



**How the Dixie Chicks broke out of the henhouse and became**



# PATRIOT DAMES

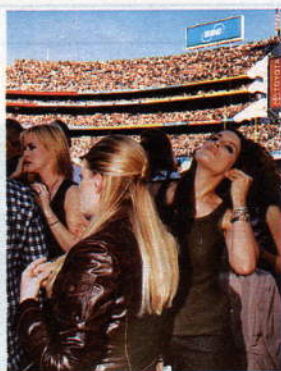
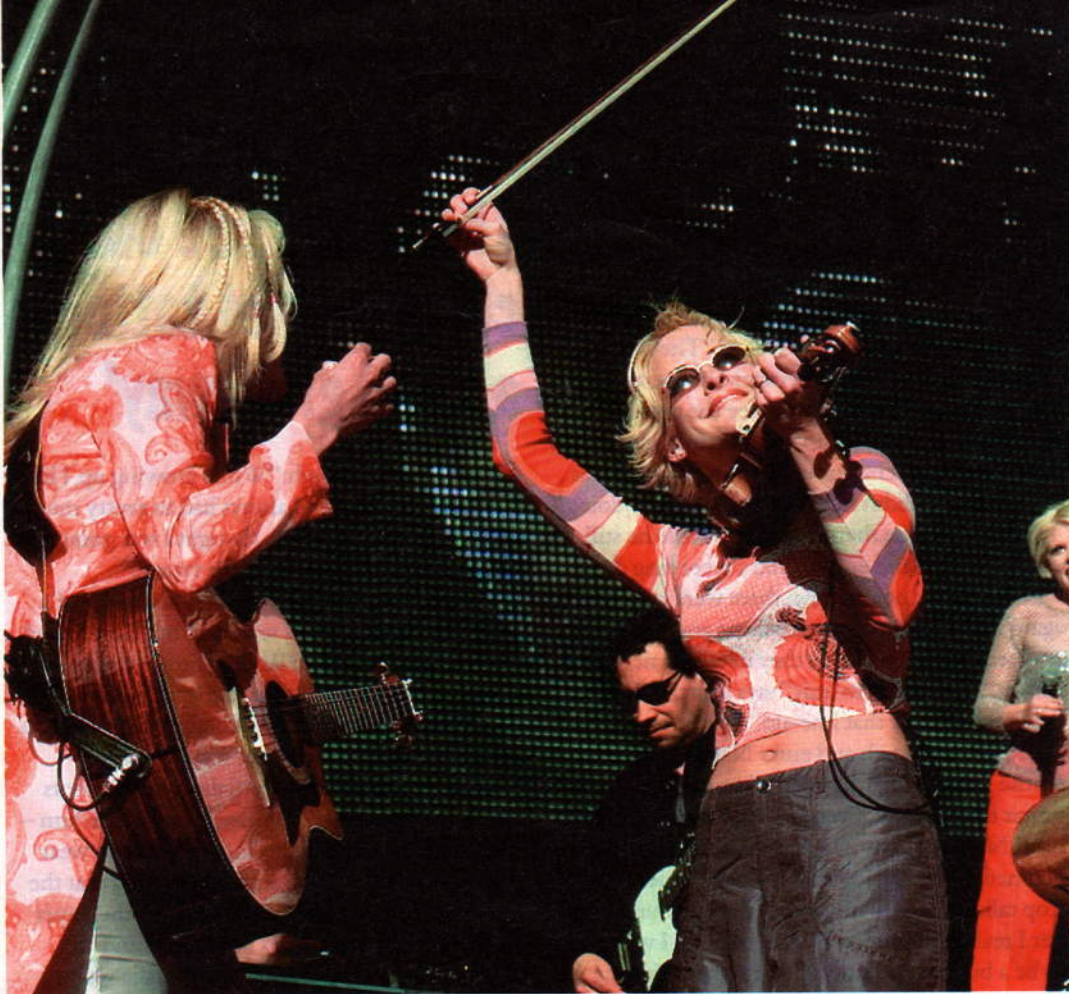
the star-spangled sweethearts of country music. Interview by Tony Barrell. Portrait: Mark Anderson

voice booms from the Qualcomm Stadium, across San Diego, California, and via television into millions of homes. "Please join in the singing of our national anthem," it says – not so much a request as a command, an edgy test of patriotism. "The anthem will be followed by a Super Hornets flyover by the VFA-122 Flying Eagles from naval air station Lemoore. Ladies and gentlemen, Grammy award winners the Dixie Chicks!"

Amid all the pageantry and palaver of the Super Bowl, America's most important national sporting event, two blondes and a brunette stand together on a modest music stage. The fireworks, flame-throwers and legions of cheerleaders are temporarily stilled on this sunny, 80F January afternoon. "Oh, say, can you see, by the dawn's early light..." they sing, their angelic harmonies sending shivers up the spine. A good portion of the 67,603 crowd joins in - including Jack Nicholson and Arnold Schwarzenegger, most probably.

