


PLAYBACK

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DIXIE CHICKS Flying High!

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Natalie Maines (pictured) and the Dixie Chicks serve up such delicious, sizzling, down-home country music, they ought to include a "wet nap" with every album.

Picking,

In Texas, a state bedeviled by sudden, extreme weather events such as twisters, the National Weather Bureau works around the clock monitoring any suspicious meteorological activity. Well, someone must have been sleeping on their shift in 1998 when a Texas tornado known as the Dixie Chicks not only took the state by storm but the whole country with their spirited bluegrass/country/pop music.

In songs and on stage, ASCAP writer Natalie Maines with sisters Martie Seidel and Emily Robison mix equal parts sass, sex appeal and stunning musicianship. Natalie sings lead with powerful, bluesy gusto, and with Martie and Emily's backing vocals, the resulting harmonies are sublime. All three Chicks play instruments, but it is Martie's fiddle and mandolin work and Emily's banjo and dobro playing that have helped these young women become darlings of discerning music critics as well as the millions of fans who bought their first album, *Wide Open Spaces*.

PHOTO BY STEVE GRANITZ

Currently, *Wide Open Spaces* (Monument) has sold more than six million copies, making it the highest selling album in history by a country music group. Since the release of *Spaces*, the Dixie Chicks have won Grammys for Best Country Album and Best Country Vocal Performance by a Group, as well as Academy of Country Music Awards, an American Music Award, TNN Music City News Awards, Country Music Association honors and many other awards. But one of the Chicks' greatest achievements has been in winning fans from outside the country world. Now, at their concerts, you're just as apt to see middle-aged couples with cowboy hats as well as leather skirt-clad pre-teen

to Maines while she was on a much-needed break between tours.

Playback: Tell me a little bit about your pre-Dixie Chicks musical experiences?

Natalie Maines: Well I grew up in Lubbock. My dad is a steel guitar player and producer [renowned Texas musician Lloyd Maines], and so I was always around music and great musicians. I think I sort of took it for granted, because it was a small town and country music wasn't necessarily the coolest thing. My parents were never stage parents who wanted me to be in contests or anything. I just started singing when I was two.

her do it. I got more practice by just singing anywhere and anytime. I never shut up.

So I would sing in the studio with my dad, or I would sing for commercials, or sing on people's records and get up on stage with the Maines Brothers. I was in a band in college that practiced a lot. But we only played three gigs and then broke up.

Were you aware of sisters Martie and Emily and their earlier band at the time?

My dad played on their second two independent records. I was familiar with them, but we joke now that I wasn't a big fan. It was more my mother's type of music.

I knew I could be in the band when they sent me a song, "You Were Mine," to do a demo. It really was an audition, but I didn't know it. So they sent the song and I absolutely loved it. Then about a week later, Martie called and she said, "we want you to move to Dallas in four days and learn 25 songs. We have a gig next weekend." I said, "Okay."

So, the next thing you knew you were on the road?

Yeah. So we had the gig. And I had notes on a big art pad in front of me and Martie was so nervous. But I was too naive to be nervous. I said, "why are you so nervous? It will be fine." Not realizing all the hard work and years that they had

Grinning & Winning

From their heaven-sent vocals to their hellraisin' attitude, the **Dixie Chicks** have two-stepped their way into the hearts of millions — By Erik Philbrook

girls, both singing the words to every song the group plays. Their inclusion on last summer's Lilith Fair tour was proof that these Chicks had truly left country's roost and were venturing into new territory.

So it is surprising to many that on the Dixie Chicks new album, *Fly* (Monument), the trio veer even further away from a modern country's pop sound to a sound that is more country than most of today's country albums. On songs such as "Ready to Run" and "Cowboy Take Me Away," there are more Carter Family-like vocals, more whirlwind string picking and more twang than ever before. The Chicks also contribute more of their own original songs on *Fly*, as well as hand-picking material from such great songwriters as Annie Roboff, Buddy Miller, Richard Leigh, Darrell Scott and Patty Griffin.

Natalie Maines, the youngest Chick, joined sisters Martie and Emily after they had already been playing the Texas circuit for years. When her playful, punk spirit put a zing in their swing, the rest was history. *Playback* recently talked



The Dixie Chicks at the 1999 Grammy Awards.

Did singing come naturally to you, or did you have to work at it?

My mom knows how it is with my dad, who has to play music, and my dad knows that it wasn't really a decision that he made, but one that chose him. And they saw that in me.

I always knew I could sing. It was in the blood. It is a lucky talent to have too, because you can practice it anywhere. Martie talks about having to set the egg timer and practice 30 minutes a day on the violin, and how her mom would sit in her room and make

So I knew their music just from my mom listening to it while she cleaned.

What were you into at the time?

I've always listened to a lot of James Taylor, Bonnie Raitt, the Indigo Girls, Maria McKee, and now Patty Griffin and Alison Krauss. We always grew up listening to Dolly Parton and Emmylou Harris. I also listened to a lot of pop and rock music, and a lot of Texas country rock like Joe Ely, Terry Allen.

When were you asked to join the band?

put into this band, their baby. And here's this new singer and all of these people were showing up not knowing that there was going to be a new singer. I'm sure they were scared to death.

But I knew that if they could write a song like "You Were Mine" and they wanted to record that song, then I knew that I could go in that direction. They just said they'd like to go towards more mainstream country and we need a new voice.

You did a lot more writing for your new album, *Fly*. When did you first start getting into writing yourself? Was it before *Wide Open Spaces*?

