



# Life

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## The Dixie Chicks fly high by making their own mark

By Brian Mansfield, Special for USA TODAY

The members of the Dixie Chicks wear the marks of their success on their legs. Six chicken-track tattoos work their way up three legs, starting at the ankles - each tiny black footprint symbolizing 1 million sales of the group's album *Wide Open Spaces*.

They'll soon have to add at least two more, as the country trio's new album, *Fly*, ships 2 million copies this weekend. Don't they think this tattoo business has gotten out of hand?

"We like to get out of hand," singer Natalie Maines, 24, says.

"Black is very slimming," says Emily Robison, 27. "So the more I get, they might make my feet look smaller."

A plan to add additional tracks for each No. 1 single and major award quickly fell by the wayside, as songs such as *There's Your Trouble*, *You Were Mine* and *Wide Open Spaces* topped the country charts and the group started accumulating trophies faster than tattoos. The Country Music Association's reigning vocal group will vie for that title again next month, along with single, video and entertainer of the year.

With their brashness, wild wardrobe and penchant for tossing in the occasional banjo lick, Maines, Robison and Robison's sister, Martie Seidel, 29, have flouted country music conventions the past two years. *Fly* finds them reveling in the creative freedom that comes from selling millions of albums in the process.

On *Ready to Run*, the album's Celtic-colored first single and breakout hit from the Julia Roberts/Richard Gere film *Runaway Bride*, they sing, "All I'm ready to do is have some fun." The fun includes *Goodbye Earl*, a shockingly light-hearted song about poisoning a wife-beater. It contains the unforgettable couplet, "Ain't it dark/Wrapped up in that tarp?"

Then there's *Sin Wagon* and its reference to "mattress dancing." "That's right," sings Maines, just in case there's any misunderstanding, "I said, 'MATTRESS DANCING.'"

The Chicks say their label didn't care much for that song.

"*Goodbye Earl* they wanted to be a single right away," Maines says. "*Sin Wagon*, they had a lot of problems with. We found that very funny, that you can't say 'mattress dancing,' but you can have a song about premeditated first-degree murder.

"Since we have sold so many records, one of the good things that comes out of that is we have lots of control. So we said, 'There's 13 songs

# Atop the pecking order



**Dixie Chicks:** Martie Seidel, top, Natalie Maines and Emily Robison are vying for the Country Music Association vocal group of the year award for the second straight year. **Coming Friday: new music for fall**



COVER STORY, continued

## They've gone 'outside the normal boundaries' of women in music

fiddle, the group turned the video channel down flat.

"We're not promoting ourselves as a crossover band," Seidel says. "We feel like we're a country band, and if people don't think we're a country band, that's fine, 'cause maybe we're bringing some new listeners over.

"I kind of giggle when they think we're not country. They must not know what country music is."

The Chicks, however, have a wide definition of country, one that

making musical choices.

"Once you've had a hit, you can do stuff you thought you could never get away with," says co-producer Blake Chancey, who signed the trio to Sony's Monument Records. "People want to hear the next Dixie Chicks record. It's almost expected that you go against the grain and bring new sounds to the format."

"We don't feel like we've made it," Robison says. "You have to keep proving yourselves."

"I'm almost, like, waiting for the downfall," Maines says. "I'm preparing myself; I know it's coming. I'm 24 with all this success. I know when I'm 34, this is not going to be my life."

Maines' life has changed drastically the past two years, as have the lives of the group's other members.

During the making of *Fly*, Maines filed to end her marriage of less than two years.

Robison married fellow Texas singer Charlie Robison. Seidel has been married four years.

The highs and lows of the group's personal lives are reflected in *Fly*'s song choices and have given them some career perspective.

"We don't see this band as the be-all, end-all to our lives," Robison says. "I mean, we want to continue it . . ."

"But we won't beat a dead horse," Seidel finishes.

Maines will know it's time to stop "when the crow's feet are here," she says, pointing to the corner of one eye, then to her left leg - "and not here."

"When the makeup won't fill in all the cracks and my a-- is hanging down to the floor, I'm gone," Seidel says. "I'm having babies."

on the record. You can like 12 of them, and we'll like the other one."

Sony Nashville head Allen Butler says he wants to be "sensitive to what the Dixie Chicks are."

He adds: "These two songs definitely push the envelope. Is that good or bad? I don't know.

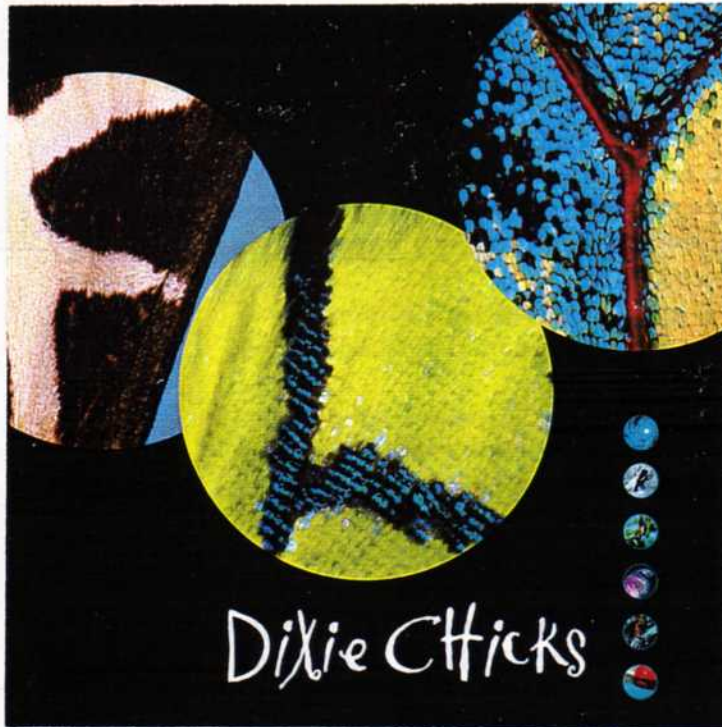
"Whether they want the part or not, they are role models to thousands, if not millions, of twenty something women who dress like them, act like them and look up to what they've done. They've stepped outside the normal boundaries of what women do in the music industry."

The Chicks have certainly stepped outside Nashville's normal boundaries, touring this year not only with George Strait and Tim McGraw, but also as part of Lilith Fair. (They'll play the tour's last three dates Saturday and Sunday in Denver and Tuesday in Edmonton, Alberta.)

Though they probably could have carried a headlining tour, the band took supporting roles to help establish a broad fan base.

"We didn't feel like we had enough material, just with one album, to headline and really have it be strong," Robison says.

After enthusiastic receptions from Lilith Fair crowds, the Chicks seem likely candidates to follow Shania Twain and Faith Hill to pop success. And they'll take it, but only on their terms: When VH1 asked for a mix of *Wide Open Spaces* without pedal steel and Seidel's



**Nature's artwork:** What appear to be abstract letters in the 'Fly' album title are actually photos of butterfly wings taken by renowned nature photographer Kjell B. Sandved. The insects were photographed without being killed.

encompasses the honky-tonk shuffle of *Hello, Mr. Heartache*, the breakdown banjo of *Sin Wagon* and the '70s-influenced country rock of *If I Fall You're Going Down With Me*.

*Wide Open Spaces* was the top-selling album in the history of Sony Music's Nashville division. In country's slack sales market, the Chicks' huge success put lots of pressure on the band to repeat their success but also gave them lots of clout when it came to