The NFL, the National Football League, doesn't just ask any old slappers to perform the sacred duty of singing The Star-Spangled Banner. Previous holders of the privilege include Mariah Carey, Whitney Houston, Neil Diamond and Billy Joel (not all together, you understand). The Dixie Chicks are country-music megastars, hit-makers *par excellence*, and recipients of so many entertainment awards and music medals that it would take a top-dollar cowboy to round them all up. And these aren't just platinum blondes: their first two albums have gone *diamond* – with sales of over 10m apiece. Their latest album, *Home* – despite being subtler and rootsier than its predecessors – clocked up 780,000 sales in its first week of release, had the nerve to bounce the rap heavyweight Eminem off the top of the main Billboard chart, and is already in 5m homes.

The Chicks only tackle the first verse of the anthem; so, while they sing about “bombs bursting in air”, they don’t get to mention “the havoc of war” from the third verse, or insist that “conquer we must, for our cause is just” as the fourth verse has it. But the four close-formation Super Hornets that scream overhead, after the song dies away, soak up any outstanding demand for military machismo in the lead-up to war on Saddam Hussein. And by the time Natalie Maines, Martie Maguire and Emily Robison step down from the stage and walk back to their trailer – the one



**Previous pages:** Emily, Natalie and Martie (left to right). Inset: performing on CBS television last August. **This page, above:** the Dixie Chicks play Oakland in 1999. **Left:** accepting three country awards in 1999. **Far left:** at the Super Bowl, where they sang the US national anthem last month

between Celine Dion's and Beyoncé Knowles's own similar mobile homes – the spectators are primed for the battle ahead: the game between the Oakland Raiders and the Tampa Bay Buccaneers.

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Back in 1989 the Dixie Chicks couldn't get arrested. You could often find them busking on a street corner in Dallas, Texas, bashing out bluegrass for anyone who would listen and toss

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the odd dollar bill. This was a different line-up: Martie and her sister Emily were there, playing fiddle and banjo, but they were joined by two chickens in their thirties, Laura Lynch and Robin Macy, on upright bass and acoustic guitar. They wore cornball cowgirl outfits and played for hours on end. They would play any gigs going — hoedowns, rodeos, pig roasts, bar mitzvahs, conventions, grocery-store promotions, funerals and “meatball reunions”, whatever those are. “The worst gigs were always the corporate gigs,” recalls Emily, 30, the brunette who plays banjo, Dobro, accordion and guitar. “It’s hard when you’re trying to play music you really care about, and forks are clanking on plates because they’re eating dinner, and there’s an armadillo race going off, or some sort of steer-roping. But most of the time, that was the best-paid job — that’s what paid the bills.”

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ingham to lamé. In the old days, so desperate were they to hit pay dirt, they tell me, that they travelled to New York and busked in the lobby of NBC television, hoping to be spotted by a scout for the David Letterman show. They were ejected. "The two older members dragged Emily and I to do a lot of things that we wouldn't have done," says Martie, 33, the band's fiddle and mandolin player.

In 1994, after the Chicks had become a trio with the departure of Robin, the Englishman Simon Renshaw saw them play in Dallas: "They were a western-swing act, with a cowgirl image and big hair. But I could immediately see the potential: they were great players, incredible singers, and very charismatic and charming. What was wrong was the material: it didn't fit with what they were doing."

Simon became their manager – a role he still enjoys today – and engineered a recording deal with Sony. But before long, there were ructions again in the Dixie camp, as Martie and Emily reached the decision that they needed a new lead singer. "I was about to quit," says Martie. "It had run its course for that line-up."

Exit Laura Lynch and enter Natalie Maines, whose father, Lloyd, had played some pedal steel guitar for the band. Even as a schoolgirl of eight or nine, Natalie – now 28 – had a starry future planned. "The teacher told me to be quiet and stop talking and do my work," she says, "and I told her I really didn't need all that, because I was going to be a big, famous singer." She wasn't thinking of

## Sometimes people aren't sure it's us. Then they see our chicken-feet tattoos: a dead giveaway'

country music, though: "While growing up, I liked anything *but* country. I always had to pretty much rebel against what people thought I was going to be like. But obviously I had the twang!"

Natalie's powerhouse vocals – "the voice of a honky-tonk rose who's seen it all but hasn't ruled out love", according to Rolling Stone magazine – put the band on course for stardom. But one condition had to be fulfilled before she signed on the dotted line. The cowgirl stage gear – the fringed, star-studded jackets, the cowboy boots and hats – had to go. "She gave us an ultimatum – 'I'm not going to join the band if I have to wear that!'" says Martie. And anybody hoping that the girls would have a patriotic relapse for the Super Bowl, draping themselves in US flags and rhinestones, were disappointed: Natalie wore

Dior, Martie was in Gucci, and Emily teamed Dolce & Gabbana with Alexander McQueen.

Not that their exquisite fashion sense keeps them away from the tattoo parlour. It is now a legendary Chicks tradition that certain landmarks in the band's recording career – No 1 records, impressive sales figures and the like – are celebrated with fresh little chicken-foot tattoos at the tops of their feet. The fact that both Natalie and Emily have recently given birth (all three Chicks are married, boys) means that they are running a little behind with their body art. "We only have nine," explains Natalie, "because you can't get tattoos when you're pregnant and we like to get them together. We have a lot of pain coming, because we have a lot of feet to get."

