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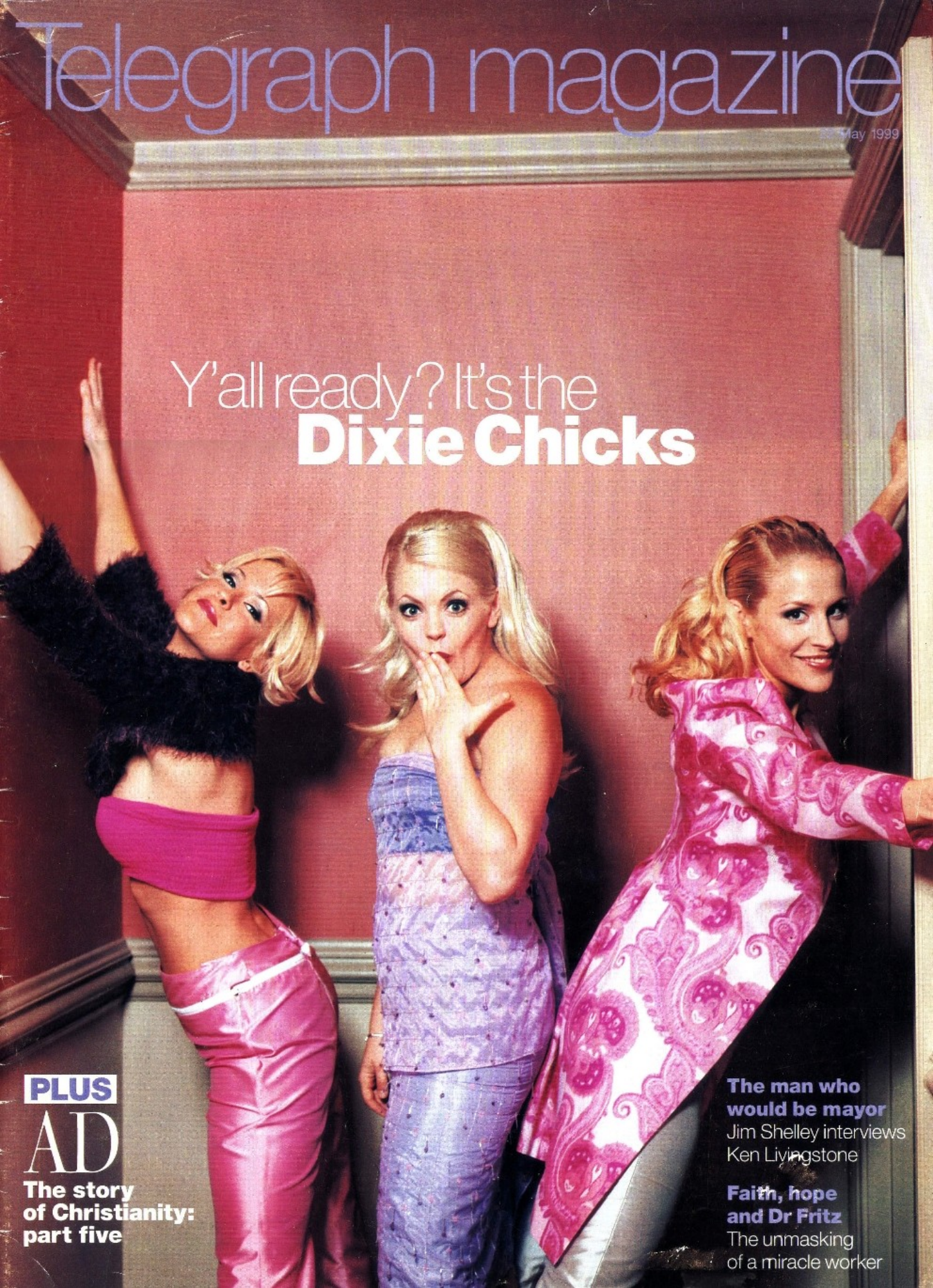

Y'all ready? It's the Dixie Chicks

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Hold on to your Stetsons: country music, traditionally the domain of cliche-drawling men, is in danger of becoming sexy and hip. The culprits? Meet the Dixie Chicks – three Texas girls with attitude to spare. By **David Thomas**. Photographs by **John Dunne**

Cowgirl power

'You gave birth to that,' I said to Tina Maines as we watched her daughter, Natalie, stomping across the stage of the gigantic Alamo Dome in San Antonio, Texas, swishing her long blonde wig like a hyperactive cross between Mick Jagger and Miss Piggy. 'I know,' came the reply. 'Scary, ain't it?'

