the meantime. I was studying agriculture and had plans to work for the Forest Service. I was enamored with forestry. But we had our first child, and I was trying to meet expenses, so I started playing a lot. I was playing probably 5-6 nights a week and learning my craft while I was going to school. And then I got a call to play steel guitar on an advertising jingle at Don Caldwell's studio. And I enjoyed that so much I started doing more sessions. The next thing you know I'd totally fallen in love with the recording aspect of it.

My brothers and I played until we all got out of high school. We never really disbanded, we just kind of went off to college, and Kenny got this gig with Kenny Vernon, who was kind of a Vegas country act, had a couple of semi-hit records. And I started working at Caldwell's studio in Lubbock, and during that time is when I met Joe Ely and started playing with him. So during the early '70s we really didn't play that much.

REUNITING AND RECORDING

KENNY: At that point Steve had left the band and was going to school in South Texas. Lloyd and I were still playing around, but I had the opportunity to go with a little lounge band in

Vegas and I ended up doing that for three years. Kenny Vernon was the artist, and he was on Capitol Records at the time. He just turned 70 this year, but he's been working with Merle Haggard on the road for the last three or four years. I worked with Kenny until the end of 1976 and then decided to come back to Lubbock. The brothers were still here, so we decided to regroup and start playing again.

I think all of us had gained more experience, as far as performing. I probably learned more in Vegas about showmanship and stage performance than I ever had working the dances in Lubbock. You've got to move around a little bit. Even if you're not in a great mood, when you take the stage you've got to act like you are and bring the crowd along with you. And of course Lloyd had been out with Ely for several years and learned a lot about not just doing cover tunes. And even when you do cover tunes, make them your own. So we started to develop our own sound with a West Texas flavor. And we'd all matured a little bit, and by that point Donnie, the youngest brother, had graduated high school and had been playing drums with a couple of bands here. So Donnie had had some experience and added that to the band.

The Maines Brothers Band, at Coldwater County.

JOE ELY: When I decided to put a band together, Lloyd was the first guy I got in touch with. He had been working at Caldwell Studios in Lubbock, so he had experience of putting things down on tape and actually building it. He knew what worked and what didn't. So we kind of applied that to our live show. Lloyd was always a big part of that whole process, because he knew what was going to take the chorus to a higher level. He just understood how a song is built from the ground up, which really taught me a whole lot.

LLOYD: Toward the end of the '70s, when Steve had gotten out of college and married and Kenny had come back to town, they just sort of regrouped, just the two of them, and started playing gigs as the Maines Brothers. And even though I was still with Ely, any time I was back in town I'd come out and play with them. By this time, our little brother Donnie had become a really solid drummer, so at times, on certain gigs, there were four of us. In the early '80s, after I'd toured all through the '70s with Ely — we hit the road hard, and I did the records with him and we did the Clash tour and all that — my kids, Kim and Natalie, were getting old enough to where I felt they needed me around more. When I told Joe I couldn't travel as much, he was totally cool, absolutely, and said when you can play, play, and when you can't, I understand. And it's kind of been that way ever since. I still play with Ely from time to time and I just produced the new Flatlanders CD [*Hills And Valleys*, released in March 2009].

KENNY: At what was probably the last Tornado Jam [an early-'80s outdoor music bash in Lubbock], the Ely band was in town and had been rehearsing, and we were playing this junior-senior

prom out at the Cotton Club. About midnight, Ely shows up with Jesse Taylor, Jimmie Dale (Gilmore) and Butch (Hancock). And Terry Allen was there, and Linda Ronstadt came in. And they all got up onstage and started jamming with us. And these kids were blown away. They couldn't believe it that their prom night had turned into something like that. There couldn't have been more than a hundred people total at that dance. But within three or four years there were like 500 people who said they were there.

LLOYD: Actually, once Steve and Kenny and Donnie started playing together in the late '70s, we made a couple of records with a really small budget. I mean $4,000; that's what Nashville guys were spending on catering. But they were very popular records. One was just called *Maines Brothers And Friends*. And one was called *Route 1, Acuff*, and that's where we cut a couple Terry Allen songs, (including) "Amarillo Highway." And that's when we started to get really popular. There was a place in Lubbock called Coldwater Country, and we would play there on weekends, like a two-night thing, and there'd be a line for a block and a half around the building. It was just a popular time for that kind of music. We were doing country, but it was pretty aggressive country.

