



story Mike Safe

Never the Twain

Unlike Shania, the Dixie Chicks remain the genuine country music article in spite of pop success.



More bottle than blonde
(from left) Martie Seidel,
Natalie Maines,
Emily Robison

The Dixie Chicks could be seen as this year's Spice Girls, a bunch of Texas blondes brought together by record company backroom boys to make a fast buck. Natalie Maines, the lead singer whose voice either coos all lovey-dovey or threatens to blast the wrinkles from your face, could be Chirpy Chick; Emily Robison, the banjo and guitar player, could be Charming Chick; Martie Seidel, the fiddle player, could be Curvaceous Chick. But the comparison would be

wrong. These Chicks, as they say in the music business, have paid their dues. Now they're reaping the rewards.

Martie Seidel and her sister, Emily Robison – their maiden name was Erwin – have been working as the Dixie Chicks for 10 years; Maines joined them in 1995. "All our success has come in this one short period," Martie says on the phone from her Texan home on the eve of their first Australian tour. "It feels overwhelming at times, but the fact we've been together so long gives us the strength to cope with what's going on. We know how long we've wanted this and we certainly don't take it for granted. Having the three of us makes it easier because we can share the load."

The sisters grew up in the not-so-wild west of Dallas, the Texan oil city. From the age of five they studied classical violin and piano but, as is the Texas way, they joined a kids' bluegrass band, if you can imagine such a thing.

In best, or worst, country music tradition, their parents ended up getting a *D-I-V-O-R-C-E*, as Tammy Wynette spelt it out all those years ago. Suddenly, the centre was torn from their lives and as part of a new start they headed off on their own musical journey – and the Dixie Chicks were born. Martie, then 19, and Emily, 16, took the name from the Little Feat song *Dixie Chicken*, which happened to be playing on the radio while they were on the way to their first gig and still wondering what to call themselves.

"We were actually the Dixie Chickens for a week," Martie says. "At the time, we were only a street corner band and kind of corny. We had a rubber chicken and our tip jar was a chicken – everything was chicken. We didn't take it too seriously, but the name stuck and we shortened it to Chicks."

It was hardly the stuff of overnight success and the sisters did the rounds, playing business conventions and political rallies, anywhere there was a dollar. Other not-so-memorable gigs included a funeral almost too morbid to be true. "The widow was in the front row sobbing her eyes out," Martie recalls. "We were singing *The Rose*, the Bette Midler song, and standing next to the open casket. It was horrible."

Back then, they wore cowgirl outfits – denim and checks, the whole Hicksville deal – and, hardly surprisingly, failed to move beyond the usual country music stereotypes. By 1995 they were thinking of throwing it in for real jobs when a new lead singer arrived. She was Natalie Maines, from Lubbock in west Texas, the home of Buddy Holly and a hotbed of alternative country, the adventurous, unpredictable kind the conservatives up the road in the country music capital of Nashville, Tennessee, shied away from.

Natalie's father was Lloyd Maines, a virtuoso pedal steel guitarist and stalwart of the alt.country scene. He knew the Chicks, having played with them, and his daughter, then 20, had won a music scholarship and was hankering for the bright lights of a singing career. One story had her telling a maths teacher there was no need to do homework because she was going to be famous.

With new management and a revitalised can-do attitude, the ▶

Chicks scored a development deal with Sony Music. They spent the next two years on the road, shaping more interesting, self-empowering material and revamping their image – designer outfits and high heels took over from jeans and boots. Only then did they record what was to be their breakthrough album,

Wide Open Spaces. Released in January last year, it relaunched the legendary Monument label, once home to another famous Texan, Roy Orbison. From a slow start, it became an unstoppable force. Still in the *Billboard* charts, the leading US monitor of record sales, after nearly 90 weeks it has sold more than seven

million copies. In Australia, where country music barely rises above a whisper on city radio, it has sold 53,000 copies and achieved gold record status.

The Chicks' follow-up album, *Fly*, was released in August and went straight to number one on the mainstream charts, a feat never before achieved by a country

band. Indeed, the only other country act to achieve such status was the biggest cowboy hat of them all, Garth Brooks.

Since then, critics have attempted to draw a parallel between the Chicks and Shania Twain, the Canadian country star who has crossed over so spectacularly into the pop mainstream. Her last album, *Come On Over*, has sold 13 million copies in the US and has been on the *Billboard* chart for two years. However, where Twain has blanded out her country roots for a pop audience, the Chicks have remained true. For them, the twang is the thing – and if you don't like fiddles, banjos and three-part harmonies, well, go back to the Spice Girls.

Interestingly, more than 60 per cent of Dixie Chicks' sales have been to under-25s, hardly the demographic most often associated with country. Along with Twain they have revitalised the genre, something it was badly in need of after too many granite-jawed hunks in hats and prairie princesses with big hair and heartaches. They were the surprise hit of this year's Lillith Fair, the annual celebration of women's music in the US, where they wowed everyone from the lipstick lesbians to the hairy-armed brigade with their brand of female assertiveness. Two songs in particular from *Fly* had the sisters swinging – *Sin Wagon*, which happens to be about "mattress dancin'", and *Goodbye Earl*, where a beaten wife gains the ultimate revenge on an abusive husband.

While their spunky image and girl-power attitude have undoubtedly helped, Martie says the music remains the core of their success. For all the years they've been on the road, she can recall only once, a high rollers' party in Dallas, where they were treated like "dumb blondes" – a term that riles her. "I heard a guy turn to his girlfriend with the fake tits and say, 'Oh, we're getting a concert by the Dallas Cowboy cheerleaders.' I remember my blood boiling and when I got up there I played the crap out of my fiddle. It empowered us. We wanted to show we were so much more than just three blondes. It's not feminism – we're just women who are proud to be women."

While unsure how they'll be received in Australia, it's part of the grand plan to spread their music beyond the usual country confines of the US. They also have a sense of humour. "Is it true every man down there looks like Mel Gibson?" Martie asks. "That's what we've been told – that's why we're coming." ☺

Dixie Chicks: at the Cairns Convention Centre, November 8; Brisbane Festival Hall, Nov 10; Sydney Capitol Theatre, Nov 11; Melbourne Palais, Nov 13.



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