"We need eight more," reckons Emily. Aren't they setting fans a bad example, I ask, but they laugh. "We did feel a little bit bad," says Martie, "when this one girl had heard about it on a radio station: they said if you get Chicks tattoos you get tickets to the concert, and she had the hugest chicken feet – she'd never seen how tiny ours were."

"In the summertime it's hard not to get recognised," says Emily.

"A lot of times, people think it's you but they're not sure," says Natalie, "and they look at the feet – they're a dead giveaway."

It's inevitable in the conservative world of country music that three feisty, tattooed female virtuosos would encounter prejudice and rub

Bill Clinton. "We'd play for anybody who would pay us," says Emily. "It didn't matter what side of the coin you were on."

What if the US calls upon the Chicks to sing for the troops in the Gulf? "Oh, that's different!" they howl in near-unison. "You have to stand behind people who are putting their life

The Chicks' earlier line-up played at George W. Bush's 1995 inauguration as governor of Texas, and they have also played for Ross Perot and for

"I think our expectations are so high for our songs," says Martie, "and if you can't write a 

song like Patty Griffin, why try?

We're not just going to put something out because we'll make more royalties if it's our song."

The Chicks have a show-and-tell approach to beginning an album, all of them bringing songs that they like to the table — like thrifty southern women pooling spare fabric to make a handsome quilt. One of the songs Natalie brought to the *Home* album was *Landslide*, by Stevie Nicks — shortly to be their new single in the UK. "I had a few reservations about it," says Emily, "because it was such a popular song, and I always had the motto that if you can't do something better, don't do it. Then I thought we might not be able to do it better than Stevie Nicks, but we could definitely put our own spin on it." Are they happy covering songs that aren't strictly country? "Yeah," says Emily, "I always feel we can put our own twist on something and make it sound like us. It's hard not to sound like us when you add fiddles and banjos and Dobros and our harmonies."

They recorded the *Home* album during a long battle with Sony — in which the label filed a lawsuit against them claiming breach of contract, and the band filed one back alleging dodgy accounting. As a result, it was their most relaxing recording experience. "We didn't have any pressure to make a record, because we weren't on the label as far as we were concerned," says Martie. "We didn't have any label people coming into the studio, asking us when we're going to finish this record, where are the songs and how long are they, how many singles do we have? We made an album for ourselves, and never even knew if anybody else would hear it." Finally, the Chicks and Sony kissed and made up, and the band returned to the fold.

There is still a game plan to raise the Dixie Chicks' profile in Europe, and they will visit Britain very soon, to promote the new single and play at the Shepherd's Bush Empire in London on March 10. But they have unpleasant memories of sloppy pigeonholing by tabloid journalists when they came over last time, in 1999. "The only way they could describe us," says Emily, "was as the country Spice Girls, which isn't indicative of who we are."

"And our label at the time, I don't think they knew where we fit in in Europe," says Natalie, "and they were trying to make us superstars as big as

Britney Spears, and we didn't think that was feasible. They wanted all these ridiculous remixes of songs."

"We're totally happy to build our way up from the ground floor like we did over here," adds Martie. "You tend to have more faithful fans and more critical acclaim if you can just start from the ground level."

Are there any British artists they would particularly like to work with? "Isn't that Robbie Williams British?" asks Natalie. "We'd record with him in a heartbeat."

Do they have any plans for the Dixie Chicks empire to diversify outside music? "Yes, there are some things we've been wanting to pursue," replies Martie. "At one point it was maternity-clothing design; we're still interested in that. We have a whole line ready to go — and we have two women who know what you can't find when you're pregnant."

If they opened a country-music theme park like Dolly Parton's Dollywood, would they call it Dixieland? "Oh, that's good," says Emily. "But I don't like theme parks. It's to do with how many hands have been on that one railing that runs up to the ride." So she wouldn't play a banjo that somebody else had played? "Uhh... you'd have to look at the back of its neck. No, I don't like being in crowds, that's all — unless I'm on stage!" she laughs.

Sometimes in life, you ask an innocent question and you get much more than you bargained for. That's how it is when I try to solve a mystery buried in the liner notes of the Chicks' breakthrough 1998 album, *Wide Open Spaces*. After they have thanked and back-slapped all and sundry for helping them with the record, they add: "Thanks to the aardvark. Without whom we wouldn't be here." What's that about?

"We could just say that one of our husbands is an aardvark," says Emily, cryptically. It transpires that she is talking about Martie's husband, Gareth, who is from Northern Ireland. I'm afraid I still don't get it.

"But we were referring to our manager," says Martie. "Our manager's English..."

The Chicks then tell me that I'm probably an aardvark too. "That's what we think it looks like," says Martie.

So let me get this straight. An aardvark is somebody who is... "Uncircumcised!" exclaims Natalie. "And that's what you get for reading those liner notes." ■