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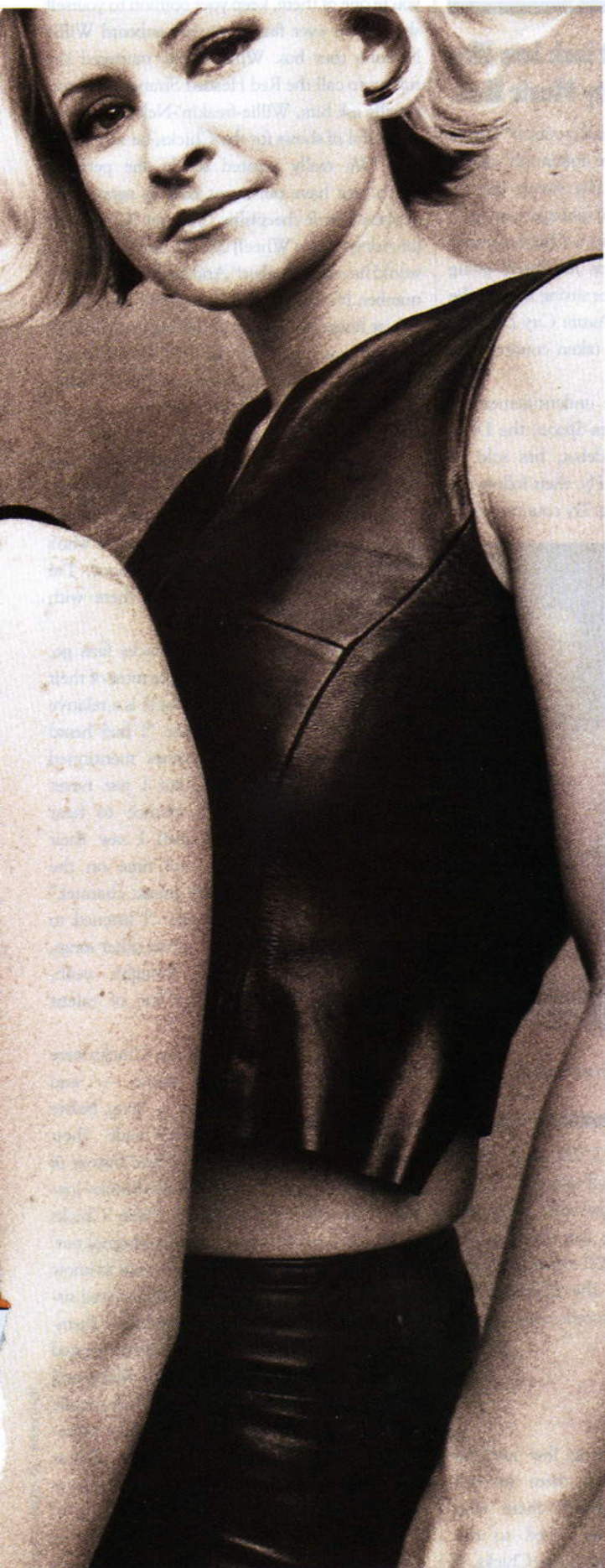
Fall 2000/Issue 4



REMEMBERING **DIXIE CHICKS**
BUDDY HOLLY
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THE YEAR CHICKS RULED

HOW a Lubbock cheerleader
H and two sisters
with a knack
for bluegrass
got the whole country
whistlin' Dixie.

by RICHARD SKANSE

There are few places on God's earth that look less like a honky-tonk than New York's Radio City Music Hall.

It's carpeted and there are too many chairs, the over-priced beer is served in little plastic cups instead of long-necks, there's no smoking and the joint's crawling with ushers. But tonight the Dixie Chicks and a few thousand of their loudest friends are calling the shots, and damned if they haven't done a fine job of rowdyin' the place up. Nobody's sitting in those bothersome seats, and when scores of young fans spill into the aisles to dance, the ushers seem to catch on fast that it's a losing battle to try and check them. One even finds himself dancing for a moment with a pair of gals in their early twenties.

"Look at our feet!" says one of them, shaking a bare foot and pointing back to their shoes, abandoned beneath their seats a row or two back. "This is country music — you gotta kick off your shoes and dance!"