Mrs Maines is an elegant, fine-boned woman with a nice line in dry humour. Her 24-year-old daughter is a blue-eyed, scarlet-lipped little cannonball with a staggering voice that can break your heart one moment and strip paint the next. She's one of those rare individuals who is obviously, naturally, a star and she sings in the Dixie Chicks, an all-girl trio who may yet achieve the astonishing feat of making country music sexy and even, dare one say it, hip.

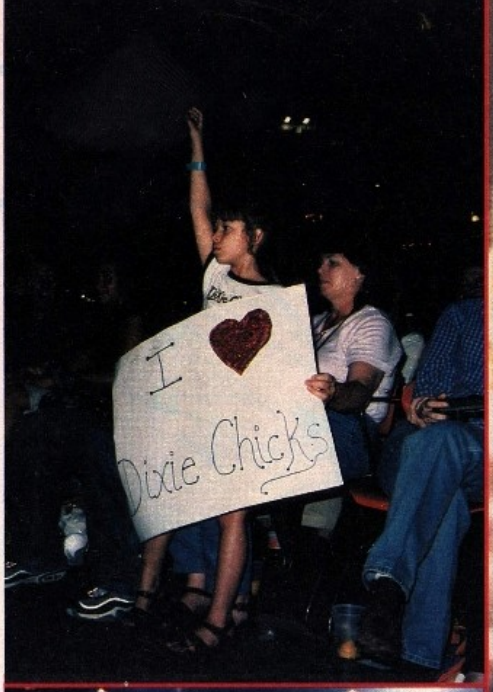
Just how massive a task this is became clear at the George Strait Chevy Trucks Festival of Country Music – a touring twangathon in which the Chicks are guest-starring. Strait is one of country's megastars. An easygoin' kinda guy, his latest album clocks in at an economical 32 minutes and he only likes to play concerts at weekends, taking home a £500,000 paycheque from each one. The line-up for these shows goes roughly: Anonymous Man in Cowboy Hat, Anonymous Man in Cowboy Hat, Dixie Chicks, Two More Men in Hats (one of whom is Strait). The hatmen stand stock-still and sing cliched songs in dull baritone voices. The Chicks look gorgeous, work every inch of the stage, and amaze their redneck audiences by slinging impromptu extracts from Lauryn Hill hits into the middle of their songs. I saw them twice – in San Antonio and New Orleans – and on both occasions they stole the show.

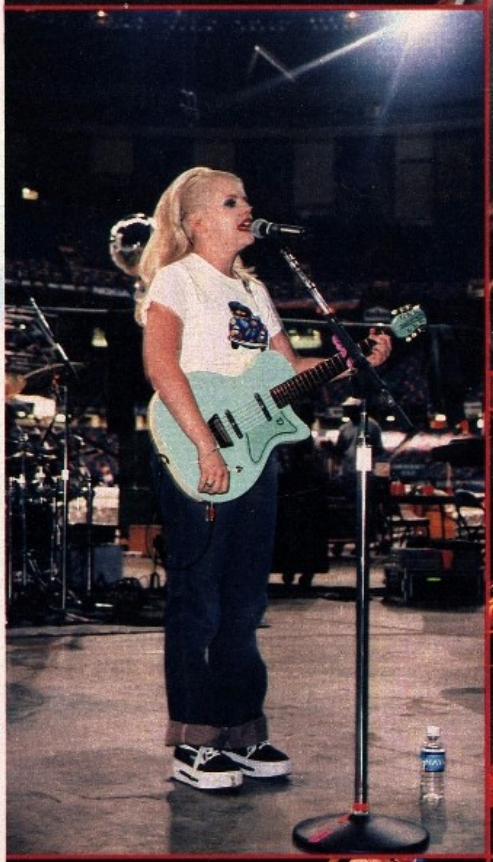
No wonder, then, that people have been describing the Dixie Chicks as Nashville's answer to the Spice Girls. On this understandable but misleading basis, Natalie Maines would be Spunky Chick. Martie Seidel, the 29-year-old fiddle player who is the group's oldest and most thoughtful member, would be Deep Chick. And her banjo- and guitar-playing sister, Emily Erwin, 26, who looks like a blonde Julia Roberts and is a living definition of the word 'willowy', would be Pretty Chick.