KENNY: I really credit Terry Allen as one of the key figures in the sound that we eventually came up with in the Maines Brothers. It's amazing how the timing works, but I came back in '76-'77, and it wasn't long after that Terry came into Don Caldwell's studio to do the *Lubbock (On Everything)* album. I'd been working as a studio bass player, and that was one of my first projects when I came back to town. Once we adjusted to Terry's writing and timing and attitude, we fell in love with it. And there were several of his songs we worked into our show. And people started hearing that stuff they'd never heard before, and they thought it was ours. We tried to credit Terry as much as we could, but Terry gave us a little bit different direction from the western swing we'd grown up playing.

That may have contributed to our downfall in the Nashville music scene. We had been a commercial country band, but when we met Terry Allen, and started hearing what he was doing, we changed. Our musical direction did. We'd always had a high energy, but with Terry we heard something we really liked about the way songs were put together. And Lloyd and Donnie and I were members of the original Panhandle Mystery Band, performing those songs with Terry. It was just so much fun. Maybe we should blame Terry for throwing us off the track.

LLOYD: So we made a name for ourself around in the region and did another record called *Hub City Moan*, where we recorded a couple more Terry Allen songs. And then we recorded one called *Panhandle Dancer*, which was a Kevin Welch song. We became friends with Kevin and recorded some of his music. And that's the one that perked the interest of Mercury-Polygram. And they sent a representative to see us play and see the kind of crowds we were drawing. They signed us for like a six-record deal, but after two records we just didn't hit it off with the Nashville scene at all. We toured heavy from about '83 to '86, '87. Bought a bus, toured coast to coast, and had a lot of good experiences. But by that time everybody had kids at home, and it just got tougher and tougher. Those two we did for Mercury-Polygram are probably our least favorite records. And it was no one's fault but our own. We were trying to make ourselves radio-

"If you grow up the child of a doctor, then you sort of learn your way around

The Maines Brothers Band with Terry Allen (far left) on an early "Austin City Limits," 1984. Lloyd Maines is on guitar at center, in the striped shirt. Photograph by Scott Newton.

ready, and I think in doing so we might have sacrificed some of our musical integrity. We cut a few songs that we wouldn't have otherwise.

STEVE: You get into what's happening in Nashville and who their PR people are gonna push to the radio stations. And sometimes it was us, but more often it was not. And so after doing two albums with them and not making a whole lot of money — heck, we didn't really make any money off the records — we were having to travel all over the country. Great exposure, but exposure doesn't buy a whole lot of groceries.

LIKE FATHER, LIKE DAUGHTER

NATALIE: If you grow up the child of a doctor, then you sort of learn your way around the hospital. And if you grow up the child of a musician, you have an ear for music and songs and arranging. I just always felt that was embedded in me.

I was definitely aware that there was always music around and that everyone in the family could play something. And that that wasn't necessarily the same way in everyone else's family. I think there's a lot of genetics to it. It was just always there. It wasn't anything conscious. I was singing as soon as I was talking. My parents said I was singing at 2. That used

the hospital. And if you grow up the child of a musician..." — Natalie Maines

The Dixie Chicks on "Austin City Limits," 1999. Lloyd Maines is on steel guitar at the left; Natalie Maines is dead center. Photograph by Scott Newton.

to not mean a whole lot to me, but now that I have my own kids, (when they were) at 2, I was worried about their singing, wondering if they've got any Maines musical genes at all. But it's working out. They actually are musical.

LLOYD: She would go to our gigs at a really early age, when she was 4 or 5 years old. I remember we were doing this show at the Lubbock Civic Center and we were backing up this real eclectic fiddle player named Cecil Caldwell who would be doing this John Hartford-style clog dancing while he was fiddling. And Natalie was just this cute little 4-year-old girl with blond, curly hair. She was standing in the wings and Cecil went over and got Natalie by the hand and she joined in and just tore it up. She had no idea what she was doing; she'd never clogged in her life.

And she always enjoyed the festivities, coming to the gigs, even when she got older. I'm not so sure she liked all the music we were doing — she wasn't much of a country fan — but she appreciated what we did. By the time she got into high school, my wife and I could tell, man, this girl is a singer. Every little kid can sing, but she could sing harmonies with people when she was 5 years old. She just listened to so much stuff and absorbed everything. She knew every word, every nuance, to the entire *Grease* soundtrack. And the *West Side Story* soundtrack — she could sing Puerto Rican. She knew all the dialogue, all the songs, front to end, the guys'

parts, the girls' parts. So we knew she had something early on. When she got older and was coming to our gigs, we'd get her up and have her sing some Bonnie Raitt, maybe a James Taylor tune. And the crowd would go nuts.

