

Clockwise from top left: Emily Erwin, Martie Seidel and Natalie Maines.

THEY'RE NOT JUST WHISTLING DIXIE

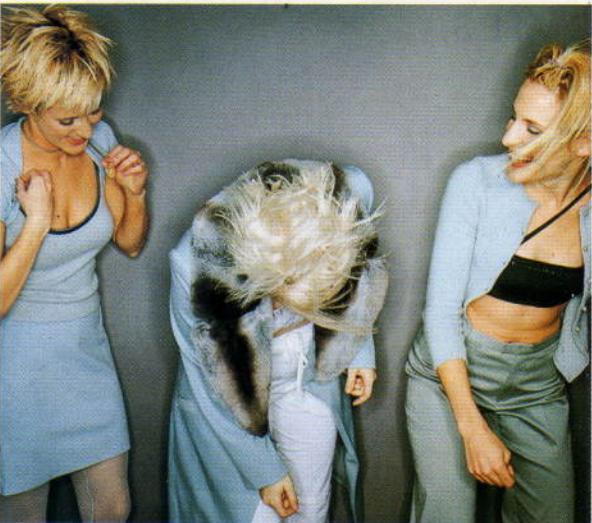
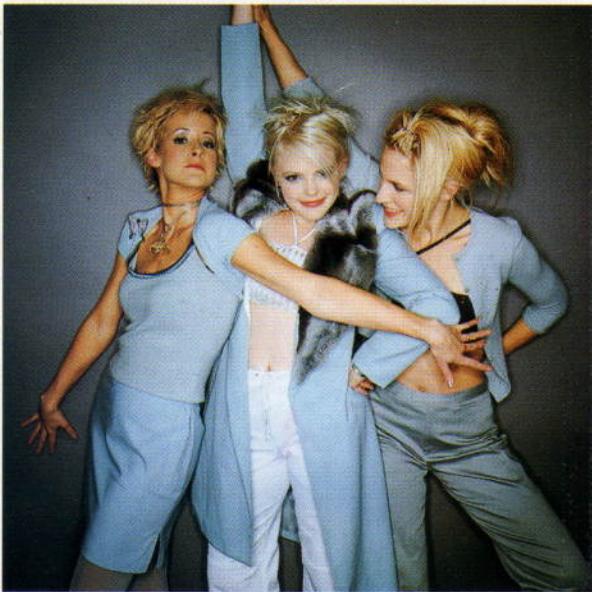
Two possible explanations exist for the abundance of ten-gallon hats in this Las Vegas club: either the Dixie Chicks are performing or the National Finals Rodeo is in town. Actually, it's both, and from the looks of the audience more than a few roughriders snuck away from the arena to catch the Chicks' show this evening.

After a couple of raucous songs, Natalie Maines, the trio's rambunctious, angel-faced lead singer, calls out, "Any cowboys here tonight?"

"Yee-haw!" the wranglers hoot and holler.

Maines, 24, smiles mischievously, then yells, "Any chicks ►

The Dixie Chicks are taking country music to another level with their **sassy attitude** and spunky debut CD, *Wide Open Spaces*. by Laura Jamison



“I’m **in it** for the **money**. Didn’t I **tell y’all** that?”

here tonight?” and the women in the audience make even more noise than the men.

Fans of the Dixie Chicks come in all flavors, but nobody loves the trio more than the young women who embrace the band’s unabashed “chickness.” The Chicks aren’t afraid to be feminine (feather boas are their trademark), have a good time (at this show, Martie Seidel, 29, teases her little sister, Emily Erwin, 26, by cracking on her bra size) or sing songs that are a far cry from the stand-by-your-man sentiments country music fans have come to expect from Nashville’s female singers.

The Chicks’ appeal extends beyond their personal style, attitude and good sense of humor. Their rock-inflected sound and tight three-part harmonies are the real reason for the band’s phenomenal success. Since its January 1998 release, *Wide Open Spaces*—the Chicks’ debut CD—has gone quadruple platinum. At the Country Music Association Awards last September, they won the Horizon Award for best newcomer *and* beat out country institution, Alabama, for Vocal Group of the Year.

