SEPTEMBER 1999 · $3.95

Texas Monthly®

SPECIAL ISSUE

THE TEXAS TWENTY

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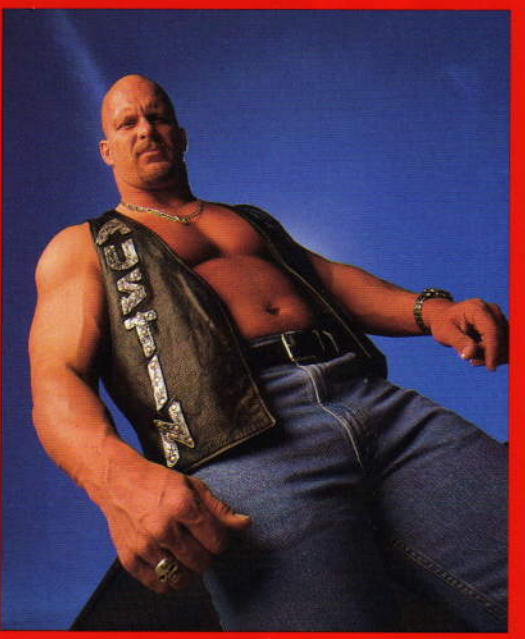
DIXIE CHICKS

LANCE ARMSTRONG



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Hot Chicks: Robison, Maines, and Seidel won two Grammys in 1999.

Nashville **Music**, Texas style

The Dixie Chicks

These brash, beautiful blondes are the rock stars of country.

by Jamie Schilling Fields

NOW THAT THEY'VE SOLD their album *Wide Open Spaces* to every girl, woman, and old lady in the United States, the Dixie Chicks are finding real career opportunity. It seems that Hollywood has homed in on our pretty country threesome much as it did on Trisha Yearwood, who sometimes plays a forensic scientist on the CBS drama *JAG*. These days banjo picker Emily Robison, fiddler Martie Seidel, and lead singer Natalie Maines are fielding scripts written for them too. One has an exciting plot: Natalie gets kidnapped! That's the script that would have her deliver the line "He's as slippery as a pocketful of custard."

Plums like that go only to the most successful country acts, and the Dixie Chicks surely fit the bill. They've sold six million copies of *Wide Open Spaces* (Sony Monument), their breakthrough CD, and may well surpass that figure with their follow-up, *Fly*, which hits stores August 31. It can't hurt that its lead single, "Ready to Run," is the theme song for the new Julia Roberts–Richard Gere movie, *Runaway Bride*. They've won too many awards to mention, but since you ask, they have two Grammys (one for Best Country Album), two Country Music Association Awards (one for Group of the Year), and three Academy of Country Music Awards; they've been nominated for another four CMA awards this year. At the end of August the trio wraps up tours with Tim McGraw and Lilith Fair.

The excitement centers on three gorgeous blondes, two of them sisters who founded the Dixie Chicks in 1989. Emily, who is 26, plays banjo well enough to impress ace picker Roy Clark, who says, "I would not want to be against her in a contest." Her work on dobro—a cousin to the slide guitar, played face-up—brings a loose, soulful twang to Bonnie Raitt covers. Her 29-year-old sister, Martie (short for Martha), cooks on fiddle, having placed second in the prestigious Winfield fiddling competition when she was 16. She stars on doleful ballads and hoedowns, as you'd expect, but also on Celtic jigs. Then there's the lead singer, 24-year-old Natalie, whose fireball soprano can lay [CONTINUED ON PAGE 150]

PHOTOGRAPH BY MOSHE BRAKHA

Dixie Chicks

[CONTINUED FROM PAGE 120] low stadiums of 40,000 fans. A voice unlike anyone else's—it's a growl, a punch—it won the Lubbock girl a scholarship to Boston's hoity-toity Berklee College of Music before she joined the band in 1995.

But musical talent alone doesn't explain the Dixie Chicks' appeal. We love them because success has only strengthened their integrity. Now that they've entered the stratosphere, don't expect to see them with fellow club members on a daffy TV drama. Nor will they remix their singles to be disco hits, as Shania Twain and LeAnn Rimes have, or shoot fiddle-free videos for VH1, though they've been asked to. They say fiddlesticks to such moves. "We'd rather be the rock stars of country than the lame-asses of rock," explains Natalie. And so, as Nashville churns out tedious product and its sales and radio audiences dwindle, the Dixie Chicks succeed with a different tack. They color outside the lines, take chances, fight for what they want, and offend. In short, as Natalie says, "I think we've brought Texas to Nashville."

