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Dixie Chicks

They're hip, they're hot,
they've got real talent and
they're at the top of the
country charts



Chicks r

Not your typical "new country" artists, the Dixie Chicks are true musicians — with an attitude

HICKS RULE.

They rule country airwaves and have walked off with the big hardware at music awards. And in a world often dominated by rhinestones and big hair, the Dixie Chicks, with their funky fashions and cowboy-hat-less blond locks, rule their own careers.

This is no stand-by-your-man stuff. The female music trio, who mix bluegrass and folk with country ballads, know what they want and no one, not even a big bad old record company, is going to push them around.

"You're taught as a Texas musician — it's in your blood — to make your own claim to what you are and fight for it," says Dixie member Emily Robison.

"The Nashville way tends to differ a little bit ... they're like, 'okay, we'll give you some songs and we'll make you a star'."

But when Robison arrived in Nashville with her sister Martie Seidel and the third member of the Chick triumvirate, Natalie Maines, they staged their very own musical Alamo.

They were blonde, loved young, fun fashions, and had already honed their sound from a decade of street corners, conventions and the honkytonks of Texas' live music circuit.

"I don't think people in Nashville really got us at first. They almost took us

on as this little pet project. Like 'okay, there's this little cowgirl band out of Dallas you know, we'll just give them a little bit of money and see what happens'."

And look what happened.

Their 1997 album *Wide Open Spaces* has sold seven million copies, an all-time record for a country group. It also brought home a shelf full of awards this year, including Grammys for Best Country Album and Best Country Vocal Performance Duo/Group.

The Academy of Country Music named it Album of the Year, and the Dixie Chicks as the top new group, as well as the top Vocal Duo or Group of 1999. And in September, they took the Country Music Association honours for single of the year and best music video.

The newest Dixie Chicks album, *Fly*, released in September, was ranked number one across the U.S. by Billboard for weeks.

These chicks are hot, red hot.

"It's almost like we surprised them," says Robison in a telephone interview from her Texas home.

"I don't think their expectations were even near what our expectations were."

Along the way, the group has picked up a wave of younger fans — more than 60 per cent are under 25. But the audience is mixed, from young teenage girls, to middle age couples and pre-

teen girls at concerts where they sing the Chicks' bluegrass, country ballads and folk songs word for word.

"We joke about how the traditional fans come up to us and say 'I like y'all because y'all are bringing back all the old country, you know, the traditional instruments and all that stuff,'" says Robison.

"Then you talk to the younger, newer fans and they say 'I like y'all because you're not country'. It's kind of like we're kind of somewhere in the middle and that lends itself to a broad base of fans."

Part of the Chicks' appeal is their irreverent on-stage presence and eclectic, colourful style. We're talking pink vinyl, fun fur, and platform shoes, a penchant for boas and tiny chicken feet tattoos across their feet, representing their No. 1 singles and gold and platinum successes.

They're 20-something and they're dressing their age.

"I think it's something fun — we're kind of girly girls, we like to get dressed up, we like to have clothes, and play around in makeup and do all the rest of the stuff that's part of our personalities."

But when Seidel and Robison started out in the mid-1980s with two other singers — who have since left the band — they debuted in timeless country style, all fringes and rhinestones, with

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From left to right: Natalie Maines, Emily Robison and Martie Seidel.



The Country Music Association vocal group of the year winners perform at the Country Music Awards in Nashville in September.

the requisite glitz and glamour.

They played bluegrass, Western swing and cowgirl music on the sidewalks of Dallas' business district, at hotel conventions and even concerts for an early fan, one-time presidential candidate Ross Perot.

The Chicks approached it like a business. If they were going to play a street corner, well damn it, they would play the best one and on

"They were having a lot of fun playing to the audience and the camera. Frankly that's part of their success."

The mountains, foothills and prairies surrounding Calgary may become the location for a video the Chicks are considering for next year. Calgary's big prairie skies, its awesome mountains and the animals struck a chord with them on past tours and when

"Then you talk to the younger, newer fans and they say 'I like y'all because you're not country.'"

the right night. They learned how to promote themselves, got their business card to the right people, scratched for better gigs, and tried to learn the industry from the ground up.

Maine signed on in 1992 and the Chicks hatched a new, hipper style.

"I felt like all the fringes and the rhinestones was very much a gimmick, although that might be very stereotypically country, it wasn't me as a person," says Robison. "So that just kind of fell by the wayside as we honed in on our image, what we wanted to portray."

If it looks like they're having fun on stage, it's because they are.

The *Wide Open Spaces* video followed them around Colorado last summer, delved into their personalities onstage and off, in a series of concerts across Colorado.

"What you see in person and on stage is not an act at all," says director Thom Oliphant, who took the stage with them to accept the CMA best video award.

they were in Alberta as part of Sarah McLachlan's Lilith Fair tour this past summer.

"The amount of wildlife we saw was incredible — the bighorn sheep and the moose and all these huge, wonderful grand animals," says Robison. "I remember thinking, 'you know, I wish the States had more of that untamed wilderness left.' It was really quite beautiful."

Calgary's Western way of life also reminded her of Texas, particularly her musician husband Charlie Robison's ranch near a small west Texas town called Banderas. Since they got married five months ago, the newlyweds have been spending a lot of time mountain biking through the rolling hills and river valleys, and may build a house on the land.

"We hang out with cows," she says laughing, then consults with her husband to discover there are 70 head, a mix of Long Horn and Angus on their ranch. "I'm still learn-

ing, I'm still a city girl."

In pictures they may look like cute, cuter and cutest, but the Dixie Chicks are also respected songwriters and musicians, adept at a number of different instruments and they wrote or co-wrote five new songs for *Fly*.

Seidel and Robison, the two youngest daughters of Dallas schoolteachers, were raised to play a variety of instruments from violin to guitar.

Robison plays the acoustic guitar, banjo and dobro, Seidel lets 'er fly on fiddle and mandolin and lead singer Maines, legendary steel guitarist Lloyd Maines' daughter, plays guitar.

"We may not be the best studio musicians in Nashville but it's us and it sounds like us and I think that lends itself to a very distinctive style," says Robison.

"The music always has to proceed it all, it doesn't matter what you're wearing and it doesn't matter how big the hype is if the music isn't there."

Within a music genre that is increasingly under fire for crossover artists who slide into pop to lure more, and younger, fans, the Chicks are being lauded by music critics across North America as the women who can save country music.

The Chicks are eager to reassure fans they will remain true to their country roots and are open in their criticism of radio stations that fill the airwaves with "pop music fluff," instead of talented country musicians' albums.

The industry is disheartening to Robison right now because she knows many talented musicians who can't get radio play for their albums.

"I know the music is out there to be played — real country that is interesting and about real life, that's actually saying something," she says. "Why must you combine it with something like pop or rock to make it valid?"

They may sling around slogans like "Chicks Rule," or "Chicks Kick Ass," but the Dixie Chicks don't hold themselves out as role models for women, as feminist icons, or as the saviours of country music. They hope simply to inspire the thousands of teenage fans mimicking their style and their attitudes.

"We're doing something real right now and I hope people are identifying with it. If it's something that a little girl can latch on to and think she can go and pick up an instrument and have fun with it, then that's great," Robison says.

"All chicks rule." **U**