Between songs, she looks a little mortified when asked if this is her first Chicks show. "We tour with them," she grins, explaining that this is the third or fourth show they've already caught on the group's current *Fly* tour. Odds are, they have tickets for tomorrow night's sold-out show at Radio City, as well. Call them Chickheads. They are

legion, and by the time this nearly six-month tour wraps up in early December, singer Natalie Maines and sisters Emily Robison (dobro, banjo) and Martie Seidel (fiddle, mandolin) will have played to a couple million of them.

"Every city has its own energy," says Emily, checking in from a tour stop in Milwaukee. "The crowds have been screaming and singing along to all the words, which really makes you put on so much better of a show than you normally would. We were just at the Tacoma Dome in Tacoma, Washington, and it was just this big echo chamber of 20,000 screaming people — that was pretty huge."

By now, the Chicks are growing used to the crowds. Not so for Lloyd Maines, formerly

"noted Texas steel guitarist and producer" but for the last couple of years more commonly identified as "father of Natalie" (he swears the tag makes him proud). "The road manager sent me a tape of one of their shows, from Chicago, and it sounded like the crowd was absolutely going nuts," he marvels shortly after sitting in with the Chicks for their taping of *Austin City Limits* in August. "The Chicks have taken country to a much broader audience."

That may well be the understatement of the year. To date, *Wide Open Spaces*, the Dixie Chicks' 1998 major-label debut, has sold in excess of 10 million copies. *Fly*, their follow-up, is at six million and counting. Try counting their

you're one of them, keep your opinion to yourself should you ever find your way onboard Willie Nelson's tour bus. When Emily mustered the *cajones* to call the Red Headed Stranger and personally ask him, Willie-freakin'-Nelson, to open a handful of shows for the Chicks, he said yes.

"We really wanted to do the personal touch, not have our agent call his agent," she explains a little sheepishly. "So I saw Ray Benson [of *Asleep at the Wheel*] one day, and I said, 'You would have his number!' And he gave me his bus number. He said, 'He's at home, but even while he's at home, he hangs out on his bus,' which I thought was hysterical. So I called, really nervous, and left the stupidest, dorkiest message ever. But he called back and left a message, and we've been saving it ever since."

"I don't mind opening for them," says Nelson, readily recalling a time he opened for Leon Russell. "It really doesn't matter to me

who's on first and who's on second. Shoot, I'm proud to be there with them."

As Chicks fans go, Nelson (like most of their constituency) is a relative newcomer. "I had heard their names mentioned before, but I just never had a chance to hear them until I saw their video one time on the country music channel," he admits. "I listened to some of their other songs, and I thought, yeah, there's a lot of talent there."

But the Chicks were making music — and headlines — long before they ever made their

CMT debut. For the full, unabridged history of the group, swing by ultra-fan Robert Brooks' lovingly compiled "All-Inclusive Dixie Chicks Page" at www.dixiechicks.mixedsignal.net. There you'll find all you could ever want to know about how Pennsylvania-born, Dallas-raised sisters Martie and Emily Erwin established themselves on the bluegrass circuit as teens, hooked up with older singers Robin Lynn Macy and Laura Lynch in 1989 and made their public debut on a Dallas street corner. They subsequently recorded three independent albums chock full of cowgirl anthems and bluegrass rave-ups before recruiting Natalie Maines, a rock 'n' roll-loving former cheerleader studying music on a Berklee scholarship. With Maines on board,



Before: The Chicks circa 1990, Martie Erwin, Robin Lynn Macy, Emily Erwin, and Laura Lynch.

Grammy, CMA, ACM, CMT, TNN and AMA awards, and you're liable to fall asleep.

"I think we don't know what to expect anymore," admitted Natalie last October, the very week that *Fly* sold 341,000 copies out of the gate to debut at No. 1 on the Billboard 200 album chart. "Everything exceeds our expectations."

Even Cowgirls Get the Blues

hey're getting few and far between, but there are still some folks out there who haven't succumbed to the charm of the Dixie Chicks. If

PHOTO COURTESY OF LAURA LYNCH

the Chicks revamped their sound from the ground up, dramatically changed their image and hit it big. (For the curious, *Thank Heavens For Dale Evans*, *Little Ol' Cowgirl* and *Shouldn't a Told You That* can all occasionally be found on eBay, albeit to the tune of \$60 to \$125 a pop.)