JOE ELY: I remember when Lloyd carried Natalie into the Cotton Club when she was about two weeks old. Just seeing this brand new little baby in this honky-tonk, but she was part of the family. And when Natalie started singing, and Lloyd realized she was really a singer, she used to sit in with our band and blow everybody away. By then she was in her teens. But the first time she sat in with us, I thought, wow, this is more than a hobby.

NATALIE: I was never scared. I probably got more shy about it when I was in high school. I needed to be cool, and getting up onstage with my dad wasn't necessarily the coolest. My friends were not into country music, and neither was I. I was into the Maines Brothers, but I never had the fear that some cute guy that I liked would be there and see me. Nobody I liked would be there. In high school I thought I was a hippie, and that's when I got into a lot of classic rock from the '60s and '70s, and James Taylor, Lenny Kravitz, Indigo Girls. And Maria McKee.

But I liked Kenny's voice and their arrangements. It was definitely rockin', especially for country music back then. Much more progressive than the stuff that was out on the radio at the time. And I did like to go see my dad play with Joe Ely — that was the cool band. Especially when I was 18 and could get into clubs on my own. And I loved all of Terry Allen's stuff and still listen to him all the time. I liked the humor, the satire, the quirkiness, the rawness — and lots of West Texas references. There's definitely a certain feel to the music that comes from here, and it's very lyrical, worth listening to the words.

LLOYD: She just knew she wanted to sing. She had no inkling where or with who. And as luck would have it, I'd been doing some work with the Chicks with their original singers. There used to be four of them, and they hired me to play steel. A lot of writers get this wrong and think I gave them a cassette pitching Natalie to them, which is absolutely wrong. I just gave them a cassette like I'd give you a cassette. Hey, check out my daughter! She's a pretty good singer here.

NATALIE: I had always been very impressed with Martie and Emily's talents, with the way they played their instruments. But we didn't know each other that well, and I moved to Dallas within the week. And did my first gig in two weeks, I think. They knew I wasn't into the cowgirl western swing thing, but they made me feel confident that that wasn't what they wanted to do anymore. And that was the case.

THE MUSICAL SPIRIT OF THE MAINES FAMILY

KENNY: When I think of the three generations, harmony and energy are really the keys. In Natalie's case, she isn't working with other family members, but with Martie and Emily, all three might as well have been sisters. They lived together for enough years that they really have a feel for one another. And the things that I remember most about hearing my dad and his brothers was their harmony singing. There's first, third and fifth in harmony parts. And to me that's the holy trinity. When you get those three together, it gives me chill bumps. And

when she was about two weeks old." — Joe Ely

that's where I think genetics plays a part. When we sing together, we have the same inflection, we have the same vibrato, and those harmony parts just blend together. And I equate that to a spiritual event.

STEVE: I think the real connection of the three — the original Maines Brothers, the Maines Brothers Band, and Natalie and the Dixie Chicks — is that all of our music has made people feel good. You talk about the sixth man on a basketball team or the twelfth man on a football team? Our extra person that made things happen was the fans. Because of their interacting with us, people filled the floor. And with our dad and his band, people came out to hear them because they knew they were gonna have a good time and feel a part of what was going on. And I think that's what Natalie and them brought to country music — their music involved people feeling like a part of what they were doing. Their music was greater than just them.

Natalie Maines as a Dixie Chick.

LLOYD: We all have sort of an independent streak. Believe me, my dad and uncles were all strong-minded guys, way independent, and I'm sure they passed that along to us. And when we were doing music, we did stuff off the beaten path. Even though we had steel guitar and fiddle, we played country music like a rock band would play it. We were independent enough to do what we enjoyed, and Natalie is definitely from that school. I can't say she got it from me or the brothers, but she knows to follow what feels right and not what some corporation or machine says to do.

NATALIE: There's always a family feel, a lot of camaraderie. One thing I learned from my dad was just to be humble. It was just a job that my dad had. It was never something to show off, so I never really felt special in that way. And just seeing him always be so humble and so nice — you know, Lloyd Maines doesn't have an enemy in the world unless it's been his choice. Everybody likes him. He's just a good guy. And I can't ever say enough about my dad and his talent, his ability. I truly think he's one of the greatest producers. But very underpaid — except by the Dixie Chicks! So, I've learned lots of things from him, but I'm glad I've learned to be humble. In this career, I think everyone gets humbled, even if they weren't in the beginning.

Don McLeese, a former ND *senior editor who teaches journalism at the University of Iowa, considers Lubbock, Texas, a source of boundless fascination — one of the most conservative and isolated cities in one of the country's most conservative states, yet a wellspring of radical creativity.*