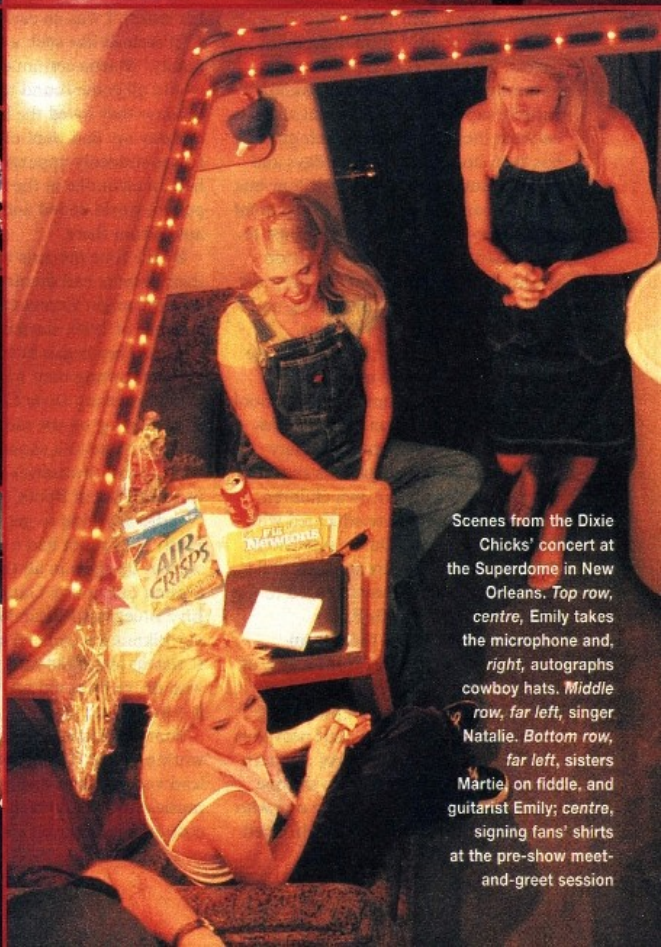
The trio have yet to conquer the world like our own dear Spices, but that may only be a matter of time and marketing budgets. They already have a gold album in Australia and their British campaign begins with their arrival here in a fortnight. America has long since succumbed. The Chicks' album *Wide Open Spaces* – a tune-packed confection of country, pop and blues, held together by luscious three-part harmonies – is still high up the US charts 15 months, five hit singles and six million copies after its release. They've won Grammys and Country Music Awards. Above all, they have attitude.

Their slogan, 'Chicks Rule', serves the same aspirational purpose as 'Girl Power'. They walk on stage in rock-babe clobber from such hot New York designers as Todd Oldham and Cynthia Rowley, their bare tummies painted with glitter. They picked up their two Grammys this year in punky black frocks held together with safety pins. Accepting yet another gong at the American Music Awards, Natalie appalled the watching musos by thanking the band's wardrobe and make-up stylist, 'Because ain't that what it's all about?'

If only they'd noticed that she was being ironic. For what absolutely differentiates the Dixie Chicks from the Spice Girls – along with about 95 per







Scenes from the Dixie Chicks' concert at the Superdome in New Orleans. *Top row, centre,* Emily takes the microphone and, *right,* autographs cowboy hats. *Middle row, far left,* singer Natalie. *Bottom row, far left,* sisters Martie on fiddle, and guitarist Emily; *centre,* signing fans' shirts at the pre-show meet-and-greet session

cent of contemporary pop product – is that they are not a pre-packaged bunch of pretty faces chosen by Machiavellian producers for reasons that have nothing whatsoever to do with musical ability, but a proper old-fashioned band who can really play and who paid their dues the hard way.

For years, they booked their own dates, hired equipment and carted it to and from gigs themselves. There's nothing these girls don't know about empty rooms, indifferent audiences and flea-bitten motels. 'We'd all three stay in the same rooms and flip a coin to see who'd sleep with Emily,' remembers Natalie. 'Even when we got our own rooms we were still in sleazy motels. We'd get on the van in the morning and go, "So, how many pubes were there on your floor?" '

'There'd be hairs woven into the mattresses,' adds Martie. 'I once wore socks in the shower because I didn't want to touch the floor, and in bed I wore socks, sweatpants and a turtleneck and put a towel over the pillow.'

Nowadays, things are different. My interview with the Dixie Chicks took place in the presidential suite of the Windsor Court Hotel in New Orleans, a five-diamond establishment. The girls each had a suite of their own, another one for their frocks (specially flown in from New York), and yet another in which a team of assistants, known as the Glam Squad, could prepare their hair and paint their faces.