Brooks, a fan since 1991, began his site in 1998 out of frustration when the national press failed to pick up on the group's grassroots history. Despite a blow-by-blow account on the site about a run-in he had with Sony Music and the Chicks' lawyers over sound samples that he had posted (a story the *Dallas Observer* picked up and ran with as evidence of Sony's attempt to erase the group's past), Brooks maintains that he's a Renaissance fan. "There are a lot of people who like the old sound and don't care much for the new sound," he says. "I miss the old sound, but I like the new sound also. And I hear the old sound in the new sound. They're returning country music to its roots, and still appealing to its younger fans."

Emily is well aware of Brooks' site. "I think that's great," she says. "I love that kind of stuff — for someone to be that interested to spend that kind of time and energy on something like that. I'm proud of our history, and I'm proud for people to know that we weren't just something that someone put together in Nashville, that we'd been together and we've been changing and growing and figuring out what works and what doesn't work. That's the nature of music and the nature of bands, to change and morph and figure out what works."

Robin Lynn Macy, a diehard bluegrass purist who chaffed at the introduction of drums to the band's sound on their second album, was the first to jump ship (later resurfacing in Domestic Science Club with Sara Hickman and Patty Lege before moving to Kansas). Laura Lynch, who left a career in broadcast journalism

after learning 10 chords on her guitar, carried on as the lead singer and bassist for several years as the Dixie Chicks established themselves as one of Texas' most successful independent acts. They played the bluegrass circuit, corporate gigs by the dozens and political shindigs without prejudice — playing parties for the likes of the late Senator John Tower (an early patron), Ross Perot, Governors Ann Richards and George W. Bush and President Clinton.

"The political shows were some of my favorites, but our corporate shows, those were the bread-and-butter gigs," Laura says today from

Nevertheless, Laura notes that scoring a major label deal was always the ultimate goal. Shortly after they finally landed one with Sony in 1996, however, the sisters decided that a drastic change was in order. "When we met Natalie, we were re-inspired," Emily says. "I think we were in a rut where we were. And I think Laura knew that too, and we remain friends with Laura to this day, because it was the best decision for both of us."

"We played bluegrass for a lot of years, and we were done with bluegrass," says Martie of the band's need to move on. "We have to keep inspiring ourselves, or else the audience is not going to see three happy Chicks up there. So we changed for the audience's sake as well as for our sake."

Having devoted seven years of her life to the group, Laura was devastated when the sisters asked her to leave. But with the benefit of hindsight, she readily concurs with Emily's logic. "I loved that band," she says. "I still love that band, dearly. I never, ever would have left on my own. And for about the first year, I could not understand why that whole deal would come down the way it did. But if you give anything a



After: "We have to keep inspiring ourselves, or else the audience is not going to see three happy Chicks up there."

her home just west of Fort Worth. "We were making a lot of money. We sold a lot of stuff, we played a lot of shows and kept our overhead down — we never bought anything unless we could pay cash for it. We were in good shape."

"At the time that you do things like that, you think, 'My God, how could it get any better than this?'" reflects Emily when asked about their days at the top of the regional talent heap. "I think that is the art to surviving the shitty gigs. But to me that was the pinnacle, like, 'I've made it.' It was so fun to meet people like Ross Perot and do the halftime show at the Cowboy game. You hope you go on to bigger and better things, but it's like, this would be fine if we stopped here."

little time, you get clarity. And it really was a great thing that happened, as it turned out. I fell in love, I met the man that I'm married to now, and I really have a great future of happiness with him."

Believe her when she says life is "peachy." Laura's husband, who is a cattle rancher, quietly won \$27 million in the Texas lottery in 1995. "Being on the road was awful for me," Laura continues. "I was just absent from these really important things in my life because I was at some club playing a show somewhere in Timbuktu. And as much as I would love to be a part of this incredible fanfare that's going on with the Chicks right now, it's okay that I'm not. It truly is."