The Dixie Chicks have been around for almost 10 years, though they only recently hit the big time. Seidel and Erwin started playing bluegrass when they were tots. The sisters are not only good singers but talented musicians, too: Seidel plays fiddle and mandolin, and Erwin plays Dobro, banjo and acoustic guitar. They formed the band with two other women, Laura Lynch and Robin Macy, in 1989 in their native Dallas, playing on street corners and at conventions. “It was a way to avoid waiting tables,” Seidel says. Later, when Lynch and Macy left the group, steel guitar legend Lloyd Maines inadvertently came to the sisters’ rescue. “He gave us his daughter’s tape, and we were both secretly listening to it,” says Seidel. “I had to call him and ask for another because I thought I lost it. It turned out that Emily was hoarding it.” When the sisters realized they were thinking the same thing about fellow Texan Natalie Maines, asking Maines to join the band in 1995 became a no-brainer.

Maines, who had attended the prestigious Berklee College of Music in Boston, jumped at the chance—with one stipulation: “I wouldn’t wear the clothes they were wearing,” she says with a laugh, mocking the Chicks’ southwestern wardrobe of spangles and fringe. “But they were ready for a change anyway.”

“We were really looking for a soul sister,” Erwin says. “Someone who was in it for the music.”

“I’m in it for the money,” Maines cracks. “Didn’t I tell y’all that?”

The bandmates all laugh, which they do a lot. But their quest to win the respect of the country music establishment was no joke. “When you’re three blond women in this industry, you’re at a disadvantage as far as perceptions go,” Seidel says. Erwin ►



concurr. "It's like, 'Oh, here's another girl group somebody put together,'" she says. "But that's us playing on the CD. A lot of people in Nashville sing over tracks laid down by studio musicians. I may not be the best banjo player in Nashville, but I can re-create our sound in a live show."

Erwin's modesty is a bit unwarranted. When she and Seidel jam a bluegrass instrumental, every foot in the house is stomping. "In the beginning, it was fun to watch the audience," Maines says. "When Emily or Martie would do a solo, you could just see people's jaws drop."

The sisters credit their confidence in a male-dominated industry to their parents. "They let us know there was nothing we couldn't do," Seidel says. "But when we wanted to try out for cheerleading, our dad said, 'I don't want you to be on the sidelines rootin' someone else on. I want you to be the ones on the field.'"

"Hey," Maines says, sniffing. "I was a cheerleader and I loved it."

The Chicks certainly refused to sit on the sidelines when it came to cutting their CD. "The day Natalie was laying down the vocals for the tune 'Wide Open Spaces,' our producer said, 'Man, she sounds like Alanis Morissette,'" says Seidel. "'We gotta make her sound more country.' He was freaked out thinking nobody would relate to this chick country singer who has such an edgy sound." But the Chicks stood their ground because they believed in their style.

"We haven't gotten any underwear thrown at us yet, but if we do, boxers please. No briefs."

In fact, Maines casually suggested they all get tattoos for every hit single. To her surprise, Seidel and Erwin agreed immediately. After 10 years with no hits, they figured smash singles were *really* hard to come by. Maines pulls off her shoe to expose three half-inch stick figures on her instep that look like chicken footprints. "The first time we went in," Maines recalls, "the tattoo artist said, 'Do you know you've chosen the most painful part of your body for a tattoo?'"

With such a zealous group of fans—and they're not all chicks, either—it's no surprise that the chicken tattoos have caught on among the band's followers. "They come to our shows with big honkin' chicken feet in rings around their ankles," says Seidel. Unfortunately for all the enamored guys, Seidel is happily married, Erwin ties the knot in May, and Maines, who recently filed for divorce, isn't looking for a new man. Their male fans are usually respectful, but, Maines adds, "It wouldn't faze us if they weren't. We're pretty disgusting ourselves."

"We haven't gotten any underwear thrown at us yet," Seidel adds, "but if we do, boxers please. No briefs."

Again the Chicks laugh. Outside of family and music they don't take many things too seriously, including people who criticize their name. "Someone wrote us a letter saying we've put women back generations by calling ourselves chicks," Seidel says. "Women don't have to be so defensive anymore. Just work hard, do what you do best and reap the rewards." After all—to quote the band's official motto—"Chicks rule." ■