Yeah, when I was a kid, I was always making up songs and melodies and words while I cleaned my hamster cage. Before *Wide Open Spaces*, we had written together. We'd go over to Emily's house, where we always practiced, and we wrote a bunch of songs. However, we have a rule that the best songs win, and we only had one song for the first album that beat all the others from the Nashville writers. So before

Fly, we built in a week here and there where we would meet with other writers and hone in. Emily and I wrote "Don't Waste Your Heart" on the road. The rest were written at writers' retreats. I would say we had about 30 songs, and we picked five for the record.

Would you say that *Fly* reflects more about who you all are, as women, as musicians, as artists, then on *Wide Open Spaces*?

I think we had to make *Wide Open Spaces* to get to *Fly*. We approached it the same way. We went into the studio, locked the doors, and didn't let anybody from the label, or management, come in and give their two cents until it was completely finished. I think this album does reflect our lives more, just because we have more of our own songs on it. And musically, it definitely does. There is more of us, because there is way more pickin' and three-part harmony. We got more original and intricate with our harmonies.

It obviously shows. This album sounds more country than most modern country albums. Yet, at the same time, it has an attitude that most country music doesn't have. I'm sure that is why your appeal reaches different age groups as well as people who usually don't care much for modern country.

Yeah, I think it is because people can't put their finger on the music or the style. Maybe they can now because we have two albums, but they definitely couldn't with the first one. We have tons of people who say "I like you because you all aren't country." And then we get the old traditionalists who say, "I like you all because you're bringing country back to its roots." I'm like, "okay, as long as you're liking it."

For the other songs on the album, you've obviously chosen material from some of Nashville's top songwriters. Being that there are three of you, how do you go about choosing which songs to record? Does the record company get involved in that? Tell me about that process.



"We have tons of people who say 'I like you because you all aren't country.' And then we get the old traditionalists who say, 'I like you all because you're bringing country back to its roots.' I'm like, 'okay, as long as you're liking it.'" — NATALIE MAINES

Along with our producers, Blake Chancey and Paul Worley, we hope to have five thumbs up on all the songs that we choose. But pretty much everyone gives on at least one song that they might not love, but if everyone else is for it, they go along with it. On the first record, Blake didn't like "Wide Open Spaces." And we all said, "no, trust us, we're twentysomething, you're not. We know the song will be good." Actually, after we recorded it and presented our version of it, he loved it. It's good that we trust each other.

Tell me about the origin of "Sin Wagon," the song on *Fly* that has become a showstopper at your recent concerts?

I've watched the movie *Grease* about five million times and I know every single line. I was watching it one day and when it came to the scene when Danny makes a move on Sandy in his car, she throws the ring back at him and says, "do you think I'm going to stay here with you in this sin wagon?" I said, "sin wagon," that's a good song. And I had it in my notebook for a long time. Emily and Stephony Smith had written a song together the same day that we wrote that. On that day, my writer didn't show up, so I was walking around the retreat bored and they said, we just finished a song, why don't you come in and we'll try to write another one. So, I was going through my

notebook and she saw the words "sin wagon," and said, "let's try 'sin wagon?'" And I looked at her and said, "are you sure you can write this, because I'm not going to waste this title if you're not going to go all the way with me (laughs)." And she said, "I can go there." And she did. It came really quickly, it flowed and it was a lot of fun.

And now it is one of the biggest crowd pleasers.

Yeah. And it is the one that Sony didn't really want. We're lucky in that we sold so many records the first time that we had a say over keeping it on the record.

I think it is refreshing to a lot of people who like country music to see an act like the Dixie Chicks who have a very strong and original identity and are allowed free reign to explore that identity.

Being in the industry, we see a lot of acts that don't know who they are. I do know that when Sony signed us that they told us they were very relieved that we had the history that we had, and that we had all that time to grow on our own and decide what we wanted to be. And Martie and Emily have said that they wouldn't have been ready for a record deal two or three years before we got it. Their picking wasn't strong enough. The act needed all that time to grow and we needed to because the music wasn't there.

find out who we were. I think a lot of people just go to Nashville because they want to be a star. For people who do say that, Nashville does have a formula and a plan for that. It is to Sony's credit that they let us be who we are, and that is why we have an original sound, but I think a lot of artists don't take the time to do that themselves.

So when does the tour for *Fly* start?

It will start in June and it will be called the "Chicks with Picks" Tour. They wanted us to headline last year, but we really wanted to wait until we had two albums under our belt, so we could play a full 90 minute set. It just makes for a better show, having the audience know all the songs and having them sing along. We feed off of that. Our goal up to now has been to play in front of as many people and many different audiences as we could. With George Strait, we played in front of 70,000 country music fans. And then with Lilith Fair, we played in front of a lot of people who had heard of us, like the media, but hadn't really heard us. And we think our live show is our strongest thing. So that was a real "prove ourselves tour," which we've had to do the whole time, being girls and being blonde and all.

On the Lilith Fair tour, it must have been fun to share the stage with so many artists from different genres, such as folk, pop and R&B.

It was especially great to be around all those women. We became very good friends with Sheryl Crow. And we got to ask her for advice on a lot of different things we were going through. And it was great just hanging out with people who have gone through the same things we've gone through. The whole tour was run so well that we got a lot of great ideas for how to run our next tour. ■

NASHVILLE

FLY ALBUM RELEASE

ASCAP recently hosted a party in honor of the release of the new Dixie Chicks album, *Fly*. Pictured (l-r) are ASCAP's John Briggs, the Dixie Chicks' Emily Robison and Natalie Maines, Sony Music's Allen Butler and Dixie Chicks' Martie Seidel.