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Dixie Chicks

CONTINUED FROM PAGE 47 She proudly notes that her 18-year-old daughter Asia (from a previous marriage), is the biggest Chicks fan alive. "She loves them," Laura laughs. "She got glasses just like Natalie wears in one of her publicity photos. She is the Chickhead of the century ... now that they're cool."

W *Cowboy Take Me Away*

hile Laura has managed to enjoy her marital bliss in private, the tabloids

have called open season on the remaining Chicks' fluctuating states of matrimony ever since Natalie filed for divorce from her first husband, musician Michael Tarabay. In quick succession thereafter, Emily married singer-songwriter Charlie Robison, Martie divorced her husband and Natalie married a second time, exchanging vows with actor Adrian Pasdar in a quickie Vegas ceremony. The couple expects their first child in the spring. (If you're keeping score, Emily reports that Martie has recently fallen in love, but at press time, the fiddle-playing Chick had not gotten hitched again.)

Emily and Charlie met at a Dixie Chicks' concert at Gruene Hall in 1998, but they didn't click until later that year, over a game of quarters at Chicks' producer Blake Chancey's house in Nashville. They were engaged within two months and the romance inspired sister Martie to pen the Chicks' sweeping single, "Cowboy Take Me Away."

"I didn't actually know it was about us until about two months after Martie had written it," says Emily. "We decided to do it at our wedding, but we had had too many margaritas and were so out of tune. It's like, the worst ode to me and Charlie's love was this out of tune version of 'Cowboy Take Me Away.' I have our wedding video tape of us singing it ... and it will never get out."

Both Emily and Charlie admit that balancing two recording careers and a marriage can be tricky, but they've gotten it down to a science of sorts. "We just spent about two weeks together, and now we're not going to see each other for about two weeks, and then we'll probably see each other for about ten days," explains Charlie from somewhere on the road, apart from his wife. "It's two weeks on, two weeks off — kind of like working on an oil rig."

Charlie notes that he did manage to snare Emily for a banjo part on his upcoming album, and both of them hope to do another batch of "Robison Family Christmas" gigs this December

Dixie Chicks

CONTINUED FROM PAGE 77 with Charlie's brother Bruce and his wife, Kelly Willis. "After we've all been in different parts of the country all year, it's great to finally get to sit down and play music together," he says. "It's really low key and loose and a lot of fun — we just gratuitously play the exact songs we want to play — old covers and gospel and stuff like that."

A word of warning though, for the current man in Martie's life: "For better or worse, they're always there, all the time, always," Charlie says, recalling the night Martie and Natalie crashed their honeymoon. "It's like when you marry one of them, you marry the band."

I **The Chicks Come Home** t takes them a couple of months to get there, but when the Dixie Chicks finally manage to swing their *Fly* tour through Texas, they do it with a vengeance. The first stop is an August 6 date in Natalie's hometown of Lubbock, where her father joins the band on steel guitar. This is followed in short order by a pair of shows at the Reunion Arena in Dallas, where Laura visits with the girls backstage ("It was like old times,"

she happily recounts.) After that, the Chicks move on to Austin, then Houston and then back to Austin again for a taping of *Austin City Limits*.

"We definitely still feel the pressure of proving ourselves when we come home," admits Natalie. But that helps them keep their "chops up," notes Martie, "and feel proud to be from Texas, too."

When Natalie, Emily and Martie arrive at the ACL studio on the afternoon of August 15 for a quick rehearsal, they're all but unrecognizable. Later that night, after their celebrated "glam squad" has given them a once-over, they'll be transformed back into spunky, designer-outfitted Dixie Chicks, but this afternoon, they all look normal, refreshingly down-to-earth, and — particularly in Natalie's case, tired as hell. The word "scrubby" comes to mind for all but Martie, who looks like she couldn't be scrubby if she tried. When they fire up the band to run through several songs, however, there's no mistaking the trademark chops, from Martie's almost casually fluid fiddle intro on "Ready to Run" to Emily's stinging dobro lead on "Give It Up or Let Me Go." One minute, Natalie looks ready to crawl back in bed and sleep for another four hours, and a moment later, she's effortlessly roaring through the chorus of "Goodbye Earl." If the Chicks left the makeup and pastel fashions at home and

took this show on the road just to get their grungy ya-ya's out once in a while, they'd make short work of any skeptics still ignorant enough to brush them off as Nashville fluff.