At which point, I should issue this caveat. The quotes that follow are, naturally, accurate. But they cannot entirely capture the banter that zings between the three Chicks. Their girl-talk has been honed during long days and nights spent cooped up in their tour bus, driving from show to show, to the point where they find it difficult to adjust to the constraints of life in the outside world. As Emily puts it, 'You burp out loud or say something disgusting and think, oops, I'm not on the bus.'

She and Martie – or Martha, as she was back then – grew up in Dallas. Their father was headmaster of a school for children with learning difficulties and their mother taught at a smart private school, which gave its staff reduced rates for their own children. So the Erwin girls were educated with the offspring of the Dallas super-rich. 'My best friend had credit cards and a two-door Jag sports car she used to drive to school,' recalls Emily.

What distinguished them from their classmates – apart from a lack of funds – was music. From the age of five, both girls were given piano and violin lessons, a memory that provokes a quick recital of horrendous teachers: the one with gnarled fingers; the one who smacked their hands; the one who screamed at Martie when she dropped

'My mom had a garage sale. We came out in our bikinis and rollerskates and played. I can't believe it – we had no shame!'

her music. 'They had a fondling voice coach, too,' adds Natalie.

'He was inappropriately touchy-feely,' says Emily. 'He'd say, "Breathe from your diaphragm," and hold us. But it was wa-a-a-y too high.'

By then they were already working musicians. On her 12th birthday Martie switched from playing classical violin to country fiddle. Within a month, her teacher (a nice one, this time) had hooked her up with a children's band called Bluenight Express that played bluegrass music – the high-speed, banjo-picking sound that was the folk precursor to country and western. Soon nine-year-old Emily was in the band, too.

Bluenight Express became the centre of Erwin family life. The sisters' parents dedicated their lives to the girls' music. Every summer weekend they'd get in a motorhome and drive off to music festivals around the country, playing with top adult musicians. According to Emily, 'Martie was the rebel of the bluegrass festivals.' 'I'd sneak out of our trailer and go and swap hot licks with a cute young fiddle-player,' grins her sister. 'I was an early developer.'

'It seemed like such a happy-go-lucky family,' Martie continues. 'Our friends would all come round to our house because they loved the hominess. Then one day my dad went off to rehab. It was suddenly apparent that we had an alcoholic in the family. Our perfect world ended and everything fell apart from there.'

By the time the girls were 19 and 16, their parents had divorced. They had quit Bluenight Express and, in the summer of 1989, started the Dixie Chicks. They began by busking on street corners, getting their name because the Little Feat song *Dixie Chicken* happened to be playing on the radio while they were en route to a show, wondering what to call themselves. 'Emily wanted us to be Puss in Boots,' says Martie. 'We did anything to get attention,' says Emily. 'My mom had a garage sale and she put up signs in all the streets around our house: Garage Sale and Live Bluegrass Music. We came out in our bikinis and rollerskates and played. It was in our front yard, so everyone who drove by could see. I can't believe it – we had no shame!'

Soon the Dixie Chicks were a regular working band. Using a succession of lead vocalists and backed by male musicians, they dressed up in cowgirl costumes and played shows wherever they could get them: barbecue joints, clubs, private parties – they even provided the half-time entertainment for a Dallas Cowboys football match at Texas Stadium. Whenever a corporation had a convention in Dallas, the Dixies would be hired to entertain the suits. Along the way they made three albums, released on independent labels, and played shows in Europe and Japan. The money was fine – they could get almost £4,000 for a big show – but it wasn't much good for their souls. And then, in 1995, they met Natalie Maines.

Natalie was born and bred in Lubbock, Texas, Buddy Holly's hometown. Her father was – and still is – one of country music's finest pedal-steel guitarists, so Natalie, too, grew up with music. But she wasn't interested in the finer points of musical technique. What she wanted was fame.

At the age of four, she was discovered standing on a desk at the hospital where her mother worked, giving a note-perfect rendition of *Greased Lightnin'*. At school, she once claimed that she didn't need to do her maths homework because she was going to be famous. 'See this grey hair?' sighed Tina Maines, having described life with her daughter. 'I got it natural.' Natalie was a 20-year-old college student when her father, who had played with the Dixie Chicks, heard that they were looking for a new singer. She met the Erwin sisters, who asked her to sing a track they had written about their parents' divorce called *You Were Mine* – a beautiful ballad that would three years later top the country charts. The session was a success, and within a week Natalie had left college, moved to Dallas and joined the Dixie Chicks.

'At that point, Emily and I were ready to throw in the towel,' says Martie. 'We were tired of running every aspect of our business. Natalie was a breath of fresh air – she lit my spark again.'

'I was always the voice of confidence,' says Natalie. 'I didn't realise all the pavement-pounding they'd been doing.'