As Willie and Waylon did a generation ago, our threesome projects a certain outlaw style. The self-described "girly girls" have 750 outfits (capri pants, skintight camisoles, enormous bell-bottoms, headbands made of bra straps) and dozens of pairs of Mary Janes. They hire designer Todd Oldham, a fellow Texan, to outfit them for awards shows and tours. He's put them in tie-dyed lingerie, glamorous gowns, and black matte jersey covered in safety pins, a look he calls "punkin'," for "country punk." "There's no reason to head down any path that anyone expects them to," he says. The hallmark of Chick style is brash color—fuchsia, lemon, turquoise, orange. "They can wear anything," says Susan Kittenplan, the senior features editor at *Harper's Bazaar.* "And they're not afraid to do that."

They're not afraid to take risks either, even if it means alienating fans. Most purchasers of *Wide Open Spaces* have been the pop-loving 24-and-under crowd, a big chunk of them kids. On that release the label wielded a good deal of control. For instance, their rip-roaring bluegrass instrumentals would never have been permitted, the Chicks say, for fear they might be a turnoff. But with executives now giving the trio carte blanche on *Fly,* they're rubbing our noses in *Beverly Hillbillies* riffs on "Sin Wagon": "Praise the Lord and pass the ammunition!" hollers Natalie as a good woman gone bad; she plans to get drunk on some "12-ounce nutrition" and do "a little mattress dancin'." Another pearl tells how two friends, one with an abusive husband, put poison in his black-eyed peas and stuff his body in the trunk of a car ("Earl had to die!"). Is the label nervous? "A little," says Allen Butler, the president of Sony Nashville. "But I'm not going to argue with success."

And that success stems from the group's naive belief that the record business in Nashville should be like it is back home. Natalie grew up watching her father, Lloyd Maines, produce albums for the likes of Jerry Jeff Walker and Robert Earl Keen, and assumed that all artists played their own instruments in the studio. In the early nineties the pre-Sony Dixie Chicks had done as much on three CDs, two of them featuring Lloyd on steel guitar. But in reality few big-name country acts do their own sessions work. Take Brooks and Dunn: On videos the earnest duo strums up a storm; on their latest record they just sing. The same goes for veteran foursome Alabama, whose lead guitarist, Jeff Cook, and drummer, Mark Herndon, don't play at all on a new CD. Even George Strait's near-perfect Ace in the Hole Band stays away from the studio for most recordings. So by playing their own instruments on *Wide Open Spaces,* the Dixie Chicks earned the adulation of their peers, which they think is pathetic. "In Texas that's a normal, everyday thing," says Martie.

Perhaps the strongest sign of their heritage is that they refuse to be told what to do. Paramount Studios, which made *Runaway Bride,* offered to pay for the "Ready to Run" video if 20 percent of it would be clips from the movie. But all of the treatments the Chicks proposed got nixed. "They wanted us to do something really tame, like sing on a big wedding cake," says Emily. So the girls dumped the studio and coughed up the money for their own video, in which they run from a triple wedding, steal bicycles, and have a food fight. They stood their ground even before they had clout—as when Sony told them "Dixie" was too regional and "Chicks" was politically incorrect. If the three had listened to executives, they say, their biggest hit, "Wide Open Spaces," would never have been put out as a single. The coming-of-age anthem, with its alternative-sounding arrangements, struck the label brass as too left of center for radio.

All three Dixie Chicks are now stars, but one of them always was—at least to everyone who knew her. Visiting her mother, Tina Maines, at the doctor's office where she worked, four-year-old Natalie sang on a desktop to the adults. In the second grade she announced that she didn't need to learn math: She was going to be a star. Show business, after all, was in her genes; her grandfather had sung in the Maines Brothers band, a respected country group

from Lubbock, and her father and uncles had carried on the tradition, making two regional hit records in the eighties. Trouble was, she didn't like country music. Broadway musicals captured her imagination, and she could perform every line from *West Side Story* without crib notes. "She even had the Puerto Rican accent down," recalls Lloyd. The best thing about junior high was cheerleading, Natalie says, because she could yell and wear short skirts.