All that glam and glitter, then, merely adds to the fun of the Dixie Chicks experience. The actual taping hours later goes off without a hitch, except for a somewhat subdued "Earl" which is quickly remedied with a do-over ("Okay, let's kill him again," quips Natalie). This time, rest assured, the bastard stays dead, but the fans — who all received their ACL tickets at the Frank Erwin Center show over the weekend — sound like they wouldn't mind at all if they had to hear the song a third time. When Natalie mentions that the following day will be Emily's (28th) birthday, the audience stumbles through a sloppy rendition of "Happy Birthday." "Y'all need practice!" laughs Emily.

"They wanted to make sure they got the tickets in the hands of their real hard-core, rabid fans," explains ACL producer Terry Lickona. "Based on the crowd we had here tonight, it worked." Lickona notes that tonight's taping is "light years apart" from the Dixie Chicks' debut on the program two years ago. "And yet they haven't changed," he says. "They're the same as they were two years ago — just a lot richer, and a lot more popular. CONTINUED ON PAGE 84

Dixie Chicks

CONTINUED FROM PAGE 78 It says something about them, and at the risk of being immodest, it says something about us, that they are willing to come back and do a show like this. We're basically paying them the same scale that we paid them before, that we pay everyone — which amounts to about \$500 each. There's a lot of out-of-pocket expenses that they're just absorbing."

Laura, for one, is not surprised at all that the Chicks would still jump at the chance to play ACL. "We used to hound Terry mercilessly, we wanted on it so bad," she laughs. "We would have played with no airtime, no nothing — we'd just be the warm-up band for the cool act that was going to be aired. Just to go in and have a captive audience and be able to say, 'Yeah, we played *Austin City Limits*.'"

These days, of course, the Dixie Chicks rarely have to beg for such opportunities. The problem now is merely a matter of staying on top of it all and choosing the right ones. Emily readily mentions plans for a DVD, tour book and live album, all aimed for release in time for Christmas. Whispers fly about a fall network TV special. Lloyd Maines says the girls have so many irons in the fire, he has no idea what they're doing, though he's heard mention of a possible IMAX film, and the thought clearly delights him. "I've seen Natalie 5'2" for so many years, it'll be nice to see her 8' tall," he laughs. The Chicks' publicists, meanwhile, scurry like mad doing potential damage control, stressing that the details of this or that grand project "are still being worked out, nothing's definite, not yet, etc." "Natalie's pregnant," one finally offers. "That's really all we've got at the moment." Finally cornered on the subject of the live album, the Chicks' manager, a cherubic looking Englishman named Simon Renshaw, grins a little mischievously and says only, "It's a good rumor. A good rumor."

One thing seems certain, though. As long as they keep their heads about themselves — and their heads together — the Dixie Chicks' perch at the top of their game looks steady for a long time coming. And naysayers be damned, both country and Texas music are better for their reign.

"I will always consider myself a Texas artist," says Emily, dismissing the "sell out" stigma that many Texas artists are stuck with when they record in Nashville. "With us, I feel like it was the exact opposite — it was one of those things where you're given an opportunity to spread Texas music. I knew we would stand out

ground."

"Nobody likes to be the first," says Natalie of the significant ground they've broken in country music by sticking to their guns and rewriting the rules along the way. "But we go out there, and because there's three of us, we're not scared because we can point the finger at each other if we fail," she says laughingly. "And we can hug each other if we're a success."

"I think we're all well adjusted enough to realize that what goes up must come down, so that's the really scary part," admits Emily. "But I think that, having been on the road and being a traveling band for the ten years before we did this, we have a confidence that radio success doesn't have to be the be-all, end-all. Touring, however, makes fans for life. So three or five years down the road, if people become fickle, and the Dixie Chicks have had their day, and it's time to get off the roller coaster, I think we could still continue to tour just because of the kind of fans we've gained."

And if not?

"I've accomplished far more than I ever expected to accomplish," she says. "So if you look at it in those terms, if five years from now I'm sitting at home having babies, well, that's also wonderful." X



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