She found out the hard way when she had to play on the party circuit. 'They were used to that corporate world and all those rich, snooty people, but I hated it. It was so humiliating. We had a big talk and I said, "I know y'all can fake it, but I can't." '

The sisters, too, were sick of their working life. 'They wouldn't even feed us properly,' says Martie of one party. 'I was standing in the dinner line once and the waiter took the plate out of my hand and said there wasn't enough food for the help. I just started crying.'

Slowly, though, things began to look up. Natalie's voice and stage presence gave the Dixie Chicks new impact. They found a manager, an ebullient Englishman called Simon Renshaw who had worked with acts as diverse as

***Opposite*, the Dixie Chicks, from left, Emily Erwin, Natalie Maines and Martie Seidel**

the Sweet and ZZ Top. He secured them a development deal with Sony Music in Nashville: the Dixies were given money to work on their material, in return for which Sony had an option on any future recording contract. Over two years they refined the songs that would eventually appear on *Wide Open Spaces*.

And then, suddenly, it began to fly. Sony not only gave them a record deal, but also made them the first act to appear on the relaunch of Monument, a label that had once been home to Kris Kristofferson and Dolly Parton. It was vital to Sony that Monument return with a bang, so it spent more than £1 million making sure that no one in the business was unaware of the Dixie Chicks. More than 150 radio executives were flown to Biltmore Mansion in North Carolina – a former country retreat of the Vanderbilt family – to see the girls perform. By the time their first single, *I Can Love You Better*, came out in late 1997, the market had been thoroughly primed.

Wide Open Spaces was released in January 1998, since when the Dixie Chicks have worked a non-stop schedule of promotional appearances and live shows. Country artists are expected to cater to their fans – Garth Brooks once conducted a 24-hour autograph-signing session broken only by trips to the lavatory – so every Dixies concert is preceded by a meet-and-greet, when the girls chat to fans and pose for photographs. Until recently, they even went out to their merchandise stall after shows to sign autographs (they had to stop because other acts refused to play to halls left half-empty by fans desperate to meet the Chicks).

That sort of hysteria is something that country music badly needs. There are still more radio stations in the US playing country than any other form of music, but recently they have suffered losses of up to 50 per cent of their teen listeners to pop and rap stations. The Chicks, however, have begun to recapture the youth vote: 60 per cent of their albums are sold to the under-25s.

After all the years of struggle, they are thrilled by their success, but the effort required to maintain it can be shattering. 'Around Christmas, I had a total sense of burn-out,' says Natalie. 'I was sick of talking, sick of singing. There's no time to reflect on how this has affected you. You win the Country Music Awards and three weeks later you realise you never even celebrated. You just went to bed because you were so tired and you had a gig the next day.'

Along the way, Natalie's 18-month marriage to the band's former bass player broke up. 'I'm 24 and divorced. I never should have gotten married, but you think there's something wrong with you if you don't want to get married and have kids. You think you're not supposed to be having a good time. Success gave me the confidence to know I didn't have to settle for that.'

Martie has the opposite problem. 'My only regret is that I wish that this was all happening five years earlier in my life. I'll be 30 this year and I'm starting to think more seriously about families and having more time off.' In June 1995, she married a sales rep called Ted Seidel, but she saw him for only 30 days last year. 'I'd miss him and my stepson so terribly I'd make myself sick. It was just killing me emotionally. But he's very understanding, and I've learnt that I can't be Wonderwoman. I can't be everything to everyone in my life.'

Her sister, Emily, undaunted by her bandmates' experiences, got married to another musician last May, becoming Mrs Charles Robinson. But Mr Robinson can expect to see as little of his wife as Mr Seidel. The Dixie Chicks have been spending the weeks between George Strait shows recording their next album, due out in September. They arrive here next month before going back to America to spend the summer on the road. In the autumn they visit Europe again, and then Australia.

Chicks Rule because Chicks Work. Backstage in New Orleans, jammed between the meet-and-greet and the show, they recorded a promotional spot for a British television appearance. In exaggerated Texan accents they drawled, 'Hi there, y'all. We're the Dixie Chicks, on *Top of the Pops 2*. We can't wait to see y'all in June – you'll have a finger-lickin' good time. Yee-haw!'

Then they recorded the promo again. This time they ended, 'Yee-****in'-haw!' It may not be a word that I can print in full. But it sums them up just perfectly.

The Dixie Chicks are appearing at Shepherd's Bush Empire on June 16 and 17. Their debut British single, 'There's Your Trouble', is released on June 14