Cheerleading was not part of the program at Martie and Emily's house. Having left Massachusetts for Dallas in 1974, their parents, private-school teachers Paul and Barbara Erwin, preached that instead of being relegated to pep squads, girls should be in the game. They started their three daughters (Julia, who is thirty, lives in California) on Suzuki violin lessons when they were five and took them to the symphony. By the time she was twelve, though, the artistic Martie was growing bored with classical violin, spicing up practice sessions by adding her own riffs to Beethoven and Mozart. What she heard on the radio seemed infinitely more exciting, especially the fiddle on "The Devil Went Down to Georgia," which crackled with life.

Martie's interest in fiddling took off, and the family started to pack pup tents in the trunk of their car, camping out at fifteen bluegrass festivals a year. In the evenings folks would gather in a large circle, and even small children were expected to play solos. Martie performed on fiddle, and Emily followed her on banjo (a quick study, she taught herself to play by reading books about chord progressions).

It wasn't long before Martie joined a children's bluegrass band, Bluenight Express, earning pocket money from a steady gig at Judge Bean's restaurant in Dallas. When the banjo player quit, Emily decided to join the group. Later, when they were sixteen and nineteen, to avoid having to get summer jobs, the sisters joined two bluegrass friends, singers Robin Lynn Macy (a guitarist) and Laura Lynch (a bass player), to perform on a downtown Dallas street corner. They knew they were on to something when they made more than $100 in their first hour. (For Lynch, at least, that would turn out to be peanuts compared with the almost $27 million her husband would win in the Texas lottery in 1995.) As they drove back downtown the next week, they heard Little Feat's "Dixie Chicken" on the radio and christened themselves the Dixie Chickens, which soon became Dixie Chicks. Dressing in cowgirl getups, the band quickly grew in popularity, playing clubs, livestock shows, and corporate conventions.

In 1990, when she was a sophomore, Martie decided to drop out of college (she had been a music major at Southwestern and Southern Methodist universities) and pursue a full-time career as a Chick. The decision to devote her life to music was more wrenching for Emily, who had dreamed of attending the Air Force Academy and flying jets. That year the foursome recorded *Thank Heavens for Dale Evans*, a bluegrass-western album, and *Little Ol' Cowgirl* followed in 1992; shortly after its release, Macy left the group because of its increasingly contemporary-country direction. A third record, *Shouldn't a Told You That*, brought their total sales to 90,000 units. Known as Dallas' Sweethearts, the Dixie Chicks were voted the best country band by the *Dallas Observer* for four years running.

One day in 1995, when Lloyd Maines was playing steel guitar for the Chicks at a gig in Lubbock, he gave them a copy of Natalie's Berklee audition tape. Martie and Emily were mesmerized, and when Lynch left the band that year to spend more time with her daughter, they called Natalie, who was attending Texas Tech. She brought a youthful edge to a band that had never been commercial enough to nab a deal, and two years ago Sony signed them.

After they wrap up their Lilith Fair work on August 31, the threesome will set off for tours in Europe and Australia. Then, in November, they will take a much-needed seven-month break to spend some time enjoying their personal lives. Since 1995 Martie has been happily married to pharmaceuticals representative Ted Seidel and stepmother to his four-year-old son, Carter. They own homes in Nashville and Dallas. Natalie is going through a divorce from Michael Tarabay, a bass player she married at age 22—before, she says, she knew anything about love. Content for now to decorate her Nashville home, she says of future romantic prospects, "I don't think that I'll be able to settle for anything less than the fairy tale." As for Emily, she lights up when she speaks of her new husband, Austin singer-songwriter Charlie Robison, who released *Life of the Party* on Sony Lucky Dog last year. The two recently bought their first house, in San Antonio.

Emily and Charlie's May wedding, staged in the rugged beauty of the Cibolo Creek Ranch near Marfa, reflected their profound ties to home. For the event Martie co-wrote "Cowboy Take Me Away" (which appears on *Fly*), and she and Natalie sang it at the ceremony. The song idealizes the "wild blue," where there's no one for miles around and no buildings mar the horizon. One of its lyrics goes, "I want to sleep on the hard ground . . . on a pillow of bluebonnets." ✦

Jamie Schilling Fields wrote about country singer Lee Ann Womack in the October 1998 issue of Texas Monthly.